

The Role of Emotional Engagement and Story Structure in Digital Social Campaign Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

This literature study synthesizes research on the role of emotion psychology and storytelling in the effectiveness of viral social campaigns. It examines how narrative structures elicit specific emotional responses (empathy, moral anger, hope), and how this emotional engagement subsequently influences audience engagement, message recall, and behavioral intention. The analysis further explores the characteristics that enable such narrative-driven, emotional content to achieve virality across social networks. Findings indicate that well-crafted narratives systematically trigger target emotions through character identification, moral conflict, and resolution pathways. These emotions then act as psychological catalysts: they enhance engagement by capturing attention and enabling social identity expression; they strengthen recall through emotionally charged memory encoding; and they motivate behavioral intention by shaping attitudes, perceived norms, and self-efficacy beliefs. For virality, high-arousal emotional content packaged within coherent, morally framed stories provides social currency to sharers, aligns with platform algorithms that reward engagement, and creates easily transmissible units of meaning. The study concludes that the strategic integration of emotional and narrative design is central to creating social campaigns that are not only widely seen and remembered but also effective in motivating meaningful action and organic spread.

INTRODUCTION

Social campaigns strive to influence public attitudes and behaviors to support positive changes on public issues. Unlike commercial marketing communication, these campaigns face unique challenges, such as the complexity of the issues, the need for deep-seated change, and intense competition for audience attention. The transformation of cultural values and social practices in the digital era influences how society receives and responds to campaign messages (Al Hakim et al., 2021). In an increasingly dense and fragmented media environment, conventional social messages that are informational and didactic often fail to penetrate the noise of information. The need for communication approaches that are more engaging, memorable, and capable of driving action becomes urgent. The development of social media and digital technology has shifted the paradigm of mass communication to be more participatory and networked, creating opportunities for messages to

spread organically beyond the initial target audience. Understanding the psychological mechanisms that drive acceptance, engagement, and message dissemination becomes a crucial foundation for campaign success.

Storytelling has emerged as a highly effective strategic approach. Humans are inherently narrative beings; we understand the world and our experiences through stories. Narratives provide a cognitive structure that makes complex information more coherent, relatable, and easy to process. In the fields of health and social communication, narrative approaches have gained significant empirical support. Green and Brock (2000) introduced the concept of transportation, a psychological state in which individuals are fully absorbed into the world of a narrative. This transportation process reduces critical resistance to the message being conveyed, thereby facilitating more persuasive attitude changes. In other words, when someone is "carried away" by a story, they tend to accept the values and

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lessons contained within it more easily than they would with direct argumentative messages.

The effectiveness of storytelling is inseparable from its ability to touch the realm of emotion. The psychology of emotion shows that emotions function as adaptive mechanisms that direct attention, memory, and motivation to act. Emotions are not distractions from rational consideration but are integral components of the decision-making process. Green et al. (2002) argue that fictional stories serve as safe social simulators, allowing us to experience and understand complex emotions in various situations. In social campaigns, well-constructed narratives can leverage this simulation function. A story about a child struggling with illness due to air pollution, for instance, not only conveys facts about air quality but also allows the audience to emotionally experience the human consequences of the issue, thereby evoking empathy and a sense of urgency.

The relationship between emotions evoked by narratives and their persuasive effects can be explained through information processing theory. Petty and Cacioppo (1986), in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), distinguish between two routes of persuasion: the central route, which involves deep thinking about arguments, and the peripheral route, which relies on simple cues such as source attractiveness or emotional content. For many social campaigns aimed at broad audiences with low initial involvement in the issue, the peripheral route through emotional appeal is often more effective. Emotional narratives function as powerful peripheral cues that can change attitudes and intentions to act without requiring intense rational analysis. However, for these changes to be lasting and lead to concrete action, emotional engagement must be combined with strong information and a clear path of action.

In the digital era, the goals of social campaigns are often expanded to achieve virality, which is the rapid and widespread dissemination of messages through sharing between individuals on social media. Virality acts as a dramatic force multiplier. Berger and Milkman (2012), in their seminal research, found that online content that triggers high-arousal emotions (both positive, such as awe, and negative, such as anger or anxiety) is more likely to be shared compared to content that triggers low-arousal emotions, such as sadness. Social media and contemporary popular culture shape the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the younger generation through digital content that is often emotional (Kurniawan & Khayru, 2021). These findings directly link the psychology of emotion to sharing behavior

on social media. A successful social campaign, therefore, must not only evoke the right emotions to motivate individual action but also the right emotions to drive social dissemination. Narratives become tools for designing emotional journeys that strategically trigger the types of emotional arousal that encourage people to share the story, thereby creating an amplification cycle that benefits the spread of social messages.

There remains uncertainty regarding which emotions are most appropriate for different campaign goals. Although research like that of Berger and Milkman (2012) shows the superiority of high-arousal emotions for virality, their application in social contexts can be problematic. For example, evoking anger might be effective for rapid mobilization, such as online petitions, but anger can hinder long-term reflective thinking and trigger polarization. Conversely, deep empathy might be less "shared" due to its low-arousal nature, but it could be more effective for building long-term relationships with an issue and encouraging recurring donations. Furthermore, the interaction between various emotions within a single narrative is complex. A story might start with sadness, shift to hope, and end with a call to action that evokes moral outrage. Understanding how these emotional sequences and transitions influence message processing and final outcomes still requires further exploration.

Another challenge lies in measuring actual impact. Many studies on the effectiveness of storytelling rely on laboratory experiments or surveys that measure self-reported behavioral intentions. However, there is a significant gap between stating an intention to donate in a questionnaire and actually clicking the online donation button. Social media metrics such as likes, shares, and comments are often used as proxies for engagement and virality, but these metrics do not directly reflect deep attitude changes or offline actions. Developing digital literary literature among the younger generation through social media shows that engagement with content does not always mean deep value adoption (Kurniawan et al., 2021). Slater (2002) notes that while narratives can be highly effective for changing normative beliefs and risk perceptions, the transition from belief change to sustained behavior change is influenced by many external factors, such as structural barriers or social norms. Thus, directly linking a specific narrative structure to real behavioral outcomes is a task fraught with methodological complexity.

Furthermore, ethical questions arise alongside

the use of intentional emotional manipulation in social campaigns. Where is the line between legitimate persuasion and emotional exploitation? Narratives that oversimplify complex issues to create emotional and shareable stories risk reducing nuanced public understanding. The challenge in building an inclusive and equal society often stems from stigma and simplified social perceptions (Hardyansah et al., 2021). Campaigns that rely on "poverty porn" or images that exploit suffering to evoke sympathy can reinforce stereotypes and create passive dependence instead of empowerment. The transportation concept from Green and Brock (2000) also shows that when someone is fully absorbed in a story, their critical capacity diminishes, which makes them more vulnerable to messages that might be biased or misleading. Therefore, the psychological effectiveness of storytelling must be balanced with strict ethical considerations regarding accuracy, the dignity of the subjects of the story, and the long-term goals of the desired social change.

The digital attention economy has made virality and engagement the new, highly valuable currency. Non-profit organizations, public institutions, and social movements must compete not only with one another but also with the entire ecosystem of entertainment and commercial content. Minimalism trends in consumption behavior also reflect shifting values in society that can be leveraged in social campaigns (Gani et al., 2021). Without a deep understanding of the psychological mechanisms that drive engagement and sharing, social campaigns risk wasting limited resources on ineffective strategies. A comprehensive synthesis of literature can serve as an evidence-based navigation map for practitioners, helping them shift from guessing or mimicking trends toward deliberate and theoretically informed campaign design. This is crucial for maximizing the impact of investments in communication for social good.

Advances in cognitive neuroscience and psychophysiology offer opportunities to deepen our understanding of how stories affect the brain and body. Research is beginning to map how narratives activate neural networks associated with the theory of mind (understanding others), emotion, and even motor areas, creating simulations of deep experiences. These neuroscience insights can strengthen and enrich existing psychological theories, such as transportation theory. By integrating findings from the biological level with research on media effects and behavior, we can build a more holistic and robust model of the persuasive power of narratives. Literature reviews that connect

these different levels of analysis are essential to advancing the field of persuasive communication.

The world today is faced with highly urgent social and environmental challenges, from the climate crisis to systemic injustice. Addressing these issues requires the mobilization of awareness, political will, and collective action on a scale never seen before. Patterns of poverty and social segregation in metropolitan areas show that structural issues require communication approaches capable of reaching various layers of society (Fauzi, 2021). Effective communication is a prerequisite for such mobilization. Storytelling that leverages the principles of emotional psychology has the potential to bridge the gap between knowledge and action, between individual concern and collective solutions. By exploring and synthesizing the best knowledge about how emotional stories work, this research contributes to the larger effort of building a public discourse that is more empathetic, informed, and motivated to create positive change. This is not just about making more "viral" campaigns, but about making important messages more human, more memorable, and more capable of moving the hearts and hands of the masses.

This research aims to conduct a comprehensive literature synthesis regarding the role of emotional psychology and storytelling in the effectiveness of viral social campaigns. The first objective is to analyze the psychological mechanisms through which narrative structure and character depiction in social campaign stories trigger specific emotional responses such as empathy, hope, and moral outrage in the audience. The second objective is to examine the relationship between the resulting emotional engagement and broader communication outcomes, namely the level of audience engagement with the message, message recall, and the intention to perform the advocated actions. The third objective is to investigate how the emotional and narrative characteristics of a message interact with social media dynamics to facilitate the viral spread of messages. Theoretically, this study seeks to integrate insights from emotional psychology, narrative theory, and digital communication research to develop a more unified framework for understanding social message effectiveness. Practically, this synthesis is expected to provide evidence-based guidelines for social communication practitioners, non-profit organizations, and policymakers to design campaigns that are not only narratively and emotionally engaging but also capable of driving meaningful engagement, being well-remembered,

motivating action, and spreading widely to the target audience.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a systematic literature study with a qualitative approach aimed at synthesizing scientific findings related to the psychological mechanisms of storytelling in social campaigns. The study relies entirely on secondary data, which includes reputable international peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs from leading experts, and relevant research reports from academic institutions and professional organizations in the fields of communication and social psychology. Data sources were collected through in-depth searches in academic databases such as PsycINFO, Communication & Mass Media Complete, and Google Scholar. The keywords used include combinations of terms such as "narrative persuasion," "emotional appeal," "social campaign virality," "transportation theory," and "behavioral intention." The selection process was conducted in stages, beginning with title and abstract screening, followed by a full-text eligibility assessment, prioritizing peer-reviewed publications with high citation rates as indicators of influence in their respective fields.

The data analysis technique applied is thematic content analysis. This method was chosen for its ability to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes emerging from a corpus of texts. The analysis procedure follows the guidelines developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which emphasize an iterative and reflective process. The initial stage involved repeated reading and immersion in the entire corpus of text to achieve deep familiarity with the data. Subsequently, an inductive coding process was performed on segments of text relevant to the research questions. These initial codes were then grouped based on their conceptual similarities to form candidate themes. These themes were then reviewed, refined, and labeled to ensure they accurately represent the essence of the data and address the research problems.

The validity and reliability of the synthesis in this qualitative research are maintained through several key strategies. First, source triangulation was conducted by comparing and confirming findings from literature originating from different disciplines, such as social psychology, communication science, and social marketing. Second, the analytical process was meticulously documented through research notes and concept maps that chart the development from codes to

themes, allowing for an audit trail as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) regarding naturalistic inquiry. This approach allows the researcher not only to summarize existing findings but also to conduct critical interpretation, identify gaps in the literature, and propose new conceptual relationships. Thus, this study aims to produce a coherent, evidence-based synthesis that provides a meaningful contribution to the development of theory and practice in the design of effective social campaigns.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Psychological Mechanisms: Narrative Structure and Emotional Triggers in Social Campaign Storytelling

Narratives function not only as communication tools but also as psychological mechanisms that shape audience engagement. The narrative structure in social campaign storytelling serves as a psychological framework that systematically evokes and directs the audience's emotional responses. Storytelling, whether delivered in person, in writing, or online, has been recognized as capable of motivating individual action and support for government measures in handling important social issues. In line with this enthusiasm, government agencies, advocacy groups, and organizations now spend significant time and funds on public storytelling campaigns, often assisted by storytelling consultants (Polletta & Redman, 2020). Social interactions in digital society have changed communication patterns, including how stories are disseminated and received within virtual communities (Darmawan, 2021). The most fundamental and effective structures often follow classic narrative patterns, such as those identified by Greimas's actantial theory or Campbell's monomyth, which are simplified into three main parts: setup (initial situation), conflict or challenge, and resolution. In the setup phase, characters are introduced in a relatable, normal state. The depiction of authentic characters and small details about their lives facilitates the identification process. Public opinion formation through social media is heavily influenced by how information and narratives are disseminated and has the potential to cause polarization (Arifin & Rojak, 2022). When audiences can see parts of themselves or people they know in the character, the door to empathy begins to open. Empathy, as explained in social psychology research, consists of affective components (feeling what others feel) and cognitive components (understanding others' perspectives). A study by Batson and his

colleagues consistently shows that imaginatively taking on another person's perspective is key to evoking empathy that drives helping behavior. Within the scope of a campaign, a narrative that allows the audience to mentally step into the shoes of the main character is the foundation for evoking care. The main character usually appears alongside opponents and helpers to resolve problems or conflicts in the story (Kang et al., 2020). Carefully designed narrative structures become central elements in building empathy and driving audience engagement in social campaigns.

The conflict phase plays a crucial role in deepening the audience's emotional engagement. The conflict or challenge faced by the character is the engine that drives more intense emotional responses. This is where specific emotional triggers begin to differentiate. Nationalist ethno-religious populism can be a challenge to global governance and domestic social integration, including how social narratives are received by the public (Fariz, 2021). When the conflict depicts injustice, violations of fundamental social norms, or the arbitrariness of those in power, the narrative evokes moral outrage. Moral outrage differs from ordinary anger because it arises from the judgment that a universal ethical principle has been violated. According to appraisal theory, emotions like moral outrage are triggered by the cognitive judgment that an event violates one's standards, is blameworthy, and is controllable by others. Narratives that clearly describe the causal agent (e.g., a polluting corporation or discriminatory policies) and show that the character's suffering could have been avoided effectively build this cognitive judgment. Thus, the story structure not only presents suffering but also directs causal attribution, which serves as a catalyst for focused and actionable moral outrage. Narratively designed conflict serves as a strategic means to turn audience emotion into a moral impulse to act.

In the emotional dynamics built by social campaign narratives, the type of conflict determines the direction of the audience's affective response. Conversely, if the conflict is more personal or involves fighting inevitable circumstances (such as natural disasters or illness), the narrative is more likely to evoke sadness or pity. However, strategic social campaigns often avoid stopping at passive sadness and turn to evoking hope. Hope is evoked through structural elements in the resolution section or through depictions of the character's resilience. Characters who are not just passive victims but who show agency, efforts to fight, or who receive support from the community, send a signal that change and

improvement are possible. Snyder, in his theory of hope, defines it as a blend of agency (motivation to reach a goal) and pathways (perception of the ability to generate routes toward that goal). A narrative that shows a path to a solution, whether through the character's own actions or through replicable interventions, provides the audience with a cognitive map to channel their empathy or anger into directed action. The resolution phase plays an important role in transforming audience emotion into the belief that social change can be achieved through both collective and individual action.

Characters hold a central role as triggers for audience emotional engagement. The characteristics of the characters themselves are powerful tools for modulating emotional responses. The transformation of masculinity and femininity in modern society influences how characters in social campaign narratives are perceived and identified by audiences (Negara & Khayru, 2022). Characters depicted as having similarities to the target audience (in-group) will more easily trigger empathy and identification. However, campaigns aimed at expanding the moral circle often intentionally feature out-group characters, such as marginalized groups whose voices are rarely heard. To be effective, the narrative must explicitly link those characters' experiences with universal values held by the audience, thereby reducing psychological distance. Furthermore, the character's morality is also important. Characters depicted as innocent or as blameless victims will trigger more empathy and moral outrage compared to characters with significant moral flaws. Research on attribution theory shows that we tend to empathize more with those we perceive as not responsible for their own suffering. Proper character design can direct audience empathy and strengthen the desired emotional response within a narrative.

Beyond characters, the narrative point of view is a key tool in shaping the intensity and direction of audience emotional responses. The use of narrative point of view also plays a significant role. The exploration of literary works as a medium to form and maintain national identity through narratives and cultural symbols shows that perspective is highly decisive in how a message is received (Kurniawan et al., 2021). First-person narratives or strictly limited points of view force the audience to experience events through the lens and feelings of a single character, thereby strengthening emotional connection. This technique enhances what Green and Brock (2000) call "transportation," a state of being fully absorbed into the world of the story. This

transportation reduces critical resistance and makes emotional responses more direct and authentic. Conversely, a broader third-person narrative can be used to present a systemic picture of an issue, connecting individual experiences with larger social structures, which can further strengthen moral outrage by demonstrating the scale and patterns of injustice. The selection of a narrative point of view is not merely an aesthetic decision, but a psychological strategy that determines whether a narrative is more effective at building personal empathy or mobilizing critical awareness against structural injustice.

Beyond point of view and characters, the emotional power of a narrative is also heavily determined by the use of sensory elements and descriptive details. Sensory elements and descriptive details in a narrative function as emotional amplifiers. Big data brings new things into social life, including how data on audience emotional responses can be collected and analyzed to refine campaign narratives (Wahyudi et al., 2021). Rather than simply stating "he is poor," a story that describes the coldness of the dirt floor he sleeps on or the hesitation in his eyes when he must choose between buying food or medicine for his child activates sensorimotor simulations in the audience's mind. Cognitive neuroscience shows that reading about actions or sensations activates the same areas of the brain that would be activated if we performed or felt them ourselves. The activation of the mirror neuron system is believed to be the neural basis for empathy. Thus, a narrative rich in sensory detail not only makes a story more vivid but also engages the audience's brain at a deeper level, making emotional responses stronger and more personal. Sensory detail plays a crucial role in bridging narrative experience with deep emotional audience engagement.

The management of emotion in a narrative plays an important role in shaping the audience's experience. Finally, the narrative structure also regulates emotional rhythm, which is essential to avoid emotional exhaustion or despair. A narrative consisting only of continuous suffering can overload the audience's emotional capacity and cause disengagement as a defense mechanism. Beauty standards in cyberspace and the implications of social media on body perception show that repeated exposure to certain emotional content can shape and burden audience perception (Nur Özkaya, 2021). Effective narrative designs often intersperse moments of difficulty with moments of humanity, small humor, or glimpses of resilience. This emotional variation, known as the "emotional arc,"

helps maintain audience attention and prepares the foundation for a moment of transformation or hope at the end of the story. A structure that allows negative emotions (empathy for suffering, outrage against injustice) to be followed by positive emotions (hope, inspiration) creates a more complete and motivating psychological experience, as it provides both emotional resolution and a path forward. Emotionally structured narratives are capable of building deeper and more sustainable engagement.

Narrative structure plays a strategic role in shaping audience psychological responses. Overall, this analysis shows that narrative structure and character depiction are not merely creative tools, but a system of precise psychological engineering. They work by manipulating fundamental cognitive processes such as identification, attribution, appraisal, and mental simulation to evoke specific target emotions. The relationship between social factors and individual well-being shows that social dynamics, including narrative exposure, influence mental and physical health (Warin, 2021). Empathy is triggered through identification and perspective-taking with relatable characters. Moral outrage is triggered through a clear depiction of conflict involving norm violations and the identification of a responsible agent. Hope is evoked through the depiction of character agency and the presence of a path toward a possible resolution. By understanding and applying these structural principles, campaign creators can design narratives that do not just convey information, but intentionally and predictably shape the audience's emotional landscape, which becomes a crucial foundation for all subsequent communication effects such as engagement, recall, and intention to act. Consciously designed narratives are capable of directing audience emotions toward desired communication goals.

From Emotion to Intention: The Impact of Affective Involvement on Engagement, Recall and Behavioural Intention

Emotions in social campaign narratives serve functions beyond mere feeling. The emotional engagement successfully evoked by a social campaign narrative is not an end goal, but a psychological catalyst that drives a series of critical communication outcomes. These outcomes include active engagement with the message, recall of the content and its call-to-action, and most importantly, behavioral intention in alignment with the campaign's goals. The relationship between emotion and these three outcomes is causal, mediated by various cognitive and motivational

mechanisms. The initial process is the allocation of attention. Emotions, especially high-arousal ones such as moral outrage, awe, or profound anxiety, act as a psychological alarm system that redirects our cognitive resources to process the stimulus that triggers them. In a media environment full of distractions, the emotions from a touching story act as a powerful filter, ensuring the message is not only seen but also given deeper mental processing. This increased processing is the direct foundation for higher engagement, whether in the form of exposure duration, depth of contemplation, or the tendency to interact with the message, such as providing comments or reactions. Emotion is not just a bridge to attention, but also a foundation for the expected change in attitude and behavior.

In the context of digital communication, emotion plays a critical role in driving audience participation. Engagement in the digital sphere is often measured through likes, shares, comments, and watch time. Emotional engagement increases the probability of all these metrics. A study on responses to online video content shows that videos triggering strong emotions, both positive and negative, receive significantly higher sharing rates. This occurs because emotions are not only personal but also social; by sharing touching content, individuals engage in emotional expression and impression management. Digital storytelling as a form of digital narrative can include various alternative methods and tools (e.g., interactive stories, multimedia presentations, web-based games, etc.) (Podara et al., 2021). They communicate to their social networks about the values they care about and the types of emotions they deem legitimate to express. For example, sharing a story about injustice is a way to express moral outrage while simultaneously asserting a personal identity as someone who is socially sensitive. Thus, emotional engagement transforms the message recipient from a passive consumer into an active participant who uses the message as a tool for social communication and identity construction. Narrative designs capable of evoking emotion not only broaden the reach of the message but also deepen the social meaning of digital participation.

Message recall is heavily influenced by the emotional quality of its delivery. The impact of emotion on message recall is even better documented in cognitive psychology literature. The principle of emotional enhancement of memory states that events accompanied by emotional arousal are more likely to be strongly encoded into long-term memory compared to neutral events. The

relationship between social media use and mental health in users with FoMO shows that exposure to emotional content on social media can significantly impact a user's psychological state (Aisyah & Issalillah, 2021). The neurobiological mechanism behind this involves the amygdala, which interacts closely with the hippocampus, the center of memory formation. When we experience an emotional response to a narrative, the amygdala helps tag that information as important, thereby facilitating memory consolidation. In the scope of a campaign, this means that facts, statistics, and calls-to-action wrapped in emotional narratives have a greater chance of being remembered by the audience after exposure. However, there is an important nuance: emotions that are overly intense or extremely negative can sometimes lead to memory narrowing, where attention narrows only to the most emotional central aspects of the story, at the expense of contextual details or action-related information. Therefore, narrative design must balance emotional intensity with clarity of the core message and the call-to-action. Emotional narratives can be effective tools to strengthen recall while encouraging the expected response.

Emotional engagement not only shapes perception but also serves as the foundation for the drive to act. The relationship between emotional engagement and behavioral intention is the most complex yet most substantive. Here, theories such as Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provide an explanatory framework. Gamification approaches in employee training show that elements of engagement and motivation, similar to those evoked by emotional narratives, can enhance learning effectiveness (Eddine & Darmawan, 2022). Emotions evoked by narratives can influence key components of behavioral intention. First, emotion influences attitude toward the behavior. Empathy or moral outrage can change one's assessment of the importance and value of the advocated action, making it seem more necessary and moral. Second, emotion influences perceived norms. When a story goes viral, it creates a perception of strong descriptive social norms; seeing many people engage with or share the story signals that "others also care," thereby reducing social barriers to action. Third, emotion can influence perceived behavioral control. Narratives featuring ordinary characters (not superheroes) who succeed in making small changes can increase the audience's self-efficacy, making them feel that the action is possible and within their reach. Emotion in narratives does not just evoke

awareness, but also activates psychological mechanisms that drive real behavioral change.

Each type of emotion within a narrative has a distinct pathway of influence on audience motivation. The specific mechanisms vary based on the type of emotion. Empathy, as demonstrated in Batson's research program on the empathy-altruism hypothesis, directly motivates helping behavior with the goal of reducing the suffering of others. Empathetic feelings diminish selfish motivations and increase the desire to help, regardless of social rewards. Socio-psychological analysis of teenagers' ideal choices in environments of social pressure also shows that emotion and identification with characters play a significant role in decision-making (Fajar et al., 2021). Moral outrage, on the other hand, motivates action through the impulse to correct injustice and punish perpetrators perceived as guilty. This can motivate collective action such as protests or petitions, which aim for systemic change. Hope operates as a motivational resource that reinforces perseverance. Snyder (2002) emphasizes that hope involves the belief that goals can be achieved (pathways thinking) and the motivation to use those pathways (agency thinking). Narratives that evoke hope by showing viable solutions and individual agency provide both components, thereby sustaining behavioral intention over time, even after the initial emotional arousal subsides. By understanding the distinctive role of each emotion, narrative designers can strategically choose and direct emotional responses to achieve the desired behavioral impact.

The effectiveness of emotion in driving action is heavily influenced by the individual's perception of their capacity and the impact of their actions. However, the path from emotion to behavioral intention is not automatic. There are important moderating factors, such as self-efficacy and response efficacy. Social psychology theory, particularly the Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) developed by Rogers (1975) and subsequently expanded, provides a framework for understanding this. According to this theory, the motivation to perform a protective action (such as pro-environmental behavior in social campaigns) is determined by the perceived threat and the ability to overcome it. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief that they have the capability to execute the necessary actions, while response efficacy is the belief that those actions will indeed be effective in reducing the threat. A narrative might succeed in evoking deep moral outrage against plastic pollution by depicting its destructive impact, but if the audience feels that

their individual actions, such as recycling, will have no effect on such a massive problem (low response efficacy), that anger can turn into hopelessness or cynicism, rather than constructive behavioral intention. This phenomenon, where awareness of uncontrollable large-scale problems triggers helplessness, has been studied in different contexts, such as in research on psychological distance and climate change by Spence, Poortinga, and Pidgeon (2012). Effective narratives must not only evoke emotion but also explicitly reinforce the belief that individual actions are meaningful and capable of producing real change.

The effectiveness of a narrative in driving behavioral change depends heavily on its ability to build the perception that the action is possible and impactful. Therefore, effective narratives do not just evoke emotion but also, explicitly or implicitly, reinforce the belief that the proposed action is effective and doable. Research by Nabi, Gustafson, and Jensen (2018) on health message campaigns shows that messages combining emotional appeal with information that increases efficacy generate stronger behavioral intentions compared to messages that rely solely on emotion or information alone. The relationship between social support and entrepreneurial intention among teenagers also shows that the belief in one's own ability (self-efficacy) is crucial in turning intention into real action (Khayru et al., 2021). In the context of narrative, this reinforcement of efficacy can be integrated into the storyline itself. Showcasing real successes, however small, or connecting individual actions with a larger collective impact, is an important narrative strategy for turning emotion into actionable intention. For example, a story does not just focus on an activist struggling alone, but also shows how their efforts inspire their community to act together, ultimately resulting in local policy change. Such strategies model collective efficacy the belief that group action can achieve desired outcomes which is a strong predictor of engagement in collective action, as outlined in the work of Bandura (2000). By designing narratives that intelligently build both self-efficacy and response efficacy, campaign creators can ensure that the emotional energy they evoke is channeled into productive motivation, avoiding the trap of hopelessness and encouraging meaningful action. Narratives do not just serve as a tool to convey messages but also as an instrument of psychological empowerment that drives social change.

Emotional design in campaign narratives must consider the dynamics between different types of emotions to achieve sustainable impact. The

interaction between various emotions is also essential for lasting outcomes. Campaigns that only evoke negative emotions (such as guilt or fear) without providing a constructive pathway for release can lead to avoidance or denial. Conversely, narrative patterns that move from negative emotions (identifying the problem and victims) toward positive emotions (showing solutions and agency) are often the most effective. The challenge of building social cohesion in urban environments also involves polarization issues triggered by differing views, which can be influenced by the type of narratives in circulation (Mardikaningsih, 2021). This pattern, sometimes referred to as negative-positive emotional flow, utilizes negative emotions to create a sense of urgency and the need for change, then uses positive emotions (hope, inspiration) to motivate and empower the audience to take action. This well-designed emotional arc guides the audience through a complete psychological journey, from awareness of the problem to commitment to the solution, thereby maximizing the potential to generate strong and meaningful behavioral intention. Structured emotional balance and transition are keys to turning shock into sustained action.

Effective social campaign narratives work through the strategic integration of emotion and cognition. In summary, the emotional engagement generated by social campaign narratives operates as a psychological engine that drives engagement, recall, and behavioral intention through interconnected pathways. Emotion increases engagement by capturing attention and facilitating the expression of social identity. Emotion enhances recall through the neurocognitive mechanisms of memory reinforcement. And most importantly, emotion motivates behavioral intention by shaping attitudes, influencing perceived norms, and increasing efficacy beliefs, with each primary emotion (empathy, moral outrage, hope) contributing to slightly different motivational components. Final success in turning intention into real action depends on the narrative's ability to not just evoke emotion, but also to link it with empowering beliefs and a clear, accessible call-to-action, thereby bridging the gap between feeling and doing. Consciously designed emotional narratives can serve as catalysts for sustainable social change.

Spread Mechanisms: The Role of Narrative and Emotional Elements in Driving the Virality of Messages

The dissemination of social campaign messages in the digital era is strongly influenced by their

emotional power and narrative structure. The emotional and narrative characteristics of a social campaign message not only determine its impact on the primary recipient but also fundamentally shape its potential to spread virally through social media networks. Virality is a complex network phenomenon; however, communication and digital marketing research have identified clear patterns in which affective content and story structure interact with users' psychological motivations to share content. Fundamentally, viral dissemination is mediated by an individual's decision to share, which is a social behavior driven by both internal and external considerations. High emotional content, specifically emotions that increase psychological arousal (high-arousal), serves as a primary internal driver. Seminal research by Berger and Milkman (2012) strongly demonstrates that online content triggering awe, anger, or anxiety has a higher probability of being shared compared to content that triggers low-arousal emotions such as sadness. The mechanism behind this is that high-arousal emotions create a physiological and psychological state that requires release, and sharing such content is one way to manage and communicate that arousal to others. Narratives designed for virality must consider not only the message content but also how the evoked emotions can drive social action in the form of widespread message dissemination.

In social campaign communication, narratives act as a bridge between emotion and shareable meaning. However, emotion alone is not enough. Narratives provide a framework that makes that emotion understandable, communicable, and socially meaningful. A startling statistic about hunger might evoke momentary anxiety, but a complete story about a child named Aisha struggling against hunger provides a coherent package of emotion and cognition that is much easier to pass along. Social media and contemporary digital literature for youth show how strong narratives can be easily replicated and disseminated on digital platforms (Kurniawan et al., 2021). Narratives create a "complete thought" or a holistic unit of meaning. When someone shares a story, they are not just sharing raw emotion; they are sharing a package of world interpretation a view on what is wrong, who is responsible, and why it matters. This narrative cohesion reduces the cognitive cost for those who will re-share; they do not need to re-explain why the content is important because the story has already done so. In this regard, narrative structure acts as a powerful meme, a cultural unit that is easily replicated because of its ability to package complex

ideas and emotions into a digestible and transmissible format. Narratives do not just convey a message, but also strengthen the reach and vitality of the message within a dense and competitive social media ecosystem.

Viral narratives do not depend solely on emotional power, but also on structural elements that facilitate social resonance. Specific narrative elements that significantly increase viral potential are character identification and the presence of a clear moral conflict. When audiences can identify with a character or at least clearly understand their struggle, they develop psychological ownership of the story. Access to technology and digital skills play an important role in bridging gaps in education and job opportunities, which also influences how various groups access and disseminate narratives (Arifin & Darmawan, 2021). Sharing the story then becomes part of self-identity management; it is a way to signal to one's social network about the values they hold and the types of issues they care about. For example, sharing a campaign about gender equality with a strong personal narrative is a public statement about the sharer's moral position. Moral conflict, especially one involving a clear injustice between "good" and "evil" parties, is very powerful because it evokes high moral outrage and provides a simple script. The "David versus Goliath" script is a highly viral narrative pattern because it easily mobilizes empathy for the oppressed and anger toward the powerful, while simultaneously providing a universal and easily understood storyline that minimizes the need for additional context. Narratives featuring strong characters and explicit moral conflict not only strengthen emotional engagement but also amplify the possibility of widespread message dissemination through mechanisms of social identity and solidarity.

The motivation to share content in social campaigns is not only altruistic but is also closely related to identity dynamics and social positioning. The concept of "social currency" is key to understanding virality from a motivational perspective. Shared content serves as social currency that increases an individual's value within their group. The navigation of social mobility through the reintegration of individuals involved in crime shows that social acceptance and a sense of belonging are strong drivers of individual participation in a community (Suwito et al., 2022). Emotional and well-crafted narratives provide three main forms of social currency. First, they provide "insider knowledge" or a "conversation starter"; sharing a moving or provocative story gives someone something relevant and meaningful to talk about, positioning them as an

informed and caring person. Second, they facilitate "impression management"; by choosing which stories to share, a person shapes their public image as an empathetic person, one who is angry at injustice, or one who is full of hope. Third, highly emotional stories can provide "emotional utility" to the sharer by serving as a means to express and validate their own feelings. Sharing a story about loss due to a natural disaster, for example, can be a channel for the sadness or solidarity already present in that individual. Strong narratives do not just touch the audience's hearts, but also fulfill their psychosocial needs to connect, be recognized, and find meaning within their digital communities.

The technical aspects of narrative delivery play a critical role in determining the extent to which a message can spread widely. Another narrative factor facilitating dissemination is the "technical shareability" of the story. This includes an optimal length (long enough to build emotion but short enough for online attention spans), a format suitable for the platform (short videos, image carousels with text, Twitter threads), and the inclusion of visual or auditory elements that amplify emotional content. Ethical leadership and social responsibility in organizational managerial practices emphasize the importance of authentic and responsible communication, including in the dissemination of digital narratives (Rojak & Darmawan, 2021). The channel for storytelling plays an important role, as narratives delivered through audio and visual media tend to have a stronger persuasive effect compared to print narratives (Van Laer et al., 2019). Moving background music, expressive facial features of characters, or surprising data visualizations embedded in the storyline function as emotional amplifiers that make the message easier to feel and remember, thereby increasing the likelihood of sharing. Well-constructed narratives also frequently provide concise and powerful hashtags that summarize the emotional or moral core of the story, such as #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter. These hashtags act as social labels and aggregation tools, allowing various individual stories to be grouped under the same narrative and emotional umbrella, thus creating a viral wave greater than the sum of its parts. Successful narrative dissemination depends not only on content and emotion but also on the fit of the format and the technical strategies that support digital reach and engagement.

The dissemination of narratives in social campaigns cannot be separated from the structure and dynamics of the social networks in which they circulate. Social network dynamics also interact with

message characteristics. Content that triggers high-arousal emotions tends to spread faster and wider because it creates a stronger urge to share at each individual node. The reframing of free speech and hate speech bans within Indonesia's democratic legal system shows that social and legal contexts heavily influence how narratives can be disseminated (Udjari et al., 2022). However, the type of network also matters. Narratives that evoke moral outrage might spread very quickly within homogeneous networks (echo chambers) where group norms reinforce those emotions. Conversely, narratives relying more on universal empathy or hope might have a better ability to cross the boundaries of different social groups (cross-cutting networks), as those emotions are less polarizing and more easily accepted by a broader audience. The overlap of various narratives that are modified, amplified, or debated by diverse media forms a complex picture of the situation at stake in a country. Each group believes its narrative represents the truth, while other perspectives on a crisis are deemed lies, misinformation, or fake news (Wagener, 2020). Narrative design can consider this: campaigns aiming for rapid mobilization within a loyal support group might intentionally use more confrontational narratives, while campaigns aiming to increase broad public awareness might choose more humanistic and empathetic narratives. By understanding the social network landscape and the dominant emotional responses within them, campaign creators can adjust their narrative strategies to achieve maximum resonance and strategic dissemination.

In today's digital ecosystem, social media platform algorithms are invisible actors that heavily determine message reach. The role of social media platforms and their algorithms cannot be ignored. Algorithms are designed to promote engagement, and content that consistently triggers strong emotional responses generates higher engagement (watch time, comments, reactions, shares). Urban sprawl, daily mobility, and community cohesion in suburban areas show that physical social network structures share dynamic similarities with digital social networks regarding information dissemination (Wisnujati & Mardikaningsih, 2021). Thus, emotional narratives are intrinsically more likely to be promoted organically by platform algorithms, reaching audiences far beyond the initial followers. Such narratives create a "viral loop": emotion drives engagement, engagement signals the algorithm to display it to more people, who then experience the emotion and engage, thereby strengthening the cycle. Story structures

that have a strong emotional hook at the beginning (such as in videos designed for platforms like TikTok or Reels) are specifically tailored to leverage this algorithmic logic, ensuring viewer retention and triggering shares from the very first seconds. Understanding how algorithms work is a strategic element in digital narrative design that aims to reach and move audiences widely.

Behind the immense potential of emotional narratives to spread widely, there are strategic risks that need to be anticipated. However, there are limitations and risks. Not all emotions or narratives lead to positively impactful virality. Content designed solely to shock or trigger anger without substance may spread widely but damage public discourse and drain social capital. The effectiveness of internal controls and compliance with accounting rules can be likened to efforts to maintain the quality of information dissemination, ensuring that viral narratives remain accurate and responsible (Gardi & Sinambela, 2022). Furthermore, "compassion fatigue" can occur when audiences are bombarded with too many similar narratives of suffering, thereby reducing the emotional effectiveness of each individual story and inhibiting the willingness to share it. The challenge for campaign creators is to design narratives that authentically connect high-arousal emotions with meaningful actions, ensuring that virality does not become an end in itself, but a tool to achieve deeper social impact. Narratives that succeed in the long term are those that are not only viral but also "stick" staying in the collective memory and "mobilize," turning the created attention into organized action. Sustainability of social impact demands narratives that are not only emotionally strong but also ethical, strategic, and oriented toward real transformation.

Virality in social campaigns is the result of a strategic orchestration of content, emotion, and the medium of delivery. Overall, emotional and narrative characteristics facilitate virality by operating on several levels simultaneously. At the individual psychological level, they leverage mechanisms of emotional arousal and identity management to motivate sharing. At the socio-cognitive level, they provide a coherent package of meaning and valuable social currency. The relevance of email marketing in the contemporary digital marketing communications mix shows that personalized and emotionally relevant messages have higher engagement rates (Sinambela & Darmawan, 2021). At the technical-algorithmic level, they are optimized to trigger the engagement metrics valued by platforms. The most viral narratives are

those capable of aligning these three levels: evoking undeniable high-arousal emotions (such as awe or moral outrage), wrapping them in a clear and relatable story structure with recognizable characters and conflicts, and formatting them for optimal performance in the digital attention economy. Thus, virality is not an accident or a mystery, but a predictable outcome of message design that strategically combines insights from the psychology of emotion, storytelling principles, and an understanding of social media dynamics. The success of social campaigns in the digital space depends heavily on the ability to design narratives that are not only touching but also structured, measurable, and directed. Implications regarding intellectual property and legal protection are also important in ensuring that social campaign narratives are not misused or replicated without permission, thereby maintaining the integrity of the original message (Rizky & Darmawan, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This literature review demonstrates that the effectiveness of storytelling in viral social campaigns can be understood through a model that integrates the psychology of emotion, narrative theory, and social media dynamics. The analysis proves that well-designed narrative structures through the introduction of relatable characters, clear conflict depiction, and the presentation of viable resolutions systematically evoke specific emotional responses such as empathy, moral outrage, and hope. These emotions then function as powerful psychological catalysts. They increase engagement by capturing cognitive attention and facilitating the expression of social identity. They strengthen recall through neurobiological memory reinforcement mechanisms triggered by emotional arousal. And most crucially, they motivate behavioral intention by shaping positive attitudes toward advocated behaviors, influencing perceptions of social norms, and increasing self-efficacy beliefs. Furthermore, the emotional (high-arousal) and narrative (coherent story, moral conflict) characteristics of these messages facilitate viral dissemination by providing social currency to those who share them, satisfying platform algorithmic logic that rewards engagement-triggering content, and creating units of meaning that are easily transmitted through social networks.

These research findings have significant implications for both social communication theory and practice. Theoretically, this study affirms the

necessity of a multidisciplinary approach that unites insights from the psychology of emotion, persuasive communication, and digital media studies. The resulting model offers a coherent framework for predicting and analyzing the effectiveness of narrative campaigns, moving beyond intuitive or trend-based approaches. For practitioners including non-profit organizations, activists, and government agencies the primary implication is that campaign design must begin with intentional strategic planning of emotion and narrative. This means selecting target emotions (e.g., hope for sustainable donations, moral outrage for rapid mobilization) that align with campaign goals, and then constructing a story structure that can psychologically trigger those emotions. Furthermore, the technical design of content (format, length, visual elements) must be optimized for shareability and algorithmic compatibility, ensuring that narrative power can be translated into performance on target platforms. Practitioners must also consider the ethics of using emotional manipulation, ensuring accuracy, respecting the dignity of story subjects, and avoiding exploitation that could lead to empathy fatigue or polarization.

Based on the findings and implications, several suggestions are proposed. First, for future researchers, longitudinal experimental studies are needed to directly compare the effectiveness of various narrative structures (e.g., negative-positive arcs vs. pure victim narratives) in evoking different combinations of emotions and their impact on actual behavior, rather than just self-reported intentions. Second, for education and communication training institutions, training modules should be developed that teach evidence-based storytelling principles to aspiring practitioners, with a focus on the linkages between narrative elements, emotional triggers, and communication outcomes. Third, organizations implementing campaigns are advised to implement content pre-testing systems that measure not only aesthetic appeal but also emotional response and the willingness to share among a sample of the target audience before widespread launch. Fourth, social media platforms are encouraged to develop analytical tools that help non-profit organizations map emotional responses and content dissemination patterns, and to consider algorithmic adjustments that give greater weight to high-quality, informative social content rather than solely to content that triggers high engagement.

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