Tales of Timeliness: The Incorporation of Storytelling Elements in Real-Time Marketing on Instagram

A Qualitative Content Analysis of the Construction of Brand Stories to Connect with Audiences Through Timely Relevant Content

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling as a creative dimension of advertising is challenged due to the rapid extension of social media platforms and their new functionalities. Consequently, brands need to rethink the structure of their content and explore innovative and creative approaches that are timely and contextually relevant while reevaluating traditional storytelling techniques. Therefore, brands are inspired to adopt real-time marketing (RTM) to their content creation on Instagram and, in the meantime, adhere to their story and creativity. In response to this development, this research aims to investigate how brands incorporate storytelling elements in RTM campaigns on Instagram, focusing on how brands construct narratives to connect with their audience through timely relevant content.

This research employs a qualitative research design that combines thematic analysis and visual analysis, examining textual and visual elements of RTM campaigns from three brands proven to be good practices of RTM: Bol, HEMA, and IKEA. The analysis identifies six core themes that demonstrate the brands' storytelling techniques: Persona Profiling (P.P.), Comedic Creativity (C.C.), Brand Identity Integration (B.I.I.), Entertaining Solution Messaging (E.S.M.), Relatable Action Narratives (R.A.N.), and Narrative Embedding (N.E.). The themes reveal that, through narrative embedding, brands implement storytelling elements into their RTM to humanize and familiarize the content and to create an insider feeling among the audience while constructing brand-customized micro-stories.

This research enriches the theoretical framework for understanding RTM storytelling, emphasizing the importance of humor, character development, and cultural relevance. Practically, it offers marketers strategies to create engaging RTM content that reinforces brand identity and interacts with audiences creating an insider feeling among them. Brands are advised to focus on creating relatable characters, leveraging humor, and addressing real-time challenges to enhance their storytelling techniques.

The study addresses a gap in marketing literature by focusing on brand perspectives in storytelling, particularly in the context of RTM on Instagram. It introduces the concept of narrative embedding as a novel approach to RTM, providing insights into innovative storytelling techniques that align with audience perceptions and brand differentiation.

KEYWORDS: *Storytelling, Real-time marketing, Instagram, Brand identity, Creativity*

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1. Introduction

Storytelling has appeared to entertain, stimulate imagination, and foster emotional bonds, connecting consumers to the narrative content. It is therefore not surprising that storytelling is prevalent across various industries. The practice has evolved into a dominant language in marketing and brand communications, establishing itself as a crucial creative practice and a key element of branding (Nhedzi et al., 2023, p. 68; Lund et al., 2019, p. 274). Without a compelling narrative, brands lack distinctiveness, making storytelling techniques essential for advertising efficacy and brand existence (Lund et al., 2018, p. 271). However, storytelling as a creative dimension of advertising is challenged due to the rapid extension of social media platforms and their new functionalities (Dwivedi et al., 2021, in Wahid et al., 2022, p. 108). The rise of social media has revolutionized consumer-brand interactions, reshaping the landscape of brand identity management and brand storytelling (Aimé, 2021, p. 1246). This development of new communication channels and the shift in consumer behaviors demand reevaluating traditional storytelling techniques. Namely, consumers use diverse social media platforms, each with unique communication dynamics (Wahid et al, 2022, p. 106), advertisers are compelled to adapt their storytelling to the platform to stay relevant and keep promoting their products. One of these platforms is Instagram, requiring brands to rethink the structure of their narratives and explore innovative and creative approaches to deliver their brand messages.

1.1. Research Problem

Instagram has emerged as the main channel for brand communication, offering a visually oriented space where consumers showcase products and project brand-associated lifestyles (Lim & Childs, 2020, p. 33). In this, storytelling plays a central role in shaping brand narratives and consumer perceptions. However, storytelling on Instagram presents significant challenges for brands due to the fast communication nature of the platform (Ric & Benazić, 2022, p. 5203), resulting in users spending only a few seconds on a post before scrolling to the next. This makes it crucial for brands to convey their message quickly and effectively, presenting a story that is immediately interesting and captivating.

Additionally, the platform's huge amount and diversity of content creates increased competition which fragments the audience's attention (Tefesse & Wood, 2022, p. 407). Brands must compete with other advertisements and a vast array of user-generated content, trending topics, and viral posts. With so much information available, it is challenging for brands to stand out and capture consumers' attention. Therefore, creating a story that is

visually striking, timely, contextually relevant, and emotionally resonant is essential. This might inspire brands to adopt real-time marketing (RTM), for which Instagram offers great opportunities because of the platform's immediacy and extensive user engagement. This allows brands to integrate current events into their narratives, making their content more relevant and captivating.

RTM is a well-established technique in the marketing sector and can be defined as the alignment of brand messages with timely moments allowing for joining social media conversations (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 830). It allows brands to use the immediacy of current events, integrating them into brand narratives in real-time. For instance, brands might integrate their brand products or services into brand messages about seasonal events or hotly debated news topics. Doing this, RTM not only addresses the demand for timely and relevant content (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 17) but also may add an element of unpredictability and excitement to the storytelling process. Therefore, brands are suggested to create RTM content, though, to continue to adhere to their story and creativity.

Creating compelling brand stories while creating RTM content that adheres to evolving platforms like Instagram is challenging, particularly as there is limited scholarly literature available on modern storytelling techniques and RTM strategies. Therefore, this research aims to tackle the challenge of capturing and retaining consumer attention on Instagram, where the fast-paced nature and vast amount of content make it difficult for brands to stand out. Specifically, it aims to explore how storytelling elements in RTM can enhance brand communication and audience interaction on the platform to do so.

Taking the brands Bol, HEMA, and IKEA as good practices of RTM, this study aims to answer the following research question: *How do brands incorporate storytelling elements in advertising campaigns to connect with their audience in real-time on Instagram?*

1.2. Academic Relevance

This research contributes to the academic understanding of storytelling within the context of RTM on social media platforms, particularly Instagram. The intersection of storytelling and RTM is an area that remains underexplored in the existing scholarly literature, especially given the rapid evolution of social media dynamics. Namely, the literature on storytelling is focused, though narrowed to, the interaction between consumers and brands, concentrating on consumer-level perspectives (e.g., Lund et al., 2018; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Park et al., 2021; Mills, 2023). By investigating how storytelling techniques are adapted to RTM content on Instagram, this study provides new insights into current

advertising strategies. It builds on established theories of narrative construction in marketing (e.g., Ben Youssef et al., 2018; Lim & Puspita, 2020; Lund et al., 2019) and real-time marketing practices (e.g., Mazerant et al., 2021; Willemsen et al., 2018) and examines how these theories need to be modified to remain effective in a fast-paced, visually-driven environment (Ric & Benazić, 2022, p. 5203; Wahid et al., 2022, p. 108). Doing so contributes to the broader discourse on digital marketing and brand management, offering a framework for understanding how real-time, platform-specific storytelling can enhance brand visibility and audience connection.

While there is already considerable scholarly literature on Instagram (e.g., Kim et al., 2016; Lim & Childs, 2020; Lund et al., 2018; Martinus & Chainiago, 2017), the challenges brands face due to the evolving platform – and the resulting novel or adapted marketing practices such as storytelling and RTM – should be acknowledged and studied to address this research gap. Specifically, this study responds to the call from Hollebeek and Macky (2019, p. 35) to use alternate theoretical lenses in investigating content marketing.

Scholarly literature often centers on social media as narrative spaces, addressing subjects such as user-generated brand stories, co-creation, open-source branding, and impulsive performances (Lund et al., 2018, p. 271; Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 197). This study adds to this body of work by exploring the nuanced ways in which storytelling is leveraged on Instagram to interact with consumers in real-time, thus enhancing the understanding of contemporary digital marketing practices.

1.3. Practical Relevance

From a practical standpoint, this research provides valuable insights for marketers seeking to navigate the challenges of storytelling on Instagram. Given how fragmented and brief customer attention is these days (Ric & Benazić, 2022, p. 5203; Tefesse & Wood, 2022, p. 407), marketers need to create content that is both compelling and contextually relevant. Therefore, this study offers practical insights into how brands can adopt their storytelling strategies, and leverage RTM to create engaging, relatable, and timely relevant content that resonates with their audience. By examining specific case studies (good practices) and examples of RTM campaigns, this research outlines the incorporation of brand narratives with current events, thereby enhancing the immediacy and relevance of marketing efforts.

Additionally, it highlights the importance of maintaining brand identity and creativity while adapting to the evolving nature of Instagram. This guidance is important for brands

aiming to navigate the fast pace and continual development of social media, helping their content to capture attention and foster audience interaction and loyalty.

1.4. Thesis Structure

After this introductory chapter, this master thesis will provide the theoretical framework that guides this research. This chapter presents the definition of storytelling, even as its development, connection to marketing, elements, and appearance on Instagram. After this, RTM will be discussed, along with its creative determinants. Subsequently, the method delves into the qualitative research design of this thesis, including sampling, data collection, operationalization, and data analysis. Noteworthy is that this research employs a combined analysis of captions and visuals, using thematic analysis and visual analysis. The reason for this is that excluding one of them would result in insufficient data as the two components complement each other in delivering brand messages. After this, the findings will be discussed in the results section, offering six main themes that reveal how storytelling is employed in RTM posts on Instagram. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings and presents the answer to the research question. This is accompanied by the implications for academia and marketing practice, and limitations and areas for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

Drawing from scholarly literature, this theoretical framework delves into the concept of storytelling, focusing on its definition and development, its relationship to marketing, the elements it entails, and its context on Instagram. Additionally, real-time marketing (RTM) and its creative determinants will be outlined. Together, it will provide a theoretical lens through which to analyze how brands incorporate storytelling elements in advertising campaigns to connect with their audience in real-time on Instagram. This research aims to bridge the gap in marketing literature by focusing on brand perspectives in storytelling, rather than solely on the interaction between consumers and brands. Specifically, it provides new insights into how brands construct their narratives within RTM contexts on Instagram.

2.1. Storytelling and its Foundation in Human Nature

Storytelling is the practice of delivering narratives, in which narratives – or stories – are temporally sequenced accounts of actions undertaken by characters (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698). The knowledge that the story embodies helps the audience understand the lesson or information that the story is trying to deliver, which in this research includes that of brands (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698).

Stories are a fundamental component of human nature, imparting ethical lessons and teaching morality while simultaneously serving as a source of entertainment and leisure (Lund et al., 2018, p. 27). In essence, storytelling embodies a dynamic interaction between the storyteller, the listener, and the narrative itself (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698). In this interaction, the listener's interpretation is uniquely shaped by their experiences, judgments, and thoughts, emphasizing the subjective nature of storytelling (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698). This refers to the distinction between stories and narratives that are central to understanding storytelling. Namely, stories originate from the storyteller's production, whereas narratives are co-created by consumers through their subjectivity, i.e. their prior knowledge, attention, and personality (Lund et al., 2018, p. 273). Consumers interact with stories by placing them in their frames and giving them a sense of personal importance. Considering the contextual approach of RTM, i.e. the alignment with familiar timely relevant moments that allow for joining social media conversations (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 830), this research is focused on both the story and the narrative as both are necessary for understanding brand messages.

Furthermore, stories are retained in memory in a variety of ways, including factually, graphically, and emotionally, resulting in consumers being more likely to recall them (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 699). This results from episodic memory which assists consumers in

achieving pleasure and/or deep, satisfying levels of sense-making (Woodside et al., 2008, p. 103). Therefore, storytelling enables brands to forge enduring connections with their audiences and to let their audience recall the brand. Besides, storytelling is a crucial tool for establishing brand identity and image in which authenticity is the cornerstone of customer trust (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 699).

Thus, literature shows that storytelling is deeply embedded in human cognition and communication, offering marketers a powerful means for conveying brand messages, stimulating emotions, and building lasting relationships with consumers. However, this research requires a deeper understanding of brand storytelling in the marketing field particularly. This will be outlined in the section that follows.

2.1.1. The Marketing Scope

Scholarly literature shows that overarching storytelling strategies help move brands over time, being a powerful tool in marketing to provide meaning to a brand (e.g., Aimé, 2021; Northfelt, 2021; Siegert & Hangartner, 2017; Woodside et al., 2008). As Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) state: "Whether you are dealing with product brands or company brands, storytelling is essential to successful branding since your brand is the sum of all your corporate behaviors and communications that inform your customers' experiences with your product or company" (p. 21). Therefore, storytelling is relevant for any organization within various sectors.

With storytelling, brands aim to forge a personal relationship with the prospects, i.e. possible consumers (Lim & Puspita, 2020, p. 254). Today, stories are utilized to communicate brand values and develop cultural capital with customers in addition to solely being used for purchase and consumption (Mills, 2023, p. 1239). Therefore, brands are now distinguished from one another not just by their products but also by their storytelling, which helps to construct their brand identity and to shape the bond between the brand and its consumers (Lim & Puspita, 2020, p. 254; Fog et al., 2010, p. 78).

Furthermore, literature on storytelling in marketing underscores its significance in consumer behavior and the narrative process, aiming at forging emotional connections with customers, thereby fostering loyalty, and engagement, and ultimately driving purchasing behavior (Aimé, 2021, p. 1245). For instance, scholars have delved into understanding the complexities of story production, the guidelines for developing gripping narratives, and the power of stories to appeal to consumers' subconscious and conscious minds (Aimé, 2021; Youssef et al., 2018, p. 699; Woodside et al., 2008). According to marketing theories, stories

are essential for helping consumers understand the benefits of a brand since they persuade and create positive brand connections (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 699). Here, good stories give brands depth and individuality, making them stand out from their competitors (Fog et al., 2010, p. 78).

The essence of brand storytelling lies in its ability to create clutter-breaking content that resonates with relevance and impact (Nhedzi et al., 2023, p. 69). This is about seeking the right balance between divergent and relevant content. This will be further explained in section 2.5. By leveraging human's inherent affinity for storytelling, stories help brands to present their essence, values, and benefits to their consumers (Mckee & Gerace, 2018, in Nhedzi et al., 2023, p. 69). This makes brand narratives effective, highlighting the brand's history and journey that have the power to shape audience opinions and improve brand-consumer relations.

Central to this is the notion of brand image. According to Martinus and Chainiago (2017), brand image is "a composite of tangible and intangible traits, such as ideas, beliefs, values, interests, and features that make it unique" (p. 202). This defines a brand's identity and promise to consumers. Contemporary brand research acknowledges the co-creation of brand image through interactions between the brand and consumers, as well as the influence of multiple stakeholders, instead of only being a brand's product (Aimé, 2021, p. 1244). In this context, brand managers are viewed as co-producers of stories, aiming to influence the brand's image. Thus, brand image and, consequently, brand stories get adapted to external factors like consumer needs.

As a possible reaction to this, brand stories might be added to RTM. Social media require brands to adapt their stories to fit the format, timing, and engagement patterns of platforms like Instagram. Consumer demands for immediate, relevant, and engaging content further drive this need for adaptation. The concept of RTM will be further explored later, however, now it rests to say that the need to constantly update and modify stories to stay relevant can make it difficult for brands to maintain a consistent and authentic narrative and identity. Therefore, integrating brand stories into RTM requires a careful balance in which brands must navigate the challenges of staying true to their identity while adapting platform dynamics and consumer demands.

Additionally, consumer feedback can have a big impact on brand storytelling and perception, whether it comes from audience members directly or through influencers (Aimé, 2021, p. 1253). Therefore, the practice of brand storytelling is changing, challenging brands to adhere to these new developments while also staying authentic and presenting a consistent

brand image. As these dynamics may inspire brands to create content in real-time, challenging the production of compelling stories that the audience can relate to, the incorporation of storytelling elements in advertising campaigns to connect with audiences in real-time is worth analyzing.

2.1.2. A Critical Stance

A somewhat critical attitude toward storytelling as a marketing strategy can emerge given that each case's use of storytelling features varies (Lim & Puspita, 2020, p. 261). Therefore, it is challenging to identify the definitive representations of all instances in which brands utilize storytelling. Besides, a dynamic interaction between the storyteller, the listener – i.e. the consumer – and the story is implied by storytelling (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 68). While the storyteller and listener each have their imagination and way of breaking down the story they are telling, there are as many ways to understand a story as there are listeners (Barthes, 1967, in Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698). This also presents a limitation of storytelling in marketing as this means that consumers may interpret brand stories in unintended ways, leading to misunderstandings or misrepresentations of the brand's values or intentions. Additionally, negative brand associations might appear when there is no congruity between brand identity and brand image (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 699), resulting in consumers being skeptical of the brand, and considering it as unauthentic.

However, despite these challenges and limitations, storytelling remains a powerful marketing tool that fosters dynamic interactions between brands and consumers. While the varied use of storytelling features and the diverse interpretations by consumers might be challenging, the ability of stories to engage emotions and create connections should not be overlooked. By embracing its complexity and aiming for relevance and authenticity, brands may use storytelling to promote their beliefs and connect with their audience. The possible elements that construct these stories are outlined in the following section.

2.2. Storytelling Elements

The narrative construction of brand storytelling relies on fundamental storytelling elements. These elements can be found in various academic works. First, three elements contribute to brand storytelling – character, setting, and plot (Houghton, 2021, p. 1267). The character is crucial as consumers may relate to a character in a story and, in turn, give meaning to brands and products purchased (Houghton, 2021, p. 1266). The setting includes

the location and time of the story, and the plot covers aspects like goals, obstacles, and solutions (Houghton, 2021, p. 1267). In this research, the time in which the story takes place is an interesting component as this might align with the real-time events covered in the advertising campaigns. However, the role of the other elements is also worth analyzing in the context of RTM, because understanding how character, setting, and plot are used in this contributes to the understanding of the incorporation of storytelling elements in RTM-based advertising campaigns on Instagram.

According to Stone (2018), these elements – character, setting, plot – should be framed according to the villain-hero-victim paradigm. The villain represents the customer's challenges, the victim represents the customer, and the hero symBolizes the brand's product or service (Lim & Puspita, 2020, p. 259). Besides, the villain depicts the story's function, i.e. the purpose for which the story is told (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698). Important is the portrayal of heroes in storytelling; they serve as protagonists within the narrative, undertaking the action (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698). Consequently, personification or anthropomorphism is essential in storytelling as it creates positive effects on both internal and external brand perceptions (Hutson, 2012, in Youssef et al., 2018, p. 699). Here, internal brand perceptions might include the culture within an organization, and external brand perceptions might entail how customers view the brand, i.e. customer loyalty. Thus, the relationship between the consumer and the character that the story might cover is essential in brand storytelling. Lund et al. (2018) call this "the touch points to the lives of consumers" (p. 274), facilitating emotional connections that are related to brand values. Due to these emotional connections, brands are allowed to communicate values and establish distinctive identities (Woodside, 2010, p. 532). Therefore, in this research, the brand is expected to be portrayed as the hero, solving the challenges that touch the consumers and that are related to real-time events.

Stories are not merely sequences of events, but intricate structures embedded with meaning and purpose (Mills & John, 2021, in Nhedzi et al., 2023, p. 68). This is structured around a story's framework of context, climax, and resolution (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698). The context sets the stage for the story and introduces the character, the setting, and the initial situation or problem. The climax is part of the plot as it presents the turning point or solution of the story, and the resolution is the conclusion, which aims to leave a lasting impression on the audience (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698).

Additionally, messages of stories that convey metaphors are relevant in storytelling (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698). Selecting the right metaphors is crucial to developing a

storytelling approach that aims to have noticeable results, i.e. emotional connections (Simmons, 2002, in Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698). The metaphor is conveyed by the message, while the hero seeks to create a sense of recognition or identification (Youssef et al., 2018, p. 698).

Moreover, there are storytelling elements that are captured in visual formats. For instance, facial expressions, gestures, and backgrounds. These are likely to facilitate viewers' emotional experiences by stimulating a memory of the real world (Lim & Childs, 2020, p. 37). This is relevant for RTM as consumers can therefore, again, identify with the stories as they recognize not only the events, but the same feelings connected to these events, too. Brands can use all these elements to infuse purpose, meaning, and value into their stories, resulting in compelling stories that forge lasting emotional connections with their audience, driving meaningful connections and positive consumer responses (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 15). Figure 1 presents a visualization to clarify the introduced storytelling elements and their interrelations.

Figure 1

Visualization Storytelling Elements
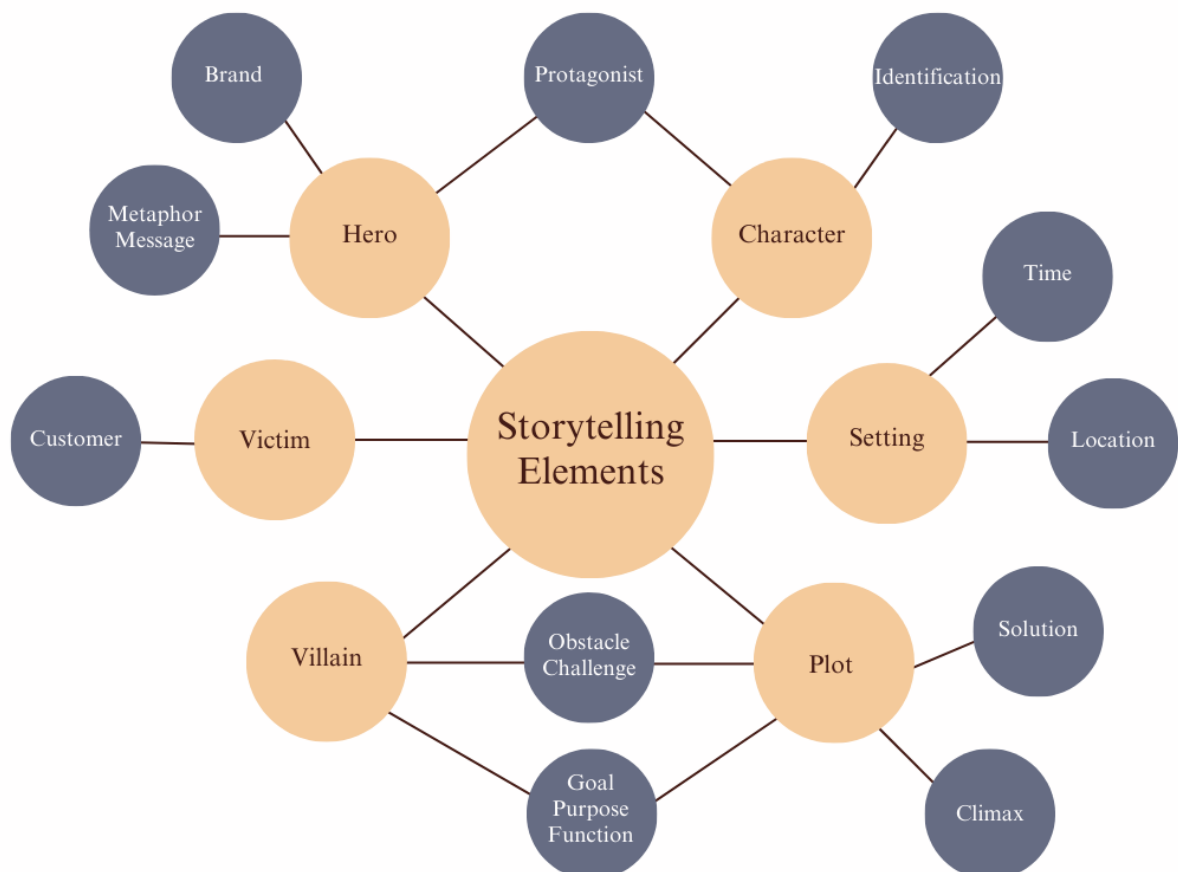
Thus far, the concept of storytelling has been introduced in the literature, along with the marketing viewpoint and the storytelling elements. The next section will explore how storytelling appears on Instagram.

2.3. Storytelling on Instagram

Instagram as a space of storytelling hosts millions of narratives that influence values, perceptions, and brand identities (Lund et al., 2018, p. 274). Brand storytelling on Instagram presented marketers with new opportunities as the platform involves not only verbal but also visual elements, leveraging the platform's capacity for immersive storytelling (Lim & Childs, 2020, p. 34). Customers' opinions and intentions to buy are greatly influenced by the visual content on Instagram, as users interpret photos to represent their own identities and goals (Lim & Childs, 2020, p. 34). Kim et al. (2016) demonstrated this with an online semi-structured qualitative questionnaire in which respondents were exposed at random to global ads from four luxury brands (p. 304). It showed how consumers attach their meanings to an imagery brand ad, suggesting an image's stand-alone ability of storytelling in brand communication. Besides, the narrative components of visual brand communication on Instagram contribute to the self-brand link, allowing consumers to project themselves into the depicted scenes (Lim & Childs, 2020, p. 35). These studies, therefore, acknowledge the effectiveness of storytelling on Instagram for brands (Lim & Childs, 2020; Lund et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Instagram's features, such as captioning, facilitate deeper brand engagement and storytelling opportunities (Martinus & Chainiago, 2017, p. 202). Brands utilize these features to reach consumers in novel ways, strengthening the brand presence and fostering meaningful interactions. Together with Kim and Lennon's findings about verbal information being a major predictor of customers' purchase intentions (2008, p. 146), causes that this research will consider both verbal and visual elements as significant data that complement one another in conveying brand messaging.

Moreover, Instagram offers a platform for brands to join ongoing conversations and adapt their storytelling to current events and trending topics (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 15; Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 194). This allows brands to market themselves through RTM. Also, the immediacy and visual nature of Instagram content enable brands to immerse users in brand narratives, enhancing enjoyment, brand attitude, and loyalty intention (Lim & Childs, 2020, p. 37). These stories are constructed through different storytelling elements

that offer grounds for analyzing storytelling in RTM-based advertising campaigns on Instagram. The notion of RTM will be covered next, along with how it appears on Instagram and the different kinds of moments it entails.

2.4. Real-time marketing (RTM)

Real-time marketing (RTM) is the outcome of brands reacting quickly to current trends and actual events (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 15). As mentioned earlier, popular platforms such as Instagram have features that make it easier for firms to implement RTM strategies (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 15; Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 194). For instance, captions allow for adding to and hashtags allow for monitoring real-time conversations, enabling brands to be responsive and engaging with their audience (Martinus & Chainiago, 2017, p. 202; Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 15). Due to features like these, brands can connect their content with events and topics that are hotly debated on social media (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 17). Consequently, brands integrate their marketing materials with current social and cultural contexts, aiming to stay relevant and maintain a connection with their audience (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 17).

In doing so, brands make use of the timeliness of content, which describes how a piece of media may be connected to a hotly debated topic within or outside of a particular social network space (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 213). News coverage can influence this, but recurrent personal experiences can also have an impact. RTM is made possible by the content's timeliness; however, it may be difficult because the cultural relevance it covers can shift quickly, making the timing unpredictable (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 213). Therefore, brands must be highly responsive.

Previous research delved into RTM as being an effective strategy to increase sharing behavior, as well as what moment- and content-related characteristics are likely to contribute to its success, and the creative crafting of RTM messages and its effects on consumer response (Willemsen et al., 2018; Mazerant et al., 2021). The objective of each research was to uncover the impact of RTM messages on consumer-oriented practices, including sharing behavior and customer responses, by quantitative content analysis of the messages on social media platforms, specifically Instagram and Twitter. Thus, research on RTM has primarily focused on its effects on consumer perspectives rather than brand perspectives or its relation to other practices. This study aims to address this research gap by considering the incorporation of storytelling elements within RTM on Instagram.

2.4.1. RTM on Instagram

On social media platforms like Instagram, users are highly responsive to current events too, resulting in discussions happening in real-time (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 831). The platform's yearly overviews highlight trending moments, such as challenges, public holidays, or breaking news stories, which dominated user conversations (Warren, 2019). By monitoring these conversations, brands can align their messages with topical moments and participate in ongoing discussions (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 830). This practice enables brands to increase the relevance of their messages by associating them with conversations and events that are top-of-mind for their audience (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 830). RTM focuses on enhancing consumers' appreciation of brands by engaging with them on topics and moments they care about (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 17). By talking about the same events and discussions as their audience, brands bridge the gap and establish a meaningful connection with their consumers (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 17). This emphasis on relevance distinguishes RTM from traditional content marketing, where the goal is to build relationships by providing valuable content (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019, p. 28).

However, using specific times to draw viewers is not a new strategy. Brands associated traditional media messaging with public events even before the advent of social media (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 830). A well-known case that illustrates this is that of Coca-Cola. The brand started to advertise its products about Christmas in the 1920s in response to the idea that Coca-Cola was a drink for hot weather, it, therefore, launched the Christmas campaign with the slogan "Thirst knows no season" (Violante, 2021). The introduction of social media has renewed interest in RTM, with brands leveraging its real-time nature and networked infrastructure to profit in timely moments (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 831). As stated before, social media allow brands to inject themselves into ongoing conversations and gain visibility by associating their messages with public events. This, again, distinguishes itself from traditional media and allows brands to advert not only with predictable moments such as Coca-Cola did with Christmas, but with unpredictable moments too.

2.4.2. Predictable and Unpredictable Moments

Brands can interact with events through two distinct kinds of moments. These can be classified as predictable moments that are known to occur, such as holidays, seasonal happenings, and public events, and unpredictable moments that unexpectedly happen, which include trending topics, viral social media content, and breaking news (Willemsen et al.,

2018, p. 829). To illustrate, Doritos' "Crash the Super Bowl" campaign has used a predictable moment – the yearly Super Bowl – to create an advertising contest to let fans make their own Doritos commercials (Randev, 2023). Additionally, an example of a brand connecting an unpredictable moment to its product is IKEA. The company quickly reacted to Cristiano Ronaldo's statement encouraging people to drink water rather than Coca-Cola by renaming one of its reusable glass bottles in his honor and emphasizing that it is meant "for water only" (Foley, 2021).

Doing this, both cases show that brands utilize RTM to interact with consumers in real-time and to connect their brand to hotly debated topics on social media (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 832). Incorporating these timely moments into brand messages enhances their connectedness with the audience, driving desirable consumer responses (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 836). As stated before, Instagram allows for both verbal and visual elements in posts (Lim & Childs, 2020, p. 34), therefore the integration of these moments is visually orientated. With this, brands establish an even deeper connection with events unfolding in people's lives, reinforcing the relevance and impact of their messages (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 836).

Overall, RTM allows brands to engage with consumers in real-time, aligning their messages with ongoing conversations and events to maintain relevance and drive meaningful connections on platforms like Instagram. It is a familiar practice within marketing, however, due to social media, it has sparked a renewed interest in RTM from practitioners, enabling new research opportunities (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 830). It is therefore worthwhile to analyze it from the perspective of storytelling, particularly since storytelling and RTM both can establish an identity with customers; both strategies enable the identification of customers through real-time events and storytelling components like character, setting, and plot. The creative determinants that will be described in the next section can be used to explain how these storytelling elements are covered in RTM content.

2.5. RTM's Creative Determinants

The following paragraphs present creative determinants that should be analyzed in the realm of storytelling. By examining how storytelling can integrate both divergent and relevant elements, brands can create more engaging and memorable advertisements that capture attention and resonate with consumers. This discussion will explore these creative determinants to provide insights into crafting RTM content.

2.5.1. Divergence and Relevance

Divergence and relevance are essential in the creation of advertisements (Chavadi et al., 2020, p. 270). Divergence refers to the degree to which advertising elements – like brand promotions through storytelling – are fresh, unique, and distinctive for customers (Chavadi et al., 2020, p. 270; Jiang et al., 2023, p. 274). Indicators are originality, flexibility, elaboration, synthesis, and artistic value, and are perceived to be conceptual dimensions of divergence in the advertising context (Chavadi et al., 2020, p. 271). Ad-to-consumer, brand-to-consumer, and ad-to-brand value are the factors that determine relevance, which is described as the degree to which advertising aspects are applicable, acceptable, beneficial, and valuable for customers (Chavadi et al., 2020, p. 271; Jiang et al., 2023, p. 274). The value in marketing, here, results from storytelling as the products people buy and sell are simply the props in the brand story – tangible manifestations of the brand's promises (Mills, 2023, p. 1239).

Considering storytelling, divergent stories are crucial for capturing consumers' attention due to the novel, original, and different advertising elements (Jiang et al., 2023, p. 275). Therefore, divergent stories contribute to a distinctive and memorable brand experience which is about the customer-brand interaction providing an enjoyable experience for their customers (Beig & Nika, 2019, p. 411). While divergence captures attention, relevant stories ensure a meaningful connection with the audience as they resonate with their needs, interests, and values (Jiang et al., 2023, p. 275). Therefore, divergence and relevance should be balanced when incorporated into the previously outlined storytelling elements.

However, RTM tends to contain relevant rather than divergent content (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 19). Namely, the urgency to align with real-time events may sometimes lead to a focus on creating content that is contextually relevant but might lack the novel and distinctive elements associated with divergence (Mazerant et al., 2021; Chavadi et al., 2020). This presents a limitation of RTM that is worth analyzing as contextually appropriate content may lack the creativity and originality needed to stand out, especially considering the fast communication and huge amount of content on Instagram as discussed in the introduction of this research. Therefore, divergence and relevance will be considered when analyzing how brands incorporate storytelling elements in advertising campaigns to connect with their audience in real-time on Instagram.

2.5.2. Ad Novelty, Message Usefulness, and Ad-consumer Association

Feng and Xie (2019) discuss divergence and relevance within ad creativity in terms of ad novelty, message usefulness, and ad-consumer association. Ad novelty can be defined as the extent to which novel ad executions differ from consumers' expectations and include elements like freshness, unexpectedness, and distinctiveness (Feng & Xie, 2019, p. 910). This novelty might appear in the way the advertisement is executed as well as in its brand components, stimulating consumers' curiosity to figure out the message – or story – and producing satisfying reactions once they do (Feng & Xie, 2019, p. 912). Therefore, it aligns with divergence. Message usefulness, corresponding to meaningfulness, entails providing useful product information that contributes to the audience's understanding of the product. This usefulness defines the structure and purpose of ad generation, facilitating audience attention and brand information processing (Feng & Xie, 2019, p. 913). Moreover, ad-consumer association indicates the connection between a creative ad and its target audience in terms of reflecting the extent to which the target audience can relate to and identify with the advertisement (Feng & Xie, 2019, p. 909). Thus, together with message usefulness, it aligns with the relevancy of ad creativity. This knowledge adds to the literature on divergence and relevance, providing an extra scope to examine the incorporation of storytelling elements in RTM-based advertising campaigns. Doing this, the degree to which these elements are balanced is worth analyzing.

Namely, literature shows that stories must integrate divergence and relevance – including ad novelty, message usefulness, and ad-consumer association – in a balanced way (Feng & Xie, 2019; Jiang et al., 2023). Too much divergence without relevance may result in creative content that fails to resonate with the target audience (Jiang et al., 2023, p. 275). On the other hand, high relevance without divergence may lead to content that is conventional and easily overlooked (Jiang et al., 2023, p. 275). The balance between both ensures that creative content captures attention while remaining meaningful and valuable to the target audience (Jiang et al., 2023, p. 275). This, again, presents that the right balance between divergence and relevance is crucial for crafting impactful advertisements that engage and resonate with consumers that, in turn, deliver the brand's story through RTM on Instagram.

2.5.3. Incongruity

The discussion of incongruity is another area to expand on in the previously outlined literature. As previously said, divergence describes how fresh, unique, and distinctive an advertisement is. This fits with the idea of using incongruity, a concept to subvert pre-

existing story schemas (Houghton, 2021, p. 1265). Schemas refer to cognitive frameworks that enable individuals to interpret and contextualize new information based on past experiences (Houghton, 2021, p. 1265). A higher level of cognitive processing is triggered when brand narratives convey information that is inconsistent with already established schemas (Houghton, 2021, p. 1265). When brands cover incongruent elements within their content, it is essential, again, to balance this. Namely, a modest level of incongruity can effectively capture consumers' attention, stimulate sophisticated thinking, and evoke profound responses from them, whereas extreme incongruity may overwhelm them (Houghton, 2021, p. 1266). Brands can integrate this by making storytelling elements – like character, setting, and plot – incongruent. In the context of RTM, for instance, this can be done by relating unpredictable events to one's brand, hereby providing fresh material, new subject combinations, and subverting already-published stories. This literature on incongruent storytelling elements adheres to the essence of brand storytelling as outlined before. This lies in its ability to create clutter-breaking content that resonates with relevance and impact (Nhedzi et al., 2023, p. 69). In other words, the ability to create balanced incongruent content that is both divergent and relevant.

These ad creativity determents contribute to the theoretical lens through which to analyze the RTM-based advertising campaigns on Instagram. How this is done, is outlined in the methodological chapter that follows.

2.6. Conclusion

In summary, this chapter presents an in-depth overview of theories and previous research that are relevant to storytelling and RTM, all contributing to the analysis of how brands incorporate storytelling elements in advertising campaigns to connect with their audience in real-time on Instagram. Besides the exploration of storytelling and its marketing scope, this chapter provides a theoretical lens that guides this research. This lens includes the key storytelling elements – character, setting, and plot – which are complemented by sub-concepts like identification, time, location, goal, obstacle, solution, and the villain-hero-victim paradigm (Houghton, 2021; Stone, 2018). This research will assess how these concepts contribute to creating brand stories that connect with audiences in real-time on Instagram, presenting the foundation of the operationalization. This will be further explained in section 3.3.

Additionally, after an extensive discussion of RTM, this chapter adds a layer to the theoretical lens aiming to investigate whether the content stands out from others. This

encompasses the creative determinants – divergence and relevance – and their supporting sub-concepts originality, elaboration, incongruity, ad-to-consumer, brand-to-consumer, and ad-to-brand value, and vividness. These will also be further explored in section 3.3.

By applying the theoretical lens in this chapter, this study aims to provide insights into RTM-based advertising campaigns on Instagram, highlighting how brands can leverage storytelling to forge meaningful and lasting connections with their audience. The next chapter discusses the method through which this is done.

3. Method

The following section will present the qualitative research design of this thesis, including the data collection, sampling, operationalization, and data analysis, all to examine the incorporation of storytelling elements in RTM-based content on Instagram.

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative research design is employed. This method emphasizes non-numerical data in data collection and analysis, supports an inductive approach to theory and research, and represents the notion that social reality is an ever-evolving emergent quality of individual production (Bryman, 2016, p. 385). It focuses on the part of data that gives meaning when detailed information is needed (Boeije, 2010, p. 94). This is done through a content analysis of Instagram content, including both the captions and visual images of advertising campaigns based on RTM, allowing for the investigation of textual and visual elements that might cover storytelling elements.

Moreover, this research design focuses on Instagram posts that are RTM-based. These posts are published by brands that have proven to be a good practice of RTM, i.e. leading brands that have used RTM well to promote themselves on Instagram. These brands are selected based on desk research. Initially, marketing websites, blog posts, and other online sources that compile and display data on top brands in real-time marketing are looked for online (e.g., Deshet Creatives & Marketing, 2023; Ślęzak, 2022; Zieliński, 2023). Special attention is given to industry publications, marketing reports, and social media analytics platforms, which often highlight brands demonstrating excellence in RTM. The aim was to create an extensive long list of brands that regularly use RTM on Instagram. This desk research approach ensured that the selection process was based on reliable and current sources, providing a strong basis for analyzing their Instagram posts and starting the data collection.

Based on the desk research, a long list of 17 brands was created. For these brands, their Dutch Instagram accounts were identified. The reason for focusing on Dutch Instagram accounts is to ensure familiarity with the cultural and geographical context in which the RTM content appears. Given that RTM content responds to timely and contextually relevant events (Mazerant et al., 2021; Willemsen et al., 2018), the audience needs to understand the specific context. Therefore, as the researcher of this master thesis is Dutch, analyzing Dutch RTM content is most appropriate to ensure proper interpretation of the context.

After identifying the Dutch Instagram accounts, 11 brands remained. These Instagram accounts were analyzed for RTM content. Primarily, seven brands were found to have RTM content on their Instagram pages. However, this content mostly covered seasonal events, i.e. predictable moments, whereas through RTM, brands can interact with events through two distinct kinds of moments: predictable and unpredictable moments (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 829). To ensure comprehensive analysis, the Instagram pages were re-examined to cover both types of moments. This is done according to purposive sampling which is outlined in the following section. Ultimately, three brands – Bol, HEMA, and IKEA – were found to interact with both predictable and unpredictable moments in their RTM content. Therefore, these three brands were selected for further research. Details of the initial long list of brands, the selection steps, and the search terms used are presented in *Appendix A*.

3.2. Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

3.2.1. Sampling

This thesis works with purposive sampling. This type of sampling is about the selection of units with direct reference to the research question of this thesis (Bryman, 2016, p. 415). This allowed for the selection of Instagram posts from the brands from the long list that have published RTM-based advertising campaigns on the platform, fitting the RTM criteria in the given timeframe. The criteria were as follows.

First, it is ensured the RTM content on the Instagram pages covers both predictable and unpredictable moments. During the selection of the brands, this was already confirmed. This allowed for the integration of holidays, seasonal events, scheduled public events, trending themes, viral material, and breaking news (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 829). Second, these posts should be aligned with current events or trending topics. This includes captions and visuals related to events like these in the posts. The visuals entail images and their additional captions only – considering the given time, this research excludes videos to ensure sufficient attention is given to the analysis of the captions and visuals.

Lastly, the brand's RTM content is analyzed based on one of the content characteristics as outlined by Willemsen et al. (2018): moment-driven visuals. These refer to visual material connecting to the public event (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 836). This visual imagination makes the brand images 'vivid', allowing for the involvement of representational richness of media content. The message connects with events taking place in people's lives at that very moment by fusing the present with the image. Research

demonstrates that the audience must connect with a brand's message to be effective (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 836). A wide range of desirable customer responses that correspond with what is happening in the lives of consumers are strongly driven by this connectedness. In other words, the vividness of the posts refers to the ability of the content to depict a situation in ways that approximate reality. Based on this, the brands' Instagram accounts are scanned for having appropriate RTM material.

The content is gathered from March 2022 to March 2024. This is because, over these two years, several predictable moments have recurred, and unpredictable occasions have passed, allowing businesses to demonstrate their adaptability and responsiveness in RTM in various situations. In other words, many events might have given the brands the chance to create RTM to promote themselves.

3.2.2. Data Collection

Based on the purposive sampling procedure and adherence to the specified criteria, it is ensured that the three brands – Bol, HEMA, and IKEA – have posted sufficient data that can be selected to examine how brands incorporate storytelling elements in advertising campaigns to connect with their audience in real-time on Instagram.

As stated before, the Dutch Instagram accounts of the brands are selected. Therefore, the sample consists of Dutch content only, showing similarities between the published RTM due to the same cultural and geographical context. Additionally, the international accounts of the brands show that the emphasis lies on product promotions solely, resulting in fewer RTMs being present. In contrast, the Dutch accounts regularly participate in RTM activities, which is consistent with the brand's overall aim to interact with its audience in real-time and profit from hot events and themes.

This focus on the Netherlands may restrict the scope of the findings. However, since the companies are good practices of RTM, it is anticipated that the findings will be relevant and, consequently, applicable to brands using RTM in an international context. The value of good practices can be found in their ability to guide which brands should be used as a case study, i.e. a detailed study of the concerned unit of analysis (Priya, 2020, p. 95). In a case study, the focus is on a contextual study, which is of high value in this research considering that RTM is all about responding to and operating in timely relevant contexts. The adherence to good practices ensures that the selected case studies are not only representative but also provide relevant insights into the incorporation of storytelling elements in RTM on Instagram.

The collection of data is done manually, analyzing the Instagram accounts of the chosen brands. RTM posts published in the given timeframe are saved using Instagram's feature that allows users to store posts in personal folders on their accounts. Each brand got a separate folder, after which the captions were copied and pasted into a created Excel file, including the brand's name, the post's theme (e.g. "Summer" or "Song Festival"), and the date. The visuals were downloaded using the online Instagram Photo Downloader "Toolzu" which allows for saving Instagram photos from any public account to one's device so they can be consumed offline too. Consequently, the visuals are stored per brand, including the same information as the captions. Both are saved on the cloud, to ensure there is a backup.

The gathered data consisted of 34 posts of Bol, 57 posts of HEMA, and 37 posts of IKEA. Therefore, a second analysis of HEMA's posts was conducted, and the most moment-driven ones – those with captions and images that best complemented one another as well as current events and trending topics – were selected. This resulted in 35 posts of HEMA, eventually resulting in a sample of 106 RTM-based Instagram posts which were analyzed on storytelling. This number is considered sufficient as it entails various themes and events, ensuring a comprehensive representation of different RTM strategies. Besides, this sample size allows for a detailed qualitative analysis, enabling an in-depth understanding of storytelling in RTM content within the given time.

3.3. Operationalization

The storytelling elements as outlined in the theoretical framework guide this research. The 106 RTM-based Instagram posts were analyzed on the presented elements to examine their incorporation into the advertising campaigns on the platform. These elements will also be analyzed through the creative determinants. The operationalization of this research is presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

First, Table 1 shows the operationalization of the key storytelling elements. It thereby translates the theoretical concepts of storytelling elements so they can guide this research. Here, the key elements from the theoretical framework are character, setting, and plot. They are identified and categorized, giving them theoretical embedded indicators (i.e. sub-concepts). Additionally, data examples are presented to clarify how the elements are operationalized. Together, they provide a theoretical lens to conduct the data analysis, investigating their role in RTM-based advertising campaigns on Instagram.

This lens provides the foundation for the primary research categories, resulting from concept-driven coding during the thematic analysis (Boeije, 2010, p. 115). Characters in the

posts will be identified based on the theoretical understanding of consumers relating to characters in a story and, consequently, give meaning to brands and products (Houghton, 2021, p. 1266). During the analysis, any new types of characters that emerge will be noted and categorized, allowing for the discovery of unforeseen character roles that contribute to storytelling in RTM. The setting will be coded according to predefined categories such as time, location, season, or specific events (Houghton, 2021, p. 1267). These categories help to frame the context in which the story takes place. New settings or contextual elements that are not initially considered will be identified and included in the analysis, providing a richer understanding of how settings are incorporated into RTM content.

Lastly, the plot will be coded based on categories such as goal, obstacle, solution, villain, and hero (Houghton, 2021; Stone, 2018). These categories help in identifying the narrative structure of the posts. Any new narrative elements or plot structures that are examined during the analysis will be recorded and incorporated, allowing for a comprehensive view of how plots are constructed in RTM content. By combining concept-driven coding with open coding, the analysis ensures that the theoretical concepts are systematically applied while remaining flexible to new insights and patterns.

Table 1

Operationalization of Storytelling elements

Overarching Concept	Key Concept	Definition	Sub-Concepts	Data Example
Storytelling Elements	Character	Personality in the post with whom consumers can identify (Houghton, 2021).	Identification (Houghton, 2021).	The post introduces a relatable character that engages with the brand's products or services during the public event.
	Setting	Surroundings within the post that appear in time and location (Houghton, 2021).	Time (Houghton, 2021).	The post is carefully timed, being in occurrence with the real-time event.
			Location (Houghton, 2021).	The post places local things within the broader context of a real-time event.
	Plot	The topic within the post that is presented through the goal, obstacle, and solution (Houghton, 2021).	Goal (Houghton, 2021).	The post presents a relatable goal for consumers related to the public event.
			Obstacle (Houghton, 2021); Villain (Stone, 2018).	The post introduces a potential challenge resulting from the real-time event.
			Solution (Houghton, 2021); Hero (Stone, 2018).	The post presents the brand as a solution to the potential challenge resulting from the real-time event.

Furthermore, Table 2 outlines the creative determinants – divergence and relevance –, defining them and making them applicable to the RTM content to examine whether it is contextually relevant, creative, and original. This is because, as written in the theoretical framework, the RTM content of Bol, HEMA, and IKEA on Instagram needs to stand out from others considering the fast communication and the huge amount of content on the platform. The theoretical embedded sub-concepts are presented, even as data examples to clarify how the operationalization is applied to conduct this research.

Table 2

Operationalization of the Creative Determinants to Analyze the RTM Content

Overarching Concept	Key Concept	Definition	Sub-Concepts	Data Example
Storytelling	Divergence	The degree to which advertising elements are fresh, unique, and distinctive for customers (Jiang et al., 2023); Ad novelty (Feng & Xie, 2019).	Originality (Jiang et al., 2023).	The post presents limited-edition products that relate to a real-time event.
			Elaboration (Jiang et al., 2023).	The post elaborates on a public event by promoting its brand.
			Breaking out of a preexisting scheme (Mazerant et al., 2021); Incongruity (Houghton, 2021).	The post introduces a product as a solution to an unexpected challenge related to a real-time event.
	Relevance	The degree to which advertising aspects are acceptable, beneficial, and valuable for customers (Jiang et al., 2023); Message usefulness, Ad-consumer association (Feng & Xie, 2019).	Ad-to-consumer value (Chavadi et al., 2020, Jiang et al., 2023).	The post adds value to consumers by highlighting exclusive discounts tied to the event.
			Brand-to-consumer value (Chavadi et al., 2020, Jiang et al., 2023).	The post addresses consumer needs, enhancing their experiences linked to a public event that demands the brand's solution.
			Ad-to-brand value (Chavadi et al., 2020, Jiang et al., 2023).	The post promotes its brand that aligns with the event, showcasing its products being relevant to that context.
			Vividness (Willemsen et al., 2018).	The post captures the essence of a real-time event by featuring the brand's product in a visually appealing setting.

3.4. Data Analysis

Instagram is chosen as a research context for this study, given its focus on real-time content production and content sharing. The platform is text- and picture-based (Wahid et al., 2022, p. 109), which is why this study has conducted thematic analysis and visual analysis. Thematic analysis and visual analysis allow for the examination of the captions and

images. In this way, the brand messages can be examined while ensuring nothing is overlooked. The following sections will explain how the analyses are employed.

3.4.1. Thematic Analysis

First, thematic analysis is used to analyze the textual content of this thesis: the captions. This process finds, examines, and summarizes patterns - or themes - in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It allows for the interpretation of various aspects of the research topic and will be carried out in three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). First, open coding involves creating and renaming data points that are pertinent to the research issue before using them as beginning codes (Boeije, 2010, p. 96). This resulted in 86 open codes. These codes are presented in *Appendix B*.

Furthermore, the codes were simplified and grouped into more inclusive groups in the second step, known as axial coding (Boeije, 2010, p. 108). This resulted in 62 sub-codes, grouped into eight categories. This is presented in *Appendix C*. The coding was mainly data-driven, with labels added after the data had been analyzed. Moreover, the operationalization of this thesis lays the groundwork for concept-driven coding. According to Boeije (2010), these are the primary research categories for which thorough descriptions are given (p. 115). The last phase, known as selective coding, involves identifying the primary themes and analyzing the connections among them (Boeije, 2010, p. 114). The research aimed to find recurring patterns and give these meanings, which allowed to draw relevant conclusions for answering the research question of this thesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). This resulted in five main themes, including four sub-themes. These are complemented by the visual analysis.

3.4.2. Visual Analysis

Second, visual analysis is conducted to analyze the visual content of the Instagram posts. This is done to define the communication, convey its meaning, and establish a connection between the content and its environment (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 21). The meanings of the visuals are examined with visual analysis as this allows for the investigation of explicit and implicit meanings that lie within them (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 31). The explicit meaning refers to the denotation of the visual, which is about describing the events, places, and things, whereas the implicit meaning refers to the connotation of the visual. This is about the cultural associations that viewers attribute to the visual elements presented in an image (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 39). Therefore, the implicit level is about the subjective

and interpretative aspects of how people perceive the visual. These are guided by three connotators – objects, setting, and salience (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 51). These are presented in Table 3, including their definitions, sub-concepts, and examples from the data.

The connotations, i.e. meanings, of the visuals are clarified by paying close attention to details and being aware of larger settings of the images (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 32). This makes it possible to analyze visual components such as facial expressions, gestures, and backgrounds as these are likely to evoke memories of the real world in viewers, facilitating their emotional experiences (Lim & Childs, 2020, p. 37). The interpreted meanings are reflected in the theory as provided in the theoretical framework and operationalization.

Table 3

Operationalization of Connotators

Connotators	Definition	Sub-concepts	Data Example
Objects	Attributes that connote ideas, values, and actions (Machin & Mayr, 2012).	Materiality, symBolism, iconography.	The attributes work together to represent or relate to a real-time event.
Setting	Positioning of elements to connote discourses and their values, identities, and actions (Machin & Mayr, 2012).	Emptiness, lighting, gaze.	The empty setting results in the visual being presented in a meme format, highlighting the humorous approach.
Salience	Features in compositions made to stand out, to draw attention. A central symBolic value in the composition (Machin & Mayr, 2012).	Cultural symBols, size, color, tone, focus, foregrounding, overlapping.	The foregrounded text emphasizes to what real-time event the visual refers.

Most of the patterns identified by the thematic analysis and the visual analysis overlapped. Nonetheless, based on the connotations, 54 visuals revealed storytelling of which two additional main code categories were identified. This complementation of the connotations into the main themes and sub-themes is presented in *Appendix C*, eventually resulting in 10 main categories and 69 sub-codes.

Once the thematic analysis and visual analysis were done, the findings of both analyses were merged and linked to the theory. This resulted in six main themes and seven sub-themes. These are presented in Chapter 4 and will help to examine how brands

incorporate storytelling elements in advertising campaigns to connect with their audience in real-time on Instagram.

3.5. Reliability and Validity

The credibility of this study is assessed through careful interpretation of data and adherence to rigorous academic standards. As Seale (2004) states, credibility in research does not equate to an absolute 'truth' but rather to a careful scholarship that attends to the logical connections between claims and evidence (in Silverman, 2011, p. 360). This perspective acknowledges that research is always evolving and that conclusions drawn may be further developed or refuted over time, therefore it applies to this research considering the timely relevant RTM context.

To ensure reliability, which Kirk and Miller (1986, in Silverman, 2011, p. 360) define as the degree to which findings are independent of accidental circumstances, transparency in the research process is crucial. This involves detailed descriptions of data collection methods, including sampling, operationalization of theoretical concepts, and the mode of data collection, each outlined in previous paragraphs. Moreover, self-reflexivity is essential to acknowledge the potential biases that a researcher's background and experiences might introduce. In this research, potential biases may occur considering the researcher's cultural and geographical position which is the same as those of the analyzed brands. Therefore, critical reflection is required, considering personal perspectives that might shape the analysis.

Additionally, the validity, i.e. the extent to which the findings accurately represent the social phenomena under study (Hammersley, in Silverman, 2011, p. 367), is ensured by employing triangulation. This involves using multiple theories or methods to examine the subject of the study. Thus, considering this research, this involves multiple theoretical approaches to storytelling, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of all different elements (as presented in Figure 1), and thematic and visual analysis to examine both textual and visual data. This adds depth and rigor to the research, ensuring the results are a well-rounded representation of the incorporation of storytelling elements into RTM-based campaigns on Instagram.

Together, this ensures the analysis is thorough while considering all relevant data, and accounts for variations within the data, thereby enhancing the overall validity of the research findings which are presented in the following chapter.

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of this research about the incorporation of storytelling elements into RTM-based advertising campaigns on Instagram by the brands Bol, HEMA, and IKEA. The study identified six main themes – Persona Profiling (P.P.), Comedic Creativity (C.C.), Brand Identity Integration (B.I.I.), Entertaining Solution Messaging (E.S.M.), Relatable Action Narratives (R.A.N.), and Narrative Embedding (N.E.) – each contributing to insights revealing how storytelling is employed in RTM posts on Instagram, i.e. captions and visuals. Seven sub-themes accompany these themes, and each is supported with several data examples from the analyzed data set.

4.1. Contextuality of the Data Set

The dataset comprises various content types including seasonal events, weather updates, news topics, national events, TikTok trends, and cultural excesses. *Appendix E* presents an overview of the frequency of each type of content in the data set. This overview shows that seasonal events have the highest content coverage. A reason for this might be that they are predictable and, therefore, can be planned, resulting in more frequent appearances in RTM campaigns.

Moreover, the overview presents a mix of predictable and unpredictable events, ensuring the content remains relevant and engaging, allowing brands to interact with events (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 17; Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 829). In other words, the brands in this research integrate their marketing materials within current social and cultural contexts. These contexts encompass the audience's common understanding and digital literacy, both being essential for published RTM posts. Specifically, brands exploit the context of RTM postings to engage with the audience through a familiar medium (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 15; Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 194). This is the RTM content, i.e. the collective knowledge about events, trends, and people. Because it demonstrates their common understanding, this fosters a relationship and, more importantly, an insider feeling between the brand and its audience. As a result, brands build upon this base when incorporating their products and services.

Furthermore, the data indicates that IKEA provides a greater amount of both localized and international content. The localized content primarily targets the Dutch audience, while the international posts include contexts and product promotions that may be used for different markets. Bol and HEMA focus more on Dutch-specific content. Besides, the brands adopt an informal stance toward the people, subjects, and audiences they discuss.

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By doing this, the brands connect the audience to extraordinary and regular events in a mundane way, making them seem normal and relatable. In other words, the brands aim to humanize their content, in which storytelling elements play a significant role. Therefore, the data set of this research is unique, presenting a novel approach that creates a sense of involvement and familiarity, transforming mundane subjects into shared experiences that resonate with the audience while bundling them into RTM content.

4.2. Persona Profiling (P.P.): The Presentation of Relatable Characters within RTM Contexts.

The first theme, Persona Profiling (P.P.), portrays relatable characters within RTM contexts, aiming to foster a sense of identification and connection between the audience and the brand. By presenting characters in various forms, the brands align themselves with the interests, aspirations, and values of their target audience which they want to engage with through RTM posts on Instagram. The RTM approach allows for the incorporation of characters as current events present characters themselves and present situations in which characters can be placed. Characters serve as a mediator to convey a message to the audience as well as a point of reference and topic for jokes. They also help to humanize the content. P.P. results from both the thematic and visual analysis, in which the captions are used to point directly to or cover the persona's name, and the visuals directly or indirectly portray them or use texts to refer to or name the persona. The thematic analysis revealed sub-themes 1 and 3; the visual analysis complemented this with sub-theme 2.

In P.P., characters are used to let consumers relate to them and, in turn, give meaning to brands and products purchased (Houghton, 2021, p. 1266). This establishes a bond between the customer and the character through emotional resonances with brand values, i.e. the touch points to the consumers' lives (Lund et al., 2018, p. 274). These emotional connections allow for the communication of values and the establishment of distinctive identities by the brands (Woodside, 2010, p. 532).

It might be expected that characters are present in every RTM post that contains storytelling considering the three fundamental elements in storytelling: character, setting, and plot. However, this is not the case as forms of identification and relatability appear to be created using events and quotes, too. This will be further explored in theme 5. Thus, P.P. encapsulates the storytelling approach of leveraging relatable characters that resonate with their target demographic, fostering a connection between the brand and the customers.

The analyzed data shows a variety of characters that are used to reach the goals as also described in the theoretical framework. Characters appear as celebrities such as Will Smith, customer personas like family members and festival visitors, and fictional characters such as Princess Peach. These different forms are further explored in the following sub-themes of P.P. including examples from the data set: (1) Celebrity Integration, (2) Demographic Depiction, and (3) Imaginative Impersonation.

4.2.1. Celebrity Integration

The first sub-theme, Celebrity Integration, covers the portrayal of well-known people in the RTM content brands post on Instagram. These well-known people differ from influencers and actors to singers and politicians. In this sub-theme, the characters are presented in such a way they align with the brand values and messaging for both purchase intent and entertainment. This can be seen in posts that cover celebrities while also naming specific products and their prices, and the jokes that are made about or towards celebrities. By using celebrities as characters in the brand's stories that are told within the RTM context, brands aim to leverage the popularity and influence of celebrities to enhance their messaging and appeal to a broader audience. By associating themselves with well-known figures, brands capitalize on existing fan bases and cultural relevance to amplify their brand message. Besides, presenting celebrities results in familiarity among the brand's audiences which, in turn, creates personification or anthropomorphism. This is essential in storytelling as it creates positive effects on both internal and external brand perceptions (Hutson, 2012, in Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 699). The data set shows multiple examples that cover this sub-theme of which three are presented in Table 4 and explained in the text that follows.

Table 4

Data Examples Sub-Theme 1.1: Celebrity Integration.

Content/Brand	Bol	HEMA	IKEA
Visual			
Caption	En de Oscar gaat naar...	Voor je het weet lees je een nulletje te veel voor tijdens de troonrede!	@joostklein wat ons betreft zitten die 12 points al in de tas. Lycka till! 🎤🇳🇱 #europapa #joostklein
Translation	And the Oscar goes to...	Before you know it, you're reading one zero too many during the throne speech!	@joostklein as far as we're concerned, those 12 points are already in the bag. Lycka till! 🎤🇳🇱 #europapa #joostklein

In the first example, Bol humorously tackles the Oscars of 2022 by depicting Will Smith as a character who purchased Bol. It represents a bad review written by Smith, stemming from his dislike for Chris Rock and the infamous slap. Consequently, the post crafts a micro-story using wordplay to react to the unfolding real-time incident in which both Smith and Rock are used as characters and topics for jokes. As the post divers from the norm, it offers an original and incongruent approach to elaborating on this public event. In terms of relevance, it provides ad-to-consumer value by entertaining the audience and contributing to Bol's brand identity.

The second example shows how HEMA nods to Prince's Day in the Netherlands when the King delivers the throne speech. HEMA joins the festivities by humorously pointing to the King so as not to overlook the fine print, offering reading glasses as a solution. The King of the Netherlands is therefore used as a character to point the sarcastic message to while promoting HEMA glasses. The reading glasses become an unexpected solution to the challenges of Prince's Day, adding an incongruent twist. Additionally, the post offers value to consumers by humorously showcasing HEMA's reading glasses, alongside promoting the brand within the context of Prince's Day. Though the visual lacks vividness

due to its meme format, it contributes to HEMA's brand identity while engaging with the event's humor.

In the third example, IKEA links its iconic shopping bag to a current trend: Joost Klein's standout outfit, worn by the Dutch Eurovision candidate himself, therefore presenting him as a character linked to IKEA. Joost crafts an engaging narrative around his song, with his clothing playing a pivotal role. Recognizing an opportunity to join the conversation, IKEA weaves its product into Joost's storyline, shaping its bag to mirror this character's distinctive clothing. This results in a micro-story centered around Joost, unfolding against the backdrop of his song's release and the Eurovision in Sweden, also the country where IKEA is based. By aligning its offering with Joost's persona in a playful manner, IKEA not only entertains its audience but also subtly promotes its product. Doing this by shaping the product like Joost's suit is original as it breaks out of the existing scheme of general product promotions, therefore being incongruent. The entertaining approach of the visual – rather than the promotional aim – shows ad-to-brand value as it is beneficial for IKEA's brand identity.

Thus, the Celebrity Integration sub-theme refers to the data that is about the use of celebrity endorsements in RTM content, aiming to use them as storytelling characters and figures to whom a story or message can be referred. It is a dominant sub-theme of P.P., appearing the most compared to the other sub-themes while being used to hop on current topics relating to celebrities.

4.2.2. Demographic Depiction

The second sub-theme, Demographic Depiction, is about the usage of general characters within RTM content on Instagram. This means characters people encounter in daily life such as family members and friends, but also festival visitors and colleagues. By aligning the content with specific customer personas, brands show they understand the diverse audience needs, preferences, and behaviors while resonating with different segments of their audience. In turn, the different customer personas, i.e. the various demographics, are used to make narratives approachable for everyone as they resonate with the diverse interests and experiences of their target audience. This results in the audience relating to and recognizing the depicted characters, allowing them to give meaning to brands and products purchased (Houghton, 2021, p. 1266). In Table 5, there are two examples from the data set provided.

Table 5

Data Examples Sub-Theme 1.2: Demographic Depiction

Content/Brand	1. Bol	2. IKEA
Visual		
Caption	Laat maar, ik drink mijn overgebleven knakworstsap wel op 🌭	Gefeliciteerd aan alle twintigers die bijna met pensioen mogen. 🎉 #schrikkeljaar
Translation	Never mind, I'll just drink my leftover hot dog juice 🌭	Congratulations to all the twenty-somethings who are almost retiring. 🎉 #leapyear

In the first example, the depicted sarcastic exchange mirrors a common Lowlands scenario relatable to festival visitors. In this scenario, an identifiable character emerges – the Lowlands visitor who finds themselves shelling out exorbitant amounts for bad food. The high prices and poor quality of the food serve as the primary obstacles, though no solution is presented within the visual narrative. What sets this visual apart is its sarcastic take on the relatable experiences encountered at Lowlands, lending it a unique and original flavor compared to typical event-related content. While the situation depicted may be familiar, the delivery injects freshness into the narrative. Besides, the post provides value to consumers by offering entertainment and a shared experience, particularly for those who have attended similar festivals. Additionally, it contributes to the brand identity of Bol by aligning with the humorous tone and relatability associated with the event, thereby enhancing its ad-to-brand value.

In the second example, IKEA uses Leap Day's quirk of aging where individuals born on February 29th only celebrate their birthdays every four years as an event to present to identifiable characters. Namely, the post wishes the grandma a happy birthday on behalf of the grandchild. The inclusion of these family members makes the situation relatable, especially to those who have relatives, particularly grandparents, born on Leap Day. Since a

price tag or product promotion is excluded, this relatability raises the entertainment value for the audience and concentrates more on making people laugh than on promoting a product. Breaking from the norm, the visual cleverly delves into the Leap Day phenomenon, departing from traditional product-centric promotions. While the joke itself is not entirely original, as many brands use similar themes, the execution might still be entertaining. IKEA's playful take on Leap Day showcases its humorous side, positioning itself as a brand or character that connects with the audience through relatable humor. This contributes to IKEA's brand identity, adding value through humor rather than direct product promotion, thereby enhancing its ad-to-brand value.

In conclusion, the sub-theme of Demographic Depiction features generic characters presented in an RTM setting, which makes them extremely accessible to viewers in terms of their own experiences as customers and those of others they know. The sub-theme is less apparent than Celebrity Integration, though still being a frequently used theme within the RTM content.

4.2.3. Imaginative Impersonation

The last sub-theme of P.P., Imaginative Impersonation, covers the data that integrates fictional characters within the RTM content. These fictional characters differ from the film- and series-characters such as Barbie and Ken, to seasonal figures such as Santa Claus and random, non-human characters such as a unicorn. The aim of these figures is like the ones discussed in the other sub-themes, namely, to let consumers relate to the character and, subsequently, give meaning to the brand and products covered, too (Houghton, 2021, p. 1266). The fictional characters are used by brands to draw upon universal themes and motifs these characters convey. The inclusion of fictional characters in their content can arouse feelings of nostalgia in consumers, leading to emotional reactions and bonds with their intended audience, therefore making it very effective. Besides, in storytelling, fiction does not cause incredibility as audiences enjoy both fictional and non-fictional elements that construct a narrative (Ben Youssef et al., 2018, p. 699). The reason for this might be the playfulness of the content, creating memorable brand experiences, and enhancing brand personality. Data examples that show Imaginative Impersonation are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Data Examples Sub-Theme 1.3: Imaginative Impersonation

Content/Brand	1. IKEA	2. IKEA
Visual		
Caption	Extra hulp nodig voor de feestdagen? Draaien wij onze hand niet voor om. #IKEA #IKEANederland #Wednesdayaddams #Wednesday	Met de bovenste knoop los. 😴 #VINTERFINT #feestdagen #dineren
Translation	Need extra help for the holidays? We've got you covered. #IKEA #IKEANetherlands #Wednesdayaddams #Wednesday	With the top button undone. 😴 #VINTERFINT #holidays #dining

The first example presents the setting of the Netflix Series "Wednesday," featuring the character Wednesday Adams and her pet, Thing – a disembodied hand. IKEA incorporates its decoration hand as a nod to Thing, bridging the gap between the popular series and its product, serving as a humorous RTM tactic. The text "A Helping Hand" and the December posting date hint at the IKEA version of Thing being useful during the busy holiday season, therefore using the characters to present a fictional solution to the holiday rush. While IKEA's decoration hand cannot provide practical assistance like its fictional counterpart, the visual is meant to entertain by playfully referencing the current trend of the Netflix series while promoting the product. This adds an original twist, making the post stand out amidst the holiday noise. The visual's similarity to the Netflix series captures attention, showcasing IKEA's brand as humorous and in tune with pop culture, thereby enhancing its ad-to-brand value.

The second example shows how IKEA disrupts the typical holiday narrative of overindulgence by portraying its IKEA Santa slumped on the couch, completely stuffed after a Christmas dinner, his hat covering his face. This portrayal of Santa serves as an identifiable character, resonating with anyone who has experienced overeating during the holiday season. The accompanying text further emphasizes the point of view (POV) after a

Christmas dinner, making the scenario even more relatable to the audience. By using the term "POV," IKEA invites viewers to see themselves in Santa's shoes, enhancing the connection and relatability. In addition to the humorous depiction, there's also product promotion through the inclusion of the price tag. This original approach promotes the IKEA Santa decoration while addressing the common issue of overeating during holiday dinners.

Thus, this sub-theme shows that fictional characters, i.e. imaginative impersonation, offer brands a creative form of storytelling. The data reveals this sub-theme less often than Celebrity Integration and Demographic Depiction. However, by utilizing these characters' emotional resonance and cultural significance, brands can engage their audience while tending to communicate their beliefs while promoting their brand through RTM.

To conclude, P.P. plays a dominant role in constructing RTM content on Instagram, covering "character" as the main storytelling element (Houghton, 2021, p. 1267). Audiences can identify with the characters, causing brands to be able to infuse purpose, meaning, and value into their stories. Consequently, brands can humanize the content. This results in compelling stories that forge lasting emotional connections with their audience, driving meaningful connections and positive consumer responses (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 15). Besides, P.P. is important for the story's context as it introduces the character as a storytelling element which, in turn, clarifies the RTM (Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 698). It is noteworthy that the examples illustrating Celebrity Integration and Demographic Depiction highlight the brand's offerings without featuring the celebrity or character directly. Thus, brands use them and the contexts about them to familiarize the content and to interact with the audience while promoting themselves.

4.3. Comedic Creativity (C.C.): The Usage of Humorous Elements in Response to Real-Time Events.

This theme, Comedic Creativity (C.C.), covers humorous elements in response to real-time events. This results from data showing various ways in which humor is implemented in the brand's RTM content, ranging from witty posts that tie current events to brand messaging to humorous advertisements that capitalize on trending topics. C.C. appears in different ways such as wordplay, satire, sarcasm, and playful imagery, all referring to current trends and news, and hotly debated people. C.C. is a dominant pattern in the dataset as almost all data covers this theme. Therefore, it is an important outcome of this research. It results from both the thematic and visual analysis. Both analyses reveal C.C.'s sub-themes,

though, playful imagery appears in the visuals, and wordplay, satire, and sarcasm are included by both.

The usage of humor in RTM content aligns closely with the concept of incongruency. This means the subversion of pre-existing story schemas when storytelling elements introduce incongruent elements (Houghton, 2021, p. 1265). Humor often arises from a perceived incongruity between what is expected and what occurs in the content. In the context of RTM, brands can leverage humor as an incongruent element, allowing for the juxtaposition of unexpected elements or the twisting of familiar situations in surprising ways. By incorporating humor in this manner, brands create clutter-breaking content (Nhedzi et al., 2023, p. 69), playing with the audience's expectations and surprising them with unexpected twists. Ultimately, this approach brings entertaining content that captures attention and engages audiences as a higher level of cognitive processing is triggered when brand narratives convey information that is inconsistent with already established schemas (Houghton, 2021, p. 1265). C.C. can be divided into the following sub-themes: (1) Linguistic Levity, and (2) Satirical Storytelling.

4.3.1. Linguistic Levity

The first sub-theme of C.C., Linguistic Levity, incorporates wordplay and linguistic creativity, such as using puns and rhymes, to engage the audience. By utilizing this sense of linguistic humor, playful captions, and puns in visuals are incorporated, therefore being conveyed by the message (Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 698). This is done to entertain the audience and to show the humoristic nature of the brands. This refers to the usage of the right metaphors which is crucial to developing a storytelling approach that aims to have noticeable results (Simmons, 2002, in Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 698). In the Table 7, two examples are presented.

Table 7

Data Examples Sub-Theme 2.1: Linguistic Levity

Content/Brand	1. HEMA	2. IKEA
Visual	waarom iets crom maken wat recht is? tompouce de enige (r)echte 0.⁹5 HEMA	ELLOVEN Monitorstandaard met lade €19.⁹⁹ KlaDiLaDi* voor een extra lang weekend *Afko voor 'Klap die laptop dicht'
Caption	Trending sinds 1932.💗	Tijd voor een lekker esma'tje op de vrijmibo schat xx 💋 #afko #kladiladi #weekend
Translation	Trending since 1932.💗	Time for a nice 'esma' at the Friday afternoon drinks, darling xx 💋 #shortcut #scribble #weekend

In the first example, HEMA uses wordplay by humorously asking, "Why make something crooked that is straight?" referring to the popular trend in the Netherlands where the traditional tompouce pastry is recreated on a croissant, known as "crompouce." The use of "crom" in the wordplay, deriving from the Dutch word "krom" meaning "crooked," adds to the humor. Continuing with the wordplay, the smaller text humorously asserts "tompouce, the one and only," using "(r)echte", meaning "straight," further highlighting the contrast with the crompouce. This visual stands out for its divergence from the norm, creatively combining the crompouce trend with the HEMA tompouce. By refraining from producing crompouces and instead promoting its famous tompouce through this humorous wordplay, HEMA refuses to follow the trend blindly, showcasing its unique approach through RTM.

The visual serves both entertainment and product promotion purposes, offering ad-to-consumer and brand-to-consumer value. By engaging with the current trend in a humorous manner, HEMA positions itself as a brand that is in tune with contemporary culture. Though the visual lacks vividness due to its meme format and minimalistic composition, its focus on the HEMA tompouce and the humoristic message effectively convey the brand's involvement in the crompouce trend while promoting its product.

In the second example, IKEA highlights the visually emphasized text at the forefront – "KlaDiLaDi" – referring to a Dutch language trend where words are condensed for humor and brevity. This linguistic levity, meaning "close that laptop" to embark on weekend fun, ties into the trend while subtly promoting IKEA's monitor standard. The neutral colors evoke the office environment, harmonizing with both the workplace setting and the promoted product. This enhances the visual's vividness while also aligning with IKEA's brand identity, i.e. its ad-to-brand value. This visually appealing post also covers ad-to-consumer value by entertaining its audience and subtly promoting its product. The prominent price tag further underscores the integration of the RTM trend to promote the IKEA product humorously and originally. Besides, there is an indirectly depicted relatable character, namely the tired employee. This figure symBolizes the anticipation for the weekend and the simple act of closing the laptop. This example is therefore intertwined with the P.P. theme.

These examples of linguistic creativity add to the playful nature of the visuals, engaging the audience with linguistic humor. Linguistic Levity is a dominant sub-theme, aiming to either incongruently promote a product or to joke around a common event while creatively demonstrating the brand's identity.

4.3.2. Satirical Storytelling

The second sub-theme, Satirical Storytelling, employs satire and sarcasm that is used to provide humorous commentary on real-time events. These might be sarcastic responses to news or trends, or using satirical visuals to critique real-time situations, events, or trends humorously. Brands can inject wit and irreverence into their RTM content by utilizing satire and sarcasm. This will engage viewers through comedy and help them see the brand as socially conscious and culturally informed. This strategy not only amuses but also establishes the brand as having a deep comprehension of current events and fashions. In Table 8, data examples covering Satirical Storytelling are presented.

Table 8

Data Examples Sub-Theme 2.2: Satirical Storytelling

Content/Brand	1. Bol	2. Bol	3. HEMA
Visual			
Caption	🐎🐎🐎	HOLY MOLY	Herstel: nog steeds verkrijgbaar.
Translation	🐎🐎🐎	HOLY MOLY	Restatement: still available.

The first two examples are two RTM posts of Bol. They exemplify the Satirical Storytelling sub-theme by employing satire to provide humorous commentary on real-time events. In the first example, Bol satirically comments on recent news in the Netherlands regarding carousel horses at the fair. By presenting hippo tea-holders as a humorous parallel to the animal rights debate, Bol offers a satirical take on the situation, breaking from the conventional coverage one might expect from a web shop like Bol. This approach not only entertains but also establishes Bol as a brand with a nuanced understanding of current events and trends.

Similarly, in the second example, Bol uses satire to address the commonly made joke about the discovery of a new Anaconda in the Amazon. The brand highlights this joke to shame those who make such bad remarks in response to the discovery. The reference to people making these jokes about the Anaconda discovery creates an identifiable character, as many individuals are likely to have made or encountered such jokes. The use of wordplay, with the term "lolbroeken", meaning clowns, containing the word "broek", meaning pants, further emphasizes the joke about closing one's fly. Thus, these two examples show how Bol utilizes sarcasm to contribute to ongoing discussions, offering satirical visuals that criticize current situations humorously.

In the third example can be seen how HEMA employs satirical storytelling by reposting a joke made in 2021 about a blunder in Dutch politics. This year, when Pieter Omtzigt repeated the same mistake, HEMA humorously directed the visual at him with the caption "wrong map, Pieter," alongside an image of a map that can be closed to conceal notes. The visual presents a timely commentary on a recurring issue in Dutch politics, humorously presenting a closable map as a solution to the obstacle of the inadvertent exposure of Pieter's notes. Besides, Pieter serves as an identifiable character with whom people can relate, portraying him as a bit clumsy or messy with his notes. This satirical narrative diverges from the norm by quickly responding to a political mistake and presenting HEMA's product as a solution for avoiding similar errors in the future. The humoristic approach contributes to HEMA's brand identity, adding ad-to-brand value by showcasing the brand's ability to engage with current events in a witty and satirical manner.

These illustrations highlight the important roles of sarcasm and satire in C.C.'s Satirical Storytelling sub-theme. In contrast to Linguistic Levity, the goal is to make jokes about current events rather than promote a product, offering engaging material that complements the brands' identities. The theme that follows is a result of this connection with these identities. This sub-theme is more dominant than Linguistic Levity because it occurs more frequently. The data shows that satirical commentary is more common, often without relying on wordplay or linguistic creativity.

To conclude, C.C. appears in almost all data, making it a significant theme in this research. Brands inject wit and humor into their RTM content, engaging viewers while establishing the brand's identity. Incorporating wit and humor facilitates the creation of relevant RTM content that is clutter-breaking and grabs audiences' attention (Houghton, 2021; Nhedzi et al., 2023). Besides, even as P.P., C.C. contributes to humanizing RTM content.

4.4. Brand Identity Integration (B.I.I.): The Integration of Brand Identity into RTM Narratives.

The third theme, Brand Identity Integration (B.I.I.), consistently portrays brand identities through RTM, showing personality traits such as humor, wit, quirkiness, and creativity. B.I.I. differs from the previously outlined themes – P.P. and C.C. – as this theme concerns the brand itself, what's behind the message, and how storytelling relates to this instead of constructing RTM with storytelling elements. Rather than attempting to identify with an audience like P.P. does, the brand identity is delivered indirectly to form an overall

impression of all material consistent with its characteristics. These characteristics appear to be related to humor, which is why B.I.I. is very much intertwined with C.C. The thematic analysis produced this theme, but the visual analysis ultimately completed the theme by developing the sub-themes and enhancing the description. More specifically, rather than using humor, the captions showcase brand promotions. Therefore, B.I.I. was created by combining the results of the visual analysis (sub-theme 1) and the thematic analysis (sub-theme 2).

In this theme, storytelling is used to provide meaning to the brands (Northfelt, 2021; Woodside et al., 2008; Siegert & Hangartner, 2017; Aimé, 2021). Consequently, storytelling is used to differentiate a brand from one another, therefore being used to construct brand identities. (Lim & Puspita, 2020, p. 254; Fog et al., 2010, p. 78). Therefore, this theme is important to storytelling within the RTM context. The theme appears in two sub-themes: (1) Witful Branding, and (2) Brand-Centric Selling.

4.4.1. Witful Branding

The first sub-theme, Witful Branding, covers the application of humor across RTM narratives to establish and maintain brand identities. The data shows that brands infuse their RTM content with quirky humor to reinforce brand identity traits. This theme embodies a whimsical approach to product promotion, where the emphasis lies not on direct sales pitches but rather on showcasing a brand's ability to embrace current trends and events. While the brand's product may appear, the primary aim is to demonstrate its relevance within current events, aligning with public discussions and cultural phenomena. This content is closely intertwined with C.C., prioritizing entertainment value over explicit brand promotion. However, crucial within this theme is to maintain clear brand ownership, often through the inclusion of the brand's logo, name, or other visual elements. This ensures the content is associated with the brand's identity, facilitating easy linkage, and reinforcing brand recognition. Table 9 shows data examples in which Witful Branding appears.

Table 9

Data Examples Sub-Theme 3.1: Witful Branding

Content/Brand	1. Bol	2. HEMA	3. IKEA
Visual			
Caption	Kan prima rekenen, meidenwiskunde is een keuze 💅✨	Hij heeft inmiddels 6,5 miljoen streams op YouTube en staat op de zesde plek bij de bookmakers. @joostklein, droom groot! #Europapa	Niemand vraagt op welke camping je staat als je zelf de camping bent #IKEA #festival #slapen #camping
Translation	Can do math just fine, girl math is a choice 💅✨	He now has 6.5 million streams on YouTube and is in sixth place with the bookmakers. @joostklein, dream big! #Europapa	Nobody asks which campsite you're on when you are the campsite yourself #IKEA #festival #sleeping #camping

In the first example, Bol taps into the trending phenomenon of "girl math," a humorous concept emerging on TikTok. This phenomenon humorously depicts the intricate and often exaggerated ways in which girls justify their spending habits. The goal is to represent this relatable event and anticipate the audience's engagement with the current trending topic in an entertaining way. The post lacks the brand's name or logo, but it is obvious that Bol is the owner because of the "Bol-blue" and how it matches other Bol content. Therefore, it contributes to Bol's brand identity by engaging with its target audience in a humorous and relatable manner.

The second example shows how HEMA humorously references the outfit of Joost Klein, the Dutch Eurovision candidate, to establish HEMA's brand identity within the context of current trends. The text reads "Keep that position, Joost," referring to Joost's distinctive outfit featuring shoulder pads resembling the shape of bent clothing hangers. This witty connection between Joost's attire and the bent hanger supports the humorous tone of the visual. The visual serves to entertain the audience and engage with the current story surrounding Joost. The meme format, alongside the adjusted HEMA product, reinforces the message as humorous marketing content aimed at showcasing HEMA's involvement in

trending topics, rather than solely promoting its clothing hangers, thus aligning with its brand identity.

In the third example, IKEA crafts a humorous story to establish its brand identity during the festival season. The caption and text employ Dutch wordplay, transforming the popular phrase "Inkakken? Bijpakken!" into "Inkakken? Slaapzakken!" which humorously suggests that if one is tired, they should grab a sleeping bag and keep going. This witty twist on the phrase aligns with the festival experience, responding to exhaustion from dancing and partying. By reframing tiredness as an opportunity to recharge with a comfortable sleeping bag, IKEA reinforces its relevance within the festival scene.

This approach prioritizes entertainment value over direct product promotion, presenting IKEA's product as a humorous solution for festival fatigue. The original approach to engage with the festival season freshly and amusingly indirectly promotes IKEA's brand identity by offering a humorous solution to a common festival event. The absence of a price tag underscores its focus on entertainment rather than direct sales promotion. Besides, instead of portraying the IKEA logo in the visual, the brand chose to use the hashtag "#IKEA" to clarify the content is theirs.

4.4.2. Brand-Centric Selling

In contrast to Witful Branding, this sub-theme, Brand-Centric Selling, delves into the integration of product promotions alongside the portrayal of brand identity. The data reveals that product promotion often entails weaving the brand's identity into narratives or contexts that resonate with its personality traits, such as humor, creativity, or resilience. Through this integration, brands can reinforce their identity while simultaneously promoting their products within the RTM context. Besides the brand's logos and names, additional product information, advertising texts, and price tags are included. In this way, brands can showcase their unique brand personality and values while promoting their products (Woodside, 2010, p. 532). Seen the humorous approach of Brand-Centric Selling, this sub-theme is closely linked to C.C. and serves to entertain consumers while marketing its brands and products through RTM. In Table 10, three data examples are provided that showcase this sub-theme.

Table 10

Data Examples Sub-Theme 3.2: Brand-Centric Selling

Content/Brand	1. Bol	2. HEMA	3. IKEA
Visual	Bedenk even wat deze meid allemaal had kunnen bereiken als ze niet de hele tijd door een grote schildpad werd gekidnapt — PRINCESS PEACH SHOWTIME!	deze kan best wel eens storm gaan lopen vandaag — storm paraplu Ø 114 cm 22.⁵⁰	Kokend hete thee, uit een glas drinken ... Kan gewoon, met dit glas — IKEA 365+ Beker, helder glas, 30cl € 2.⁴⁹
Caption	Pak die spotlight, perzik ✨	Kom maar op met die code oranje! 🌧️	Alleen wel even laten afkoelen voor je begint te drinken, @zusenzodepodcast 😘 #thee #zusenzo #podcast
Translation	Grab that spotlight, peach ✨	Bring on that code orange! 🌧️	Just let it cool down a bit before you start drinking, @sistersandso podcast 😘 #tea #sistersandso #podcast

In example 1, Bol promotes the new Nintendo game by humorously questioning what Princess Peach could achieve if she were not constantly kidnapped by Bowser. Doing this, the visual taps into the nostalgic feelings and identification many audiences have with Nintendo characters and games. The Bol-blue text, again, maintains coherence with Bol's brand identity. This cohesive color scheme enhances the visual appeal and reinforces the connection between the brand and the product being promoted. The approach of playing on nostalgic identification adds originality to the visual, aligning with the event of the new game release without introducing incongruence. The post adds value to consumers by introducing them to the new video game while also contributing to Bol's brand identity as a sarcastic, edgy, and up-to-date brand that engages with current events and trends.

The second example is a product promotion presented in a meme format. HEMA employs Dutch wordplay – i.e. Linguistic Levity – to humorously suggest that their umbrella might be selling well today. Acting as an entertaining hero, HEMA presents its umbrella as a practical solution to the obstacle of the stormy weather, while simultaneously aiming to entertain the audience and promote the product. The product's relevance to the current weather conditions, coupled with the wordplay and the prominently displayed price tag near the unfolded umbrella, positions the visual as an entertaining product promotion. Although

lacking the HEMA logo, the visual maintains its relevance and reinforces the brand's identity through its humorous approach and focus on practical solutions through product promotion in the RTM context.

The third example shows how IKEA integrates a vivid product promotion with the portrayal of IKEA's brand identity within the context of a current TikTok trend. The foregrounded text and caption refer to the "Zus & Zo Podcast" humorously stating that drinking hot tea out of a glass cup is dangerous. This links the post to the trend. In response, IKEA presents its tea mugs as a solution, highlighting their glass construction suitable for tea consumption. While humor is utilized in this approach, the primary focus is on promoting IKEA's products in alignment with its brand identity. The smaller informative text further emphasizes the link between the trend and IKEA's glass tea cups, reinforcing the product promotion aspect.

Furthermore, both sub-themes show how B.I.I. and C.C. are intertwined. This may result from brands appealing to customers' episodic memories, which help people make deep, gratifying senses and experience pleasure (Woodside et al., 2008, p. 103). Therefore, brands forge enduring connections with their audiences and let their audience recall the brand including its identity. In other words, within B.I.I., C.C. is also used to create clutter-breaking content and to differentiate themselves from others (Nhedzi et al., 2023, p. 69; Lim & Puspita, 2020, p. 254; Fog et al., 2010, p. 78). Therefore, they play into the episodic memory of consumers while consistently promoting brand identities through RTM by integrating brand characteristics such as humor, wit, and quirkiness into their narratives. These characteristics help to humanize the content even as P.P. and C.C. do.

In conclusion, B.I.I. is an often occurring and important theme, coming in two frequently appearing, therefore dominant sub-themes that show how brands aim to differentiate themselves from others and create their own brand story. Given the humorous tone of all B.I.I. data examples, it can be concluded that humor plays a crucial role in the display of brand identity, leading to the combination of B.I.I. and C.C. in RTM brand promotion.

4.5. Entertaining Solution Messaging (E.S.M.): The Portrayal of Brands as Heroes to Unforeseen Challenges arising from Real-Time Events.

This theme, Entertaining Solution Messaging (E.S.M.), includes data that shows brands as solutions to unforeseen problems brought on by current events. Brands highlight potential challenges from real-time events, presenting themselves as heroes to solve these.
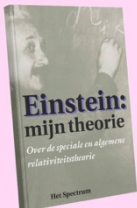
Here, the hero in brand storytelling symBolizes the brand's product or service (Lim & Puspita, 2020, p. 259). The brand's value proposition and unique selling points are presented, sometimes including a call to action (CTA). These mostly appear in captions for specific discounts, services, or products. However, E.S.M. appears in both thematic and visual analysis, in which captions and visuals complement each other by presenting the problem and the solution, i.e. the hero.

The brands take different approaches while covering E.S.M. Namely, IKEA, and HEMA often provide solutions – even if they are presented humorously – including product promotions and CTA's. In contrast, Bol explores an event, highlights its challenge, and jokes about it while randomly linking it to a product it offers. In both cases, E.S.M. strongly relates to C.C. as evidenced by their wordplay, jokes, and satirical challenges.

Furthermore, E.S.M. provides the climax of the presented micro-stories as it includes the point where the tension reaches its peak and the solution is presented (Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 698). In other words, E.S.M. is used by brands to show their products or services that address the problem or need to be established in the overall RTM context. Brands might choose to highlight unique features or benefits of its brands, making it a compelling story for the audience, aiming for the audience to choose the brand. In this story, E.S.M. appears after the already presented character and setting – if applicable –, appearing as the plot of the story in which the obstacle and solution get clarified, and therefore also the villain and the hero. Thus, in E.S.M., there is no clear presentation of characters solving problems. The brands rather present a solution entertainingly, therefore presenting themselves as entertaining heroes undertaking the action (Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 698). Table 11 shows two data examples that show E.S.M.

Table 11

Data Examples Theme 4: Entertaining Solution Messaging (E.S.M.)

Content/Brand	1. Bol	2. HEMA
Visual		
Caption	Bedank Albert maar! 🧑‍🦳	Let op: Er is een koude koningsnacht voorspeld! Dus wil je het lekker warm hebben en tóch een beetje vorstelijk voor de nacht komen? Dan hebben wij de oplossing. Oranje boven! 🔝
Translation	Thank Albert! 🧑‍🦳	Note: A cold King's Night has been predicted! So if you want to stay nice and warm and still come off a bit royal for the night? Then we have the solution. Orange above! 🔝

In example 2, HEMA responds to forecasted cold weather during King's Night, presenting its King's fleece cape as a humorous solution to staying warm while partying. The text cleverly plays on Dutch wordplay, linking the forecasted frost ("vorst") with the monarch ("vorst"), adding a playful twist. Despite the product being King's Day themed, its promotion during King's Night including wordplay highlights HEMA's ability to offer timely solutions in unexpected situations, therefore acting as an entertaining hero. The brand creatively integrates with a trending event that showcases adaptability and humor while contributing to brand identity. Therefore, this example also presents C.C. and B.I.I.

In contrast, example 1 shows how Bol humorously presents being late for the first day of school as a relatable scenario. The post taps into the back-to-school period, a common challenge for many, offering a humorous "solution" in the form of a quote about the relativity of time. Thus, the solution is rather a joke than a practical offer, however, Bol still acts as an entertaining hero, in which the humorous approach to the challenge of the first day of school might be more relieving than using the quote. Besides, by incorporating Einstein's

relativity theory, the post adds an element of wit and creativity, aligning with the brand's identity, therefore also showing C.C. and B.I.I.

To conclude, in E.S.M., brands tackle unforeseen challenges resulting from current events, positioning themselves as entertainingly problem-solving heroes (Lim & Puspita, 2020, p. 259; Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 698). It is a less apparent theme, though being important for storytelling as it embodies the concept of a narrative climax where the brand provides the solution (Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 698). The examples show how the brands do this, framing obstacles as opportunities to showcase their products or services as solutions, either being practical or just amusing.

4.6. Relatable Action Narratives (R.A.N.): The Presentation of Recognizable Activities within RTM Contexts

In the fifth theme, Relatable Action Narratives (R.A.N.), brands present situations that stem from or occur during real-time events, aiming to foster audience relatability and recognition. This theme may be comparable to P.P. because relatability is at its foundation. However, rather than focusing on identification, R.A.N. is about presenting specific activities that the audience might relate to. Therefore, the distinction is that this theme is about recognizing specific actions the audience may recognize and relate to, whereas P.P. covers the depiction of characters that the audience might identify with. Both the thematic and visual analysis reveal this theme as the captions and visuals, again, complement each other in delivering the message.

In R.A.N., consumers interact with stories by placing them in their frames and giving them a sense of personal importance (Lund et al., 2018, p. 273). Therefore, relatability in RTM makes a lot of sense, allowing brands to create content that taps into shared experiences within these RTM contexts. By presenting situations that resonate with real-time events, brands demonstrate an understanding of their audience's lives and concerns, fostering a sense of empathy and recognition. RTM appears to be a good manner to do this as it focuses on enhancing consumer's appreciation of brands by engaging with them on topics and moments they care about (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 17). Making these even more relatable and recognizable through R.A.N., this, in turn, strengthens brand affinity as consumers see themselves reflected in the brand's narratives.

Moreover, relatability enables brands to humanize their content and identity, positioning themselves close to audiences rather than distant, somehow abstract entities. This allows brands to infuse meaning and value into their stories, resulting in compelling

content that forge lasting emotional connections with their audience, driving meaningful connections and positive consumer responses (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 15). To clarify R.A.N., Table 12 presents two data examples.

Table 12

Data Examples Theme 5: Relatable Action Narratives (R.A.N.)

Content/Brand	1. Bol	2. Bol
Visual		
Caption	"MAMA OEHOEHHOOEEEEEE" ik heb in ieder geval niet de mooiste stem...	ik kwam, ik zag, ik verloor alles
Translation	"MAMA OEHOEHHOOEEEEEE" at least I don't have the prettiest voice....	I came, I saw, I lost everything

In the first example, Bol captures the annual dominance of Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody album, securing the top spot in the Top2000 countdown on Dutch radio station Radio 2. By showcasing this recurring event, the brand aims to establish relatability with its audience. The caption reinforces this by referring to a popular phrase of the song people might (falsely) sing, presenting a recognizable action in the context of New Year's Eve. While the post may not be very divergent, it aligns the brand with a widely recognized cultural phenomenon, strengthening its relevance and identity within the context of the event.

The second example shows another relatable situation presented by Bol, namely carnival festivities. The post presents different things that might have been lost after partying during carnival, resonating with audiences that might have experienced the same. In its divergence from conventional carnival narratives, this post stands out by presenting an original joke that highlights the absurdities of the celebration. By offering a sarcastic solution in the form of a memorial, the post playfully engages with the audience's

expectations showing both the entertaining value and brand identity of Bol. Besides R.A.N., this example therefore also shows C.C., B.I.I., and E.S.M.

To conclude, R.A.N. presents non-persona elements in stories that are created in such a way the audience might relate to and recognize certain actions. The examples show the different ways it might appear and how the theme relates to C.C., B.I.I., and E.S.M., though the theme is less apparent than the others. The theme aligns brands with shared audience experiences, humanizing the content and strengthening emotional connections.

4.7. Narrative Embedding (N.E.): The Inclusion of Products into Broader Storytelling Frameworks, Creating Own Micro-Stories.

The last theme, Narrative Embedding (N.E.), integrates brand products into existing stories derived from real-time events, weaving them into the created RTM content. This makes the content more relatable and engaging, as the audience can recognize and connect with stories that reflect events and topics they encounter in their daily lives. Other than the other themes, this theme results from the visual analysis only as the analyzed images appear to embed the posts into a broader narrative.

In N.E., products are linked to current trends, events, or pop culture references. Brands leverage current trends to embed their products into timely and culturally relevant stories. By doing so, they tap into the ongoing conversations and interests of their audience, making their content more engaging and shareable (Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 17). This refers to content timeliness, which denotes how a media item may be related to a contentious issue inside or outside a certain social network space (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 213). Besides, embedding events such as holidays, public celebrations, or notable occurrences helps brands stay relevant and capitalize on the attention these events receive. This approach ensures that the product is seen within the context of something familiar and important to the audience. By referencing pop culture, brands can create micro-stories that resonate with a wide audience's cultural touch points (Lund et al., 2018, p. 274). This can include nods to movies, music, celebrities, or viral internet phenomena, allowing brands to connect with their audience through shared cultural knowledge and experiences while promoting their products in the RTM context.

When a micro-story is constructed, it often includes various storytelling elements such as character, setting, plot, climax, and resolution (Houghton, 2021, p. 1267; Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 698). These elements are crafted to align with real-time events, therefore making the narrative compelling and relevant. The inclusion of these elements helps to

create a cohesive and engaging story that not only promotes the product but also enhances the brand's identity and connection with the audience. Table 13 presents data examples that cover N.E.

Table 13

Data Examples Theme 6: Narrative Embedding (N.E.)

Content/Brand	1. HEMA	2. IKEA
Visual	daar kun je ons midden in de nacht voor wakker maken! oranje tompouce per stuk 0.⁹⁵ HEMA	We always knew it was a piece of art FRAKTA Shopping bag €0.⁹⁹
Caption	Al onze tompoucen kleuren vandaag oranje! Dus, wie gaat er voor een mooie pot voetbal én een heerlijke snack om 03:00 uur? ⚽🦁🧡	Fijn om te zien dat het schilderij Lentetuin weer veilig thuis is! #IKEA #VanGogh
Translation	All our tompoucen are turning orange today! So, who is up for a nice game of football and a delicious snack at 3:00 AM? ⚽🦁🧡	Great to see that the painting Lentetuin is safely back home! #IKEA #VanGogh

Example 1 shows how HEMA refers to a Dutch national football game played at 03:00 AM, using wordplay that suggests HEMA's orange tompouces are worth waking up for, much like the game itself. The post plays on the inconvenient timing of the game, offering HEMA's orange tompouces as a delightful reason to wake up early, blending product promotion with a real-time event. Besides, the post sets the time and implies a situation where the audience watches the game while enjoying a tompouce. The obstacle is the early hour, and the resolution is the enjoyment of the tompouce, making the experience more pleasant. While not highly divergent, as orange tompouces are a recurring product for events like this, the post is relevant by tying the product to a current event.

In the second example, IKEA integrates into the current news about the found Van Gogh painting by making a visual in which the painting is carried in the iconic IKEA shopping bag. The post jokes about how the famous painting is being transferred in an IKEA bag, which they call a "piece of art." This playful twist not only references the real event but also humorously elevates the IKEA bag to the status of a masterpiece. While there is no

traditional character or setting, the relatable subject of the Dutch Van Gogh creates a connection. The plot revolves around the humorous notion of transporting valuable art in a mundane item, creating a micro-story that entertains the audience. The incongruity of associating a priceless painting with a common shopping bag breaks traditional storytelling schemas, making the content memorable and engaging. It ties into current news, making it relevant and relatable for the audience.

4.7.1. N.E.: The Unifying Theme.

Most of the analyzed data covers the N.E. theme, making this theme highly dominant and connected to other themes. First, N.E. and P.P. are closely related because both involve storytelling elements that resonate with the audience. While P.P. focuses on creating relatable characters, N.E. integrates brand products into ongoing narratives. The characters created in P.P. can serve as vehicles within N.E. stories, making the product integration feel more natural and engaging. Second, N.E. and C.C. often overlap, as humor can be a powerful tool in embedding narratives. By integrating products into humorous real-time contexts, brands can create memorable and engaging content. Third, N.E. and B.I.I. are connected through consistently portraying the brand's identity. When a product is embedded in a narrative, it should reflect the brand's personality traits, such as wit, creativity, or quirkiness. This ensures the embedded content aligns with the overall brand identity. Fourth, N.E. and E.S.M. both address challenges and solutions. E.S.M. focuses on presenting the brand as a solution to unforeseen problems brought on by real-time events, often with a clear CTA. N.E. complements this by embedding the product into a broader narrative highlighting its role in solving a problem. Last, N.E. and R.A.N. both aim to foster relatability and recognition. While R.A.N. focuses on specific actions and situations that audiences can relate to, N.E. embeds these relatable actions, again, into broader narratives involving the brand's products. This connects the audience's real-life experiences and the brand's messaging.

4.8. Conclusion

In summary, the findings reveal a diverse use of storytelling in the analyzed RTM content of the brands Bol, HEMA, and IKEA. Whether through relatable characters, humor, consistent brand portrayal, entertaining solutions, or culturally relevant themes, the brands established storytelling to enhance their RTM campaigns on Instagram. Persona Profiling,

Comedic Creativity, Brand Identity Integration, and Narrative Embedding appear to be the most dominant themes.

The findings are theoretically embedded as follows. First, characters are used to let consumers relate to them through the touch points in the consumers' lives (Houghton, 2021, p. 1266; Lund et al., 2018, p. 274). This is presented in Persona Profiling. These emotional connections allow for the communication of meanings and values, and the establishment of distinctive identities by the brands (Houghton, 2021, p. 1266; Woodside, 2010, p. 532).

Second, brands use humor as an incongruent element to create clutter-breaking content playing with the audience's expectations while surprising them with unexpected twists (Houghton, 2021, p. 1265; Nhedzi et al., 2023, p. 69). This is done by using the right metaphors that entail linguistic humor, playful captions, and puns in visuals (Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 698). This is embedded in Comedic Creativity. Together, this causes the content to grab the audience's attention (Houghton, 2021; Nhedzi et al., 2023). Besides, as revealed by B.I.I., brands use storytelling to provide meaning to themselves and to differentiate them from others by constructing brand identities (Northfelt, 2021; Woodside et al., 2008; Siegert & Hangartner, 2017; Aimé, 2021; Lim & Puspita, 2020; Fog et al., 2010).

Moreover, brands present themselves as entertaining heroes undertaking the action by offering their products and services as solutions to problems occurring through the RTM (Lim & Puspita, 2020, p. 259; Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 698). This is done through the climax of the constructed micro-stories, i.e. the point where the tension reaches its peak and the solution is presented (Ben Youssef, 2018, p. 698), as being presented by Entertaining Solution Messaging. Additionally, by putting the content inside the consumer's frames like being done in Relatable Action Narratives, brands enable consumers to interact with stories and increase their appreciation of the brands by addressing topics and moments that are important to them (Lund et al., 2018, p. 273; Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 17).

All of this is done through Narrative Embedding which uses content timeliness to tap into ongoing conversations and interests of their audience, making their content more engaging and shareable (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 213; Mazerant et al., 2021, p. 17). Therefore, Narrative Embedding serves as a unifying theme that ties together elements from all the other themes by integrating products into engaging, relatable, and contextually relevant micro-stories. The following chapter will dive into this further.

5. Conclusion

This chapter provides an answer to the study's research question based on the findings drawn from the thematic and visual analyses. Additionally, the implications for academia and marketing practice, as well as the limitations of the study and potential areas for future research are discussed. The conclusion will reflect on how the six themes collectively contribute to the construction of brand narratives through RTM practices and offer recommendations for brands looking to enhance their storytelling techniques in digital marketing.

5.1. Concluding Discussion

This study aims to answer the research question: "*How do brands incorporate storytelling elements in advertising campaigns to connect with their audience in real-time on Instagram?*" The findings show that, through narrative embedding, brands implement storytelling elements into their RTM to humanize and familiarize the content and to create an insider feeling among the audience while constructing brand-customized micro-stories. The study took the brands Bol, HEMA, and IKEA as good practices of RTM, unraveling six main themes.

The first, Persona Profiling, shows how brands create identifiable characters that enhance consumer-brand relationships, allowing brands to communicate their values and distinctive identities. Celebrity Integration, Demographic Depiction, and Imaginative Impersonation construct the theme, humanizing the content and forging lasting emotional connections. The second, Comedic Creativity, reveals that humor is a significant storytelling element, used to capture the audience's attention through clutter-breaking content. This is done through Linguistic Levity and Satirical Storytelling.

The third theme, Brand Identity Integration, presents how brands consistently portray their identities within RTM, using storytelling to differentiate themselves. It appears through Witful Branding and Brand-Centric Selling, showing brand personality and values while promoting products, and the intersection with Comedic Creativity. The fourth, Entertaining Solution Messaging, reveals how brands portray themselves as entertaining heroes addressing real-time challenges and offering their products or services as solutions. The climax of the brand's micro-stories is incorporated, and the entertaining-hero approach links the theme to Comedic Creativity and Brand Identity Integration.

The fifth, Relatable Action Narratives, presents relatable content that enhances audience interaction by tapping into culturally relevant themes and shared experiences. This

creates a sense of familiarity and connection, letting the consumers interact with stories and engage with brands on topics they care about.

The last theme, Narrative Embedding, shows how brands weave their products with pre-existing stories based on real-time events. This makes the content relatable and engaging by presenting stories that mirror situations and topics audiences face, creating an insider feeling among them. It incorporates various storytelling elements to create compelling, contextually relevant micro-stories, unifying all other themes.

Thus, all themes are narrative-embedded in the creation of the brand-customized micro-stories, ensuring the RTM content is humanized and familiarized while giving the audience an insider feeling and maintaining a consistent brand identity.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

The previous paragraph shows how the six themes are embedded within existing scholarly literature. In response, this paragraph will present the main theoretical contributions of this research that confirm or complement this.

Most research on brand storytelling in marketing concentrates on the interaction between consumers and brands, focusing on the storytelling from consumer perspectives (e.g., Lund et al., 2018; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Mills, 2023), resulting in marketing strategy literature on brand stories and storytelling being limited (Mills, 2023; West et al., 2019). Therefore, this study aims to bridge this research gap in the investigation of storytelling from a brand perspective, specifically, on the reevaluation of storytelling techniques in RTM-based advertising campaigns on Instagram. Doing this, this study presents an enhanced understanding of RTM storytelling, contributing to the academic discourse on RTM by providing a detailed analysis of how storytelling elements are embedded in RTM campaigns.

Identifying six key themes enriches the theoretical framework for understanding how brands can humanize and familiarize their content and interact with their audience in a more relatable manner. Therefore, in follow-up studies that compile their theoretical framework, a dual storytelling approach from both consumer and brand perspectives can be included, taking the six identified themes as a foundation. This may result in a more comprehensive understanding of the incorporation of storytelling elements in RTM to connect with audiences on Instagram.

Moreover, this study shows that the integration of humor in branding is essential, though this is not a novel insight for marketing literature (e.g., Yang, 2022; Weinberger &

Gulas, 2019; Phua & Kim, 2018). Therefore, this research confirms the role of humor in marketing, presenting the consistent use of humor across all themes which underscores its importance in creating clutter-breaking, i.e. divergent and incongruent, and memorable RTM content.

Additionally, this research challenges academic literature that claims RTM has content that is more relevant than divergent because the data analysis reveals a balance between the two creative determinants. For instance, Mazerant et al. (2021) conclude that brand messages that align with timely moments are more focused on meaningful, i.e. relevant, content instead of original and well-crafted, i.e. divergent, content (p. 25), affecting the creative development (p. 26). The conclusion drawn by Mazerant et al. (2021) should be nuanced, considering the balance between divergent and relevant content in the RTM posts of this research. This balance should be adopted in further theorizing as it contemplates the scholarly literature on brand storytelling and RTM.

Lastly, this research sheds light on narrative embedding, where brands integrate their products and messages into pre-existing stories and real-time events. This is a novel approach to RTM as it helps brands create brand-customized micro-stories that are humane and familiar. The latter insight provides academia with knowledge on innovative storytelling techniques that offer new insights on RTM and, eventually, on targeting consumers while adhering to one's story and identity. Researchers are recommended to leverage this insight to further explore innovative storytelling techniques in RTM while expanding research on narrative embedding and developing new frameworks.

While this research provides substantial insights, it also questions whether the existing understanding is sufficient. Namely, there is a need for further studies to explore additional dimensions of storytelling in RTM, especially in different cultural contexts and across various social media platforms. Also, further research is needed on the distinctiveness of brand identities in the context of RTM. The brands in this research aim to present a unique identity, however, they exhibited similar characteristics in their RTM content. Therefore, studies should explore how brands can maintain distinct identities while engaging in RTM strategies.

Besides, as new technologies and social media keep emerging, further research should focus on how this might impact RTM strategies to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the field. Lastly, further studies should delve into the audience perspective to understand how consumers perceive and interact with storytelling in RTM. This might include examining how different demographic groups respond to RTM campaigns, the

emotional, cognitive, and behavioral impacts of RTM content on audiences, and the factors influencing audience engagement and resonance with storytelling in RTM.

5.3. Practical Implications

This research has practical implications for a wide range of people and organizations who work in the fields of marketing, advertising, and brand management and wish to create brand-customized micro-stories through timely and contextually relevant content on Instagram. First, brands wishing to foster deeper connections with their audience through RTM are suggested to focus on creating relatable characters and personas. By leveraging Persona Profiling, brands can humanize their content, making it more engaging and emotionally resonant. Second, brands aiming to create content that resonates with their audience are advised to tap into culturally relevant themes and shared experiences. Here, Relatable Action Narratives might be useful as they help forge a sense of familiarity and connection, both crucial for storytelling. To ensure the created RTM content revealing Persona Profiling and Relatable Action Narratives stands out from others, brands should leverage humor, therefore incorporating Comedic Creativity in RTM campaigns. Humor allows for the reversal of familiar circumstances or the juxtaposition of unexpected things, creating clutter-breaking content to make it more appealing. To do so, using wordplay, satire, and other forms of linguistic creativity are suggested.

Furthermore, brands are advised to carefully consider possible challenges that occur from real-time events, and, consequently, respond to this and present their products or services as solutions. Entertaining Solution Messaging might assist brands with this, positioning brands as heroes while addressing current issues and enhancing brands as proactive and consumer-centric entities. Central to these practices is the embedding of narratives in real-time contexts. The starting point should be that the audience is dealing with brand-customized micro-stories that feel familiar. This familiarity is created by timely and contextually relevant content, in which storytelling elements are employed to enhance the relatability and impact of brands' RTM content. This, in turn, will help brands to distinguish themselves from others, building a recognizable and trustworthy brand that should ensure that every piece of content aligns with the brand's core values while integrating the brand identity.

Thus, the practical implications are surrounded by the six themes revealed by this research. Each of them can be used to improve RTM advertising campaigns while

reinforcing brand identities by addressing the incorporation of storytelling elements in the context of real-time marketing on Instagram.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

While this research provides detailed findings on how brands incorporate storytelling elements in advertising campaigns to connect with their audience in real-time on Instagram, some limitations exist. Primarily, the study focused on three specific brands, resulting in a sample that gives an overview of good practices, but that may not fully represent the diverse storytelling strategies employed across different industries and markets. This limits the generalizability of the findings, though the theoretical notions are valid as the theory reflects the empirical data. Besides, the analyzed brands operate in a specific cultural and geographical context, namely, Dutch social media users who are expected to have a certain digital literacy to understand the brands' content.

Consequently, audiences in different cultural and geographic contexts are presumed to possess varying levels of knowledge, potentially impacting the storytelling strategies employed by brands operating within these contexts. This might cause the findings of this research not to be directly applicable to brands in different settings. Therefore, future research is advised to include a broader range of brands to validate and expand upon the findings of this research and explore RTM content across various cultural and geographical contexts to understand broader and context-specific elements of RTM strategies.

Furthermore, some limitations occur because of the temporal relevance of RTM content. Namely, RTM content is dynamic and timely as it responds to current events. This means that the relevance of the six themes identified may change over time as this research is only concerned with RTM content from the brands from March 2022 to March 2024. Because of this dynamic, timely nature of RTM content and the timeframe of this research, future research is recommended to track how storytelling in RTM evolves in response to new trends and events.

Besides, the data did not include location settings, potentially because the content focused on micro-stories that did not necessitate or have room to mention specific locations. This implies that the storytelling scope may be limited, necessitating a reevaluation of how the storytelling elements are operationalized. Specifically, future studies might examine the role of location in RTM content, and how it appears as a storytelling element to connect with audiences in real-time on Instagram. Other storytelling elements, such as character and plot,

in RTM contexts might be considered too, taking this research as a foundation to include or exclude certain aspects.

Furthermore, this study shows the balanced use of creative determinants in RTM content. However, the primary focus lies on the narrative construction and thematic elements of timely relevant content. Therefore, this study lacks knowledge of the role of creativity in these storytelling practices which is why future research is suggested to consider creativity in storytelling practices, thereby exploring new ways to examine content divergence and relevance.

Lastly, this study emphasizes the importance of analyzing both captions and visuals, as they complement each other in conveying the brand's messages. This is demonstrated by the visual analysis adding one theme, changing one theme, and overlapping with four themes in the thematic analysis. Analyzing only one aspect would have resulted in less comprehensive data and might not have led to the identification of the six key themes. Therefore, future research should continue to consider both elements to capture the full essence of RTM storytelling, taking this study's method as a starting point.

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Appendix A

The Initial Long List of Brands and the Selection Steps.

Long List	Dutch Instagram accounts	RTM apparent on Dutch Instagram accounts	RTM, both predictable and unpredictable moments, apparent on Dutch Instagram accounts
Albert Heijn (Ślęzak, 2022)	Albert Heijn (Ślęzak, 2022)	Albert Heijn (Ślęzak, 2022)	Bol (Ślęzak, 2022)
Asos (Big Marketing, 2021)	Bol (Ślęzak, 2022)	Bol (Ślęzak, 2022)	HEMA (Ślęzak, 2022)
Bol (Ślęzak, 2022)	Coca Cola (Hagan, 2024; Swier, 2024)	Dunkin Donuts (Ślęzak, 2022)	IKEA (Big Marketing, 2021; Deshet Creatives & Marketing, 2023; Ślęzak, 2022; Zieliński, 2023)
Coca Cola (Hagan, 2024; Swier, 2024)	Dunkin Donuts (Ślęzak, 2022)	HEMA (Ślęzak, 2022)	
Dunkin Donuts (Ślęzak, 2022)	HEMA (Ślęzak, 2022)	Horn Bach (Ślęzak, 2022)	
HEMA (Ślęzak, 2022)	Heineken (Deshet Creatives & Marketing, 2023)	Jumbo (Swier, 2024)	
Heineken (Deshet Creatives & Marketing, 2023)	Horn Bach (Ślęzak, 2022)	Macdonald (Deshet Creatives & Marketing, 2023)	
Horn Bach (Ślęzak, 2022)	IKEA (Big Marketing, 2021; Deshet Creatives & Marketing, 2023; Ślęzak, 2022; Zieliński, 2023)		
IKEA (Big Marketing, 2021; Deshet Creatives & Marketing, 2023; Ślęzak, 2022; Zieliński, 2023)	Jumbo (Swier, 2024)		
Jumbo (Swier, 2024)	KFC (Big Marketing, 2021)		
KFC (Big Marketing, 2021)	Macdonald (Deshet Creatives & Marketing, 2023)		
Kitkat (Ślęzak, 2022)			
Macdonald (Big Marketing, 2021; Deshet Creatives & Marketing, 2023)			
Norwegian Airlines (Ślęzak, 2022)			
OREO (Ślęzak, 2022; Zieliński, 2023)			
Pepsi (Deshet Creatives & Marketing, 2023; Ślęzak, 2022)			
Wendy's (Deshet Creatives & Marketing, 2023; Hagan, 2024)			

Appendix B

Code Tree – Open Coding.

1. Sarcastic Nintendo Switch Peach promotion
2. Joost Klein reference
3. Quote request to visual
4. Sarcastic Leap Day reference
5. Sarcastic questions about Carnival
6. Sarcastic audience quote
7. Sarcastic Barbie during Oscars reference
8. Blue Monday comparison
9. Wordplay brand name
10. Sarcastic Santa reference
11. Relatable lyrics NYE Top2000
12. Joke about cold weather
13. TikTok trend girl math
14. TikTok trend Roman Empire
15. Sarcastic Albert Einstein back to school solution
16. Sarcastic festival conversation
17. Sarcasm about holiday joke
18. Sunday hangover relief
19. Blue Monday clarification
20. New Year's resolutions joke
21. Wordplay Dry January
22. Wordplay hot weather and sunscreen
23. Relatable joke hot weather and moms
24. Final examination Chemistry solution
25. Joke Oscars Will Smith clarification
26. Wordplay Easter sweets
27. Joost Klein reference
28. Wordplay rainy day and plants
29. TikTok trend hot tea
30. Cold weather solution
31. Christmas pastry promotion
32. Internet meme joke "mand" reference
33. TikTok trend crompouce
34. Sint solution for vegan and gluten intolerance
35. Satirical commentary to Dutch politician
36. Sarcastic solution for tangled Christmas lights
37. Drinking water solution for hot weather
38. Hot weather reference Nijntje
39. Sunday morning
40. Back to school reference
41. Solution HEMA tompouce as football snack
42. Solution HEMA socks for Tour de France
43. Umbrella as solution for bad weather
44. Sarcastic Eurovision bingo
45. Joke visual clarification
46. Wordplay cold weather King's Night
47. Orange product promotion

48. New Easter eggs information
49. Easter eggs comparison to other brands
50. Tomsoesje for weekend snack
51. "Consumentenbond" best product reference
52. Dutch national team reference
53. Christmas Takkie sweater solution
54. Wordplay King's Day cooling bag solution for hot weather
55. Sarcastic wordplay for weekend drinks
56. Spring celebration with loved ones
57. Eurovision support Joost Klein
58. Smaland versus Wonka experience
59. Leap Day celebration
60. Weekend reassurance
61. New Year's resolutions product reference
62. Sarcastic NYE meatballs comparison
63. Relatable Christmas overeating
64. TikTok trend hot tea
65. Sinterklaas gift solution
66. Sarcastic Halloween commentary
67. Sarcastic comparison Beckham documentary
68. Sarcastic comparison Van Gogh painting
69. Back to school reference
70. Wordplay holiday and toy
71. Relatable summer picnic quote
72. Sarcastic Father's Day DIY
73. Sarcastic festival season product promotion
74. Spring-ready kitchen promotion
75. Sunday favorites
76. NYE celebration products
77. Swedish NYE cheering
78. Netflix comparison Wednesday
79. Swedish Holiday invitation
80. Relaxation Ascension Day
81. Support IDAHOTH
82. Mother's Day reference
83. Heel Holland Bakt versus showroom pies
84. Relaxation Mother's Day
85. Easter day-off question
86. Boekenweek BILLY reference

Appendix C

Main Code Categories and Sub-Codes Axial Coding

Main code category	Additional connotation category	Sub-code
Holiday and seasonal promotions		Leap Day
		Halloween
		Sinterklaas
		Ascension Day
		Spring
		NYE
		Swedish holiday
		IDAHOTH
		Weekend
		Mother's Day
		Father's Day
		Summer holiday
		Easter
		Christmas
		King's Day
		Blue Monday
		Sports
Trending references		TikTok trends
		Netflix's series "Wednesday"
		Eurovision Songfestival
		Nintendo games releases
		Dutch series "Heel Holland Bakt"
		The Oscars
Brand product promotions		Product promotion in response to cultural events
		Product promotion in response to news topics
		Product promotion in response to sports events
		Product promotion in response to seasonal events
		Product promotion in response to weekend
		Product promotion in response to weather
		Product promotion in response to trends
Relatable moments		Relatable holiday moments
		Relatable weather moments
		Relatable seasonal moments
		Relatable weekend moments
		Relatable celebration moments
		Relatable cultural moments
Character coverage		Joost Klein
		Will Smith
		Barbie
		Ken
		Nijntje
		Takkie
		Santa
		Wednesday
Sarcastic commentary		Sarcastic seasonal events commentary
		Sarcastic cultural references
		Sarcastic weekend references
		Commentary Dutch politics
		Sarcastic Oscars reference
		Sarcastic holiday reference
		Sarcastic audience quote
		Sarcastic comparison products and trends

Wordplay		Wordplay brand name
		Weather-related wordplay
		Seasonal events wordplay
		Weekend wordplay
		Celebrations wordplay
Entertaining solutions		Back-to-school solutions
		Weather-related solutions
		Solution for decorations
		Food-related solutions
		Sport-related solutions
	Micro-story creation	Cultural embedded micro-story
		Seasonal embedded micro-story
		Micro-story about news topic
	Brand identity coverage	Humoristic identity
		Entertaining identity
		Sarcastic identity
		Trendy identity

Appendix D

Overview of Frequency of Content Types

Content type	Frequency
Seasonal events	35
Weather updates	17
News topics	15
National events	7
TikTok trends	6
Cultural excesses	10
Other	16