



## Networked narratives on Humans of New York: A content analysis of social media engagement on Facebook



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### ABSTRACT

Humans of New York (HONY) is a popular Facebook page which has more than 13 million fans. The posts on HONY are termed as networked narratives, which are stories told on social media with technology affordances enabling story co-construction between the story tellers and the readers. A content analysis ( $N = 390$ ) was conducted to examine the popular topics on networked narratives and its impact on social media engagement as represented by the number of likes, the number of shares, and likability of characters featured in the post. Results revealed a set of topics of the networked narratives were associated with social media engagement. Also, the tone and the length of posts were associated with social media engagement.

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Humans have a long history of writing, telling, and sharing stories about themselves and other individuals. Reading stories allows individuals to immerse themselves into the story world as if they could feel and live other people's lives (Johnson, Huffman, & Jasper, 2014). Narrative is a sibling concept of story. Narratives have been defined in a variety of ways with their events and characters varied. As Bruner (2004) put, narratives can be thought of as a basic mode of communication that best suits the way humans think and remember. Similarly, Abbott (2002) defined them as a set of description on events and characters, which entertain or even enlighten and its audiences. Moreover, Fludernik (1996) referred narratives as portrayal of the inner world of a character in the story by revealing characters' unique views, perspectives, emotions, motivations, and goals.

With the advent of media technologies, a new form of narratives, termed as networked narratives, has emerged in recent years. Networked narratives are digital stories embedded with technology affordances as represented by the number of likes, the number of shares, and the number of comments (Page, Harper, & Frobenius, 2013). The term networked refers to the connection between people who created the networked narrative and those who read

the networked narratives (Page et al., 2013). Examples of successful networked narratives include various Facebook posts on product, brand, and celebrities' Facebook pages. Many companies and celebrities have their own official Facebook pages and they generate carefully written posts containing photos and captions almost everyday. Followers of these Facebook pages could interact with the company through liking, commenting and sharing the posts to enhance the organization public relationship (Cho, Schweickart, & Haase, 2014; Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012).

Extant literature on narratives have mostly focused on how narratives serve to persuade individuals for health-related purposes, or to entertain them, mainly in the context of interpersonal communication or mass media communication (e.g., Appel & Malečkar, 2012; Cho, Shen, & Wilson, 2012; Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, & Jones, 2010), but in those studies, the role of narratives was unclear in the context of social media. Previous content analysis studies focused on analyzing the content of social media profiles (Hum et al., 2011; Shelton & Skalski, 2014). For example, Hum et al. (2011) examined the profile pictures on Facebook and found them to be inactive, posed, appropriate, and only including the subject. They also found the content and the amount of Facebook profile photographs did not significantly vary by gender. Shelton and Skalski (2014) examined the Facebook profiles and controversial content among college students' Facebook pages. Different from previous studies, the current study examines the content of the posts.

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In this study, a content analysis was conducted using Humans of New York (HONY)'s Facebook page. HONY started off as a photo blog. Brandon Stanton is the founder of HONY, who posted photos of everyday people in the New York City. These photos are usually paired with textual descriptions (quotes, background of the character) so each post on HONY's Facebook page exemplifies how networked narratives embodies and how it resonates with its audience. HONY has now garnered more than 13 million followers on its Facebook page (Bosman, 2013).

## 1. Literature review

Engagement has often been conceptualized as a psychological state (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Hatzithomas, Boutsouki, Pigadas, & Zotos, 2016; Higgins, 2006; Hollebeek, 2011; Calder & Malthouse, 2008; Jacques, Preece, & Carey, 1995; Oliveira, Huertas & Lin, 2016). According to Higgins (2006), being engaged is to be involved, occupied, and interested in something. Calder and Malthouse (2008) posited engagement is a state of involvement and connectedness between individuals and its target. Engagement with narrative refers to the extent to which individuals feel engaged, transported to, or immersed in narratives of a constructed story or plot (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Engagement with narrative consists of four dimensions: narrative understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement, and narrative presence (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). User engagement is defined as an intrinsically motivated attraction to a media system (Jacques et al., 1995). User engagement with social media refers to the degree to which people are willing to contribute to online conversations with their friends on social media (Oliveira et al., 2016).

Hollebeek (2011) defined engagement under the context of marketing. Four steps constitute the engagement process: behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and social engagement. Among these four steps, behavioral engagement refers to individuals requesting additional information about products and services to manufacturers, writing product reviews, and asking product related questions. Behavioral engagement is closely related to the conceptualization of social media engagement in this current study. Followers who like the content of HONY's Facebook page may hit the like button on the Facebook post to express liking toward the content. They may also share the Facebook post with their friends and make comments under these posts.

This study focuses on people's engagement with the networked narratives as represented by the number of likes, the number of shares, and character's likability in each post. In particular, various features embedded in Facebook posts allow people to directly get involved with the story-based content in each post. Notably, some interactive features, including like, share, and comments, enable a two-way and real-time communication between source and viewers of the post. Specifically, the "like" feature helps users to express various emotions, ranging from happiness to compassion, grief, and anger (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). Meanwhile, each click on the like button may trigger more engagement between the user and the web content.

For example, when an individual sees his/her friend likes a post on Facebook, he or she may do the same thing (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) posited enjoyment and story-consistent attitudes were the two major outcomes of narrative engagement. In the current study, liking and sharing Facebook post, and liking the characters in the Facebook post are the major outcomes of social media engagement.

Bakan (1966) discovered agency and communion were two major topics in life stories. Agency refers to characters' intentional movements toward self-mastery, self-control, achievement, and

power, while communion refers to love, intimacy, care, and sense of community (Bakan, 1966). Networked narratives on HONY covers a wide range of topics, including various life stories, such as romantic relationship, families and friends, career, education, religion, dream, and health. Although HONY presents a multitude of topics, it has not been identified what kind of topics in the networked narratives are covered the most frequently. Moreover, association between topics and users' engagement that come in various forms, such as likes, shares, and comments, has been rarely examined although there exists a substantial variation in popularity among the posts. Thus, the following research questions are raised:

**RQ1:** What are the popular topics on the networked narratives on HONY's Facebook page?

**RQ2:** What is the relationship between the popular topics on the networked narratives on and social media engagement?

The tone of the narrative may range from extreme positive (happiness, joy, optimism) to extreme negative (despair, fear, pessimism) (McAdams, 1997). Previous study found sharing emotions on Facebook was associated with social network size and density (Lin & Qiu, 2012). Another study examined the relationship between the Big-Five traits (extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, neuroticism) and the emotional tone. Results showed neuroticism was positively associated with the tone of the narrative (McAdams et al., 2004). Previous studies showed the association among tone of the post, personality trait, and network size. However, tone of the networked narratives and its association with users' engagement with the content has been under examined. Thus, the following research question is posed:

**RQ3:** What is the relationship between tone of the post and social media engagement?

Story length has often been examined in terms of its impact on memory including information recall and recognition (Wilson, 1974; Lang et al., 2005). Lang et al. (2005) examined the joint effects of story length and production pacing on people's channel changing behavior. Results showed people recognized information better when they were exposed to a short and fast paced story than with the short but slow paced one. Wilson (1974) found long stories resulted in greater loss of information than medium or short stories regardless of the type of media platform (i.e., television, radio, newspapers). However, the relationship between length of the post and social media engagement is under examined. Thus, the following research question is raised:

**RQ4:** What is the relationship between the length of the post and social media engagement?

## 2. Method

A content analysis was conducted to answer the research questions. Three hundred and ninety ( $N = 390$ ) posts from January 1, 2015 to May 13, 2015 were collected from HONY's Facebook page. The unit of analysis is each individual Facebook post. Posts were selected based on several criteria: First, only posts written by the owner of HONY, Brandon Stanton, were included. That is, posts uploaded by the fans or visitors were not included in the sampling frame. Second, updates on Stanton's personal life were not included as they are few in number and the content were different from the vast majority of other posts. Third, group photos in which the dominant character(s) cannot be readily recognized or those showing partial body without showing a face (i.e., hands) were not

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