

THE STORYTELLING EFFECT ON CONSUMERS' PURCHASING BEHAVIOR: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW WITH BIBLIOMETRIC APPROACH

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Resumo

O storytelling desperta as emoções dos consumidores e afeta o comportamento de compra por meio de desejos e atitudes. A literatura de marketing discute essa crença, mas sua clareza permanece nebulosa, pois as definições conceituais e operacionais dos usos do storytelling são diversas. Com o objetivo de consolidar o conhecimento fragmentado, esta pesquisa examina como a literatura de marketing tem abordado a influência do storytelling no comportamento de compra dos consumidores, esclarecendo as ênfases de pesquisa existentes. Por meio de uma revisão sistemática da literatura com análise de cluster, em uma abordagem bibliométrica, ficou demonstrado que a literatura de marketing segue quatro vertentes de entendimento sobre o efeito do storytelling no comportamento de compra do consumidor, sendo que o storytelling: (1) fornece um estímulo para a identificação do consumidor com a marca, (2) permite que os consumidores experimentem valor emocional e (3) apoia comportamentos de engajamento, embora haja uma desvantagem, pois também (4) propaga discursos negativos. Esta pesquisa conclui com um roteiro para pesquisas futuras sobre as articulações entre storytelling e o comportamento de compra dos consumidores.

Palavras-chave: Consumidor; Storytelling; Revisão

Abstract

Storytelling arouses consumers' emotions and affects purchasing behavior through desires and attitudes. The marketing literature discusses this belief, but its clarity remains blurry because the conceptual and operational definitions of storytelling uses are diverse. With the goal of untangling complexities and consolidating fragmented knowledge, this research examines how the marketing literature has addressed the influence of storytelling on consumers' purchasing behavior by clarifying existing research emphases. Through a systematic literature review with cluster analysis using a bibliometric approach, we demonstrate that the marketing literature follows four strands of understanding concerning the effect of storytelling on consumers' purchasing behavior, in that storytelling (1) provides a stimulus for consumer identification with the brand, (2) allows consumers to experience emotional value, and (3) supports engagement behaviors, though there is a downside as it also (4) propagates negative speech. This research concludes with a roadmap for future research on storytelling and consumers' purchasing behavior.

Keywords: Consumer; Storytelling; Review.

The storytelling effect on consumers' purchasing behavior: a systematic literature review with bibliometric approach

1. INTRODUCTION

Stories are robust and have taken on a new dimension in the marketing field (Mora and Livat, 2013). The use of narration or narrative as a communication technique can be an effective instrument of persuasion and a form of connection with the consumer through shared values and sub-cultural group identity (Boldosova and Luoto, 2019). However, an informative or straightforward narrative often cannot evoke emotions in the way that storytelling can (Mora and Livat, 2013). To understand storytelling as a marketing tool, it is important to consider how consumers respond to messages.

Consumers' cognitive and emotional responses are two separate agencies that are closely intertwined, though the explanation of emotions has frequently been in tandem with cognitions (Kuuru and Närvänen, 2019). Consumers perceive a range of positive and negative emotions (Sultan, 2018) that contribute to a meaningful experience and reinforce relationship building (Klaus, 2013). In this regard, consumers who feel satisfied, excited, or emotional are more likely to remain in the marketplace and are willing to spend more time and, consequently, more money (Clarke et al., 2012). Hence, when storytelling evokes emotion, it brings value to consumers (Boldosova and Luoto, 2019). Indeed, storytelling can more easily provoke a change in consumers' attitude than an informative or straightforward message (Grace and Kaufman, 2013). Therefore, storytelling arouses consumers' emotions (Lee et al., 2016), directly affecting consumers' desires and attitudes (Mora and Livat, 2013) and indirectly impacting their purchasing behavior (Padilla-Zea et al., 2014).

Though the marketing literature has shed light on the construction and impact of storytelling, its conceptual and operational uses definitions are diverse and its body of knowledge remains fragmented (Walls, 2013). In marketing, discussions about the use of storytelling go through the exploration and development of the companies and brands own stories (Delgado-Ballester and Fernández-Sabiote, 2016), also through the creation or analysis of the characteristics and intrinsic elements belonging to the developed story itself (Sanders and Van-Krieken, 2018), and even about the techniques and transfers communication of the storytelling (Chiu et al., 2012). Indeed, recent scholars have issued a rallying call for the need to take stock on the state of storytelling in the field of marketing (Pitt and Treen, 2019). There is also a need to focus

specifically on the influence of storytelling on consumers' purchasing behavior in order to support the return on investment of its use in marketing (Rowles, 2022). More importantly, the diversity and fragmentation of knowledge that exist in a field are an indication of a need for consolation efforts, which can typically be undertaken through a systematic literature review of that field (Gummerus, 2013; Paul et al., 2021). With the increasing expectation of objectivity in review studies, the use of bibliometric methodology has emerged as an established and mainstream method for reviewing the literature with greater objectivity due to its reliance on quantitative techniques to reveal the intellectual structure of the field (Donthu et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2022).

Therefore, this research aims to investigate how the marketing literature has addressed the effect of storytelling on consumers' purchasing behavior using a systematic literature review that adopts a bibliometric methodology. This research contributes to the body of knowledge by clarifying the existing emphases and discussions relating to storytelling's influence on consumers' purchasing behavior in the marketing field. In doing so, this research responds to the need to "constantly evaluate mainstream definitions, categories, and concepts concerning those offered by new constructs" (Gummesson, 2006, p. 18) as well as the call for a retrospective review of storytelling in marketing (Pitt and Treen, 2019).

2. THEORETICAL BASIS

Stories can arouse emotions linked to affective memories among the audience, consciously or unconsciously (McGaugh, 2003). When applied to marketing, storytelling is a marketing strategy whose content and form are a narrative, wherein the objective is to persuade consumers through both commercial (e.g., sponsored posts) and non-commercial (e.g., community posts) stories (Shavitt and Barnes, 2020). The importance of sustained consumer attention and emotional engagement with storytelling characters has been highlighted through neuroscience. Anker et al. (2015) explain that if the narrative is sufficiently engaging, the brain can reorient itself and become transfixed, retaining full attention and being wholly transported into the narrative. The authors further explain that attention is key to emotional resonance and that emotional involvement results in a greater connection and sense of identification. To create attention-grabbing storytelling, Rosen (2000) structured and suggested the dramatic arc by deconstructing the narrative into five parts: exposure, rising action, climax, falling, and stripping.

The narrative can be judged through the thoughts that create a greater or lesser involvement with the character (protagonist), building high and low moments in the story experience, wherein this evaluation is known as the theory of narrative quality (Escalas, 2013). The codification of the narrative makes it possible to measure the audiences' involvement with storytelling characters by way of the relationship with their personality characteristics, notions of narrative chronology, temporal dimension (beginning, middle, and end), and structural chronology, which involves causality and personality development (Escalas, 2013). Thus, the challenge for marketers is to develop the “right” stories for their brands (Rosen, 2000).

When storytelling is focused as a marketing and communication technique, it helps create a direct connection with the consumer, building brand trust and developing their empathy toward brands (Woldarsky, 2019). While a story can explore consumer emotions, brand authenticity and shared values have become increasingly important in the brand-consumer relationship (McGaugh, 2003). Woldarsky (2019) affirms that consumers choose brands based on self-identification, which reflects their identity or desired identity, and consume products or services based on the meanings attributed to them. Consumers though notice how “authentic,” “real,” or “true” a brand and its story is, which aids in attributing symbolic value to the brand and its product (Woldarsky, 2019). Woldarsky (2019) argues that authenticity plays a vital role in the brand-consumer relationship and affects consumers' behaviors. The identifiable variables influenced by authenticity include brand equity, brand nostalgia, brand marketing, brand clarity, brand social commitment, legitimacy, employee or representative passion, production method, quality compromises, and disregard for commercial reasons (Woldarsky, 2019). Authenticity, in this sense, is romanticized by the consumer (Gabriel, 2000).

Consumers have perceptions related to brands that can be identified with specific forms or characteristics of the product or ideas that may be associated with them (Aaker, 1996). These associations represent the basis for purchasing decisions, differentiating one brand from others and building positive attitudes towards the brand (Lang et al., 2022). Brand associations are essential for loyalty to the brand, creating value for the company and its customers (Aaker, 1996; Lang et al., 2022). In this context, stories can create and reinforce positive associations about brands through loyalty, notoriety, perceived quality, brand associations, and other brand assets, thus modifying the behavior of consumers towards them, making them willing to pay more for the product (Lundqvist et al., 2013).

Storytelling not only serves to arouse consumer emotions but can also communicate the values of the brand and how they relate to the consumer (Anaza et al., 2019). Gilliam and

Flaherty (2015) contends that storytelling plays a role in information, persuasion, and connection in interactions between the consumer and the brand. In that way, Lacoste and LaRocca (2015) propose that consumers play an active role in storytelling by co-creating value with a brand. This fits with the service-dominant logic proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2004) showing the central position of the consumer as a co-creator of value, a departure from the prior dominant mentality in which brands create value unilaterally. Furthermore, Anaza et al. (2019) highlighted that storytelling is positively related to the trust that consumers have in brands, favoring a personal connection. In this regard, storytelling serves as a powerful mechanism that marketers can leverage to enhance brand-consumer relationships.

3. METHODOLOGY

To respond to the purpose of this study, an exploratory and descriptive research was carried out with a systematic literature review procedure with a bibliometric analysis (Donthu et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2021; Whitemore and Knafl, 2005).

Researchers have promoted improvements in the quality of the literature review process through a systematic, transparent, and reproducible synthesis of research (Tranfield et al., 2003), which has attracted further business research (Denyer and Neely, 2004; Donthu et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2021). Filippi et al. (2019) offers that systematic literature reviews present critical and quality materials that provide importance and relevance in scientific works in different areas of knowledge. Furthermore, systematic literature reviews differ from traditional or narrative literature reviews through more rigorous and well-defined searches. In other words, they have methodological rigor in their execution (Cronin et al., 2008; Paul et al., 2021).

Every systematic literature review follows an implementation protocol guiding the researcher throughout the review process (Cronin et al., 2008). The review procedure adopted to carry out the systematic literature review herein follows Cronin et al.'s (2008) review protocol, which has five steps (Table 1).

Table 1. The review procedure

Step	Description
1	<i>Selecting a review topic:</i> “How does storytelling influence consumers’ purchasing behavior?”
2	<i>Searching the literature:</i> Keyword search string in the “title, abstract and keywords” is defined as “(“storytelling” AND “consumer behavi*or”).” Scientific papers were included if they were (a) peer-reviewed, (b) written in English, (c) published within the last decade at the time of review (2011 to 2021), and (d) indexed in the Web of Science (WoS) Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and excluded if they did not meet these criteria.

3	<i>Gathering, reading, and analyzing the literature:</i> The full texts of 31 scientific papers were downloaded. The reading of the full texts indicates that six papers did not address the review topic, and thus, only 25 scientific papers were included for further review using “bibliometric analysis” in the “Bibliometrix in R” software.
4	<i>Writing the review:</i> The literature in each knowledge cluster is also read and content analyzed as per the recommendation of Bardin (1977).
5	<i>Reporting the references:</i> “Scientific papers” and “key takeaways” are reported in a table.

Source: Adapted from Cronin et al. (2008)

4. RESULTS ANALYSIS

4.1. Profile of scientific papers

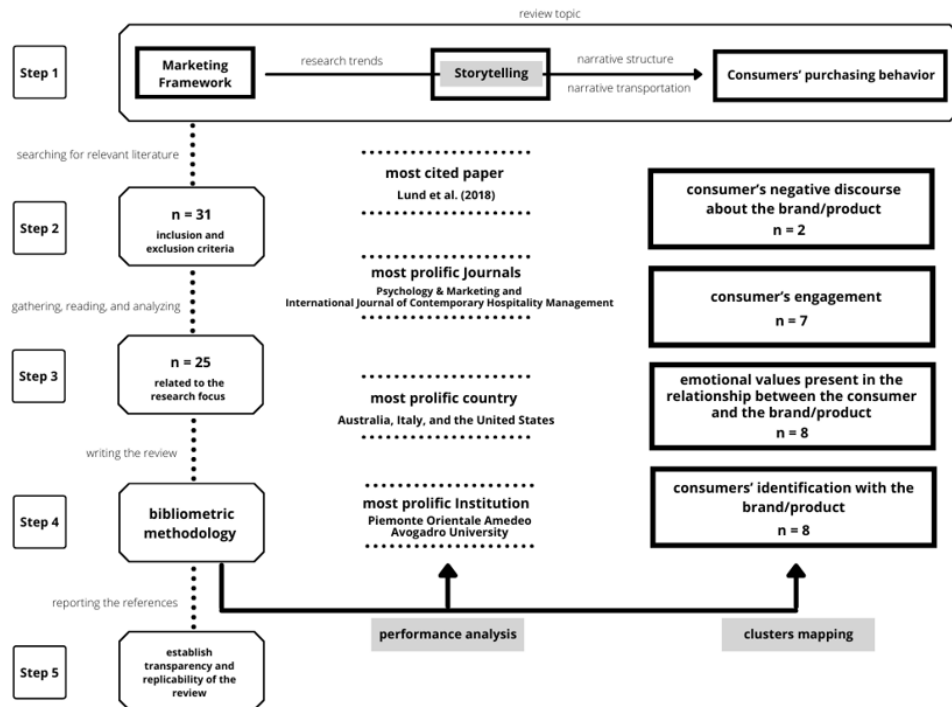
The pool of 25 relevant scientific papers that shed light on the influence of storytelling on consumers’ purchasing behavior in the past decade indicates that the field is relatively niche and small as compared to larger marketing fields with hundreds of scientific papers such as customer engagement (Lim et al., 2022). Noteworthy, the present field of research has relied on a variety of methodologies, including case studies ($n=2$), conceptual models ($n=3$), interviews ($n=1$), netnographies ($n=7$), reviews ($n=3$), surveys ($n=4$), and mix methods ($n=5$).

In the marketing field, netnographies have become a widely accepted form of research that has been used to address a wide range of topics, from applied questions of online advertising to more general investigations of identity, social relation, purchasing behavior, learning, and creativity (Kozinets, 2014). Netnography supports qualitative, quantitative, or mixed analysis tools according to the assumptions listed by Creswell (2010). A netnography in digital networks offers an opportunity to understand the daily social behavior of consumers, as digital networks have become increasingly part of the constitution of human nature (Lund et al., 2018).

4.2. Performance of research constituents

Using bibliographic data of the 25 scientific papers, this research presents a *performance analysis* of the most prolific research constituents in the field: *most cited scientific papers*, *most prolific journals*, *most prolific countries*, and *most prolific institutions*. Also, we performed a cluster analysis in the bibliometric approach step. The summary of the performance and cluster mapping is presented in figure 1.

Figure 1. The performance and cluster mapping



4.3. Knowledge clusters in the field

Science mapping enables the major themes or research streams in a field of study to be ascertained (Donthu et al., 2021). Bibliographic coupling is a science mapping technique used in this research to reveal the knowledge clusters in the field - the technique assumes that scientific papers with shared references are likely to be similar in content, and thus, clusters papers into homogeneous groups based on the co-occurrences of shared references (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017; Budler et al., 2021; Castriotta et al., 2019; Weinberg, 1974). The keywords listed in scientific papers are also a valuable resource to determine the themes of knowledge clusters (Callon et al., 1983; Donthu et al., 2021). In this regard, the bibliographic coupling conducted in the Bibliometrix in R software revealed that the 25 scientific papers in the review can be segmented into four knowledge clusters, whose themes were assigned based on the most prominent keyword and reading of scientific papers in each cluster.

Throughout the next sections, we discuss the influence of storytelling on consumers' purchasing behavior based on the four knowledge clusters revealed through science mapping - consumers' identification with the brand/product, the emotional values present in the relationship between the consumer and the brand/product, the consumer's engagement, and the consumer's negative discourse about the brand/product.

4.3.1.1. Storytelling as a stimulus for consumer identification with the brand/product

Stories build identities and realities and based on that, relationships between brands and consumers (Lund et al., 2018). Narratives can help consumers identify with the brand more easily, evoking their empathy and facilitating engagement behaviors (Song et al., 2019).

Lund et al. (2018) explain that personal affective creation bonds between the brand and the consumer enable trust and commitment, generating ambassadors and allies who defend the brand's narratives. Brand stories purposefully unite consumers and brands as co-protagonists in the purchase process of a particular product (Santo, 2019). Santo (2019), however, notes that the stories about the brands/products are built by the companies themselves based on the needs, desires, and concerns they perceive consumers have. Thus, it is up to companies to develop the "right" story for their brand (Rosen, 2000), because consumers are capable of mentally preparing and understanding a "good story" that they think is relevant to them (Weder et al., 2019).

Karpinska-Krakowiak and Modlinski (2020) note that a highly factual story that directly encourages consumers to buy or use a product negatively impacts purchase intent. For the narrative to encourage the consumer to buy or use a brand, the stories need to transport the consumer to a place different from the real world (Dhote and Kumar, 2019), creating physical and virtual performative spaces that facilitate communicative modalities (Lund et al., 2018). If the consumer finds relevance in the content produced, the ability to remember and connect with the brand/product for a more extended period is enhanced (Dhote and Kumar, 2019). For Dhote and Kumar (2019), the relevance of storytelling lies in the story's ability to achieve an emotional connection with the consumer. For this emotional connectivity, stories must be structured similarly to a classic dramatic pattern, with elements such as a protagonist, an antagonist, incidents, inflection points, goals to be achieved by a character, and obstacles to be overcome (Karpinska-Krakowiak and Modlinski, 2020).

The protagonist has the function of highlighting the similarity between company and consumer. Lund et al. (2018) explained that if consumers personify the brand's narrative, this situation can create spaces for relationships and engagement. An exciting protagonist who represents pleasurable assets as part of his social role triggers an identification (Lund et al., 2018) and a mirroring process (Karunasena et al., 2021). In this way, storytelling about the brand/product will rely on narratives of common (Song et al., 2019) and real (Lund et al., 2018) people.

However, the way the story is told can build or deconstruct the image of a brand or a product (Ingenbleek and Zhao, 2019) in the mind of the consumer. For example, highly humorous

narratives can negatively moderate the impact of brand/product identification (Karpinska-Krakowiak and Modlinski, 2020). Karunasena et al. (2021) suggests that brands should focus on intergenerational storytelling, focusing on specific behaviors of target audiences such as young consumers, with the creation of short, engaging videos for use in a wide range of digital areas, including social media. Furthermore, Karpinska-Krakowiak and Modlinski (2020) noted that storytelling works better for highly engaging product categories with long purchase cycles than non-durable or fast-consuming goods. This information can be explained by the differences in the stories developed for simple versus complex products. High-involvement products have more versatile roles in consumers' lives and can be incorporated into more emotional stories (Karpinska-Krakowiak and Modlinski, 2020).

4.3.1.2. Storytelling allows consumers to create emotional value

When examining the value of a product, the emotional value derived from the consumer's purchase experience must also be considered (Yu and Lee, 2019). In studying consumers' purchasing behavior, one needs to anticipate possible behavioral changes that determine the level of interaction with the brand, its content strategy, and its effectiveness (Trachuk et al., 2021) as part of a customer-oriented approach (Hemsley-Brown and Alnawas, 2016; Trachuk et al., 2021).

From the customer-oriented perspective, storytelling is an effective communication strategy (Chapman et al., 2011). It develops the consumer experience based on symbolic values and profound emotional aspects (Hemsley-Brown and Alnawas, 2016). For this, brands must consider the consumer's mood and emotions to increase interaction and brand value (Trachuk et al., 2021). Affective storytelling is faster and more effective in changing the attitudes of consumers (Hamelin et al., 2020), as each plot in a story can be treated as a symbolic sign, which in turn is subject to interpretation by the consumer (Nguyen, 2017).

Consumers relate positive storytelling with experiences they have lived, and there is an evocation of memory in this process. Kessous et al. (2015) suggest that nostalgic memories are primarily favorable. For the consumer, nostalgia is a way to reconnect with the past, communicate a particular image, and publicize one's values, thus telling one's "story" to the group members, and in this way, nostalgia has a significant effect on storytelling (Kessous et al., 2015). Furthermore, consumers' attitude and trust in the product must be addressed to explain the impact of emotional value on purchasing behavior (Yu and Lee, 2019), while loyalty derives from positive evaluation and warm feelings towards brands (Hemsley-Brown and

Alnawas, 2016). For Hamelin et al. (2020), however, there is a limit to the level of emotion generated by the choice of emotional semantics so marketers should avoid being overly sentimental during storytelling. Depending on the context, excessive sentimentality can trigger negative emotions such as contempt and result in a loss of credibility and trust (Hamelin et al., 2020).

Finally, a story can also arouse negative emotions in consumers. Emotions such as shame, guilt, regret, and envy directly affect consumers' choices (Bianchi, 2014) and, consequently, their purchasing behavior (Chapman et al., 2011). Nguyen (2017) warned that an anticlimax signal forces the consumer to withdraw from the story and therefore undoes their emotional connection to it. To that extent, when storytelling introduces an anticlimax, the story arrives at a chain of many possible and unexpected outcomes, with inflection points and multiple endings (Nguyen, 2017).

4.3.1.3. Storytelling supporting consumer engagement behaviors

Engagement can be influenced by connections with other consumers in the form of social influence, and also by the character's psychological factors, such as morality, altruistic duty, and satisfaction, among others (Bouncken et al., 2015). Therefore, if a consumer is not engaged or is unwilling to cooperate in an interaction, the brand cannot enhance its value (Chandler and Lusch, 2015). From this perspective, sharing stories is strategic for any social or managerial environment, as it reinforces the growing involvement of the members with the environment itself (Pera, 2014). Storytelling, therefore, becomes a collective creative process that enables social interactions by generating a shared emotional experience that becomes the essence of the identity of any social community (Pera, 2014).

Telling stories is a way to develop one's own experience and impact other consumers (Pera, 2014). Living a good story and retelling it offers a captivating emotional experience (Pera, 2014). The recipients of the stories are emotionally transported to the storyteller's world through empathy and images, internalizing the stories through narrative transport and making a connection with the protagonist (Pera and Viglia, 2016).

An emotive narrative aims to engage consumers, awaken their emotions, and connect them to other consumers, thus increasing their understanding, imagination, and experience (Dogan and Kan, 2020). The consumer understands storytelling through both intra-story (meaning, structure, and internal aspects) and inter-story (organization, society, and relationship) analysis (Chautard and Collin-Lachaud, 2019). When the consumer correctly assimilates the

information conveyed by storytelling, there is a willingness to pay more (Nie et al., 2017). As such, storytelling is a value co-creation behavior for the consumer (Pera and Viglia, 2016). Co-creative storytelling results in “consumer delight” and helps other consumers reach deeply satisfying meaning-making levels (Pera and Viglia, 2016). Part of this co-creation behavior are intra-story factors, which are the attitudes and personality of the consumer, and inter-story factors, which are based on cultural attributes (Kozak, 2016). Specifically, the first dimension of this behavior (intra-story) is interpersonal communication built on trust and admiration (Pera and Viglia, 2016), whereas the second dimension (inter-story) turns to storytelling itself, wherein stories portray unconscious memories and cultural values associated with the meaning of any purchase and beliefs deeply ingrained in the social environment (Merchant et al., 2017).

4.3.1.4. Storytelling as a propagator of negative speeches

A social identity is a part of our self-concept (social self) resulting from our perception of belonging to a group (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2018). When someone’s social identity is threatened—for example, through negative discourse about a particular brand/product—consumers are motivated to protect their self-image and use defensive behaviors and attitudes (Champniss et al., 2015). In this regard, negative storytelling can influence a consumer’s purchase decision, whether delivered by similar consumers (peer-to-peer) or by social authorities (influence within a social group).

In peer-to-peer communities, consumers exploit their storytelling skills to strengthen their needs for products (Harris et al., 2016). Harris et al. (2016) emphasize that exaggeration of consumer experiences is driven by psychological characteristics and perceptions of consumer experiences through intentionally distorted communications of their own experiences about a particular brand/product. This exaggeration does not arise from the cognitive distortion of negative experiences, but from the rhetorical objective of the consumer’s storytelling (Harris et al., 2016). Thus, exaggerated negative consumer discourse can be strongly affected by the brand’s relational behavior, with reflective assessments of the brand-consumer situational social dynamics determining consumers’ willingness to lie about the brand/product (Harris et al., 2016).

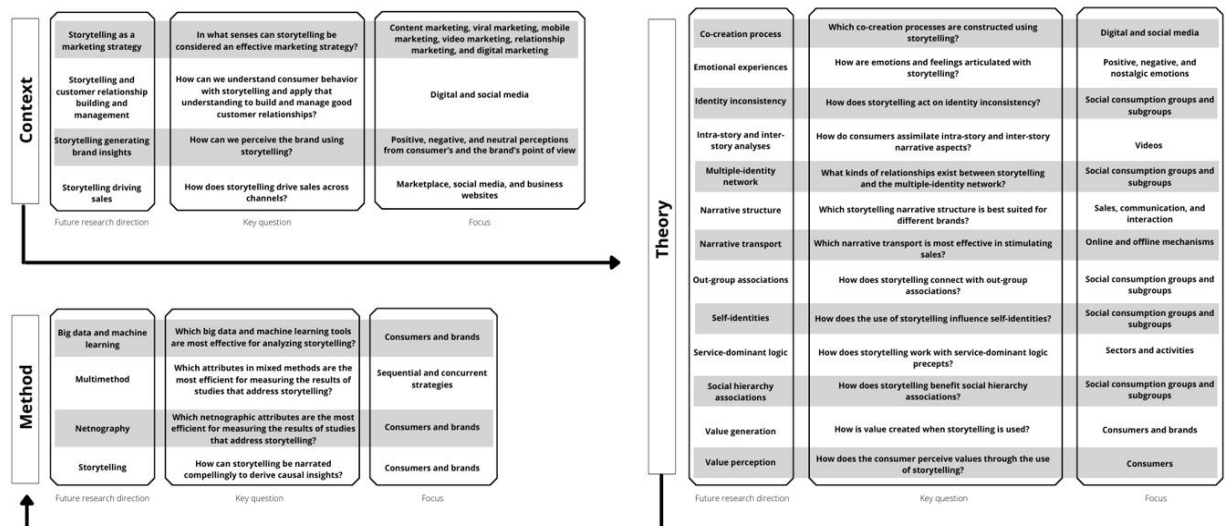
Moreover, the social authorities in specific communities can directly influence the purchasing behavior of consumers because individuals increasingly seek to “hear the voice” of social influencers (Stubb, 2018). Thus, negative storytelling about brands/products that social influencers engage in often resonates among members of the social community (Stubb, 2018).

5. CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this research was to investigate how scientific papers in the marketing field have address the influence of storytelling on consumers' purchasing behavior. Through a systematic literature review with cluster analysis using a bibliometric approach, this research reveals that the literature in this field follows four strands of understanding: (1) storytelling as a stimulus for consumer identification with the brand/product, (2) storytelling that allows consumers to create emotional value, (3) storytelling that supports consumer engagement behaviors, and (4) storytelling as a propagator of negative speech. It needs to be noted though that the majority of the storytelling literature focuses on the positive aspects of storytelling as only two of the articles examine storytelling as a propagator of negative speech. Furthermore, this research shows that netnography is the most used methodological prerogative in the field to understand the relationship between storytelling and consumer behavior and its influence on their purchases.

Based on the retrospective insights from this review and our ensuing reflection, we put forth a purposefully crafted research agenda (Figure 2) using the theories, contexts, and methods (TCM) framework proposed by Paul et al. (2021) to guide future research in the field.

Figure 2. Research agenda



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