Best Practices and Evaluation Methods for Narrative Information Visualizations: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: Evaluating narrative visualizations presents unique challenges due to their integration of data and storytelling elements, making traditional assessment methods insufficient. This paper presents a systematic mapping study (SMS) aimed at identifying best practices for designing visualizations and the current evaluation methods used to assess them. It synthesizes 116 studies from 1984 to 2024, examining both traditional information visualizations and narrative visualizations. The study reveals that the application of best practices is highly context-dependent, with trade-offs between simplicity and comprehensiveness. Furthermore, it highlights the lack of standardized evaluation frameworks for narrative visualizations, as existing methods often fail to capture narrative elements. The paper contributes by offering a synthesis of design guidelines, laying the groundwork for future research focused on improving the evaluation of narrative visualizations.

1 INTRODUCTION

Narrative visualizations combine information visualization with storytelling techniques to present complex information in an engaging and accessible manner (Segel & Heer, 2010). They integrate charts, images and annotations into a cohesive narrative structure to communicate data and insights. The growing prevalence of narrative visualizations across domains such as journalism (Hao et al., 2024), and healthcare (Meuschke et al., 2022) –including the COVID-19 pandemic– demonstrates their effectiveness in enhancing comprehension.

Evaluating narrative visualizations presents significant challenges due to their human-centered nature (Carpendale, 2008; Lam et al., 2012; Plaisant, 2004). Traditional evaluation methods, which focus on quantitative metrics like task completion time or accuracy, are insufficient for assessing qualitative aspects such as user engagement, emotional response, and narrative clarity. The subjective experiences of users, influenced by individual perception and interpretation, make it difficult to establish standardized criteria for what constitutes an effective visualization (Wu et al., 2018). As a result, current evaluation practices are often informal and ad hoc, lacking systematic guidelines tailored to narrative visualizations (Errey et al., 2024).

In this paper, we present a systematic mapping study (SMS) of 116 information visualization and data storytelling studies published between 1984 and 2024. Our goal is to collect and summarize best practices for designing visualizations, and current evaluation criteria and methods to assess them.

The findings reveal that applying best practices is context-dependent, with trade-offs between recommendations, such as balancing simplification of complex ideas with providing detailed context. We also found a lack of standardized evaluation methods for narrative visualizations, as current approaches often do not capture narrative elements.

The primary contribution of this work is a synthesis of existing best practices and evaluation methods, identifying gaps in current approaches and offering a foundation for developing tailored frameworks for narrative visualizations that address their unique challenges while incorporating general visualization principles.

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This review is organized as follows. Section 2 summarizes the background and related works. Section 3 describes the methodology for conducting the SMS. Section 4 reports the results and findings. Section 5 discusses our research questions and presents the threats to validity for our study. Finally, Section 6 concludes and outlines future work.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Evaluation in Information Visualization

Evaluation has long been acknowledged as one of the most complex aspects of visualization research (Carpendale, 2008). The core difficulty lies in the exploratory nature of visualizations, which are designed for supporting deeper cognitive processes like insight generation and communication. Traditional metrics—such as task completion time or error rate—do not capture these higher-order objectives (Plaisant, 2004).

Isenberg et al. (Isenberg et al., 2013) reviewed 581 papers and provided a quantitative and objective report of the types of evaluation practices encountered in the visualization community. They found an increasing trend in the evaluation of user experience and user performance. Although it has improved over the years, the general level of rigor when reporting evaluations is still low.

Lam et al. (Lam et al., 2012) identified the need to broaden the scope of evaluation to include not just performance measures but also the underlying cognitive processes that visualizations are meant to support. Evaluation, in this sense, extends beyond efficiency—it requires a deep understanding of how users reason with data, communicate insights, and collaborate in decision-making processes. This requires researchers to select metrics that encompass interaction quality and the cognitive or communicative outcomes.

Despite these advancements, many evaluations still rely on anecdotal evidence or "validation by example," where visualizations are merely presented without systematic testing (Elmqvist & Yi, 2015). This ad-hoc approach limits the replicability and the generalizability of findings across different contexts. In response, Elmqvist and Yi (Elmqvist & Yi, 2015) introduced a pattern-based evaluation framework, aiming to formalize informal practices and make them more systematic.

In the context of narrative visualization, these challenges become even more pronounced. Conventional evaluation methods are insufficient for assessing the storytelling effectiveness and user engagement inherent in narrative visualizations (Saket et al., 2016). Qualitative end-user evaluation methods, such as "walk-throughs," "think-aloud" protocols, and interviews, offer insights into user comprehension and experience(Andrews, 2006; Figueiras, 2014). However, these methods are resource-intensive, limiting their scalability (Carpendale, 2008).

Visualization practitioners often rely on heuristic evaluation as a common inspection technique. Existing heuristic sets, such as those developed by Zuk et al.(Zuk et al., 2006) and Forsell & Johansson(Forsell & Johansson, 2010), are grounded in usability principles but lack the specificity required to assess narrative elements effectively. Recent work by Errey et al. (Errey et al., 2024) addresses this gap by examining the methods practitioners employ when evaluating narrative visualizations. Their findings reveal that many practitioners rely on peer feedback and experience rather than structured approaches. They introduced a practice-led heuristic framework aimed at providing a more systematic approach to narrative visualization evaluation. Their work emphasizes the need for more structured approaches to narrative visualization evaluation, as the lack of stablished guidelines means that the process is rarely systematic.

Building on these insights, this SMS aims to synthesize and map the strengths and limitations of existing evaluation methods. By doing so, we aim to guide future developments in evaluation frameworks, ensuring they capture general visualization principles as well as narratives aspects.

3 METHODOLOGY

In this section, we describe the steps of the SMS process, following the guidelines by Kitchenham and Charters (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007) and Petersen (Petersen et al., 2015). to ensure rigor and reproducibility. Additionally, we followed guidelines for conducting automated searches (Singh et al., 2018) and effective data extraction (Garousi & Felderer, 2017). All data analyzed for this SMS are available at Supplementary materials[1].

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3.1 Research Questions

As stated in previous sections, the goal of this SMS is to identify, analyze and summarize best practices for the design of information and narrative visualizations and existing evaluation methods. To this end, we formulate the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the visualization design best practices reported in the literature and how are they implemented?

RQ2: What are the current strategies to evaluate visualizations?

3.2 Search Strategy

The search and selection process of the primary studies was performed in three steps to control the number and relevance of the results: automated search, study selection, and snowballing search.

Database Search: We conducted a series of database searches on three indexing systems related to the Software Engineering field: ACM Digital Library, IEEE Xplore, and Scopus. The search string was divided into two parts: one containing a keyword that describes our main subject and its synonyms, and another one focusing on the different topics of the research questions. The search was limited to title, abstract and keywords. Table 1 presents each term together with its keywords.

Table 1: Main terms and synonyms used in the search string.

Main Term	Keywords
Data storytelling	"data storytelling" OR "data-driven storytelling" OR "data story" OR"data-driven story" OR "data visualization" OR "information visualization"
Best practice	"best practice" OR practice OR guideline OR principle
Evaluation	evaluation OR assessment

Snowballing Search: We complemented the database search with forward and backward snowballing. The goal of this step was to expand the set of relevant papers by focusing on papers citing or being cited by previously included studies (Wohlin, 2014).

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

We defined the following inclusion (I) and exclusion (E) criteria based on the guidelines proposed by (B.A Kitchenham, 2007) to select appropriate studies and filter out unrelated ones. Our focus was on primary academic research studies, published in any year up until 2024, that presented significant contributions or advancements in the fields of data storytelling, information visualization and evaluation.

To narrow the scope of the study, we excluded articles about data comics. While they have gained recognition for their contributions to storytelling, authoring them requires a higher degree of design expertise(Wang et al., 2019, 2022). Moreover, due to their leisure and entertaining nature, data comics are less commonly employed for conveying sensitive or serious topics(Chen et al., 2022; Zhao & Elmqvist, 2023). Thus, we preferred to maintain a focus on more formal and structured approaches.

Inclusion Criteria:

- I1: The title, abstract and keywords explicitly state that the paper is related to data storytelling and information visualization.
- I2: The study is a full paper with empirical evidence.
- I3: The paper is peer-reviewed (journal article, conference paper)
- I4: The full text of the paper is available.
- I5: The paper was published in any year up to 2024.

Exclusion Criteria:

- E1: The paper is not written in English.
- E2: The paper's full text is not accessible.
- E3: The paper is a gray publication without peer review.
- E4: The paper is explicitly a short paper.
- E5: The paper is focused on data comics.

3.4 Study Selection

We identified a total of 1,181 articles published between 1984 and 2024 by following the search strategy outlined in Section 3.3. The search was conducted using titles, abstracts, and indexed keywords (see Table 2 for details).

Table 2 Automated search details.

Database	Search results
ACM Digital Library	163
IEEE Xplore	243
Scopus	775
Total	**1181**

The study selection process consisted of five phases (Figure 1). In Phase 1, we retrieved studies from electronic databases and consolidated the results into a single spreadsheet after removing duplicates. In Phase 2, we screened the titles based on I/E criteria, selecting relevant articles for further consideration. Phase 3 involved reviewing abstracts and excluding papers that lacked sufficient relevance or detail. In Phase 4, we conducted a thorough full-text review to assess each paper's contribution. Finally, in Phase 5, the selected studies underwent a quality assessment before inclusion. We also supplemented our selection with additional studies identified through snowball sampling. Each study was assigned an identity code, listed in Table 8 (Appendix). The asterisk (*) indicates the studies most relevant to this review.

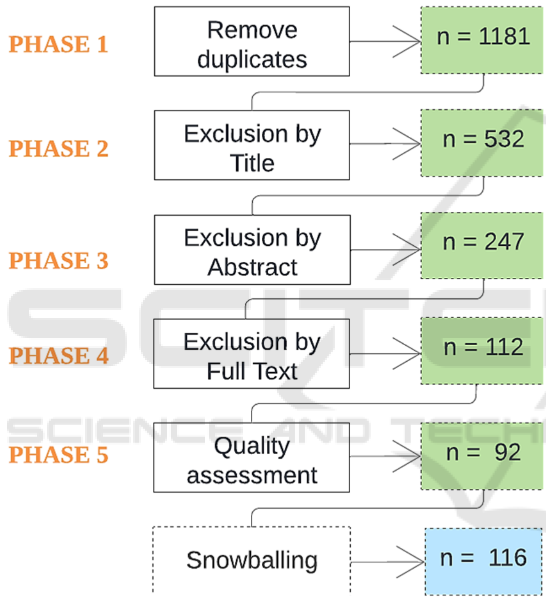

Figure 1: Study selection process.

3.5 Quality Assessment

In addition to the inclusion/exclusion criteria, it is critical to assess the quality of the primary studies(Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). The quality assessment (QA) of the selected studies was achieved by a scoring technique to evaluate their credibility, completeness, and relevance. All papers were assessed against a set of eleven quality criteria. The assessment instrument is presented in Table 3. Questions Q1, Q2, Q4-Q11 were adopted from the literature (Dermeval et al., 2016b; Kitchenham & Charters, 2007), while question Q3 is a proposal of the authors.

Each quality assessment question is judged against three possible answers: “Yes” (score = 1), “Partially” (score = 0.5) or “No” (score = 0). The quality score for a particular study is computed by taking the sum of the scores of the answers.

Table 3: Quality assessment checklist.

ID	Question
Q1	Is there a clear statement of the goals of the research?
Q2	Is there sufficient discussion of related work?
Q3	Are the visualizations under study clearly described?
Q4	Is the purpose of the analysis clear?
Q5	Is the investigation process adequately documented?
Q6	Are the statistical methods described?
Q7	Are the study participants or observational units adequately described?
Q8	Are all study questions answered?
Q9	Is there a discussion about the results of the study?
Q10	Are the limitations of this study explicitly discussed?
Q11	Are the lessons learned interesting and relevant for practitioners?

3.6 Data Extraction

We used the template shown in Table 5 to extract data from the selected primary studies. Collected data includes general information (e.g., title, authors, year of publication, and source) and information related to the research questions. Before the actual data extraction, we performed an extraction pilot with a random set of ten papers to calibrate the instrument, assess the extraction strategies, and avoid possible misunderstandings.

For each paper, we considered abstract, introduction, methodology, results, and conclusion. In some cases, a comprehensive reading of the paper was necessary. Any conflicts were discussed and resolved internally by the authors to reduce bias and ease reproducibility. To quantify agreement between researchers, we employed Cohen’s Kappa statistic(Pérez et al., 2020), achieving a value of 0.87 which reflects substantial agreement.

Table 4 Quality assessment checklist.

Focus	Item	Description
General Information	Identifier	Reference number given to the article
	Bibliography	Author, year, title
	Source	Journal/Conference
	Aim	Goal of the study
	Type of study	Empirical strategy
RQ1	Best practice	Recommended practice or guideline
	Application	Ways to implement the guidelines and best practices
RQ2	Evaluation method	Strategy to evaluate data visualizations
	Type of chart	The visualization technique covered by the evaluation method
	Metrics	Values measured by the evaluation method
	Tools	Software applications, models and algorithms used to support evaluation

To support this task, we used Atlas.ti (*ATLAS.Ti | The #1 Software for Qualitative Data Analysis - ATLAS.Ti*, n.d.). For RQ1, we used an open and axial coding strategy based on grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2012). First, we read each guideline and assigned it a best practice (BP) id, such that a new BP was created for guidelines that did not resemble previous ones. Then, we used axial coding to compare the best practices to each other and identify categories or themes, by relying on general knowledge and categorizations proposed by other authors.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Quality Assessment Results

The quality assessment helped us increase the reliability and achieve a coherent synthesis of results (Dermeval et al., 2016a). We present the results of the assessment in Supplementary Materials according to the questions described in Table 4. The results indicate that the overall quality of the studies is high since the quality mean was 90%.

4.2 Overview of Selected Primary Studies

The selected primary studies were published between 1984 and 2024. Figure 2 presents the number of studies by year of publication. Overall, we found at least one study each year since 2005. An increasing number of publications is observed starting in 2010, with the majority of them conducted between 2013 and 2024. The highest number of studies was in 2018. This demonstrates a trend in the topic of information visualization and data storytelling.

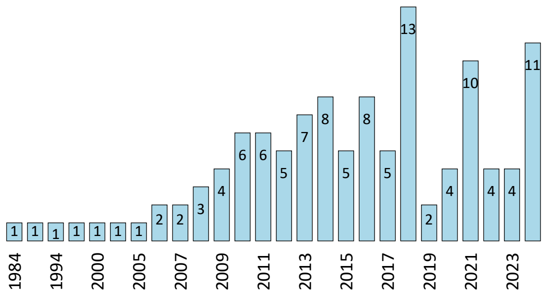

Figure 2: Distribution of selected primary studies over the years 1984 – 2024.

Regarding the use of narrative visualizations, we encountered a diverse range of application domains. While the specific use cases varied, they spanned fields such as healthcare(Amri et al., 2015), government (Brolcháin et al., 2017; Yovanovic et al., 2021) and journalism (Hao et al., 2024). Although each domain has its unique challenges and opportunities, it underscores the benefits and versatility of narrative visualization as a tool to convey complex information. A detailed exploration of each application domain is beyond the scope of this paper, though this demonstrates the value of data storytelling across a range of disciplines.

4.3 RQ1: What Are the Visualization Design Best Practices Reported in the Literature and How Are They Implemented?

We identified 21 best practices, summarized in Table 5. These practices encompass a range of visualization principles, with some specifically tailored to narrative visualizations and others applicable to broader information visualization contexts. For instance, "Simplify complex ideas" (BP1) and "Declutter visualizations" (BP9) are relevant to general visualization design. In contrast, practices like "Communicate a narrative clearly" (BP16) and "Incorporate tangible or situated feelings to evoke experiences" (BP15) are more aligned with storytelling techniques.

Table 5: Best practices found in the literature.

ID	Best Practice	Reference
BP1	Simplify complex ideas	S03, S08, S16, S91, S100, S102, S108, S113
BP2	Provide contextual information	S23, S41, S42, S52, S85, S97
BP3	Map visual signs to implicit meanings	S03, S23, S96, S112
BP4	Select visualization techniques appropriate for the data and tasks	S01, S12, S15, S20, S21, S24, S35, S38, S40, S42, S45, S46, S51, S65, S67, S69, S74, S75, S77, S84, S87, S91, S93, S94, S96, S98, S105, S115
BP5	Use a common baseline to facilitate comparisons	S37, S50, S115
BP6	Map information and data dimensions to the most salient features	S03, S12, S22, S23, S30, S32, S33, S40, S42, S51, S54, S64, S74, S79, S84, S90, S99, S110
BP7	Provide redundancy to improve comprehension and memorability	S16, S57, S69
BP8	Focus on important data points	S02, S03, S30, S47, S76, S78, S81, S90, S95, S101, S102, S113, S114
BP9	Declutter visualizations	S10, S13, S19, S39, S37, S42, S55, S81, S96
BP10	Maximize the data-ink ratio	S13, S17, S34, S82, S83, S39, S67, S72
BP11	Use text, labels, and annotations	S02, S19, S23, S25, S49, S50, S57, S60, S92, S23, S100, S109, S113, S115
BP12	Avoid obscuring information	S03, S29, S34, S43, S50, S56, S83, S88
BP13	Provide credits for data provenance and design transparency	S03, S08, S23, S80, S91, S96
BP14	Avoid omitting important information	S03, S24
BP15	Incorporate tangible or situated feelings to evoke experiences	S23, S34, S43, S56, S57, S81, S102, S107, S116
BP16	Communicate a narrative in a clear way	S02, S03, S08, S23, S62, S100, S102, S107, S116
BP17	Layout the elements of the charts and the whole story logically	S25, S26, S62, S75, S109
BP18	Maintain consistency throughout the story	S02, S47, S99
BP19	Include interaction techniques to allow exploration	S02, S03, S04, S08, S29, S62, S68, S98, S100, S103, S112
BP20	Make information accessible to all users	S23, S25, S78, S95, S111
BP21	Use color strategically	S12, S22, S23, S30, S64, S74, S79, S90, S98, S99, S102, S109

In addition to best practices, we found 122 unique implementations, which provide concrete examples of how these practices are applied. For instance, the practice of simplifying complex ideas (BP1) includes implementations like visualizing only essential variables, grouping data where possible, and introducing complex data gradually. Similarly, providing contextual information (BP2) can be implemented through instructions or explanations to aid interpretation or adapting designs based on users' skill levels.

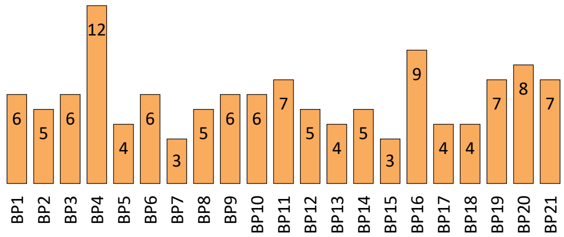

Figure 3: Number of implementations found per best practice.

The number of implementations varies across practices. For example, practices like selecting appropriate visualization techniques (BP4) have a greater number of implementations. In contrast, practices such as providing redundancy (BP7) or incorporating tangible emotions (BP15) have fewer implementations, indicating their more specialized use, as shown in Figure 3. Table 6 shows an excerpt of implementations for best practices. The "Reference" column specifies the primary study where it was found. For the complete set of guidelines and implementations, see Supplementary Materials.

Table 6: An example of best practices implementations.

ID	Best Practice	Implementation	Ref.
BP1	Simplify complex ideas	Visualize only essential variables to simplify the representation.	S03
		Provide text and visual summaries.	S03
		Group or aggregate data where possible.	S03
		Introduce complex data gradually	S109
		Provide clear explanations of how different components relate to each other	S112
		Allow users to combine datasets that are similar.	S08

Table 6: An example of best practices implementations (cont.).

ID	Best Practice	Implementation	Ref.
BP2	Provide contextual information	Include instructions or explanations for interpreting complex visual data.	S23, S03
		Adapt designs to users' skill levels.	S41, S44
		Consider individual differences like perceptual speed and working memory.	S41, S44
		Provide additional support (e.g., simplified legends) for users who need it.	S44
		Emphasize textual elements for users with lower verbal working memory.	S44
BP3	Map visual signs to implicit meanings	Apply visual metaphors like "up = more" or "left = past" for meaning.	S03
		Match categories with colors or typography.	S03
		Match the emotional tone of the visualization with the data content	S107, S109
		Use familiar visual metaphors or objects to make the content more recognizable and easier to remember	S109

4.4 RQ2: What Are the Current Strategies to Evaluate the Quality of Narrative Visualizations?

The table below provides an overview of the current evaluation methods identified in the literature. The Evaluation Objective column specifies the primary aim of each method, i.e., the criteria it assesses. For instance, Zhu et al. [S28] focus on cognitive load, while Padda et al. [S31] emphasize design comprehension. These methods highlight the importance of considering user experience from the design stage.

The Approach column outlines whether the method is user-centric or visualization-centric. User-centric methods focus on assessing how users engage with and comprehend visualizations. For example, the visualization literacy assessments by Boy et al. [S18] and Lee et al. [S59] measure users' ability to interpret visualizations, using questionnaires to test their memory and understanding of visual elements. Similarly, the recallability models by Wang et al. [S101] assess how well users remember specific details of visualizations, providing insights into how visualizations can be improved for clarity and memorability.

Table 7: Current evaluation methods found in the literature.

Ref.	Year	Objective	Approach	Tool
S28	2007	Complexity Cognitive load	Vis-centric	Theoretical model
S31	2008	Comprehension	Vis-centric	Theoretical model
S86	2009	Data richness, useful information	Vis-centric	Theoretical model
S14	2011	Contextual fit, purpose	Vis-centric	Theoretical model
S18	2014	Visualization literacy	User-centric	Questionnaire
S36	2017	Usability, decision support	Vis-centric	Heuristic checklist
S59	2017	Visualization literacy	User-centric	Questionnaire
S61	2017	Engagement	User-centric	Questionnaire
S67	2018	Consistency	Vis-centric	Algorithm
S70	2018	Usability, decision support	Vis-centric	Heuristic checklist
S58	2018	Usability	Vis-centric	Questionnaire
S73	2019	Value, usefulness	Vis-centric	Heuristic checklist
S23	2021	Usability, expressiveness	Vis-centric	Heuristic checklist
S98	2022	Usability, aesthetic appeal	Vis-centric	Theoretical model
S101	2022	Memorability	User-centric	Questionnaire
S104	2023	Usability, Engagement	User-centric	Questionnaire
S109	2024	Storytelling, Engagement	Vis-centric	Heuristic checklist

Visualization-centric methods, on the other hand, focus more on the characteristics of the visualization itself, without direct user involvement. For instance, Lan et al. [S23] extend traditional heuristics by categorizing them into usability and expressiveness, providing a framework to assess visual and functional aspects of a visualization. The consistency score introduced by Wang et al. [S67] considers how well visualization techniques align with the underlying data for comparative charts and trend analyses.

Most methods, such as the heuristic evaluations by Forsell and Johanesson [S36], Dowding and Merril [S70], and Wall et al. [S73], are designed for general information visualizations, focusing on usability and decision-making support. The heuristic framework by Errey et al. [S109] is explicitly tailored for narrative visualizations, assessing storytelling elements, composition, and user engagement.

Additionally, certain methods are tailored for specific contexts. For example, Liu et al. [S98] provides a framework for evaluating COVID-19 pandemic data visualizations, focusing on chart types, color usage, and interaction modes to improve the readability and aesthetic appeal of pandemic-related information. This highlights the practical applications of these methods in specific domains.

The Tool column highlights whether a method comes with practical tools or frameworks. Some methods, like heuristic checklists [S36, S70, S109], offer structured guidelines that help designers evaluate visualizations based on established usability principles. Others, such as the UXIV questionnaire [S104], provide comprehensive questionnaires that capture qualitative and quantitative feedback on user experience. Methods like the consistency score [S67] offer algorithmic approaches, while theoretical models like Bai's purposeful visualizations [S14] guide designers conceptually but may not provide concrete tools for direct application.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 RQ1: What Are the Visualization Design Best Practices Reported in the Literature and How Are They Implemented?

The goal of this question was to identify and summarize best practices for designing effective visualizations, focusing on how they are implemented. Our findings show that best practices for narrative visualizations are often integrated into broader visualization design principles, though some are specifically tailored for storytelling purposes.

The most frequently referenced practice was BP4 "Select visualization techniques appropriate for the data characteristics and user tasks," which had the highest number of implementations (12). This highlights the importance of aligning design choices with the nature of the data and the demands of the task (Teets et al., 2010). As discussed in several primary studies, different charts (or design choices within a single chart) perform better than others depending on the task, and designers must consider how they want the display to support a specific task, at potential cost for others (Albers et al., 2014). For instance, spotting outliers in a scatterplot would be difficult at low marker opacity but estimating data density could benefit from it (Micallef et al., 2017).

Other frequently implemented practices include BP1 "Simplify complex ideas" and BP9 "Declutter visualizations." Both focus on reducing cognitive load and improving interpretability by presenting essential information clearly. Storytelling-focused practices, such as BP16 "Communicate a narrative clearly" and BP15 "Incorporate tangible or situated feelings to evoke experiences," emphasize creating an emotional connection with the viewer and crafting a coherent narrative. These practices are important for narrative visualizations aimed at engaging users and conveying more than just data. Adding annotations or metaphors can enhance the impact and memorability of a visualization.

Guidelines can also present contrasting recommendations. For instance, BP11 "Provide redundancy to improve comprehension" suggests repeating information or key messages, which can improve clarity but potentially clutter the visualization. This contrasts with BP1 and BP9, which advocate for removing unnecessary elements. These examples highlight the trade-offs in visualization design between clarity and comprehensiveness and illustrate the inherent complexities and context-dependencies in establishing guidelines for narrative visualizations. This indicates that the effectiveness of a particular best practice may vary depending on the specific objectives, audience, and nature of the data in each visualization project.

5.2 RQ2: What Are the Current Strategies to Evaluate the Quality of Narrative Visualizations?

The findings show that evaluation strategies vary significantly in their approach, focus, and applicability. One key observation is the lack of a standardized evaluation approach for narrative visualizations. While there are well-established methods for general information visualizations, as seen with heuristic evaluations, narrative visualizations introduce additional layers of complexity due to their focus on storytelling, engagement, and emotional resonance. This complexity suggests that existing evaluation methods may need to be adapted or expanded to fully capture the unique qualities of narrative visualizations. For example, while Lan et al. [S23] extend traditional heuristics by incorporating expressiveness, this remains primarily focused on usability rather than the storytelling elements. Errey et al. [S109] developed a heuristic framework explicitly aimed for narrative visualizations, standing out as the only approach dedicated to this type of evaluation.

The results also highlight that many evaluation methods are domain specific. Liu et al. [S98], for instance, focuses specifically on visualizations related to the COVID-19 pandemic, where the clarity, usability, and aesthetic appeal of the data have immediate and practical implications. This domain-specific focus demonstrates that evaluation methods cannot be one-size-fits-all and should be tailored to the context in which the visualizations are applied. The challenge here is that narrative visualizations span a wide range of fields—from journalism and education to public health—requiring flexible evaluation strategies that can adapt to different storytelling needs. This raises questions about how to balance generalizable evaluation criteria with the specificity required for different narrative visualization contexts.

There is also a clear need for practical tools to support the application of evaluation frameworks. While theoretical models provide valuable conceptual insights, their practical applicability can be limited. For instance, Bai's "purposeful visualizations" [S14] offers a comprehensive framework for ensuring that visualizations align with their intended purpose, but without concrete tools for implementation. Methods like heuristic checklists [S36, S70, S109] or algorithmic approaches such as the consistency score [S67] provide structured, actionable tools that can guide designers in the evaluation process.

Finally, it is worth discussing the interdisciplinary nature of narrative visualization evaluation. While many of the methods identified are rooted in information visualization research, narrative visualizations often draw on concepts from storytelling, cognitive science, and media studies. This interdisciplinary approach requires evaluators to consider not only how the data is presented but also how it is experienced by the viewer. For example, memorability, as discussed by Wang et al. [S101], extends beyond simple recall to how the visualization resonates with the viewer and contributes to decision-making or behavioral change. This intersection of cognitive and emotional factors makes the evaluation of narrative visualizations particularly challenging, requiring more integrated frameworks that draw from multiple fields of research.

5.3 Threats to Validity

This section discusses the limitations that may impact this study regarding construct, internal, external, and conclusion validity.

Construct Validity: Construct validity refers to how well we capture what we intend to measure. Primary studies could have been missed during the search. To mitigate this, we searched across multiple libraries covering most high-quality publications in SE and used forward and backward snowballing. Additionally, we re-executed our search query to capture newly published papers during the research.

Internal Validity: Internal validity concerns the risk of incorrect conclusions about causal relationships. Researcher bias is a potential threat. To address this, we conducted an iterative selection process. During data extraction, we performed a pilot phase to validate the extraction form, with one researcher extracting data and another reviewing it. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and we measured agreement using Cohen's Kappa statistic.

External Validity: External validity refers to the generalizability of findings. Selection and publication bias may affect the scope of included studies. To ensure the widest coverage possible, we included papers published from 1984 to 2024.

Conclusion Validity: Conclusion validity reflects the reproducibility of the study. This was mitigated by following the protocol outlined by (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007), commonly used in SE research, to guide research questions, search strategy, inclusion/exclusion criteria, quality assessment, data extraction, and study selection.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This paper presented SMS of 116 studies on information visualization and data storytelling. Our goal was to identify and synthesize the best practices for visualization design, along with the methods to evaluate them.

The results revealed a broad spectrum of best practices, many of which are applicable to general information visualizations. However, specific practices related to storytelling, such as emotional engagement and narrative clarity, were less frequently addressed. Similarly, while various evaluation methods exist for general visualizations, few focus on the unique aspects of narrative visualizations, highlighting a gap in the current research. This gap could be addressed by developing more targeted evaluation frameworks that incorporate both general visualization principles and storytelling elements.

This review contributes to the field by offering a structured synthesis of best practices and evaluation methods. Future work will focus on leveraging the identified best practices to develop an evaluation model tailored to narrative visualizations.

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APPENDIX

Table 8: List of selected primary studies.

Ref.	Paper Title
S01	Graphical Encoding for Information Visualization: An Empirical Study
S02 *	Narrative Visualization: Telling Stories with Data
S03 *	Visualization Rhetoric: Framing Effects in Narrative Visualization
S04	Suggested Interactivity: Seeking Perceived Affordances for Information Visualization
S05	Graph and chart aesthetics for experts and laymen in design: The role of familiarity and perceived ease of use
S06	A Study on Designing Effective Introductory Materials for Information Visualization
S07	The Attraction Effect in Information Visualization
S08	Extending Open Data Platforms with Storytelling Features
S09	Evaluating Visualizations Based on the Performed Task
S10	Improving 2D scatterplots effectiveness through sampling, displacement, and user perception
S11	Investigating the Comprehension Support for Effective Visualization Tools – A Case Study
S12 *	Perceptual Guidelines for Creating Rectangular Treemaps
S13 *	Whisper, Don't Scream: Grids and Transparency
S14	Purposeful Visualization
S15	A Study on Dual-Scale Data Charts
S16 *	An Empirical Study on Using Visual Embellishments in Visualization
S17	Selecting the Aspect Ratio of a Scatter Plot Based on Its Delaunay Triangulation
S18	A Principled Way of Assessing Visualization Literacy
S19	Clutter-Aware Label Layout
S20	Towards Perceptual Optimization of the Visual Design of Scatterplots
S21	Evaluating Cartogram Effectiveness
S22	Rainbows Revisited: Modeling Effective Colormap Design for Graphical Inference
S23 *	Smile or Scowl? Looking at Infographic Design Through the Affective Lens
S24	Visual Reasoning Strategies for Effect Size Judgments and Decisions
S25	Improving the Visualization of Hierarchies with Treemaps: Design Issues and Experimentation
S26	Evaluating Visual Table Data Understanding
S27	Effects of 2D Geometric Transformations on Visual Memory
S28	Complexity Analysis for Information Visualization Design and Evaluation
S29 *	The Effect of Aesthetic on the Usability of Data Visualization
S30	Perceptual Dependencies in Information Visualization Assessed by Complex Visual Search

Table 8: List of selected primary studies (cont.).

Ref.	Paper Title
S31	Comprehension of Visualization Systems - Towards Quantitative Assessment
S32	Evaluation of Symbol Contrast in Scatterplots
S33	Evaluating the Effectiveness and Efficiency of Visual Variables for Geographic Information Visualization
S34 *	Useful Junk? The Effects of Visual Embellishment on Comprehension and Memorability of Charts
S35	Using Cognitive Fit Theory to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Information Visualizations: An Example Using Quality Assurance Data
S36	An Heuristic Set for Evaluation in Information Visualization
S37 *	Graphical Perception of Multiple Time Series
S38	Eye tracking for visualization evaluation: Reading values on linear versus radial graphs
S39	The Effect of Colour and Transparency on the Perception of Overlaid Grids
S40	Comparing Averages in Time Series Data
S41	Towards Adaptive Information Visualization: On the Influence of User Characteristics
S42	How Capacity Limits of Attention Influence Information Visualization Effectiveness
S43	Evaluating the Effect of Style in Information Visualization
S44	Individual User Characteristics and Information Visualization: Connecting the Dots through Eye Tracking
S45	Evaluation of Alternative Glyph Designs for Time Series Data in a Small Multiple Setting
S46	Data Visualisation, User Experience and Context: A Case Study from Fantasy Sport
S47 *	A Deeper Understanding of Sequence in Narrative Visualization
S48 *	What Makes a Visualization Memorable?
S49	Sample-Oriented Task-Driven Visualizations: Allowing Users to Make Better, More Confident Decisions