Telling more or less? The impact of blank-leaving narrative style on story immersion and brand attitude

Chao Fan
School of Business, Central University of Finance and Economics
Feng Jiang
School of Business, University of Leicester
Mingzhe Yu
School of International Economics and Management, Beijing Technology and Business University
Xiaobo Tao
School of Economics and Management, North China University of Technology

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Abstract

Purpose – Brand storytelling is an effective marketing tool. However, when choosing whether to tell more or tell less, it remains unclear which of these two narrative styles is most effective. This research aims to examine whether blank-leaving(less) leads to favorable brand attitudes and compares its effects on consumers' story immersion, to non-blank-leaving(more).

Design/methodology/approach – Two experiments were conducted to test the hypotheses. In Study 1, a single-factorial design was used with 252 participants assigned at random to one of two narrative conditions: blank-leaving or non-blank-leaving. Study 2 replicated Study 1 and investigated the moderating role of implicit mindsets.

Findings – The results show that a blank-leaving narrative style increases favorable brand attitudes. Consumers present deeper immersion in the brand story that uses blank-leaving, as compared to non-blank-leaving, leading to a more favorable brand attitude. Furthermore, this effect is stronger for individuals with growth mindsets.

Practical implications – Telling the brand story using a blank-leaving narrative style is more effective in catching consumers' attention than non-blank-leaving. In particular, a blank-leaving narrative is a good approach for targeting consumers who have a growth mindset.

Originality/value – This research is the first to investigate and compare the effects of blank-leaving and non-blank-leaving narrative styles on brand attitudes in the context of storytelling marketing.

Keywords Brand storytelling, Blank-leaving, Brand attitude, Immersion in the story, Implicit mindsets

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Stories are ubiquitous. People are exposed to a wide range of stories from birth, including bedtime stories in infancy, fairy tales or fables in childhood, inspirational stories in adolescence, and life stories in adulthood (McKee and Fryer, 2003; Weick, 1995). Stories of all kinds flow through people's lives and become essential chapters in their experiences. In brand marketing, storytelling has become a common practice and has proven to help build strong emotional connections and brand loyalty (Crespo *et al.,* 2023; Feng, 2018; Hong *et al.,* 2022; Yin *et al.,* 2023).

Brand storytelling refers to the art of creating a compelling story about a brand, by a firm or consumers, that conveys brand value and establishes connections with consumers (Delgado-Ballester, 2021; Pachucki *et al.,* 2022). Existing research indicates that brand stories can be categorized into various types, including top-dog versus underdog stories (Delgado-Ballester, 2021; Lude *et al.,* 2023), happy versus meaningful stories (Carnevale *et al.,* 2018), and inspirational versus non-inspirational (Chen *et al.,* 2023; Zheng and Zhang*,* 2023). Additionally, there are consumers' brand storytelling versus brand story by a firm (Hong *et al.,* 2022), first-person versus third-person storytelling (Pachucki *et al.,* 2022), and snapshot versus posed images storytelling (Lim and Childs, 2020), among other typologies.

Furthermore, based on their narrative styles, brand stories are classified into blank-leaving and non-blank-leaving. Blank-leaving refers to the intentional omission of explicit depiction of some actual events within a story (Gerrig, 2010; Goldstein, 2021; Li, 2018). It encompasses three distinct forms: structural blank, characterization and plot blank, and ending blank (Li, 2018). Structural blank involves positioning key elements such as protagonists and major plotlines in peripheral narrative positions, while focal attention is directed towards depicting peripheral elements such as life scenes, folk customs, and secondary characters. Characterization and plot blank entails omitting detailed facial features and specific actions of characters, instead focusing on indirect portrayals of their inner thoughts and behaviours. Finally, ending blank refers to an ambiguous resolution, leaving the trajectory of characters and plot unresolved. Conversely, non-blank-leaving involves directly depicting the protagonist's experiences, providing detailed accounts of plot events or signalling the story's resolution.

In practice, both blank-leaving and non-blank-leaving narrative styles have been widely employed in brand storytelling practices. For example, In the well-known story

"Brave New World"[1] by Huawei, the utilization of a structural blank-leaving style allows for the indirect portrayal of Huawei's role as a custodian of scientific pursuit. Rather than presenting the story directly or solely from Huawei's perspective, the narrative unfolds by narrating the exploits of notable figures such as Archimedes, Madame Curie, and Turing in their unwavering pursuit of the unknown and the truth. This narrative style not only enhances consumers' immersion in the story but strengthens their emotional identification with the brand's values. Furthermore, Nongfu Spring portrays natural landscapes to underscore the pristine quality of its water[2], Ganten utilizes the legendary love story of Descartes and a princess to highlight its position as an esteemed water brand[3], and Starbucks crafts narratives that explore diverse facets of human experience, with tables serving as a thematic centerpiece[4], all these widely circulated stories, applying the structural blank, demonstrate the positive effects of the blank-leaving style.

On the other hand, the legendary story of Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple who was fired from the company but later returned to save it during a crisis, can be viewed as a prime exemplar of employing non-blank-leaving narrative styles. This stems from the fact that the story predominantly revolves around Jobs as the central character, emphasizing his experiences and emotional transformation, while also presenting a definitive story resolution. In fact, the success of this story is intrinsically linked to its eloquent and non-blank-leaving storytelling approach. In addition, Coca-Cola's Chinese New Year reunion story[5] and McDonald's "Imaginary Iggy"[6] friendship story provide valuable instances of non-blank-leaving narration.

Therefore, this research proposes these questions:

(1) Which narrative style is more effective for brand story marketing?

(2) Do consumers have different attitudes toward the two types of storytelling?

Despite the ongoing research, a thorough and conclusive answer to these questions remains elusive. First, most research has focused on how to design a compelling brand story, analyzing elements such as storytelling subject (Hong *et al.,* 2022), story structure (Ryu *et al.,* 2019), story character (Dessart, 2018), etc., however, they lack the

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4XzyEO0P2A

[2] https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1E4411y7G3/?spm_id_from=trigger_reload&vd_source=ab8ff7a62f8151e79fefd69a81afa26e

[3] https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV13t411S77V/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click

[4] https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV16e4y1o7DN/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=ab8ff7a62f8151e79fefd69a81afa26e

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jj4jzIsZiM

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRFSj3UC5jk

corresponding emphasis on how to effectively tell a story. Furthermore, focusing on blank-leaving narrative style, research in the field of literary novel creation suggests that blank-leaving can stimulate the reader's imagination, leading to increased engagement and interest (Li, 2018). However, it remains uncertain whether the use of blank-leaving still generates superior marketing outcomes in the context of brand storytelling.

Second, drawing on narrative transportation theory, the central influence of brand stories on consumer attitudes lies in the concept of transportation or immersion in the story (Delgado-Ballester, 2021; Ryu *et al.,* 2019). Previous research has also corroborated the significant mediating role of story immersion in various elements of story content, such as story themes (Delgado-Ballester, 2021) and the typicality of story plots (Lin and Chen, 2015). However, within the specific context of examining the effects of blank-leaving/non-blank-leaving storytelling style on brand attitudes, it is unclear whether there is a mediating role of story immersion.

Finally, implicit mindsets, which encompass an individual's perceptions of fundamental attributes, such as intelligence, morality, and personality traits, and the belief in their changeability or stability (Levy *et al.,* 1998), are considered to influence the marketing effects of brand stories. For example, Individuals with growth mindsets have a natural empathy for struggling or weak brands and a strong sense of identification with underdog brand stories (Delgado-Ballester, 2021). Furthermore, growth-mindset consumers have higher ratings for brand stories with the theme of meaning-making, compared to happiness sharing (Carnevale *et al.,* 2018). However, it is still unclear how different narrative styles influence consumers' brand attitudes when they hold distinct implicit mindsets.

To address the research gap described above, this paper focuses on the central question of how brands can effectively tell their stories (telling more or less), and examines this topic through a comprehensive investigation of three areas:

(1) Comparing the effects of blank-leaving and non-blank-leaving on brand attitudes

(2) Testing the mediating role of immersion in the story between brand storytelling styles and brand attitudes

(3) Testing the moderating effect of implicit mindsets on the relationship between narrative styles and immersion in the story

This research is the first to compare the effects of blank-leaving and non-blank-

leaving narrative styles on brand attitudes in the context of storytelling marketing. The findings contribute to the understanding of the role of narrative styles in brand storytelling strategies. Moreover, this research reveals the underlying mechanism and clarifies boundary conditions of storytelling styles, expanding the application scope of narrative transportation theory and implicit mindsets. The study also offers practical implications for brand managers regarding how to effectively tell brand stories. They need to better understand the use of blank-leaving.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 Brand storytelling and blank-leaving narrative style

A brand story refers to a series of events created by a company that reflects the origin, development, and evolution of the brand, such as its establishment, significant success or crisis, and the future development prospects, or specific events related to the brand/product usage experience created by consumers (Aimé, 2021; Paharia *et al.,* 2011; Ryu *et al.,* 2019; Woodside *et al.,* 2008). The content of brand stories covers various elements, including enterprises, products, brands, and internal (brand founders, brand managers, etc.) and external stakeholders (brand spokespersons, consumers, etc.) (Brakus *et al.,* 2009; Chronis, 2015; Granitz and Forman, 2015). From the perspective of brand management, brand stories can be further classified into the stories of (Denning, 2005): (1) brand birth; (2) organizational history; (3) brand vision; (4) brand evolution and innovation; (5) brand benefits and values; (6) brand ambassadors; (7) brand-consumer interaction; (8) brand success; (9) brand image; (10) brand-social relationships.

A distinct brand storytelling style can be differentiated in terms of blank-leaving and non-blank-leaving. The notion of blank-leaving, commonly known as "white space," originates from a creative technique in traditional Chinese painting (Fan *et al.,* 2022; Li *et al.,* 2013). Within this artistic practice, artists purposefully incorporate vacant spaces in the composition from a perspective of layout coordination, thereby allowing ample room for the viewers' imagination to engage with the artwork (Fan *et al.,* 2019). This approach allows the artwork to achieve an aesthetic realm of the harmonious interplay between the real and the imaginary, resulting in a unique and captivating visual experience (Fan *et al.,* 2022).

The blank-leaving technique has since been adopted in literary fiction writing to convey events that cannot be narrated directly in the story world. In this case, blank-

leaving refers to selected events that are not explicitly described in the text, indicating a communication phenomenon where the story time exceeds the text length (Li, 2018). Blank-leaving differs from ellipsis or omission, as it involves the intentional absence of certain story contents, which itself constitutes a narrative (Xie and Kim, 2017). It is the void and absence of text but the presence and plurality of story events (Pracejus *et al.,* 2006; Solja *et al.,* 2018). By leaving some aspects of the story untold, the narrator attracts readers' attention and invites them to engage in filling in the narrative gaps. As a result, blank-leaving is more conducive to communicating with the audience, as it enhances their immersion and memory of the story (Li, 2018; Yang and Xu, 2011).

2.2 Influence of brand storytelling styles on brand attitudes

Brand attitude is a psychological construct that reflects an individual's inclination toward a brand and is influenced by both rational and emotional evaluations of the brand (Chaudhuri, 2006). Compared to non-blank-leaving narratives, the use of blank-leaving in brand stories has been shown to enhance consumer engagement and evoke more intense emotional experiences. Specifically, the absence of certain narrative elements resulting from blank-leaving, such as the lack of characters' experiences and feelings, omitted story plots, and an unresolved story ending (Li, 2018), requires greater cognitive resources from consumers to comprehend the story's implications (Ryu *et al.,* 2019). This immersive reading experience allows consumers to fully engage with the characters' emotional journeys and envision their own responses in similar circumstances. Consequently, such immersion helps consumers develop a vivid brand image and long-lasting cognitive memories (Lin and Chen, 2015).

Moreover, brand stories with blank-leaving also facilitate emotional resonance among consumers. The absence of certain story content not only transports consumers to the narrative scene but also encourages them to empathize with the characters and engage in emotional interactions, ultimately leading to positive emotional resonance with the story's protagonists (Nabi and Green, 2015). Therefore, the blank-leaving narrative style is instrumental in enhancing consumers' cognitive memory and emotional engagement, deepening their comprehension and immersion in the brand story, and effectively improving their brand attitude. This study posits the following hypothesis:

H1. Compared to the non-blank-leaving style, brand stories with blank-leaving can elicit more positive brand attitudes.

2.3 Mediating role of immersion in the story

Narrative transportation theory suggests that the core of how brand stories influence consumer attitudes lies in narrative transportation or immersion in the story, which involves a person's ability to process, imagine, and emotionally react to stories (Green and Brock, 2000). Existing research views immersion as an experiential response to the activation of consumer imagination by story plots (Van Laer *et al.,* 2014), manifested by consumers immersing themselves in the story plot, and even getting "lost" in it, to the extent that they achieve a momentary state of dissociation from reality (Green and Brock, 2000). From the perspective of narrative transportation, the key to the persuasive effect of brand stories lies in enabling readers to become immersed in the story scene.

Research has shown that consumers' immersion in stories can create vivid psychological imagery and induce cognitive and affective reactions, thereby leading to changes in their beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (Kim *et al.,* 2016). Previous studies have confirmed that readers who enter a story often change their prior perceptions of the brand or story theme (Green and Brock, 2000; Van Laer *et al.,* 2014). This is because when consumers are attracted and immersed in the brand story, they develop their emotional resonance with the story characters, which in turn reduces their negative perception of the story content. Escalas *et al.* (2004) further demonstrated that consumers who become immersed in a story generate a warm feeling and exhibit more positive attitudes toward the story.

Similarly, a brand story featuring blank-leaving, which reserves a certain amount of "white space" in the narrative structure, character creation, plot development, or story ending, can endow consumers with rich imaginative space and make it easier for them to enter a state of immersion when interpreting the story. Consumers will unconsciously immerse themselves in the story scene, explore the unfinished meaning of the story, and fill in the narrative gap with their own understanding and imagination. The depth of consumer immersion in the story scene has been shown to evoke more positive emotional responses. As such, brand stories featuring blank-leaving can trigger consumers' story immersion and generate positive brand attitudes. Based on this, this research proposes the following hypothesis:

H2. The influence of brand storytelling styles on brand attitudes is mediated by the consumer's immersion in the story.

2.4 Moderating role of consumers' implicit mindsets

Individuals' implicit mindsets can be categorized as either growth or fixed, depending on their perception that whether the world around them, especially their beliefs about intelligence, morality, personality traits, are fixed or malleable (Butler, 2000; Jain *et al.,* 2009; Murphy and Dweck, 2016). Those with growth mindsets embrace change and view human nature, intelligence, personality, and skills as dynamic and transformable through effort, learning, and experience (Mathur *et al.,* 2016). This dynamic perspective allows for greater flexibility in outlook, whereas individuals with fixed mindsets prefer stability and believe that traits, skills, and abilities are innate and unchangeable (Park and John, 2012; Plaks *et al.,* 2005).

This study proposes that individuals with growth mindsets are more likely to engage with blank-leaving narratives. First, blank-leaving narratives necessitate active cognitive engagement, requiring consumers to fill in missing information and construct the underlying meaning of the story. This interactive dimension resonates with growth mindsets, as they are intrinsically motivated to seek challenges and embrace opportunities for personal growth and development (Mathur *et al.,* 2013). Second, blank-leaving narratives may resonate with growth mindsets by providing a platform for introspection and self-reflection (Plaks *et al.,* 2005). As consumers engage with the narrative and fill in the narrative gaps, they may discover a resonance with their own life experiences, values, and aspirations. This process of introspection reinforces the growth mindset's emphasis on self-awareness and personal development (Burnette *et al.,* 2022).

Moreover, blank-leaving narratives often offer a broader scope for interpretation and personalization (Pracejus *et al.,* 2006). Individuals with growth mindsets typically exhibit a heightened sense of agency and firmly believe in their capacity to influence their own outcomes (Burnette *et al.,* 2022; Carnevale *et al.,* 2018). Within such narratives, the openness and indeterminacy provide them the opportunity to apply their creative faculties and problem-solving skills, collaboratively shaping the resolution of the story. This alignment with their conviction that persistent effort and continuous learning can lead to positive outcomes fosters a profound sense of empowerment and ownership over the trajectory of the narrative (Duchi *et al.,* 2020).

H3. The influence of brand storytelling styles on story immersion is moderated by consumers' implicit mindsets. Consumers with growth mindsets are more likely than those with fixed mindsets to be immersed in brand stories with a blank-

leaving style.

Figure 1 illustrates the research framework.

---------- Figure 1 about here----------

3. Study 1

This study consists of two parts: a pilot study, aimed at designing appropriate situational experimental materials for the subsequent formal experiment, and a formal experiment, intended to test *H1* (the impact of brand storytelling styles on brand attitudes) and *H2* (the mediating effect of immersion in the story).

3.1 Pilot Study

3.1.1 Design of story materials

The pilot study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of manipulating brand storytelling styles (blank-leaving vs. non-blank-leaving). Chocolate, a product commonly encountered in daily life, was selected as the product stimuli, and a fictitious brand named "ANGEL" was created. The story materials used in this research was obtained through three stages: the pre-collection of existing chocolate stories, in-depth discussions with two marketing professors, and the final phase of inviting marketing doctoral students for testing.

Both stories depicted that the relationship between Davis and Sophie, the protagonists, maintained through ANGEL chocolate despite their physical distance. Other than the narrative style, the two stories were identical in all other aspects, such as the types of products and brand. In the non-blank-leaving narrative style condition, the story had a definite ending where the two protagonists were reunited, and Sophie said, "Love needs to be together." In the blank-leaving condition, the story had an open ending, leaving it unclear whether the two protagonists would reunite.

3.1.2 Procedure and results

A total of 82 participants (55 women, 27 men, mean age = 31.51) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, either blank-leaving or non-blank-leaving, using the third-party online research platform Credamo. After reading the corresponding brand stories, participants completed the measurement items, which were divided into two parts: a manipulation check of the brand storytelling style and a test of the story's readability, reasonability, and comprehensibility.

The measurement items for the storytelling style were "I think there are still some plots that haven't been fully expressed after reading the brand story" and "I feel that the brand story gives me more space for imagination" (α = 0.726). The higher the average score, the more blank-leaving the subject thought the story style was. Story readability, reasonability, and comprehensibility were adopted from Lin and Chen (2015). All of the measurements were taken on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree.

The results of the independent sample *t*-test showed that the manipulation of the brand storytelling style was successful ($M_{\text{blank-leaving}}$ = 5.781, SD = 0.830, $M_{\text{non-blank-leaving}}$ = 4.793, SD = 1.351; $t(80) = 3.990$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, there were no significant differences in the measures of readability, reasonability and comprehensibility between the blank-leaving and non-blank-leaving conditions. Consequently, both sets of story materials will be used in subsequent experiments.

3.2 Experiment

3.2.1 Research design and procedure

Hypotheses were tested using a between-subjects design, and participants were randomly assigned to read a brand story with either a blank-leaving or a non-blank-leaving style. The story materials used in this experiment were identical to those employed in the pilot study mentioned earlier. A total of 252 online respondents (62.7% were women; *M*age = 30.94, SD = 6.52) were recruited from Credamo and participated in the study. After reading the stimuli, all participants answered the questions.

First, they were asked to briefly describe the brand story they had read in one sentence. Next, they reported their reactions to the brand storytelling in terms of brand attitudes and immersion in the story. Brand attitudes were assessed with a 3-item scale developed by Nagar (2019). A sample item states, "This is a good brand." (α = 0.648). Immersion in the story was assessed with a 4-item scale developed by Escalas *et al.* (2004). For example, "This story draws me in." (α = 0.733). Third, participants were asked to evaluate brand story novelty (α = 0.877; Lin and Chen, 2015), and product attractiveness (Gramazio *et al.,* 2021). Finally, participants provided demographic information such as gender, age, and education level. All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

3.2.2 Results and discussion

Manipulation check. The manipulation check of the two brand storytelling styles

was again assessed. An independent sample *t*-test showed that the storytelling style (blank-leaving vs. non-blank-leaving) could be successfully manipulated, and the evaluation of the blank-leaving condition was significantly higher than the non-blank-leaving ($M_{\text{blank-leaving}} = 5.539$, SD = 0.768, $M_{\text{non-blank-leaving}} = 5.252$, SD = 1.003; $t(250) = 2.556$, $p = 0.011$).

Direct effect of brand storytelling styles. A one-way ANOVA analysis was conducted with brand attitude as a dependent variable, storytelling style as a fixed factor (non-blank-leaving = 0, blank-leaving = 1), brand story novelty and product attractiveness as covariates. The main effect of storytelling styles on brand attitudes was significant, suggesting that blank-leaving narrative style ($M_{\text{blank-leaving}} = 6.171$, SD = 0.460) increased positive attitudes toward a brand to a greater extent than non-blank-leaving style ($M_{\text{non-blank-leaving}} = 5.853$, SD = 0.675; $F(1, 248) = 12.554$, $p < 0.001$), which supported *H1*. Refer to the test results shown in Figure 2.

---------- Figure 2 about here----------

Mediating effect of immersion in the story. To test *H2*, a mediation analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro (Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap estimations) following Hayes (2013). Model 4 examined the direct effect of brand storytelling styles on brand attitudes and their indirect effect through immersion in the story, furthermore, brand story novelty and product attractiveness remained as covariates. The brand storytelling styles were coded 0 for the non-blank-leaving style and 1 for the blank-leaving style. The results gave support to *H2*. With the mediator in the model, the total effect of brand storytelling styles on brand attitudes was 0.226, and the direct effect was significant ($\beta = 0.135$, SE = 0.063, 95% CI [0.012, 0.258]). The overall indirect effect through readers' immersion ($\beta = 0.091$, SE = 0.025, 95% CI [0.046, 0.145]) was significant based on a bootstrap evaluation. The effects of all paths in the mediation analysis process are visually presented in Table 1.

---------- Table 1 about here----------

4. Study 2

Study 2 attempts to replicate the findings of Study 1 with different story materials. Furthermore, this study investigates the moderation effect of consumers' implicit

mindsets.

4.1 Pilot Study

Following Study 1, the product stimuli in this research still chose "ANGEL" chocolate. However, the brand story material used a completely different story theme, it depicted that the protagonists, Davis and Sophie, enjoyed the silky and sweet taste of ANGEL chocolate, highlighting the pleasure and enjoyment brought by delicious food. Specifically, in the non-blank-leaving narrative style condition, the story directly described the sweetness and luscious taste experienced by two people tasting chocolate. In the blank-leaving condition, the story depicted a side-view depiction of the scene of two people tasting sweet chocolate.

A total of 80 participants (48 women, 32 men, mean age = 31.64) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, either blank-leaving or non-blank-leaving, using the third-party online research platform Credamo. As in Study 1, respondents were asked to answer questions about manipulation check for narrative style ($\alpha = 0.714$) and story's readability, reasonability, and comprehensibility. The results of the independent sample *t*-test showed that the brand storytelling style (blank-leaving vs. non-blank-leaving) was successfully manipulated ($M_{\text{blank-leaving}} = 5.738$, SD = 1.006, $M_{\text{non-blank-leaving}} = 4.975$, SD = 1.301; $t(78) = 2.933$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, both groups of story materials will be used in subsequent experiments.

4.2 Experiment

4.2.1 Research design and procedure

Following Study 1, Study 2 was conducted in a 2 (storytelling style: blank-leaving vs. non-blank-leaving) single factorial between-subjects design, where participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions through Credamo. The story materials used were the same as those in the pilot study mentioned above. A total of 268 online respondents (56.0% women; *M*age = 31.33, SD = 7.05) were recruited from Credamo and participated in the study.

In Study 2, the experimental procedure was the same as in Study 1, and the measures used for brand attitude ($\alpha = 0.701$), immersion in the story ($\alpha = 0.899$), manipulation check of storytelling style, and some covariates such as brand story novelty ($\alpha = 0.856$) and product attractiveness were identical to those in Study 1. Moreover, implicit mindsets were measured using eight items, such as "People can do

things differently, but the important parts of who they are can't really be changed" (α = 0.958, Levy *et al.,* 1998). Higher scores indicated more fixed mindsets. All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

4.2.2 Results and discussion

Manipulation check. An independent sample *t*-test showed that the storytelling style (blank-leaving vs. non-blank-leaving) was manipulated successfully, and the evaluation of the blank-leaving condition was significantly higher than the non-blank-leaving ($M_{\text{blank-leaving}}$ = 5.785, SD = 0.759, $M_{\text{non-blank-leaving}}$ = 5.440, SD = 1.023; $t(266)$ = 3.142, $p < 0.01$).

Direct effect of brand storytelling styles. Following Study 1, the results of the one-way ANOVA showed that storytelling styles had a significant effect on brand attitudes ($M_{\text{blank-leaving}}$ = 6.052, SD = 0.577, $M_{\text{non-blank-leaving}}$ = 5.880, SD = 0.806; $F(1, 264)$ = 5.839, p = 0.016 < 0.05). *H1* was again supported. The test results can be further reviewed in Figure 3.

---------- Figure 3 about here----------

Mediating effect of immersion in the story. Similar to Study 1, a mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro (Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap estimations) following Hayes (2013). The results supported *H2*. With the mediator in the model, the total effect of brand storytelling styles on brand attitudes was 0.154, but the direct effect was not significant (β = 0.020, SE = 0.072, 95% CI [-0.122, 0.162]). The overall indirect effect through readers' immersion (β = 0.134, SE = 0.040, 95% CI [0.057, 0.214]) was significant based on a bootstrap evaluation. The effects of all paths in the mediation analysis process are visually presented in Table 2. The mediator was again found to explain the relation between brand storytelling styles and brand attitudes.

---------- Table 2 about here----------

Moderating effect of implicit mindsets. To test *H3*, a regression analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro (Model 1 with 5,000 bootstrap estimations), with immersion in the story as the dependent variable and brand storytelling styles, implicit mindsets, and an interaction term between the two as independent variables.

Furthermore, brand story novelty and product attractiveness remained as covariates. The results indicated a significant two-way interaction between brand storytelling styles and consumers' implicit mindsets in explaining story immersion (β = −0.453, SE = 0.062; 95% CI = [−0.576, −0.331]) (Table 3), thus supporting *H3*. In addition, a simple slope test was performed, and an interaction diagram was created using Aiken *et al.* (1991) method. As shown in Table 4, the effect of storytelling styles on story immersion was greater in the low score condition (β_{growth} = 1.792, p < 0.001) than in the high score condition (β_{fixed} = 0.322, p < 0.05). Figure 4 depicts the interaction diagram.

---------- Table 3 about here----------

---------- Table 4 about here----------

---------- Figure 4 about here----------

Moderated mediation analysis. Furthermore, a moderated mediation analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro (Model 7 with 5,000 bootstrap estimations). The results indicated the presence of a significant moderated mediation effect (Index = -0.056, LLCI = -0.087, ULCI= -0.025), highlighting the importance of considering the interplay between storytelling style, immersion, and individuals' implicit mindsets in shaping brand attitudes. Specifically, for individuals characterized by fixed mindsets, the storytelling style exerted a significant influence on brand attitude through the mechanism of immersion in the story (β = 0.040, SE = 0.023; 95% CI = [0.006, 0.094]). Similarly, for individuals displaying growth mindsets, the aforementioned indirect path effect remained significant (β = 0.223, SE = 0.062; 95% CI = [0.100, 0.344]). These findings provide robust support for the mediating role of immersion in the story as a pathway through which brand storytelling style influences brand attitude.

Overall, Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1, demonstrating the positive impact of the blank-leaving storytelling style on consumer brand attitudes and the mediating role of story immersion, using different story materials. Additionally, the moderating effect of consumers' implicit mindsets on the relationship between storytelling styles and story immersion was confirmed.

5. Conclusions and discussion

5.1 Conclusions

This study differs from previous research that was primarily focused on the content of brand stories, which emphasized the design of a well-crafted story, considering aspects such as characters and plot (Carnevale *et al.,* 2018; Delgado-Ballester, 2021; Hong *et al.,* 2022), in that it examines the narrative styles (blank-leaving vs. non-blank-leaving) used to tell these stories and measures their impact on brand attitudes. Through two experimental studies, it was found that brand stories with a blank-leaving style generate more positive attitudes than those without. Additionally, the level of consumers' immersion in the story mediates this relationship, and implicit mindsets moderate the effect of storytelling styles on brand attitudes. These findings can provide valuable guidance for brand managers seeking to effectively tell brand stories.

5.2 Theoretical implications

This research delves into a critical and relatively new issue of how to effectively tell brand stories and expands on existing insights on the topic. While previous studies have primarily focused on how to design an engaging story, including adopting suitable themes (underdog vs. topdog) (Delgado-Ballester, 2021; Lude *et al.,* 2023), enhancing plot authenticity and typicality (Lin and Chen, 2015), etc., they have paid little attention to the storytelling approach. This study first proposes and verifies the positive effects of blank-leaving on brand attitudes, providing valuable insights into how brand stories should be effectively told.

Second, this research unveils the crucial mechanism by which storytelling styles influence brand attitudes. Specifically, the readers' immersion in the story severs as a mediating role. This study proposes that employing the blank-leaving narrative style, in comparison with the non-blank-leaving, provides the story with a grander setting and a wider space for imagination, making it easier to draw consumers into the story world (Delgado-Ballester, 2021; Ryu *et al.,* 2019). This study's findings not only address current academic concerns regarding narrative styles but also provide explanations for why blank-leaving better than non-blank-leaving.

Finally, this research contributes to the existing literature on the influence of implicit mindsets on story marketing. While previous studies have explored the impact of various individual characteristics on story marketing, such as regulatory orientation (Lin and Chen, 2015), prior knowledge (Houghton, 2021), and similarity between the story receiver and the storytellers (Kao, 2019), implicit mindsets received insufficient attention, and their effect in the context of blank-leaving storytelling has not been well-

established. This study first proposes and confirms that implicit mindsets moderate the impact of brand storytelling styles on story immersion, while providing new empirical evidence for the application of implicit mindsets in story marketing.

5.3 Managerial implications

This study provides the following practical implications. First, brand managers should place greater emphasis on the way stories are told, particularly the use of blank-leaving storytelling techniques. Specifically, this can be achieved by placing the protagonist, key plot points, and other focal elements in non-central positions within the narrative structure, focusing instead on peripheral narrative elements such as the story setting and other characters. Additionally, blank-leaving can be achieved by using abrupt endings. By doing so, this narrative technique not only leaves broad space for consumers to engage in reflection and imagination of character experiences and plot development, but also endows brand stories with rich and profound value implications.

Second, when crafting and communicating brand stories, it is imperative to consider how to effectively trigger consumers' immersion in the story. In practice, audience-protagonist similarity, which reflects the degree of similarity between the protagonist(s) of a story told by a brand and the audience that a brand is targeting, and the authenticity of story plots, which reflects the extent to which a story is perceived as a true story, are important factors to enhance consumers' immersion (Wong and Hung, 2023; Yin *et al.,* 2023). Consequently, on the one hand, brand managers ought to adopt a consumer-centric approach in telling brand stories, intensifying the similarity between the story audience and the story subject. On the other hand, they should focus on collecting genuine consumer story materials and emphasize the authenticity of the plot in the storytelling process, thereby eliciting consumers' real-life experiences and facilitating their immersion sense.

Third, effective brand storytelling must incorporate the distinctive characteristics of the target audience. The results of this study validate that consumers' implicit mindsets can significantly impact the marketing effectiveness of storytelling styles. For instance, individuals with growth mindsets tend to prefer stories that leave room for interpretation, whereas those with a fixed mindset prefer stories with a clear and definitive conclusion. This conclusion suggests that brand managers should improve their segmentation of the story audience when deploying storytelling marketing strategies, and precisely deliver stories that resonate with specific target groups.

5.4 Limitations and future research

Several gaps in this research require further exploration. First, although this study confirms that the blank-leaving narrative style, particularly ending blank (Study 1) and structural blank (Study 2), has more positive marketing effects than non-blank-leaving, it is unclear that the characterization and plot blank has the similar effect. Second, which form of blank-leaving, encompassing structural blank, characterization and plot blank or ending blank, is most effective for marketing? Can these elements be employed simultaneously in the practice of storytelling marketing? These questions necessitate further investigation. Finally, despite successfully confirming all the hypotheses in this study, which indicates statistically significant path coefficients between variables, it is noteworthy that the effect sizes are relatively small. This observation could be attributed to the limited sample size and the presence of other confounding variables that influence the dependent variables. Addressing this concern in future research could involve augmenting the sample size and employing more robust experimental materials to enhance the study's statistical power and precision.

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Table 1 The mediating effect of immersion in the story (Study 1)

Dependent variable	Immersion into the story			Brand attitude		
	Coeff.	se	95% CI	Coeff.	se	95% CI
Constant	4.561***	0.226	[4.115, 5.007]	2.805***	0.298	[2.218, 3.391]
Control variable						
Brand story novelty (BSN)	0.043	0.048	[-0.051, 0.137]	0.074	0.039	[-0.002, 0.150]
Product attractiveness	0.167**	0.050	[0.068, 0.265]	0.185***	0.041	[0.103, 0.267]
Independent variable						
Brand storytelling style	0.322***	0.075	[0.175, 0.469]	0.135*	0.063	[0.012, 0.258]
Mediator						
Immersion in the story				0.283***	0.051	[0.182, 0.384]
Sample		252			252	
R		0.427			0.622	
R^2		0.182			0.387	
F value		18.430			39.041	
p-value		< 0.001			< 0.001	

Notes. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$. Source: Authors own creation.

Table 2 The mediating effect of immersion in the story (Study 2)

Dependent variable	Immersion into the story			Brand attitude		
	Coeff.	se	95% CI	Coeff.	se	95% CI
Constant	3.189***	0.382	[2.437, 3.941]	2.440***	0.233	[1.981, 2.899]
Control variable						
Brand story novelty (BSN)	0.108	0.071	[-0.033, 0.248]	0.146***	0.039	[0.069, 0.222]
Product attractiveness	0.198*	0.078	[0.044, 0.351]	0.351***	0.043	[0.267, 0.436]
Independent variable						
Brand storytelling style	1.077***	0.115	[0.851, 1.303]	0.020	0.072	[-0.122, 0.162]
Mediator						
Immersion in the story				0.124***	0.033	[0.059, 0.190]
Sample		268			268	
R		0.545			0.696	
R^2		0.297			0.485	
F value		37.109			61.811	
p-value		< 0.001			< 0.001	

Notes. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$. Source: Authors own creation.

Table 3 Summary of the hypothesis testing results (moderating effect)

Dependent variable	Immersion into the story			
	Coeff.	se	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	3.052***	0.337	2.388	3.715
Control variable				
brand story novelty (BSN)	0.098	0.062	-0.025	0.221
product attractiveness	0.234**	0.068	0.099	0.368
Independent variable				
Brand storytelling style (BSS)	1.057***	0.100	0.859	1.254
Moderator				
implicit mindsets (IM)	0.410***	0.045	0.321	0.499
Interaction				
BSS x IM	-0.453***	0.062	-0.576	-0.331
Sample		268		
R		0.683		
R^2		0.467		
F value		45.867		
p-value		< 0.001		

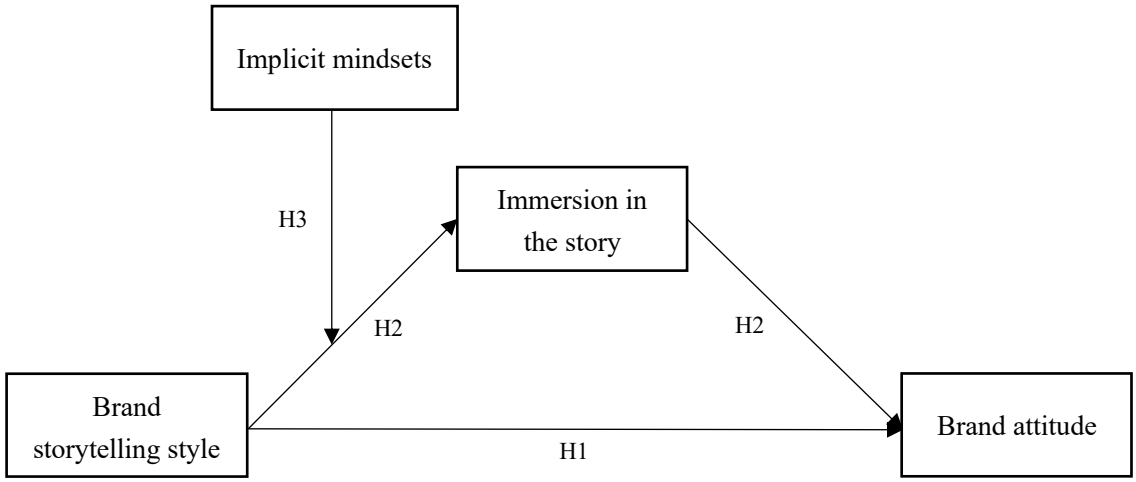
Notes. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$. Source: Authors own creation.

Table 4 Summary of the hypothesis testing results (moderating effect)

Conditional effects of the moderator at M ± 1 SD	Effect	se	LLCI	ULCI
implicit mindsets: low (M − 1 SD) (growth)	1.792	0.142	1.512	2.072
implicit mindsets: medium (M)	1.057	0.100	0.859	1.254
implicit mindsets: high (M + 1 SD) (fixed)	0.322	0.142	0.042	0.602

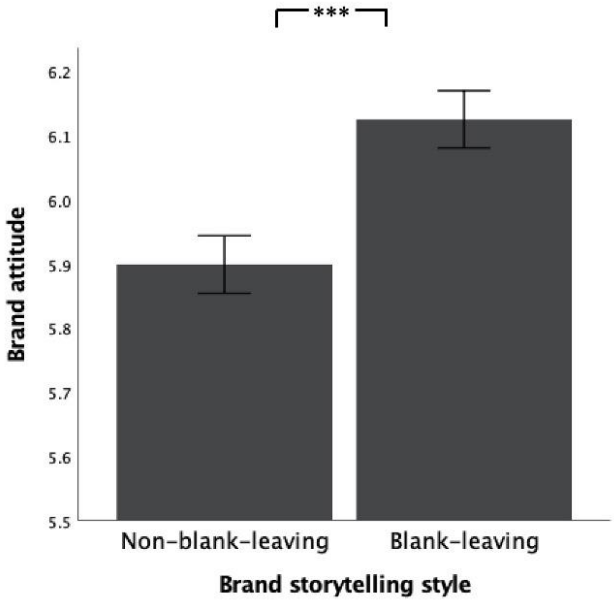
Source: Authors own creation.

Figure 1 Conceptual model



Source: Authors own creation.

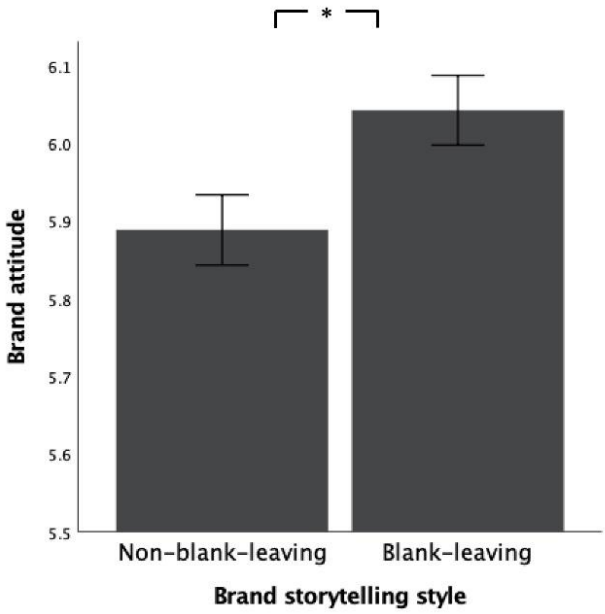
Figure 2 The effect of brand storytelling style on brand attitude (Study 1)



Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Authors own creation.

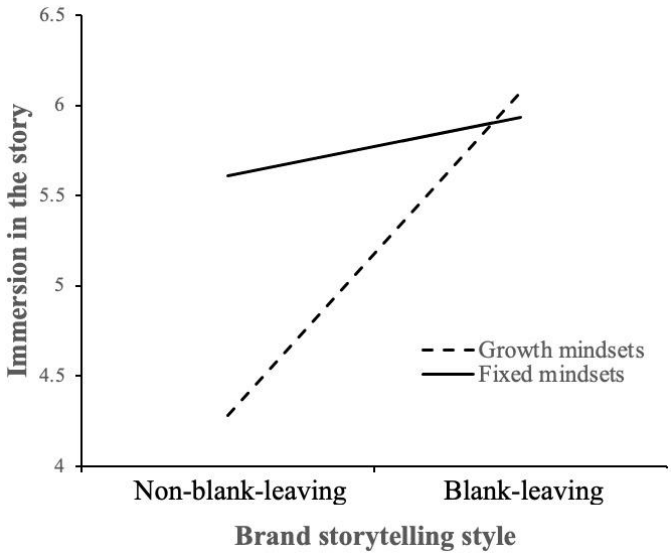
Figure 3 The effect of brand storytelling style on brand attitude (Study 2)



Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Authors own creation.

Figure 4 Interaction diagram of brand storytelling style and implicit mindsets



Source: Authors own creation.