The Art of Storytelling: Analysis of Digital Advertising Campaigns in the Telecommunications Sector

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Abstract

In recent years, the telecommunications sector in Portugal has experienced increasing competition and consumer demand for more personalised and affordable services. In response, major brands have adopted emotionally engaging and immersive storytelling in their digital advertising strategies, particularly during seasonal campaigns. This study explores how storytelling in audiovisual campaigns can influence consumer engagement and evoke positive emotions. Through a literature review and qualitative analysis of two video campaigns by Vodafone and NOS, this paper examines the role of narrative structures and emotional appeal in shaping brand perception. The campaigns on YouTube were analysed in terms of narrative content, emotional tone, and audience engagement. Vodafone's campaign, focusing on disconnection from technology to foster family bonds, achieved strong viewer interaction and empathy through relatable themes and nostalgic visuals. NOS's campaign centred on traditional Portuguese values and the emotional power of a holiday message, resonating with audiences through music, familial imagery, and themes of longing. Both campaigns highlighted the strategic use of storytelling to humanise brands and deepen emotional connections with consumers. Despite growing academic interest, literature on narrative advertising in the digital environment, specifically within the telecommunications sector, remains limited. This study contributes to bridging this gap, providing insight into how storytelling can be an effective branding tool in a saturated and competitive market.

Keywords: Storytelling; narrative structure and transportation; brand engagement; aesthetic impact of audiovisual design

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the telecommunications sector in Portugal has seen increased competition and growing consumer demand for more personalised and affordable services (ANACOM, 2025). As a result, brand communication has become essential for strategic growth. The leading brands in the Portuguese telecommunications sector have been investing in social campaigns with immersive narratives. This study aims to understand how storytelling in audiovisual campaigns influences consumer engagement and generates positive emotions. Storytelling helps build emotional connections between brands and consumers, increasing interaction, trust, and loyalty by humanising the brand (Hattar, 2022). Brands use narrative techniques to make messages more meaningful and relatable (Mills, 2023). However, brands often overextend their presence across platforms in a saturated digital environment without offering valuable content (Houghton, 2021). Innovative and emotionally resonant adverts are more likely to be remembered and foster consumer interaction (Heiser et al., 2008). Some literature reviews reveal a lack of research on storytelling in telecom advertising campaigns. Escalas (2004), Kim et al. (2017), and Ching et al. (2013) observe that most research on narrative techniques in advertising centres on traditional media. Van Laer et al. (2014) and Moin et al. (2020) argue that existing research in digital storytelling is still largely theoretical, revealing a gap between theory and practice. Therefore, this study is relevant to Portuguese telecommunications, as it improves communication strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. STORYTELLING AND NARRATIVES IN BRAND BUILDING AND COMMUNICATION

2.1.1. BRAND STORYTELLING

Brand storytelling has become essential in modern brand management. Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) argue that it is indispensable for engaging communication with consumers. Brand storytelling uses narrative techniques to promote brands in an emotionally meaningful way (Mills, 2023). Beyond encouraging purchases, stories convey brand values, build cultural capital, and strengthen market positioning and emotional bonds (Batra et al., 2000). In a context of fragmented attention, only messages that evoke genuine emotions, with well-structured narratives, stand out (Teixeira et al., 2014).

Mills (2023) notes that brands can position themselves as agents of social change by aligning with social or political causes, fostering loyalty among consumers who share the same values. Emotional connections through shared values can outweigh promotional offers. However, Houghton (2021) warns that brands risk spreading content across platforms without real value in an overloaded digital space, leading to consumer fatigue. Coherence and relevance across channels are essential, as consumers compare new stories with existing mental schemas. Brands must respect consumers' expectations or strategically challenge them. Incongruity in storytelling can generate cognitive tension, increasing processing, memorability, and engagement (Lee & Schuman, 2004). When well executed, storytelling positions brands memorably in consumers' minds (Gensler et al., 2013). Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) emphasise that compelling brand stories enhance awareness, empathy, recall, and meaning.

The next topic explores one of the most impactful applications of storytelling in persuasive communication: advertising narratives, where stories gain visibility, generate emotion, and build lasting consumer relationships.

2.1.2. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND TRANSPORTATION

Advertising narratives are central to how brands emotionally connect with consumers. Through structured stories, brands capture attention and foster emotional bonds that shape attitudes and behaviours. According to Van Laer et al. (2014), compelling narratives follow a logical sequence of events, featuring characters, conflicts, surprises, and a resolution, all aligned with the purpose of the communication strategy when audiences identify with the characters or values in these stories, emotional engagement increases, enhancing persuasive impact (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2004).

Narrative transportation is a key mechanism behind narrative persuasion—the immersive experience that draws consumers into an alternative world. This cognitive and emotional involvement changes beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (Van Laer et al., 2014). Verisimilitude, or the sense that a story could be real, intensifies immersion (Green, 2004), allowing consumers to relate more deeply to characters and situations (Cooper et al., 2010). When individuals identify with characters, they mentally simulate experiences and temporarily disconnect from reality, leading to stronger emotional responses (Perosanz, 2007).

Van Laer et al. (2014) suggest that narrative transport has longer-lasting effects than purely cognitive strategies. Fantasy propensity—one's tendency to imagine vividly—can further enhance this immersive state (Chen, 2015), making advertising narratives more persuasive. Digital media's emergence has transformed how stories are crafted and consumed. Unlike traditional platforms, the internet offers interactivity, consumer control, and dynamic formats (Jiang & Benbasat, 2007; Zeff et al., 1999), allowing users to shape their narrative experiences. This shift has also elevated the importance of narrative perspective: first-person storytelling, for instance, often generates stronger emotional responses than third-person narration, especially under high involvement conditions (Chen et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2017).

While narrative structure and transportation are key to emotional engagement, the aesthetic dimension—particularly the audiovisual design—also plays a crucial role in capturing attention and sustaining immersion.

2.1.3. AESTHETIC IMPACT OF AUDIOVISUAL DESIGN

Vision and hearing are the wealthiest and most decisive sensory channels in audiovisual perception (Min et al., 2020). The combined quality of video and sound directly affects the overall perception of the content and significantly influences how the audience receives it. Visual impact is decisive in creating trust and credibility with consumers, which is fundamental to building lasting brand relationships. In this sense, Cho (1999) and Cyr (2008) argue that appealing visual design is crucial in digital advertising, helping to reinforce consumer confidence. Similarly, Dreze and Zufryden (1997) identify variables such as prominent colours, images, sound effects, written content and animations as key elements that quickly capture the target audience's attention, influencing their behaviour almost instinctively, without requiring much cognitive effort.

So, it is clear that audiovisual design does not just serve to make content more beautiful or modern - it has an essential strategic and emotional function. The effective combination of image and sound makes it possible to create experiences that stay in the memory, thrill, and motivate action. However, even the best-applied technical elements lack a deeper purpose: to build meaning and generate value in the relationship between brand and consumer.

2.2. CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIP

2.2.1. BRAND ENGAGEMENT

Consumer engagement with the brand has emerged as one of the most relevant metrics for assessing the effectiveness of advertising, reflected in exposure to content, attitudes towards the brand and subsequent consumer behaviour (Burnik, 2023). This concept is important in the digital environment, where attention is scarce and competition between brands is constant. As Calder et al. (2016) point out, high engagement levels contribute to greater ad exposure, while improving brand memorisation and positively influencing consumption intentions.

In this context, the creativity and meaning of adverts play a decisive role. By provoking positive feelings, the likelihood of generating involvement increases (Wang, 2006). However, despite these benefits, it is important to recognise that there is no universal formula for ensuring consumer involvement. The literature emphasises that individual experiences and specific contexts influence interaction (Calder et al., 2016). Various authors approach this interaction in different ways: for Nijholt et al. (2012), it manifests itself through observable behaviours in the relationship between the consumer and the brand; Hollebeek et al. (2014) focus on the emotional responses aroused by brand messages; while Shen et al. (2020) highlight the role of creative experiences in activating engagement.

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Consequently, when associated with advertising campaigns, consumer engagement makes it possible to evaluate the stimuli generated and the interactivity established with the brand (Kim et al., 2016). With the rise of social networks, consumer involvement has been analysed through digital metrics such as likes, comments and shares. Despite the richness of these interactions, brands face difficulties optimising the connection with their audiences on social media. Barger et al. (2016) warn of the added challenges in creating content that engages users. This complexity is magnified in an environment saturated with stimuli, in which attention and participation are increasingly optional (Coker et al., 2021). Even so, the same authors show that audiovisual ads based on storytelling tend to generate more intense affective responses and more favourable behavioural intentions than direct sales ads.

3. METHODOLOGY

Given the impact of advertising campaigns in the sector and the growing use of storytelling as a marketing strategy, this study aims to analyse audiovisual Christmas campaigns launched in 2024 by the brands NOS and Vodafone, using content published on their official YouTube channels. The qualitative analysis focused on each campaign's narrative structure and audiovisual aesthetics, drawing upon theoretical insights outlined in the literature review. Meanwhile, the quantitative analysis examined basic engagement metrics—namely the number of views, likes and comments—to compare user interaction levels with each campaign.

4. RESULTS

The selected advertising campaigns were analysed, considering both their reception by the public and the narrative and emotional elements that characterise them.

Regarding narrative, the Vodafone campaign focuses on balancing technology with the value of human relationships. The story of a young man who, by leaving his mobile phone at home, rediscovers the meaning of family life, appeals to the emotions and reinforces the message of living moments of real connection with those around us. In this way, they generate empathy through the public's identification with technological dependence, especially in young people. The compelling storytelling creates a narrative progression that leads viewers to reflect on the subject. The use of cosy images and a nostalgic tone, such as a visit to the grandparents' house at Christmas time and the chance to spend time with an old friend, intensifies the emotional connection. The cinematography focuses on natural elements and familiar surroundings, using a warm colour palette to reinforce the feeling of comfort and familiarity. Although the brand is not the centrepiece, the message indirectly reinforces Vodafone's values as a facilitator of connection and communication. Published on 1 December 2024, the ad lasts 2 minutes and 30 seconds and, on the YouTube channel (available at https://youtu.be/d_Po-8TZODc?si=MdeDalSPNSFWjtsu), on 3 April 2025, it had 4,074,676 views, around 1,400 likes and 164 comments (figure 2).

Around 98% of the comments were positive and congratulated the brand on the message it wanted to convey. However, three comments negatively criticised the ad, saying that they gave more importance to the connection between the young boy and the young girl and discredited the significance of the connection between the young boy and his grandfather. In addition, one comment mentions that they share a form of education that reflects distrust between parents and children. This is because, in the advert, the mother purposely hides the mobile phone, and the son believes she has left it at home. In the end, she returns the mobile phone to her grandfather, and he realises why she did what she did. One point that stands out is that Vodafone responds to many comments, encouraging engagement with the brand. However, it did not respond to the negative comments. Following the equations adapted by Silva and Gouveia (2021) and previously defined by Biancovilli et al. (2017), the 'Total Sample Engagement' (figure 3), the 'weight of reactions' (figure 4) and the 'weight of comments' (figure 5) were measured.
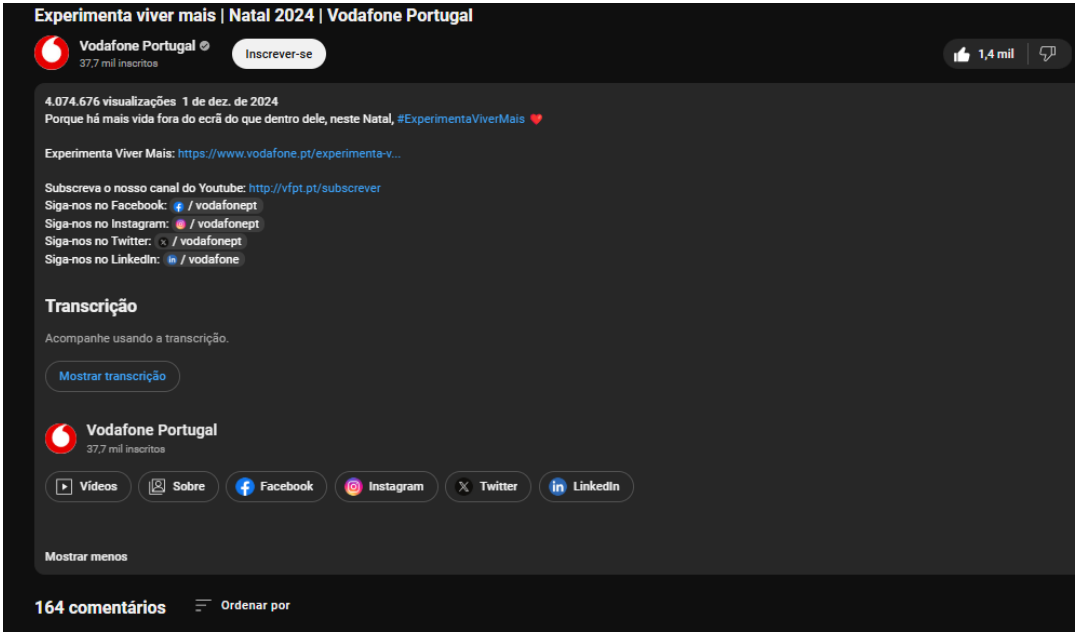
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Figure 1: Video Statistics from Vodafone's Youtube Channel

Source: Vodafone Portugal YouTube channel

$$Total\ Sample\ Involvement\ (TSI) = Reactions + Comments$$

Figure 2: Total Sample Involvement

Source: Silva and Gouveia (2021)

$$weight\ of\ reactions\ (wr) = \cfrac{1}{\cfrac{reactions}{TSI} \times 2}$$

Figure 3: Weight of Reactions

Source: Silva and Gouveia (2021)

$$weight\ of\ comments\ (wc) = \cfrac{1}{\cfrac{comments}{TSI} \times 2}$$

Figure 4: Weight of Comments

Source: Silva and Gouveia (2021)

Following the equation defined by Silva and Gouveia (2021) in Figure 3, the Vodafone advertising video on its YouTube channel had a Total Sample Engagement of 1,564. Thus, the weight of reactions resulted in a value of 0.559 and the weight of comments in a value of 4.762.

Regarding the narrative, the NOS campaign relies on the strength of the Portuguese Christmas tradition, using the song 'A Todos um Bom Natal' to create a sense of nostalgia and sharing. The focus is on the emotion of nostalgia and the power of a simple message to bring people together. This focus on nostalgia is also reflected in the demonstration of young people who are emigrating this Christmas season, which is quite common for Portuguese citizens. The choice of traditional song appeals directly to the affective memory of the Portuguese public. The progression of the advert, which shows the spread of the message and its influence, creates a growing emotional effect. The tone of the advert is warm and familiar, with soft lighting and scenes that convey cosiness and togetherness. The use of close-ups emphasises the emotional expressions of the characters. NOS reinforces its link to communication and sharing moments, associating with values such as togetherness and proximity. Published on 2 December 2024, the ad lasts 1 minute and, on the YouTube channel (available at https://youtu.be/Sx7OKaDzZWQ?si=9Xfibm9meK_XfQmO), on 3 April 2025, it had 544,760 views, around 1,000 likes and 86 comments (figure 5).
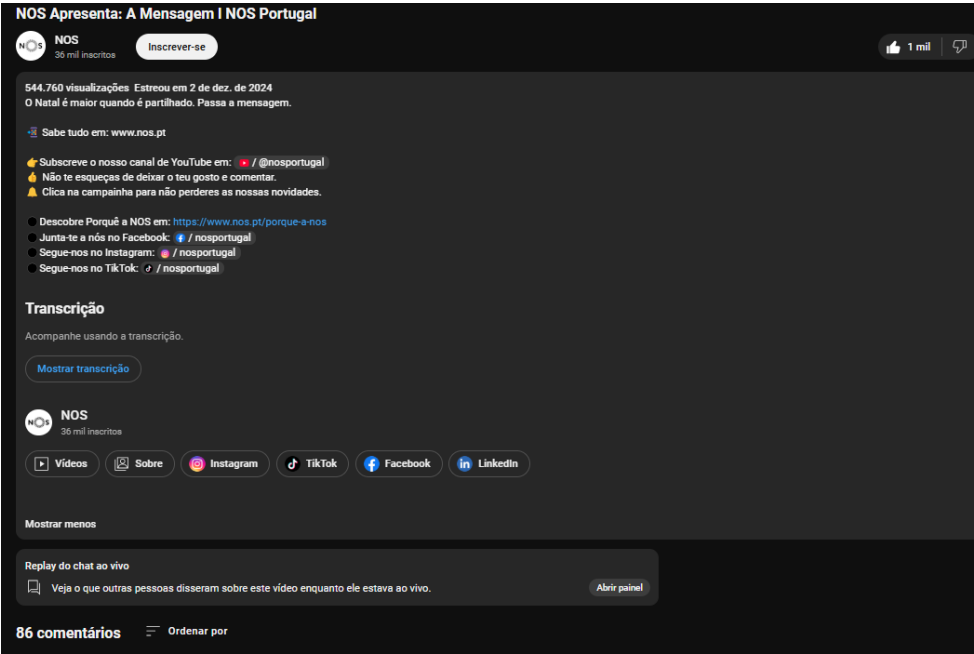

Figure 5: Video Statistics from NOS Youtube Channel

Source: NOS Youtube Channel

Around 95 per cent of the comments were positive, with most wishing Merry Christmas, praising the message and the actress who played the main character. However, despite not being direct criticisms of the advert, three users took the opportunity to comment on situations in which they were unhappy with the service provided by NOS, mainly about Internet speed or the brand's excessive advertising. One comment directly criticised the ad, saying that this type of ad does not give an accurate picture of the reality of the Christmas season. One point that stands out is that NOS responds to many comments, encouraging engagement with the brand. It also responded to negative comments about the Internet service, demonstrating confidence in its services and offering its customers a way to solve their problems. Following the equation Silva and Gouveia (2021) defined in Figure 3, Vodafone's advertising video on its YouTube channel had a Total Sample Engagement of 1,086. Thus, the weight of reactions resulted in a value of 0.543 and the weight of comments in a value of 6.313.

Although Vodafone recorded more comments in absolute terms, NOS had a higher relative weight for comments, indicating that, in its sample, this type of interaction was proportionally rarer and therefore more valued in the engagement metric. This approach allows for a more balanced reading of interactions, emphasising the greater informational value of comments compared to reactions, which are more immediate and recurrent. The difference between the weights assigned thus reveals that informational involvement depends not only on the volume of interactions, but also on the quality and communicative effort associated with each type of action, which becomes particularly relevant when analysing campaigns based on storytelling. Also, Houghton (2021), when mentioning narrative transport, suggests that the immersion process can occur in videos of any length, as long as the story is engaging and the emotional connection with the audience is effective. Therefore, the longer length of the Vodafone video may allow for a more detailed exploration of the narrative elements, but that does not mean that short videos, such as the NOS one, cannot also create an immersive and emotional experience, depending on the quality of the narrative and the visual aesthetic used. As mentioned by Escalas (2004) and Delgadillo and Escalas (2004), the narrative structure can be just as effective in shorter videos, as long as the visual elements and content organisation are appropriate for communicating the message.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study underscores the significant impact of storytelling in digital advertising, particularly in the telecommunications sector, during emotionally significant periods such as Christmas. NOS and Vodafone utilised narrative techniques to evoke emotion and convey brand values. However, they employed distinct strategies: Vodafone focused on digital disconnection and family reconnection, while NOS emphasised tradition and emotional warmth. These approaches align with the literature highlighting how emotional involvement and the narrative's authenticity are essential in capturing audience attention and fostering engagement (Escalas, 2004; Van Laer et al., 2014). While Vodafone reached a broader audience in quantitative metrics, NOS's higher weighted comment score points to more profound qualitative engagement, reflecting a deeper emotional connection with the brand (Barger et al., 2016). This suggests that effective engagement depends not solely on reach but on how the narrative resonates with the audience and encourages genuine interaction. These findings echo the importance of narrative depth and the need for brands to recognise and respond to audience feedback, an essential element in building trust and loyalty (Hollebeek, 2011; Dessart & Pitardi, 2019). The results also indicate that successful storytelling in digital advertising campaigns requires a careful balance between emotional resonance, aesthetic coherence, and brand alignment (Ryan, 2008; Green, 2004). In this context, a narrative's visual and sensory elements amplify emotional engagement and foster a strong connection with the brand (Chen, 2015; Santos et al., 2023). Future research should explore cross-platform engagement and the long-term impact of storytelling on brand perception and consumer behaviour.

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