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NEW VISUAL NARRATIVES AND STORYTELLING ON X AND INSTAGRAM: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW
AI Enhances X and Instagram

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how X and Instagram influence new visual narratives. A systematic review of Web of Science, Scopus, and ERIC identified 30 relevant articles. The results indicate that Instagram fosters fragmented visual and emotional narratives, while X is characterised by concise textual storytelling enriched with visual elements. Digital narratives evolve through multimodal formats and artificial intelligence, redefining content creation and consumption. It is crucial to investigate how AI enhances these platforms and how visual narratives impact users' identity, behaviour, and emotions in the digital environment.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary environment, digital communication has acquired a transformative dimension through social media platforms. These platforms not only facilitate interaction and information exchange (Moreano et al., 2024) but have also given rise to new forms of visual narratives and storytelling, tailored to a global and multidimensional audience. This phenomenon has had significant implications for how individuals consume and create content, particularly in a world saturated with visual and textual stimuli (Sánchez-Riaño & Sojo-Gómez, 2024). Social media, with their capacity for mass reach and emphasis on immediacy, have created spaces where stories are presented as rich, largely interactive visual experiences (Badía et al., 2017).

The concept of visual narratives refers to the construction of messages that combine graphic, textual, and audiovisual elements to convey information effectively (Williams, 2019). These narratives leverage the human brain's inherent ability to process images more quickly than text, making them ideal tools for capturing attention in stimulus-saturated environments (Adaval, 2018). On social media, these narratives are enhanced by platform designs that prioritise brief, high-impact visual content.

Storytelling on social media, in turn, is understood as the art of crafting stories specifically designed for the formats and features of digital platforms (Barber & Siemens, 2016). Through this technique, brands, content creators, and the general public convey messages, ideas, or emotions in an engaging and persuasive manner. The resources employed include text, images, videos, infographics, and interactive elements, enabling the creation of rich and captivating narratives. This approach not only aims to transmit information but also to build emotional connections with audiences (Lugmayr et al., 2017).

Platforms such as Instagram and X have been pivotal in this transformation. Instagram, with features like stories, carousels, and reels, enables the telling of micro-stories through ephemeral images and videos. This format, which disappears after 24 hours, is designed to capture attention within a limited timeframe, fostering creativity and emotional connection (Liang & Wolfe, 2022). Conversely, content threads on X have revitalised extended textual and multimedia narratives, providing a space where users can delve into complex topics by combining text, images, videos, and links to offer a more detailed narrative (Castro-Martínez & Díaz, 2021).

These new forms of narration are not only tools for personal expression but also have practical applications in fields such as marketing, education, and social activism (Liang & Wolfe, 2022). For instance, brands use visual narratives to construct stories that emotionally connect with their audiences (Lalama, 2024), while educators leverage threads on X to convey complex concepts in an accessible and engaging manner (Gallardo-López & López-Noguero, 2020).

However, despite their growing importance, the academic literature on this topic is still developing. While studies address specific aspects, such as the impact of algorithms on content visibility or the visual design of narratives, a holistic perspective encompassing the impact of these practices on communication and storytelling dynamics is still lacking.

In this context, this article aims to conduct a systematic review of the literature on visual narratives and storytelling on social media, with a specific focus on Instagram and X. Through this review, it seeks to identify the key characteristics of these narratives, analyse how storytelling practices have evolved on these platforms, and highlight gaps in current research.

This approach will provide a robust foundation for future research and a better understanding of how social media are redefining storytelling in the digital era.

1.1. Key Characteristics of Storytelling on Social Media

1. Interactivity: One of the most significant characteristics of storytelling on social media is its ability to foster interactivity between content creators and audiences. Unlike traditional media, where communication is predominantly unidirectional, social media enable users to actively participate in narratives (Hermann-Acosta, 2020). This interaction is achieved through tools, as expressed by Lozano-Blasco et al. (2023):
   - Comments: spaces where users can express opinions, ask questions, or contribute to the narrative. On platforms like Instagram, comments not only provide additional content but also create communities around posts.
   - Reactions: Features such as "like," "love," or emojis on platforms like Facebook and Instagram allow audiences to express emotions towards content immediately. These responses generate

a sense of reciprocity, encouraging creators to adapt their stories in real time based on feedback received.
- Polls and quizzes: Tools integrated into formats such as Instagram stories or interactive tweets on X allow users to directly influence the direction of narratives, transforming them into co-creators of content.
- This bidirectionality not only increases audience engagement but also strengthens the emotional connection between creators and their followers, contributing to the success of narratives in terms of reach and impact.

2. Temporality: Temporality is another distinctive feature of storytelling on social media, particularly evident in ephemeral formats such as stories on Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. These contents are designed to disappear after a specific period (typically 24 hours), creating a sense of urgency among audiences (Kircova et al., 2020). This temporal approach has several effects:
   - Encourages immediate attention: Users are motivated to engage with content quickly before it disappears, increasing viewership and response rates.
   - Promotes authenticity: Associated with everyday events and real-time experiences, ephemeral formats project a more authentic image, fostering emotional connections with audiences.
   - Reflects the immediacy of digital life: These narratives align with users' expectations for up-to-date and relevant content.
   - Additionally, temporality reinforces a sense of exclusivity, as ephemeral content is not always available to all users, making those who consume it feel part of a special and unique experience.
3. Multimedia: Multimedia integration in digital narratives is one of the greatest advantages of storytelling on social media. Through text, images, videos, and interactive elements, content creators can construct complex and engaging visual and sensory stories. This multidimensional approach enables:
   - Rapid attention capture: Studies indicate that social media users typically dedicate only a few seconds to each post. High-quality images and videos help capture attention immediately.
   - Emotional impact: Visual elements, combined with music or sound effects, can evoke deeper emotions than text alone. For example, reels on Instagram or videos on TikTok have proven highly effective in emotionally connecting with audiences.
   - Enhanced comprehension and retention: By combining text and images, multimedia narratives make messages clearer and more memorable, particularly for complex or abstract information.
4. Personalisation: Personalisation is a crucial factor distinguishing social media storytelling from other forms of narration. Content creators can tailor their stories to align with the specific interests, preferences, and behaviours of their audiences. This capability is enhanced by analytical tools provided by platforms, such as interaction reports and audience segmentation. The benefits of personalisation include:
   - Greater relevance: Narratives designed for specific audiences are perceived as more authentic and meaningful, fostering engagement.
   - Effective segmentation: Brands and creators can develop multiple stories tailored to different demographics, maximising reach and message effectiveness.
   - Building stronger relationships: By reflecting the needs and values of their audiences, creators can establish deeper and more lasting connections.
5. Virality: Finally, virality is perhaps the most emblematic characteristic of storytelling on social media. Platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of impactful narratives through features such as sharing, tagging, and reposting content. This allows a story to reach global audiences in a matter of hours or even minutes (Bravo-Jiménez et al., 2021). Factors contributing to virality include:
   - Emotionality: Stories that evoke strong emotions, such as joy, awe, or outrage, are more likely to be shared.
   - Cultural or social relevance: Content aligned with current trends or debates tends to attract more attention.
   - Simplicity and clarity: Narratives that are easy to understand and share have a higher likelihood of going viral.

Virality not only amplifies the reach of stories but also generates a positive feedback loop, where shared content gains further visibility through platform algorithms. However, this characteristic also poses challenges, such as the risk of misinformation or loss of control over the original message.

2. Methodology

To address the objectives of this article, a systematic review methodology was followed based on the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), which ensures a rigorous and transparent approach to the selection and analysis of relevant studies. This method is particularly useful for synthesising knowledge scattered across different sources and providing a comprehensive overview of a topic of interest.

2.1. Objective of the Review

The purpose of this review is to analyse how social media have transformed visual narratives and storytelling, focusing on the distinctive characteristics and practices of Instagram and X. Specifically, it seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the main characteristics of visual and textual narratives on Instagram and X?
2. How have these storytelling practices evolved in response to the specific functionalities of each platform?
3. What dimensions are currently being studied in the literature on visual narratives and storytelling on social media?
4. What dimensions remain understudied or unexplored in the current literature on visual narratives and storytelling on social media?

2.2. Search Strategy

The search for studies was conducted in the academic databases Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. To ensure comprehensiveness, key terms combined with Boolean operators were used in Spanish, English, and Portuguese, including:

- "Visual narratives on social media"
- "Storytelling on Instagram"
- "Twitter threads"
- "Visual and narrative content"

The search included articles published between 2015 and 2024, covering the period of greatest expansion and consolidation of the functionalities analysed on these platforms.

2.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The criteria for selecting relevant studies were carefully designed to ensure the pertinence and quality of the collected data.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Peer-reviewed articles addressing visual narratives and storytelling on social media.
2. Studies specifically analysing Instagram and X (formerly Twitter).
3. Publications written in English or Spanish.
4. Research including empirical, conceptual, or methodological analyses directly related to the topic.

Exclusion criteria:

1. Articles focusing solely on technical or algorithmic aspects unrelated to narratives.
2. Non-peer-reviewed publications, such as reports or theses.
3. Studies centred on platforms other than Instagram and X.

2.4. Article Selection Process

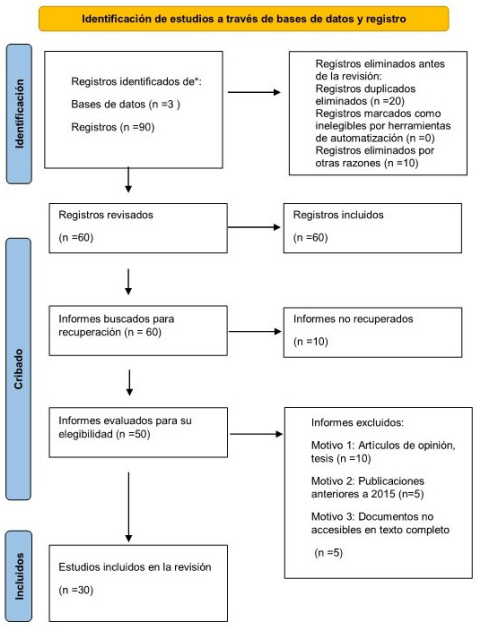
The article selection process followed the stages outlined in the PRISMA 2020 model, summarized in the following diagram (Figure 1):

1. Identification: 90 records were initially identified through searches in the selected databases.
2. Screening: 20 duplicates and 10 irrelevant studies were removed after reviewing titles and abstracts.

3. Eligibility: the full texts of 30 articles were reviewed to assess their relevance based on the established criteria.
4. Inclusion: ultimately, 30 articles meeting all inclusion criteria were selected.

The corresponding PRISMA 2020 diagram reflects this process:

Figure 1. Documents screening process.



Source: Prepared by the authors, 2024.

2.5. Data Extraction and Analysis

From the 30 selected studies, key data were extracted related to:

- Platform analysed (Instagram, X)
- Study focus (visual, textual, multimedia)
- Methodology employed (theoretical, review, qualitative, quantitative, or mixed)
- Main findings and conclusions

The data were organised into a thematic matrix to identify common patterns and divergences in approaches and findings. Subsequently, a descriptive and thematic analysis was conducted to synthesise the most relevant results and address the research questions.

3. Results

This study conducts a systematic review of the literature on visual narratives and storytelling on social media, focusing on platforms such as Instagram and X, using the PRISMA 2020 model (Page et al., 2021) to select 30 academic articles. Key trends, significant contributions, and gaps in the field were identified.

On Instagram, visual narratives are characterized by their multimodal approach, combining visual, textual, and audiovisual elements, enabling the creation of impactful stories (San Cornelio et al., 2024; Williams, 2019). The platform is notable for the use of selfies, filters, editing tools, and Happygrams to construct visual identities and engage in a culture of social approval (da Silva et al., 2019; Mesías-Lema & Eiriz, 2022). In contrast, storytelling on X is predominantly textual, complemented by images and videos, with hashtags playing a fundamental role in organizing narratives and creating digital communities (Castro-Martínez & Díaz, 2021; Egner, 2022). The brevity and creativity of language on X promote memorable stories (Sadler, 2017).

Narrative practices have evolved according to the specific characteristics of each platform. On Instagram, the introduction of ephemeral stories, reels, and carousels has facilitated fragmented and

rapid storytelling (Kircova et al., 2020; Liang & Wolfe, 2022). X, meanwhile, has integrated visual elements, promoting interactive and multimodal storytelling, and has become a space for a new type of digital journalism (Huang et al., 2023). Regarding X, Dumcombe (2024) highlights how images serve as tactile and emotional elements that mediate user experiences, influencing digital diplomacy.

Gibbs et al. (2014) explore how platforms like Instagram are adapted for practices of mourning and memory, using selfies and photographs. Mavilinda et al. (2023) analyse how storytelling marketing on Instagram influences customer engagement, creating emotional connections that impact purchasing decisions, an idea also supported by Lozano-Blasco et al. (2023).

Nguyen et al. (2024) make a notable contribution by analysing the adaptation of narratives to different platforms, emphasizing the importance of restructuring content when transitioning from lengthy formats, such as long text, to short videos designed for social media. This process requires understanding both the characteristics and audience expectations of each platform, enabling creators to adjust their visual narratives according to differences in format, length, and style between platforms like Instagram and X. The study further underscores the relevance of audiovisual synchronization to align text, images, and audio, optimizing the effectiveness of storytelling in social media videos.

The concept of narrative beats proposed by Nguyen et al. (2024) represents a key contribution to understanding how narrative structures on social media maintain the flow of stories. These fundamental units guide the narrative and are reflected in the visual and textual elements used by creators to capture audience attention. Additionally, the study highlights the transformative role of artificial intelligence (AI) in content adaptation, facilitating automated edits and more efficient audiovisual synchronizations, thereby redefining storytelling practices.

In this vein, Komal et al. (2024) and Mohamed et al. (2024) analyse how AI impacts the creation of visual narratives, and the image-editing tools used on social media. These authors emphasize that AI not only optimizes the creative process but also influences users' emotional and cognitive perceptions, manipulating emotions and opinions through language and underlying algorithms.

Qiyao et al. (2024) focus on the realism of AI-generated images, providing valuable perspectives on how this technology is shaping both the creation and consumption of images. This analysis is essential for understanding the impact of AI on aspects such as aesthetics, representation, and authenticity in visual narratives on platforms like Instagram and X. As AI continues to transform narrative practices in the digital environment, the need to investigate how these tools, alongside platform-specific functionalities, are redefining storytelling in the digital world becomes evident.

Zappavigna (2016) explores how images on social media, through visual choices such as framing and composition, contribute to identity construction. González-Álvarez and Peña (2024) analyse how visual narratives can reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes in portraits shared by young people, while Zhang and Ramayah (2024) highlight that well-designed narratives generate deep emotional connections that influence audience behaviour. Meanwhile, Hu et al. (2014) identify common patterns in Instagram posts, such as selfies, food photos, and fashion, contributing to knowledge about users' visual preferences. Russmann and Svensson (2017) emphasize the relevance of each platform's context and affordances in the creation, circulation, and reception of visual narratives.

Underexplored dimensions include the impact of algorithms on the visibility of visual narratives (Highfield & Leaver, 2016) and the interaction between narratives across different platforms, whose effect on user experience requires further investigation (Russmann & Svensson, 2017). Further studies are also needed to examine the long-term effects of participation in digital narratives on identity and perception of reality (Mesías-Lema & Eiriz, 2022), as well as quantitative analyses to complement predominant qualitative approaches (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024).

Bainotti et al. (2020) analyse the tension between the ephemerality of Instagram Stories and archival cultures, showing how users preserve content designed to disappear, reflecting a balance between the ephemeral and the permanent. This work also highlights the visual grammar used to document events and foster interaction, along with the impact of Instagram Stories' affordances, such as their multimodality and editing tools, on content creation.

Gurrieri and Drenten (2019) investigate the use of visual narratives on Instagram by vulnerable consumers, such as cancer patients, who use these practices to normalize medical processes and receive emotional support, challenging conventional recovery narratives and enhancing social well-being through personalized digital interactions.

Fan (2024) addresses tensions between creativity and exploitation in digital storytelling, highlighting creators' reliance on algorithmic factors to optimize content, often at the expense of creative autonomy. This analysis also introduces the concept of "visibility work" as a central dynamic in these practices.

Finally, Loukianov et al. (2020) identify predominant narratives on Instagram, such as the good life, reflecting cultural values and social aspirations, while Thomas (2016) analyses X fictions, experimental narratives that leverage X's technical constraints to develop innovative formats like microfictions and transmedia. Lowman and Correa (2015) complement this perspective by highlighting how these technological constraints can stimulate narrative innovation.

The studies selected through the documentary review are presented in Table 1. This table provides further detail on the data: authors, year of publication, type of research, sample scope, and a summary of content. The table follows below:

Table 1. Results

Authors	Type of research	Sample	Subject
Bainotti et al. (2020)	Qualitative study	300 stories on Instagram	Tension between the ephemerality of Instagram Stories and archival cultures; storytelling practices in Instagram Stories.
Castro-Martínez & Díaz (2021)	Qualitative study	100 X threads	Textual storytelling in X; use of hashtags for organising narratives.
da Silva et al. (2019)	Literature review and case study		Impact of Instagram on everyday life and construction of visual identities.
Dayter, & Mühleisen. (2016)	Theoretical study		Instagram and Snapchat stories are ephemeral and last for 24 hours in contrast to the traditional format.
Dumcombe (2024)	Theoretical study		Tactile and emotional nature of images on X in the context of digital diplomacy.
Egner (2022)	Qualitative study	3,000 #ActuallyAutistic	Use of X to construct narratives of individual and collective identity.
Fan (2024)	Qualitative study (interviews)	30 influencers	Tensions between creativity and exploitation in digital storytelling on Instagram and Xiaohongshu.
Gibbs et al. (2014)	Qualitative study	525 #funeral	Adapting funeral and mourning practices to the language of Instagram; use of selfies as memory tools.
González-Álvarez & Peña (2024)	Visual qualitative study	109 people	Gender stereotypes in visual narratives on Instagram.
Gurrieri & Drenten (2019)	Visual netnography	180 posts	Use of visual narrative on Instagram for social support in health experiences.
Highfield & Leaver (2016)	Theoretical and methodological analysis.		Visual social media study; digital methods to analyse Instagram.
Huang et al. (2023)	Mixed method		Visual storytelling in digital journalism on X
Kircova et al. (2020)	Quantitative study	200 people	Instagram Stories from a marketing perspective.
Komal et al. (2024)	Theoretical study		Impact of AI on storytelling; narrative authenticity and cultural impact in creative industries.
Liang & Wolfe (2022)	Quantitative analysis	1,000 publications	Effects of post format on online interaction on Instagram Reels.
Loukianov et al. (2020)	Qualitative analysis of visual and textual content.	793 #goodlife	Narratives of "good living" on Instagram and their relationship to sustainability.
Lowman & Correa (2015)	Theoretical study		X fiction in the Spanish-American literary space.
Lozano-Blasco et al. (2023)	Mixed method	30 influencers	Influence of social networks (Instagram, X, YouTube) on young people and children.

Mavilinda et al. (2023)	Quantitative study	200 people	Effectiveness of storytelling marketing on customer engagement and purchase decisions on Instagram.
Mesías-Lema & Eiriz (2022)	Qualitative analysis of visual content		"Happygrams on Instagram and their relationship with the panoptic society.
Mohamed et al. (2024)	Mixed method	500 content creators; 500 users	Impact of AI on social media content.
Nguyen et al. (2024)	Theoretical-practical study: proposal Narrative beats		Adapting visual narratives to different social media platforms; use of narrative beats.
Qiyao et al. (2024)	Quantitative study	30,824 AIGIs	Realism of AI-generated images and their potential for misinformation.
Russmann & Svensson (2017)	Theoretical and conceptual analysis		Visual communication in the age of social media; conceptual, theoretical and methodological challenges.
Sadler (2017)	Theoretical-critical study		Narrative and interpretation on X; reading tweets through narrative.
San Cornelio et al. (2024)	Qualitative study	60 Instagram accounts 14 in-depth interviews	Emerging visual narratives about the environmental crisis on Instagram.
Thomas (2016)	Qualitative content analysis and theoretical review.		X fictions: experimental narratives on X that exploit their technical limitations.
Williams (2019)	Visual study	124 documents	Visual aspects of visual storytelling; use of art and design concepts to interpret and compose narratives.
Zappavigna (2016)	Qualitative visual study		Construction of subjectivity in Instagram images; visual choices and framing.
Zhang & Ramayah (2024)	Systematic review	86 articles	Storytelling in destination marketing; systematic review.

Source: own elaboration, 2024.

Of the 30 studies reviewed, 40% are qualitative, 20% theoretical, 13% quantitative, 10% mixed, 10% visual, and 7% reviews. The sample sizes of the reviewed studies vary widely, ranging from 30 to 30,824 elements. In general, the samples are suitable for exploring specific trends and practices. Studies such as Qiyao et al. (2024) with 30,824 AIGIs provide robust and generalizable data. Qualitative studies like Egner (2022) with 3,000 elements and Gibbs et al. (2014) with 525 elements also offer significant data. However, studies with smaller samples, such as Fan (2024) with 30 influencers, provide detailed insights but are limited in scope. The diversity of approaches and sample sizes enriches the understanding of storytelling on social media.

4. Discussion

The systematic review of the literature on visual narratives and storytelling on Instagram and X has enabled the identification of patterns, trends, and gaps relevant to understanding how these platforms have transformed the creation and consumption of stories. The most significant findings are discussed below in relation to the research questions posed.

4.1. Key Characteristics of Narratives on Instagram and X

Instagram is distinguished by its multimodal approach, where visual, textual, and audiovisual elements converge to create emotionally resonant narratives. Tools such as filters, selfies, and Happygrams enable users to construct visual identities that align with a culture of social approval (Mesías-Lema & Eiriz, 2022; San Cornelio et al., 2024). In contrast, X emphasizes textual storytelling complemented by visual elements such as images and videos, with hashtags serving as a central organizer of narratives and creator of digital communities (Egner, 2022).

The creative use of language on X, facilitated by the brevity of messages, contrasts with the fragmented but visually striking approach of Instagram. These differences reflect how platforms shape narrative practices according to their functionalities or technological affordances.

4.2. Evolution of Narrative Practices

On Instagram, the introduction of features such as ephemeral Stories, reels, and carousels has fostered fragmented and immediate forms of storytelling, aligned with rapid content consumption (Liang & Wolfe, 2022). Meanwhile, X has integrated visual elements that complement its textual narratives, adapting to a more interactive and multimodal approach. Recent studies suggest that these platforms are also utilized in specific contexts, such as digital journalism and diplomacy, where narratives aim to generate emotional and political impact (Dumcombe, 2024; Huang et al., 2023).

Storytelling on both platforms is also influenced by technological advancements such as artificial intelligence (AI), which enables efficient adaptation of narratives across formats and platforms. Nguyen et al. (2024) highlight the importance of synchronizing visual, textual, and auditory elements, while Komal et al. (2024) emphasize the impact of AI on manipulating emotions and perceptions.

4.3. Dimensions Studied in the Literature

The current literature extensively addresses aspects such as:

- Construction of visual identities (Zappavigna, 2016)
- Influence of storytelling on purchasing decisions and customer engagement (Mavilinda et al., 2023)
- Impact of visual narratives on social well-being and collective memory (Gibbs et al., 2014; Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019)
- Adaptation of narratives to the technological specificities of each platform (Nguyen et al., 2024)

These studies have explored how platforms enhance creativity and reinforce cultural and social values through their narratives.

4.4. Emerging dimensions

Despite the advances, several areas require further investigation:

- Impact of algorithms: the literature lacks comprehensive studies on how algorithms influence the visibility and reach of visual narratives (Highfield & Leaver, 2016)
- Long-term effects: there is a shortage of analyses on the sustained impact of active participation in digital narratives on identity and perception of reality (Mesías-Lema & Eiriz, 2022)
- Interaction between platforms: although some studies address content adaptation, few explore how the integration of narratives across platforms affects user experience (Russmann & Svensson, 2017)
- Data quantification: there is a predominance of qualitative approaches, leaving room for more quantitative studies to complement the understanding of narrative patterns (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024)

5. Conclusions

This study reaffirms that visual and textual narratives on Instagram and X are shaped by the specific functionalities of each platform, which influence narrative practices and user experiences. Instagram fosters emotive and fragmented visual narratives, while X is distinguished by its brief textual storytelling, complemented by visual elements.

Narrative practices are evolving rapidly due to technological innovations such as artificial intelligence, which is transforming how stories are created, distributed, and perceived. However, unexplored research areas remain, including the impact of algorithms, the long-term effects of digital narratives, and the interaction between platforms.

The field of social media storytelling still has much to explore. Although the reviewed studies encompass a variety of approaches (qualitative, theoretical, quantitative, mixed, visual, and reviews), the diversity of samples and themes suggests that further research is needed to achieve a more comprehensive and generalizable understanding of storytelling practices and their effects across

different platforms. Mixed-method studies are recommended. The qualitative approach could include in-depth interviews with content creators and analysis of visual content, while the quantitative approach could examine large volumes of social media post data.

Finally, this research underscores the importance of continued investigation into how visual narratives influence users' identity, behaviour, and emotions, particularly in an increasingly technology-driven digital context. Future research should address these gaps to provide a more holistic understanding of digital narratives on social media.

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