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# Crafting branded entertainment: insights from short films awarded at Cannes Lions

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Branded entertainment represents communication assets rooted in entertainment such as short films, among others, in which a brand creates original and entertainment content based on value creation, engagement, relevance, and non-intrusiveness and paid wholly or in part by a brand. This study examines the creative process behind brand short films, specifically those awarded at the Cannes Lions 2023. Through interviews with international experts and qualitative case analysis, it identifies fundamental patterns and key factors for the success of these productions. The study proposes an applicable model based on three dimensions: production, content, and audience. These dimensions encompass the creative and strategic quality of the works as well as their capacity to generate engagement and brand recall. The findings highlight the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between creatives and brands, where storytelling and brand values are organically integrated, prioritizing entertainment over direct brand or product promotion. Experts emphasize the need for high-quality content aligned with the standards of the entertainment industry. This work contributes to the theoretical and practical development of branded entertainment, specifically in the form of brand films, offering a framework for crafting narratives that not only reflect brand values but also position themselves as significant and diverse cultural assets within the digital economy.

## KEYWORDS

branded entertainment, content marketing, brand short film, creative strategy, advertising, branded content

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, brands have increasingly incorporated content as a tactical planning variable within their communication strategies. Content marketing encompasses a set of communication techniques aimed at creating and distributing relevant content to attract a target audience that the brand has previously identified and understood (IAB, 2022).

To achieve this, brands deploy a wide array of formats and channels that allow them to reach consumers in a non-intrusive manner, delivering value through tailored content. This strategy is implemented via a distribution model that combines owned, paid, and earned media. Within this ecosystem, branded content is positioned as one of the core tools, coexisting with others such as native advertising and content curation. According to BCMA (2024), branded content is “a communication asset produced or co-produced by a brand which, through formats that serve an entertainment, informative, and/or utility function, aims to convey its values and connect with an audience that voluntarily dedicates attention to it when found relevant.”

Rather than focusing on traditional promotional approaches, branded content seeks to foster engagement by building relationships and shared experiences between the brand and its audience.

Informative content environments are often referred to as *branded information*, while entertainment-driven productions fall under the category of *branded entertainment* (Del Pino-Romero et al., 2013).

Branded content is a broad category that includes any material funded by a brand for communication purposes, whether to inform, educate, or entertain. Branded entertainment, however, is the most ambitious and demanding form within this category. In branded entertainment, entertainment is not just optional but a core element. Its main goal is to create a cultural and entertainment piece that can compete for viewer attention alongside traditional entertainment like movies or TV shows. As a result, the success of branded entertainment is not measured by how clearly it promotes a product, but by its ability to tell a compelling and meaningful story where the brand is smoothly integrated—often acting as a key part of the story or reflecting its values. The important thing is that the story is self-sufficient and creates a real emotional bond, so the brand can connect with the audience through a shared experience (Donaton, 2005).

In this context, brands increasingly operate as content producers, creating audiovisual materials in formats traditionally associated with the entertainment industry—ranging from feature films and short films to digital series, documentaries, and television productions. Examples such as Mattel Films, BMW Films, and Red Bull illustrate this growing trend toward brand-led content production.

In social media algorithms and digital audience consumption patterns, content has become essential for strategic communication planning. Content marketing focuses on creating and sharing valuable, relevant content to attract and keep audiences, encouraging profitable customer actions (Content Marketing Institute, 2025). It combines communication techniques to produce content that engages target audiences identified by brands. Brands utilise various formats and channels to reach consumers subtly through customized content, using a distribution model that mixes owned, paid, and earned media. Branded content reinforces its character in this context.

Branded content is a marketing strategy based on the creation of original content by a brand, aimed at establishing a profound and genuine connection with its audience or customers to foster loyalty (Waqas et al., 2021). According to the Branded Content White Paper, it is defined as “the creation of relevant, entertaining, or engaging content with a non-advertising appearance, produced by a brand to attract and connect with its audience” (IAB, 2022, p. 8).

A branded content strategy aims to communicate the brand’s values and connect with an audience that, finding it relevant, voluntarily dedicates their attention to it (BCMA, 2022). Organisations regard this practice as a “highly significant communication asset” (Toledano et al., 2021, p. 33) due to the attention economy within the current communicational paradigm. However, these “communication assets” (BCMA, 2022) represent a new form of interaction, still uncertain in terms of its processes, techniques, and dynamics of production and distribution. In addition to engaging the user/viewer and fostering a medium- to long-term bond through entertaining, informative, educational, and/or useful content, it is essential to incorporate a business-oriented vision.

This study examines the creation of branded content initiatives within fictional audiovisual entertainment from the perspective of the creator, namely the brand. It focuses on the innovation of new advertising formats and how businesses can leverage them to better connect with their target audiences, a practice known in the field as brand films. Recent studies highlight the significance of the convergence between

cultural industries and marketing (Hardy, 2021; Stolley and Glynne, 2022; Wu et al., 2020) as a topic of interest for both brands and creators. While collaborations between filmmakers and advertisers are not new, Nicolaou (2023) argues that the current context, defined by three digital influenced generations (Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z), presents cinematic advertising storytelling as a form of “multigenerational marketing” that effectively caters to the preferences of these segments despite their differing consumption patterns.

This research focuses on the field of audiovisual fiction, as López and Abanades (2015) demonstrates that branded content in its fiction-based formats—such as series, television, short films and other audiovisual media—is the most highly valued by advertisers and industry professionals.

According to the Scopen (2024) report, which measures the state and trends of the branded content industry in Spain, industry professionals express a preference to produce short films, alongside other formats such as brand events and documentaries. This preference is consistent with findings from other studies: (Sociograph, 2021), which indicated that audiovisual branded content achieves greater recall and emotional connection than other branded content formats and traditional advertising.

Cinema, in itself, is an appealing and powerful medium. As Seger (2000) argues, it can make us laugh and cry. Film characters concern us and prompt us to live their lives. Sometimes they inspire us or lead us to make new decisions. According to Seger a good story for cinema has direction. It moves toward a climax, and most scenes help advance the action; it has dimensionality; while it engages the viewer emotionally, it also reveals the characters and develops the themes. This study considers it essential to study the role of the brand within the process of writing a cinematic script for a branded entertainment project, to achieve an organic and non-intrusive brand integration.

The following pages examine the creation of branded content initiatives within fictional audiovisual entertainment (short films) from the perspective of the creator, namely the brand. It focuses on the innovation of new advertising formats and how businesses can leverage them to better connect with their target audiences, a practice known in the field as brand films.

This study aims to identify the key narrative and production strategies that foster emotional engagement between brands and audiences in branded entertainment short films from the screenplay to the distribution channels. Drawing on expert interviews and award-winning campaigns from the 2023 Cannes Lions<sup>1</sup>, it explores how these creative works successfully convey brand values and offers practical guidelines for effective storytelling, design, and distribution.

The starting point of this study is grounded in recent neuromarketing research demonstrating that audiovisual branded content is preferred due to its emotional connection with the audience, which increases interest and enhances brand perception and recall (Scopen, 2024; Sociograph, 2021). Narrative, particularly fictional storytelling, holds greater emotional potential and facilitates the communication of brand values, evolving from branded content to branded entertainment.

This study focuses on short films because they hold a consolidated position within the branded content industry and receive recognition

1 <https://www.canneslions.com/>

as a distinct category at major international festivals such as Cannes Lions. Their conclusive and self-contained narrative structure allows researchers to compare creative strategies across different cases more effectively. Brands and agencies increasingly choose this format, as reflected in recent industry reports (Scopen, 2024; Sociograph, 2021), due to its ability to generate emotional impact and audience engagement. The popularity and trajectory of short films in branded entertainment have produced a wide range of examples, making them a relevant and analytically rich format for this research.

According to Van Loggerenberg et al. (2019), branded entertainment is defined as a communicative effort that employs authentic and compelling storytelling to achieve brand resonance. In the emerging digital spaces, branded content must adapt to innovative formats with narratives that foster engagement, align with the zeitgeist of consumer generations (Rahman et al., 2024), and are easily distributable across digital platforms (Jenkins et al., 2013).

The study identifies key characteristics in the creation of brand films through in-depth interviews with experts, adopting a holistic perspective that encompasses both production and narrative aspects. Initially, the research examines advertising techniques within branded content narratives to establish categories that shape flexible creative models applicable to successful branded entertainment projects. Beyond enriching the body of work on audience reception of branded content, the study aims to develop concepts that contribute new theories to the field (Gibbs, 2012). Subsequently, these models are validated by applying them to the winners of the 2023 Cannes Lions Branded Content Awards in the category of films under 5 min. The objective is to identify predictive characteristics that facilitate the development of matrices for designing effective branded content narratives with a high likelihood of success.

## 1.1 In the current digital paradigm

In recent years, brands have incorporated branded content into their communication plans, increasing their investment (Scopen, 2021) and surpassing other unconventional advertising efforts in volume (Rodríguez-Rabadán et al., 2022; Rogel and Marcos, 2020). This trend reflects the ineffectiveness of traditional advertising when addressing new digital consumers.

Branded content within the media ecosystems of generations such as Gen Z and Alpha, whose consumption habits differ from those of other audiences (Munsch, 2021), has necessitated the adaptation of narrative strategies in both timing and format to suit digital platforms. These adaptations often involve poetics distinct from those of traditional narratives.

Under this new paradigm, branded content has undergone significant evolution, leading to the introduction of the Branded Content Awards category at the Cannes Lions in 2012. However, this category remained unawarded in 2014 and 2015, highlighting the nascent nature and lack of maturity in this discipline. Given the recent growth of the industry, it is crucial to analyze optimal creative processes for designing, writing, and producing branded content, as these processes are still in their early stages.

Brands investing in this practice must deliver high-production, intelligent, creative, and relevant content to compete with entertainment studios and streaming platforms (Rodríguez-Rabadán, 2019). This approach emerges as an alternative to advertising saturation, exemplified by phenomena such as digital adblocking

(Bezbaruah and Trivedi, 2020). It enables brands to reinvent their messaging through engagement-driven storytelling, aiming to foster social advocacy (Coman et al., 2022).

In the new attention economy, attracting audiences through branded content enables the engagement of so-called liquid audiences, fragmented across various screens and times, suggesting that new strategies operate from a centripetal rather than centrifugal logic (Scolari, 2022). The current context, therefore, necessitates a re-evaluation of how brands define and propose their content and communication assets, as well as the articulation of production and distribution methods that appeal to young and digital audiences.

Strategies such as transmedia approaches and virtual narratives, as highlighted by Sidorenko et al. (2018) in the context of advertising, exemplify innovative methods to capture the interest of these emerging audiences.

## 1.2 Branded entertainment as a value proposition

The ideation of brand image, inspired by Ogilvy in the 1960s, prioritises the brand over the product, endowing it with an identity characterized by beliefs and impressions (Rodríguez-Rabadán, 2019). Brand communication thus becomes a strategic cornerstone in modern marketing. The French agency RSCG advocated for using spectacle-driven advertising strategies to achieve significant impact.

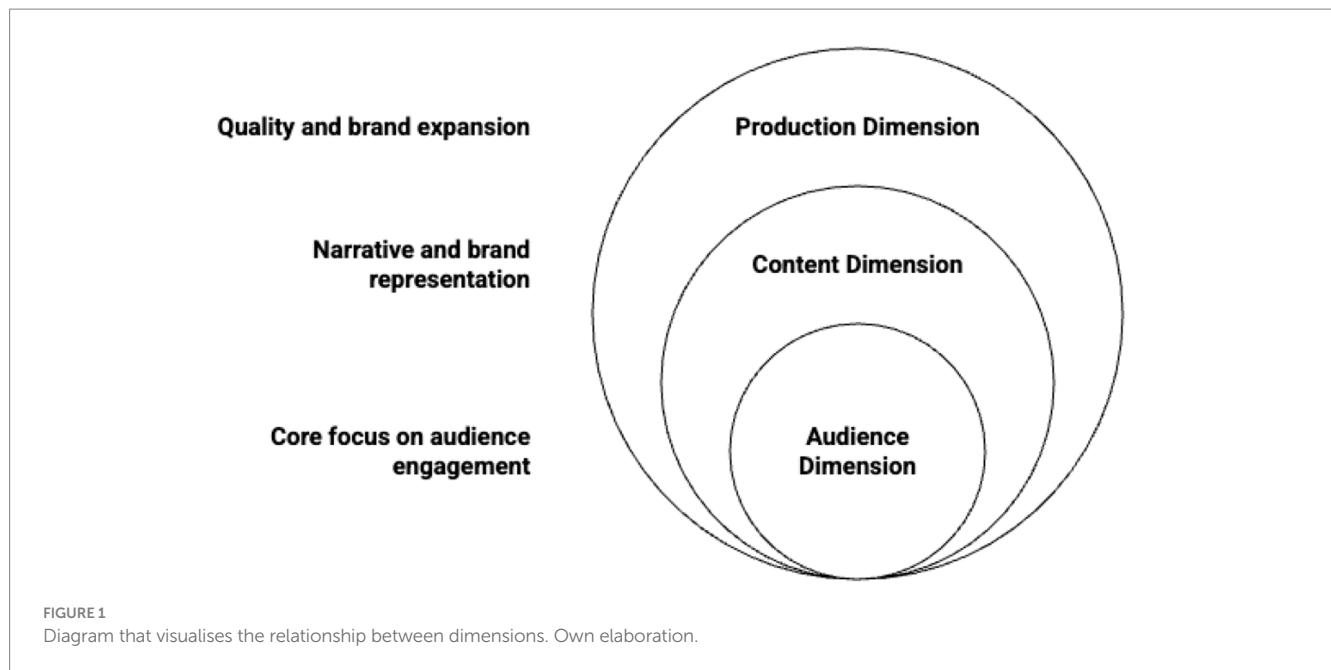
Brands seek a distinctive identity, transforming themselves into figures with pronounced personas, akin to Hollywood stars, exuding spectacle and glamour (Ortega, 2004). According to Séguela, president of RSCG, a brand's promise is intangible, rooted in the product's physical attributes, the brand's character, and its communication style (Castelló-Martínez and Del Pino-Romero, 2019) (Figure 1). Ortega (2004) further highlights the transgressive strategies of the 1990s as innovative means of capturing attention, breaking away from conservative conventions.

In recent decades, branded content has given the concept of brand image a new dimension, aligning it with universal and enduring values connected to the zeitgeist and to moral, social, cultural, or scientific concepts (Rodríguez-Rabadán, 2025).

For Castelló-Martínez and del Pino-Romero (2019), the traditional unique selling proposition (USP) based on rational attributes has evolved into an emotional unique selling proposition (EUSP), focusing on the emotional engagement of users or customers. Brands now seek an authentic truth within their identity—an aspect that differentiates them from competitors and elevates their appeal. In line with this, Llorente-Barroso et al. (2022) argue that branded content strategies increasingly centre discourse on qualitative values to strengthen the bond between brand and audience. At this juncture, creativity becomes essential in crafting memorable, empathetic, and emotional stories.

The distinctiveness of branded entertainment lies in its ability to tell a story while involving the brand in a playful and entertaining manner. Through storytelling, brands can establish emotional connections with consumers, regardless of whether the narrative revolves around a cause, a product, a person, or a specific purpose. What matters is that the narrative is underpinned by a solid story that facilitates brand resonance (Chun, 2018).

As creative strategies for brands have evolved, audiovisual branded entertainment enables creators to break free from the confines of traditional television spots, aiming to elevate the brand



by aligning it with philosophical principles. These principles may stem from the pursuit of the “truth of the brand” (Castelló-Martínez and Del Pino-Romero, 2019, p. 225) or from aligning with values the brand seeks to embody and promote.

Brands choosing audiovisual branded entertainment focus on a central communication element that embodies values granting the brand relevance while making it interesting, aspirational, and meaningful for consumers (Rogel and Marcos Molano, 2024).

## 2 Objectives

This study has the general objective of identifying the most effective narrative and technical patterns that enable the creation of meaningful emotional connections between brands and their audiences, based on expert interviews and an analysis of award-winning campaigns at the 2023 Cannes Lions.

The specific objectives are as follows:

- SO1: To examine the narrative and formal characteristics of branded entertainment pieces that excel in their ability to convey brand values.
- SO2: To establish creative guidelines that synthesise best practices in the production, narrative design, and distribution of brand films, using award-winning pieces from the Cannes Lions and insights from international branded content experts as a reference.

## 3 Methods

The study of the writing process for a branded entertainment initiative, understood as a communication asset applied to the entertainment field, represents a broad, complex, and interpretative subject. Due to the novelty of this practice and its professional

application, the study is conducted through an empirical, qualitative analysis, allowing for the exploration of the nuances of an emerging advertising genre (Cotán, 2016).

The qualitative study (Gibbs, 2012), combined with case examples (Noor, 2008), adopts a research perspective focused on understanding professionals’ perceptions of the entire process of creating a branded entertainment story. It also explores the application of previously identified frameworks to successful brand film cases. The research seeks to address the following questions:

*RQ1:* What characteristics must brand films possess to qualify as such and ensure a certain likelihood of success?

*RQ2:* What creative industry processes should be integrated into the conceptualisation and execution of a brand film?

*RQ3:* How do brand films add value—and thereby become strategic communication assets—for brands and their target audiences?

To identify and outline the characteristics of brand films and the production processes they require, incorporating methodologies from cinema and other arts, in-depth interviews were conducted with five international experts in branded content. The selection of interviewees was based on relevance and opportunity, focusing on profiles with significant representation in branded content creation and research (Neira et al., 2024).

Although the sample size was limited, the purposive and theoretically grounded selection of participants ensured conceptual depth over statistical representativeness, in accordance with qualitative research standards. Furthermore, data saturation was achieved, as the final interviews yielded recurring themes rather than new insights.

The participants included:

- Ilenia Provenzi: Story analyst, translator, screenwriter, and professor in the Master’s in Screenwriting at UNICATT.

- Armando Fumagalli: Director of the Master's in Screenwriting and Film Production at UNICATT, script consultant, and author of *Creativity in Power: From Hollywood to Pixar via Europe* (2013).
- Ugo Parodi: CEO of Mosaicoon, an audiovisual company specialising in branded content and video marketing with offices in Singapore, New Delhi, London, Madrid, Milan, Rome, and Seoul.
- Joseph Sassoon: Scholar at the University of Pavia's Storytelling Observatory, board member of the Branded Entertainment Observatory in Rome, and co-author of *Branded Content: The New Frontier of Corporate Communication* (2014).
- Mara Perbellini: Screenwriter and professor at UNICATT.

All participants provided written informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study, in compliance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

The selection of participants followed a non-probabilistic, intentional sampling approach with a theoretical focus (Arantzamendi et al., 2012). This sampling ensured a balanced representation: homogeneity in terms of the study's field, yet heterogeneity in each participant's expertise within theoretical or practical domains, thereby minimising bias.

The methodology employed structured personal interviews. The questionnaire provided to the experts contained 10 questions focusing on the role of the brand in the creation of an audiovisual branded entertainment story. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, Italian, or English, ensuring clarity and fostering an international framework.

The interviews were recorded on video to capture responses accurately. Each participant received the questionnaire, translated into three languages, 1 week in advance to allow sufficient preparation. The interviews, approximately 30 min each, provided ample time for experts to express their views on each question. The video recordings were later transcribed, translated, and analysed for efficiency and precision.

The responses were processed through inductive content analysis, aiming to compare content, identify patterns, and deduce explanatory arguments applicable to case studies.

The significant information was classified and identified according to codes to organize data segments, identify and group said data according to criteria that relate them (Arantzamendi et al., 2012).

Categories were also identified, "a category is a group of content that shares common aspects," (Arantzamendi et al., 2012, p. 113).

With the data we extracted from the responses themselves, we proceeded to read them, noting codes and categories for each of the questionnaire responses in the margins of the tables. From this coding, we produced a summary with categories and corresponding codes for each of the participants in the interview. With this procedure, we aim to arrive at an abstraction of the concepts in order to describe the phenomenon of Branded Entertainment writing in depth and generate knowledge about the subject matter.

Finally, we did a content analysis of this qualitative experiment (inductive in nature) because we found that the literature on the subject lacked sufficient theoretical content on the process of writing Branded Entertainment (Lauri and Kyngäs, 2005). See questionnaire and code categorisation in the following database (Rodríguez-Gómez et al., 1999).

The findings from the interviews propose a conceptual framework intended to be tested against successful case studies. The selected pieces for applying the framework described by the experts were drawn from the 2023 Cannes Lions Branded Content Awards in the category of fiction shorts under 5 min, all considered brand films.

The choice of this festival is justified by several factors. First, its global reach lends the selected cases a marked international character, ensuring broad applicability across diverse contexts. Second, the festival's judging criteria for brand film campaigns include percentages addressing strategic insights, creativity, execution, and campaign outcomes.

The working universe for this phase consists of four pieces, three originating from commercial brand initiatives and one from a non-profit organisation (Table 1).

## 4 Results

This section presents the main findings from the interviews, based on the methodology described previously, to then compare these findings with various award-winning brand short films in the branded entertainment category from the Cannes Lions Awards database.

### 4.1 Key insights into branded entertainment identified by experts

Branded entertainment, while still evolving and holding significant potential, remains uncertain for many brands. Narrative is essential for creating impact, and experts emphasise the importance

TABLE 1 Basic information of the analysed pieces.

| Title                              | Brand                                     | Product/ service          | Idea/ creation                                   | Locasitation | Production                                                                    | Award       |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Uber Eats presents "Don't run out" | Uber Eats                                 | Convenience product       | Uber Eats, San Francisco/ KAMP Grizzly, Portland | EEUU         | Great Guns USA, Los Angeles                                                   | Bronze Lion |
| Nike FC Presents The Footballverse | Nike                                      | Nike                      | Wieden+Kennedy, Portland                         | EEUU         | Iconoclast, Los Angeles                                                       | Gold Lion   |
| Dirty Laundry                      | Abaad Resource center for gender equality | Abaad Gender Equality NGO | Leo Burnett, Beirut                              | Libano       | Leo Burnett, Beirut/ Remie Akl Production, Beirut / MTV Studio Vision, Beirut | Gold Lion   |
| Call me, with Timothee Chalamet    | Apple                                     | Apple TV+                 | TBWA/Media Arts Lab, Los Angeles                 | EEUU         | MJZ, Los Angeles                                                              | Bronze Lion |

Source: own elaboration.

of understanding the audience, which is divided between participatory younger viewers and more passive older ones, to develop relevant content. Transmedia strategies and active audience participation are promising resources but remain under exploration.

Additionally, experts highlight that creative development requires larger budgets and close collaboration between marketing teams, screenwriters, and key roles such as the story editor. The brand must be subtly integrated into the narrative, prioritising entertainment and values over direct promotion. Defining objectives and budgets is critical to guiding the creative team, encouraging originality and fostering emotional connections with the audience.

A branded entertainment story should evoke emotion and connect with the audience through characters who face and overcome challenges, fostering identification. The narrative should be compelling, featuring contemporary protagonists who reflect the audience's experiences and surprise them with dramatic twists. The story must convey value, focusing on entertainment while aligning with the brand's mission and vision, without becoming overtly promotional.

The brand should be subtly embedded as a messenger of a cohesive and consistent identity. Understanding audience interests and social demands is crucial for delivering relevant stories. Brands should act as publishers, prioritising engaging and shareable content that highlights their purpose and values.

Table 2 summarises the key elements identified by the interviewed experts, along with their descriptions and quotes or examples from the interviews that support these findings.

## 4.2 Cannes Lions 2023 awards: application of key insights identified by experts

To evaluate the utility and effectiveness of the essential elements in creating a brand film, these insights were applied to the sample

from the 2023 Cannes Lions Awards. The key aspects of branded entertainment identified by experts include: the importance of narrative genre; audience engagement; transmedia creation; content that is valuable to both the audience and the brand; the prioritisation of entertainment; and the integration of the brand and its values as central elements. These features subtly differ from conventional storytelling or audiovisual fiction with product placement, establishing distinct production models separate from traditional advertising.

### 4.2.1 Production content and audience dimensions

To structure the analysis and interpret the data gathered from both case studies and expert interviews, this study proposes a conceptual framework grounded in three interrelated dimensions: production, content, and audience. This model offers a framework for understanding how creative and strategic decisions influence the emotional and narrative effectiveness of branded short films:

1. Production Dimension: Encompassing the conceptualisation of the piece, execution, diffusion and promotion strategy, and quality standards.
2. Content Dimension: Focusing on the narrative aspects of the brand film.
3. Audience Dimension: Addressing the implications of audience engagement with the branded entertainment piece.

The final column specifies the items corresponding to these categories within the analysed brand films (Table 3).

#### 4.2.1.1 Production dimension

The selected pieces originate from alternative marketing and communication agencies with strong international potential. These agencies, collaborators with major brands and internationally renowned,

TABLE 2 Key elements in the creation of audiovisual branded entertainment.

| Key findings              | Summary                                                                                                                                                                                         | Example Citations                                                                    |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Genre influence           | Brands influence the narrative genre but lack clear expertise in branded entertainment, which is in its early stages with numerous opportunities.                                               | Fumagalli: "Brands lack clear ideas about what they want to do" (2023).              |
| Audience participation    | A mature audience divided into two groups: younger generations (Millennials, Centennials, Alphas) open to participation, and traditional ones (Generation X, Baby Boomers) who are more passive | Disney as a pioneer in transmedia strategies for engagement.                         |
| Transmedia strategies     | An emerging tool to increase participation and engagement, although still in the exploratory phase.                                                                                             | content generates greater engagement" (2023).                                        |
| Production Costs          | Requires greater investment in the creative phase and script development. Interdisciplinary coordination improves the final result                                                              | Perbellini: Include story editors and directors in the creative process (2023).      |
| Creative Team             | Should evoke emotion through characters facing obstacles and dramatic twists. Stories must be relevant to the target audience.                                                                  | Sassoon: "The brand must serve the story" (2023).                                    |
| Emotional Narratives      | Should evoke emotion through characters facing obstacles and dramatic twists. Stories must be relevant to the target audience.                                                                  | Provenzi: "Characters are a reflection of today's individuals" (2023).               |
| Brand Values              | The brand should be subtly integrated into the narrative, reflecting values and emotions, while moving away from product placement.                                                             | Perbellini: "The brand is a character with obstacles and emotional strength" (2023). |
| Social Sensitivity        | Stories should connect with current demands and social sensitivities to reflect the brand's identity and relevance.                                                                             | Sassoon: "The brand must be subtly integrated into the story" (2023).                |
| Entertainment and Message | The pieces should entertain while delivering a clear message, prioritising content over advertising the product.                                                                                | Fumagalli: "Exciting stories are key to branded entertainment" (2023).               |

Source: own elaboration.

TABLE 3 Dimensions and categories to identify and analyse.

|                      |                                                                |                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Production dimension | Creative idea conception quality                               | Characteristics of the agency or creative production. Distribution and brand expansion. ability to generate recognition and brand equity.             |
| Content Dimension    | Form and content.<br>Narrative genre.<br>Brand representation. | Narrative structure, formal and content considerations.<br>Narrative structure, formal and content considerations.                                    |
| Audience dimension.  | Participation.<br>Entertainment.<br>Valuable content.          | Interaction with the content before, during, or after its consumption.<br>Audience Interest in the Subject Matter<br>Viralisation and Recall Capacity |

Source: Own elaboration.

establish minimum quality standards in both formal and creative execution. All have received advertising awards and are known for their innovative and disruptive approaches. The following section summarises the analysis based on the production dimension of each campaign:

#### *Nike Presents The Footballverse:*

- Internationalisation and Reach: Developed by Wieden+Kennedy, a global agency recognised for its impactful collaborations with Nike. With offices in key cities such as Portland, New York, London, and Tokyo, W + K leveraged its global cultural expertise to create a narrative that resonated internationally, particularly during the 2022 FIFA World Cup (Kennedy et al., 2021).
- Creative Capabilities: W + K showcased expertise in storytelling and high-quality visual production. The campaign combined top-tier visual effects with an emotional narrative leveraging nostalgia and humour, featuring iconic football figures that appealed to both long-time fans and newer audiences.
- Distribution Strategy: The campaign was launched on digital platforms such as YouTube, with its extensive reach, and amplified through social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. It was also distributed via traditional media in strategic markets for Nike.
- Brand Expansion: Beyond showcasing its products, Nike reinforced its role as a leader in sports innovation and its commitment to diversity in sports, using the campaign to connect with future generations aspiring to join football's elite.
- Recognition and Brand Equity: By featuring past and present football stars in a "football multiverse," Nike solidified its position as a culturally relevant and timeless brand, connecting generations of fans with a message of unity and passion.

#### *Uber Eats "Do not Run Out":*

- Internationalisation and Reach: Created by KAMP Grizzly, based in Portland, in collaboration with Uber Eats in San Francisco. The agency is known for its focus on visual storytelling, immersive design, and experiences that connect with audiences. It excels in crafting fresh and modern aesthetics that resonate particularly well with younger audiences.
- Creative Capabilities: The campaign blended humour, exaggeration, and relatable everyday scenarios to create immediate audience connection. By portraying common anxieties like running out of food during a culturally significant occasion (Halloween), KAMP Grizzly highlighted its strength in crafting culturally relevant content.

- Distribution Strategy: The campaign premiered like a cinematic release with a nearly four-minute video. It was broadcast via Uber's owned media: app, website, and social media platforms.
- Brand Expansion: Uber Eats positioned itself as the immediate solution to the "chaos" of running out of food at critical moments, reinforcing its value proposition centred on convenience and speed.
- Recognition and Brand Equity: Uber Eats emerged as an essential and reliable service. By linking strong emotions (anxiety and humour) to its value proposition, the campaign enhanced brand recognition and emotional connection with consumers.

#### *Call Me... with Timothée Chalamet.*

- Internationalisation and Reach: Created by Apple in collaboration with TBWA\Media Arts Lab, the global agency responsible for Apple's advertising. Renowned for its disruptive creativity, TBWA has extensive experience delivering high-impact campaigns for global brands. The agency's digital marketing expertise allowed it to reach diverse global audiences effectively.
- Creative Capabilities: Through a light and comedic tone, the campaign maintained Apple's elegant and exclusive brand image. Featuring Timothée Chalamet, a prominent Gen Z actor, it established an immediate emotional connection with younger, urban audiences.
- Distribution Strategy: The campaign was launched on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Apple's own site. Its mass appeal was further amplified organically through Chalamet's large social media following, quickly spreading the message.
- Brand Expansion: The campaign encapsulated Apple's essence of accessibility, innovation, and simplicity. It emphasised the brand's focus on user experience and cultural relevance without relying on direct sales promotion.
- Recognition and Brand Equity: Apple reinforced its position as a leading tech brand not only through product quality but also by leveraging its marketing to build strong brand equity. The inclusion of prominent personalities like Chalamet, Selena Gomez, and Jason Momoa showcased Apple's intent to connect with younger digital audiences through its Apple TV platform.

#### *Dirty Laundry.*

- Internationalisation and Reach: Produced by Leo Burnett Beirut, part of the global Leo Burnett network known for its creative campaigns addressing social and cultural issues with depth and relevance. The Lebanese office focuses on engaging with Arab

cultural and social realities, as exemplified by this campaign tackling gender rights.

- Creative Capabilities: Collaborating with Lebanese artist Remie Akl, the campaign used a unique visual style to advocate for cultural identity. It combined visual art with a powerful message, elevating the sensitivity of gender and equality issues through visual metaphors as tools for reflection.
- Distribution Strategy: Distributed primarily through digital platforms like YouTube and social media, the campaign also featured in specialised media focusing on gender equality, broadening its reach among socially engaged audiences.
- Brand Expansion: Abaad Resource Centre for Gender Equality expanded its reach by creatively and directly addressing issues of sexual harassment and gender inequality in the Arab world. The campaign not only reinforced its social mission but also sparked conversations and awareness about Abaad's work.
- Recognition and Brand Equity: The campaign strengthened Abaad's brand equity by positioning it as a leading advocate for gender equality. Its ability to evoke emotional responses, combined with artistic visual presentation, enhanced the organisation's credibility and relevance in contemporary social discourse.

#### 4.2.1.2 Narrative dimension

In terms of narrative genre, two of the four award-winning pieces, Nike Presents The Footballverse and Call Me... with Timothée Chalamet, use comedy through gags and humorous narrative twists. The piece from the Abaad Resource Centre for Gender Equality leans more towards the documentary genre, incorporating elements of visual art or music video, with an evocative approach aimed at raising awareness about violence against women. The Uber Eats piece follows some conventions of the horror genre, tailored to a special Halloween promotion. Below is a synthesis of the analysis according to the narrative dimension of each campaign.

##### A Nike Presents The Footballverse:

- Narrative Structure: The piece employs a storytelling format with a clear and exciting narrative. It begins with a science fiction concept where scientists create a "multiverse" to pit iconic footballers like Mbappé, Ronaldinho, and Ronaldo against each other in a virtual duel. This approach blends the fantastical with the sporting, enabling emotional and nostalgic identification.
- Formal Considerations:
- Visuals: Use of CGI to recreate iconic football moments and create a futuristic setting. Exaggerated character portrayals. Incorporation of other media, such as animation.
- Pacing: Fast-paced and dynamic transitions, reminiscent of a football match, to maintain viewer attention.
- Music: An exhilarating soundtrack that reinforces the epic tone of the narrative.
- Dialogue: Minimal, allowing the story to be understood globally without language barriers.
- The Brand as a Background Presence: Nike appears as the unifying element in this multiverse, standing out for its innovative role in football history. The brand's values (competition, innovation, diversity) are implicitly conveyed through the products and characters featured in the narrative.

##### B Uber Eats "Do not Run Out."

- Narrative Structure: The piece follows a classic three-act structure with clear conflicts (running out of sweets), where exaggeration serves as a humorous device, positioning Uber Eats as the saviour. It centres on a strange curse that befalls one of the protagonists if she fails to fulfil a family ritual involving a specific type of sweet on Halloween.
- Formal Considerations:
- Visuals: Strong chiaroscuro contrasts typical of the horror genre, with "off-screen" elements playing a key role in maintaining suspense.
- Acting: Characters display hyperbolised reactions that balance a light and comedic tone with the tension inherent in the horror narrative, including jumps and scares.
- Pacing: Editing complements the horror genre, alternating longer shots with sudden short cuts where characters or elements appear spontaneously to surprise the audience.
- Music and Sound: Strategic use of sound effects and music to accentuate narrative twists and create impactful moments, especially those designed to startle the audience.
- The Brand as a Background Presence: Uber Eats is portrayed as the invisible hero that averts chaos. Although the service is not the direct protagonist, it is essential to resolving the plot. The brand's values (convenience, speed, and reliability) are implicitly present in every scene.

##### C Call Me... with Timothée Chalamet:

- Narrative Structure: Timothée Chalamet, playing a version of himself, interacts comically with the iPhone, noticing that all the prominent actors of the moment are featured in an Apple TV production. The narrative takes a light-hearted approach, following a classic structure of introduction, conflict, and resolution.
- Formal Considerations:
- Visuals: The contrast between the minimalism of Apple products and the casual atmosphere of Chalamet's interaction with the iPhone creates an appealing dynamic. Cool colours and natural lighting highlight Apple's characteristic simplicity.
- Pacing: The piece has a brisk pace that holds the viewer's attention. The editing is sharp, with clean cuts reflecting the seamless user experience of Apple devices. The camera consistently follows Chalamet as the main character.
- Music and Sound: The campaign features minimal sound, relying primarily on dialogue and device sounds to emphasise the intuitive and user-friendly interface of Apple products.
- Dialogue and Acting: Chalamet's tone is relaxed and natural, making it easy for the audience, particularly younger viewers, to relate. His interaction with the device is direct and unpretentious.
- The Brand as a Character: Apple is portrayed as an enabler of everyday life, in this case, in a fun and effortless way, while also highlighting its entertainment platform (Apple TV). Though not visibly the protagonist of the ad, the brand is represented through its voice assistant, Siri, and the content platform it promotes. This makes the brand almost a character that facilitates interaction between the protagonist and his surroundings, driving the narrative forward.

#### D *Dirty Laundry*:

- Narrative Structure: *Dirty Laundry* uses symbolic storytelling to depict how women in Lebanon and other parts of the Arab world often bear the weight of shame, judgement, and silence regarding sexual harassment. The act of washing dirty laundry becomes a powerful metaphor for how women are forced to “clean” and “hide” evidence of abuse while society maintains an indifferent or victim-blaming attitude. The campaign illustrates how societal silence perpetuates a culture of harassment and inequality.
- Formal Considerations:
- Visuals: The campaign features high-impact visuals, using the symbolism of “dirty laundry” and the act of washing to represent abuse and shame in Arab culture. The aesthetic is raw yet visually refined, enhancing the message’s impact. Medium and close-up shots dominate, with cold tones.
- Pacing: The pacing is measured but firm, building visual tension as the story unfolds. Scene editing is carefully designed to maximise the emotional impact of each moment, blending documentary resources with specifically created imagery.
- Music and Sound: The sombre and tense music reinforces the gravity of the message. Sound effects, such as water and the scrubbing of clothes, sirens, and cries, synchronise with the visual narrative to emphasise the silent struggle faced by women.
- Dialogue and Acting: The piece relies on a monologue by artist Remie Akl, which interacts with the visual expression and emotions of the individuals featured in the campaign. Through their gestures and body language, they convey violence and suffering without the need for words.
- The Brand as a Character: Abaad is not a tangible character in the story but is represented through the message it conveys. The campaign highlights Abaad’s mission to shed light on the struggles of women against sexual harassment and oppression. In this sense, the organisation becomes an “invisible hero” striving to change social narratives, while the women affected by harassment are depicted as protagonists fighting for their voices and liberation.

#### 4.2.1.3 Audience dimension

In addition to the success of the campaigns, which demonstrates their relevance to an expert audience, the pieces effectively reached their target audiences. The impact of the campaigns was evaluated through expert platforms, documentation from the Cannes Lions festival, and the official channels of the award-winning brands. Below is a general review of the audience engagement strategies employed by the analysed audiovisual pieces.

#### A *Nike Presents The Footballverse*:

- Before Consumption: Nike generated anticipation through teasers on social media and collaborations with renowned footballers. The campaign also leveraged the context of the 2022 FIFA World Cup to maximise its relevance.
- During Consumption: The dynamic narrative and visual effects kept the audience immersed. Nostalgic elements, such as the appearance of legendary football figures, created a strong emotional bond.
- After Consumption: The campaign sparked conversations on social media, particularly around comparisons between generations of football players. This interaction was amplified by the social momentum surrounding the multiverse trend popularised by other audiovisual works, such as *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Masco Agencia Creativa, 2022), as well as memes and fan debates, which enhanced its virality.
- Virality and Recall: The Footballverse garnered millions of views on YouTube and was widely shared and discussed on platforms like Twitter and Instagram (Brito-Rhor, 2024). Its focus on the passion for football and its striking aesthetics ensured it was remembered as one of Nike’s most iconic campaigns.

#### B *Uber Eats Do not Run Out*.

- Before Consumption: Uber Eats used pre-launch strategies, such as teasers and collaborations with digital media, to generate interest. The campaign was launched during a key context—social events and celebrations (where food is essential)—enhancing its relevance.
- During Consumption: The humour and exaggeration created a strong connection with the audience, fostering recognition and message retention, particularly among low-involvement consumers (Eisend, 2021). This was exemplified by the brand film’s opening screen, challenging viewers to locate the one million sweets used in the film’s production.
- After Consumption: The campaign became a viral resource, especially on social media, where users shared memes and related the storyline to similar situations in their own lives. This extended the campaign’s lifespan and reinforced the brand’s positioning.
- Virality and Recall: The short, dynamic format, combined with a universal message (the anxiety of running out of food), allowed the campaign to achieve high virality.

#### C *Call Me... with Timothée Chalamet*:

- Before Consumption: Interest in the campaign was amplified by the prior announcement of Timothée Chalamet’s collaboration, with his significant social media following helping to generate anticipation.
- During Consumption: Interaction on platforms like YouTube and social media allowed users to share content, comment, and react to the chemistry between Chalamet and the iPhone, sparking conversations and memes. The pairing of a popular actor with an iconic device created a favourable context for virality.
- After Consumption: The campaign generated significant social media buzz, particularly on Twitter and Instagram, where Chalamet’s fans and Apple users shared their impressions and created additional content inspired by the campaign. The light-hearted and humorous tone made the campaign widely discussed and remembered.
- Virality and Recall: The choice of actor, combined with the ad’s relaxed and playful style, facilitated its virality. The campaign achieved a strong impact on social platforms due to its accessible tone and visual appeal, making it highly shareable and memorable. Furthermore, the non-overtly promotional nature of the content ensured it resonated deeply with users, maintaining a high level of recall.

#### D *Dirty Laundry*:

- Before Consumption: The campaign was carefully positioned as a high-impact piece on social media and in media outlets already committed to social and gender activism. Anticipation for its release was driven by the cause's prominence and the relevance of the issues addressed.
- During Consumption: Viewers reacted strongly to the content, with many sharing their opinions on platforms like Instagram and Twitter. The use of the visual metaphor of "dirty laundry" and "washing" proved highly effective in generating discussions about the culture of silence surrounding harassment.
- After Consumption: The campaign continued to gain attention, not only in Lebanon but also across other Arab countries and internationally, due to its relevance and the visual impact of its imagery. The piece prompted discussions about gender violence and the effectiveness of visual campaigns in driving social activism.
- Virality and Recall: The campaign's strong emotional impact and clear visual symbolism ensured rapid and widespread virality. It was widely shared, commented on, and discussed on social media platforms. From its inception, it was supported by the hashtag #NoShameNoBlame, which helped sustain its relevance and bolster the cause it represents beyond its exposure on social media.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

Associating a brand with values or ideas is not a novel concept. Tsai (2005) highlighted the importance of emotional experience as crucial to brand acceptance and purchase value. In today's context, where advertising seeks to avoid being intrusive to enhance its impact and retention, it is essential to implement discursive strategies that consider brands as active social agents. The articulation of brand content within entertainment and storytelling (De Miguel et al., 2022), particularly through brand films, is vital. This involves addressing creative and communicative dimensions that extend beyond the traditional television spot. Zomeño and Blay-y-Arráz (2022) emphasise the need to conceptualize new branded content departments, confirming their interdisciplinary nature.

This study contributes to the theoretical framework of branded entertainment by proposing a three-dimensional framework (Production–Content–Audience) in a structured and integrative manner (Figure 2).

This approach reveals how strategic brand decisions (Production) are translated into narrative elements (Content) that ultimately shape audience response (Audience). The model offers a structured approach for analyzing how storytelling techniques operate within brand-driven audiovisual narratives, particularly in the short film format, when the possibilities for narrative impact are more limited in time.

The proposed three-dimensional framework also offers tangible benefits for professional practice. By breaking down the process of branded content creation into three interconnected dimensions, it enables professionals to diagnose, plan, and evaluate their campaigns with greater precision.

Within the production dimension, the three dimension conceptual framework establishes strategic clarity by explicitly identifying production elements such as brand-driven decisions aimed at selecting protagonists with greater intentional alignment. It emphasises the importance of aligning commercial objectives with narrative decisions from the outset of the process—ultimately fostering coherence between brand strategy and storytelling.

Moreover, by unpacking key narrative elements, professionals can craft content that is more relevant and emotionally impactful without deviating from the brand's core values. Regarding the audience, this approach proposes criteria for assessing the emotional and persuasive impact of the content, allowing these insights to inform and refine future campaigns.

Finally, the triangulated framework aims to create a shared language for today's multidisciplinary teams, facilitating consistent decision-making and smoother collaboration between creative and commercial interests.

The presence of brand films necessitates that brands collaborate with the audiovisual industry to craft compelling narratives that resonate with audiences. Brands must define a creative strategy to guide the creation of the advertising message (brief), enabling the creative team to develop processes that align with the brand's needs and objectives (Ortega, 2004; Castelló-Martínez and Del Pino-Romero, 2019).

Including renowned authors in the creative team can carry a promotional nuance. Much like the use of celebrities increases the perceived authenticity of a brand (Kennedy et al., 2021), the participation of acclaimed directors or creatives in production reinforces the perception of an audiovisual production rather than a promotional piece. Recognised actors, directors, writers, or musicians, not traditionally associated with advertising, can lend authenticity to the narrative.

Each piece adopts its unique strategy. In Nike Presents The Footballverse, Call Me. with Timothée Chalamet, and Dirty Laundry, narrative quality is achieved through high-impact figures such as elite footballers, actor Timothée Chalamet, or artist Remie Akl. Interviewed experts confirm the effectiveness of this strategy, fostering audience connection with relevant characters based on their context or interests. These inclusions also facilitate brand engagement, aligning characters with brand values.

Such strategies transcend the formal dimensions of the narrative and progress towards audience engagement, exploring cultural capital as a form of interaction and involvement (Pluntz and Pras, 2020). In this context, the study by Mosquera-Álvarez and Hidalgo-Albuja (2020) examines the effectiveness of humour in brand recall, justifying the light tone of many brand films aimed at capturing younger audiences.

Creative advertising strategy serves as a roadmap to connect with the target audience, while creative proposals are strategic content designed to communicate a brand's concept to its audience (Marketing Directo, 2024). The award-winning pieces, focusing on relevant characters (e.g., Timothée Chalamet or Remie Akl), significant events (e.g., the FIFA World Cup or Halloween), or social issues (e.g., gender violence, multiverses, digital platforms, and young stars), are essential for making an initial connection with the target audience. Leveraging specific moments, trends, or interests keeps brands relevant and helps overcome initial advertising barriers.

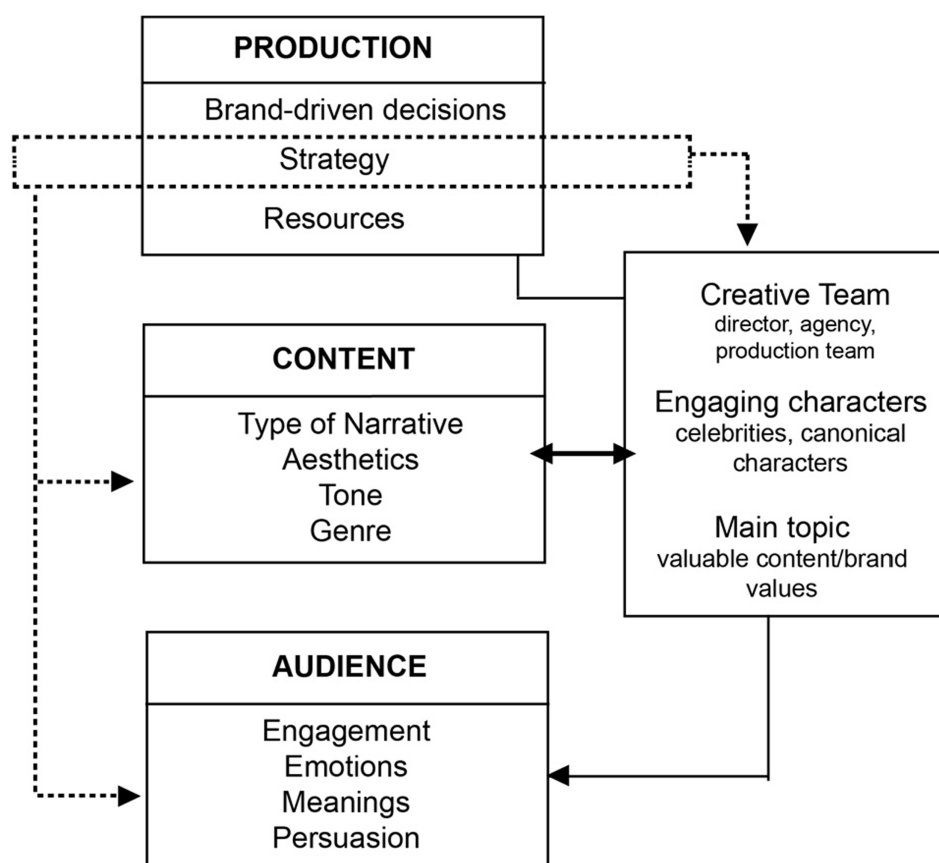


FIGURE 2  
Diagram relating dimensions to key elements. Own elaboration.

When brands combine messages, objectives, and values of engagement with prosocial corporate practices, they engage in authentic brand activism, creating significant potential for social change and brand value (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Additionally, associating brands with characters leads to an “anthropomorphisation” that strengthens audiences’ emotional engagement (Lim et al., 2022).

In a brand film, the brand must integrate into the story without appearing as product placement. The narratives analysed depict brands as narrative agents within the plot. Nike and Apple visibly feature as objects within the narrative, whereas Abaad Gender Equality and Uber Eats appear only in the credits or marginally. This suggests that for brands without physical products, inclusion is more complex, favouring a disconnection between the narrative and sales while associating the brand with values or causes. An effective strategy to avoid the perception of traditional advertising is to focus on the originality of the story or on social values and issues, as exemplified by Abaad Gender Equality.

A dimension explored in this study that warrants future attention is the organisation of native digital strategies. Disseminating content through owned and earned media channels is a significant advantage of these promotional practices. The high quality and short duration of audiovisual pieces (endorsed by creative agencies) provide avenues for engagement with the

potential to reach young audiences. This is crucial as the customer/audience experiences the brand as an audiovisual journey akin to a traditional film narrative.

This study has certain limitations, including a small expert interview sample and a focus on conceptual depth over broad representativeness. As such, findings are not generalizable to all branded content formats, especially long-form genres. The absence of direct audience data also limits insights into reception. Future research could expand the sample, include audience perspectives, and explore other formats like branded series or interactive content.

Despite the increasing practical and scholarly interest, the field of branded entertainment remains an emerging discipline, with its creative and production processes still in early stages. The existing literature often focuses on specific aspects such as audience reception or case studies, but it lacks comprehensive models that capture the phenomenon as a whole. To fill this gap, the main theoretical contribution of this study is the development of an original conceptual framework based on the interaction of three core dimensions: Production, Content, and Audience. This three dimension conceptual framework not only aims to outline the elements of successful campaigns but also seeks to provide an analytical model and a strategic guide for navigating the complexities of creating brand films, thereby contributing new concepts and theories to the field.

## Data availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available at: [10.6084/m9.figshare.29160248.v1](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.29160248.v1). Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

The patients/participants (legal guardian/next of kin) provided written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

MR: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PS: Writing – review & editing. MA: Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Generative AI statement

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