



« ON A VOYAGÉ POUR VOUS! »: EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING WITHIN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES ON THE ONLINE VALUE CO-CREATIONⁱ

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Abstract:

Storytelling is recognized as a catalyst for tourism development. It is a marketing tool that will contribute to the influence of the destination. By mobilizing the theory of image transfer, the objective of this paper is to examine the determinants of storytelling within consumer communities on the co-creation of value in the era of a pandemic. An exploratory qualitative study by non-participant observation and the critical incident method with 10 narrators who have already carried out storytelling was conducted. The results clarify that five determinants explain the adoption of storytelling tourists within the virtual community, such as helping and influencing others, citizenship, entertainment, satisfaction and community engagement. Moreover, this technique has a positive effect not only on the co-creation of value between the destination and the tourist but also between tourists.

Keywords: storytelling; destination marketing; value co-creation; the virtual community; the critical incident technique

Résumé :

Le storytelling est reconnu comme un catalyseur de développement touristique. Il s'agit d'un outil de marketing qui contribuera au rayonnement de la destination. En mobilisant la théorie du transfert d'image, l'objectif de ce papier est d'examiner les déterminants du storytelling au sein de communautés des consommateurs sur la co-crédation de la valeur à l'ère d'une pandémie. Une étude qualitative exploratoire par l'observation non participante et la méthode de l'incident critique auprès de 10 narrateurs qui ont déjà effectué des storytelling a été conduite. Les résultats clarifient que cinq déterminants

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expliquent l'adoption des touristes de storytelling au sein de la communauté virtuelle tels que l'aide et l'influence des autres, la citoyenneté, le divertissement, la satisfaction et l'engagement communautaire. De plus, cette technique a un effet positif non seulement sur la co-crédation de la valeur entre la destination et le touriste mais aussi entre les touristes. Originalité/valeur : Cette étude met en évidence le phénomène de storytelling dans le tourisme pour les jeunes touristes. Leur contribution est importante sous forme de créativité et d'innovation et en intégrant ces jeunes touristes dans le processus de prise de décision. Ils garantissent leur capacité à participer et à concevoir, ce qui se traduit par un engagement envers le fournisseur de services.

Mots clés : le storytelling ; le marketing de destination ; la co-crédation de la valeur ; la communauté virtuelle ; la technique de l'incident critique

1. Introduction

For a long time, tourism has been an activity accessible to millions of people, allowing the travel industry to flourish globally (Dionisio and Nisi, 2021). However, the global COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the tourism industry (Sharma *et al.*, 2021). It significantly affected 220 countries and had an unprecedented impact on people's daily lives (Ali *et al.*, 2020; Irfan *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, Tunisia's economy was severely affected by this virus, directly impacting its industries. In this context, Sharma *et al.* (2021) proposed technological innovation in their meta-analysis as one of the main factors contributing to tourism's resilience. Therefore, this article examines the effect of storytelling within social media during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, technology is a major force for creating flexibility in the tourism industry (Hall *et al.*, 2020; Sharma *et al.*, 2021). According to Sharma *et al.* (2021), disasters contribute to accelerating technological change. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, people received massive support from technology experts. Indeed, besides reducing costs and increasing flexibility, these technologies can promote multiple destinations. Numerous reports show a significant increase in public trust in technology, a greater willingness to connect, and a shift in attitudes toward technology.

Most importantly, tourism is an integral part of many people's lives, as evidenced by social media, where vacations and travel experiences are the third most popular topic on Facebook after music and television (Bertino, 2014; cited in Lund *et al.*, 2018). Nowadays, it is common practice in marketing to leverage influencers to promote a brand. One of the most recently used is storytelling (e.g., Woodside 2010; Lund *et al.*, 2018; Laer *et al.*, 2019; cited by Dionisio and Nisi 2021). Based on this observation, we propose a conceptual framework to assist researchers and marketers in understanding the long-term strategic shifts in tourism businesses that we might observe as a result of the 2020 and 2021 COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting changes in the tourism sector. As Rivera (2020) points out, examining tourism industries in the context of the pandemic is of paramount importance. In this regard, Sharma *et al.* (2021) mentioned that

researchers have begun to focus on this area, but the available work to date is limited, indicating that no more than 45 studies have examined the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry. Thus, such variability in studies fails to significantly enrich the body of knowledge, proving to be of limited use to policymakers and practitioners.

First, this research offers a novel interpretation of how online social channels function to stimulate the circulation of destination stories by proposing a conceptual framework based on the concept of storytelling, particularly when the virtual actions of storytellers affect the appearance of a destination (Lund *et al.*, 2018). This concept is described as a "*technology of power*" for its role in shaping social mechanisms within social channels (Lund *et al.*, 2018). Based on this understanding, a conceptual framework demonstrating the social processes of storytelling within social channels is presented. Thus, "*We traveled to Tunisia for you*" is used as a case study to put the framework into practice. The case demonstrates how destinations can leverage storytellers' experiences to strengthen their destination brand image on online social media channels. More specifically, we will explore the determinants and positive effects of storytelling within virtual communities on the co-creation of online value.

Secondly, we will show how storytelling enhances the co-creation of value within the virtual community. However, although it has emerged as an important area of research, studies on how this tool impacts value co-creation are scarce. This study, therefore, examines the impact of the storyteller as a promoter of tourist destinations on online value co-creation. The results show that storytelling significantly increases engagement on the social media channel (e.g., Facebook, Instagram), the destination brand image (Tunisia in our case), and value co-creation. Furthermore, Lund *et al.* (2018) explored the effect of storytelling on the brand image of a destination. We will attempt to complement their study by exploring the effect of this relationship on the co-creation of online value.

Theoretically, this work aims to enrich the literature on storytelling techniques by emphasizing their positive effects. From a managerial perspective, this study can help tourism businesses (hotels, restaurants, guesthouses, etc.) leverage storytellers to promote their companies. It suggests that marketing specialists should adapt their strategies during crises, increasingly relying on consumer support, particularly from destination enthusiasts. Furthermore, this research highlights the potential of social media channels as a tool for communication and information gathering. To effectively address our objectives, we will structure this paper as follows: first, a conceptual framework will clarify the various themes addressed in our research. Then, we will explain the methodology used, the critical incident technique, to answer our research question. Finally, the last part of this paper will be devoted to the results of digital storytelling, addressing the theoretical and managerial implications, the limitations of the study, and future research directions.

Tourism in terms of young tourists is a major research topic today. Young tourists exhibit certain characteristics that distinguish them from adults, notably a search for adventure and leisure, and enthusiastic behavior (Kerr *et al.*, 2021; Krnche, 2021).

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 The Technology of Power

For companies to exert influence, they must use what Foucault (1977) called the *"technologies of power."* These are techniques that can be used by individuals and groups in social channels to exert influence over others (Lund *et al.*, 2018).

2.2 The Emergence of Virtual Brand Communities

These communities began to attract the attention of researchers after Friedman *et al.* (1992) observed that consumers shared feelings and activities when consuming common goods (cited in Davis *et al.*, 2014, p. 469). In this regard, we cite the most popular definition, that of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412), which states that *"a brand community is specialized, not geographically delimited, and based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand."*

2.3 Community Members: A Source of Innovation

According to Fuller *et al.* (2008, p. 609), members are now considered a particularly valuable source of innovation because they are passionate about the brand and the experience of its products. Typically, these members are classified from the most involved to the least involved (Fox, 1987, p. 350; Susilo, 2012, p. 23). Appendix 1 briefly illustrates the different statuses of community members as provided by these researchers.

2.4 Storytelling within Virtual Communities

Storytelling, or *"narrative communication,"* is a communication method constructed from a narrative structure similar to that of tales and stories, with the aim of capturing the attention of visitors. Today, everyone uses storytelling, particularly in the tourism sector. In our case, it involves telling one's own story about the destination. According to Pachucki *et al.* (2021), storytelling is a promising tool in destination brand communication because social media, as storytelling spaces, consist of text and images through which users tell stories to communicate their actions and ideas and to produce self-representations (Lund *et al.*, 2018).

2.5 Destination Marketing

Destination marketing, implemented by the tourism offices of cities, departments, regions, and countries, refers to all the means of communication used to promote a tourist destination (Bathelot, 2021). The destination's image is derived from a multitude of sources. Tourists co-create their experiences with locals and businesses and contribute to shaping the destination's identity by sharing these personal experiences on social media. Due to the co-creative nature of social media, destination marketing is moving towards consumer stories developed via social media, where the inclusion of personal stories and lived experiences can create an emotional connection.

3. Research Methodology

We conducted a qualitative study given the exploratory nature of this research. First, to familiarize ourselves with the "*We Traveled for You in Tunisia*" community, we developed a non-participant observation approach. To this end, we focused solely on posts published after the COVID-19 pandemic, which officially began on March 2, 2020. Next, we selected the most engaged narrators within the community (those who had posted their experiences more than once). Then, to initiate a discussion with these narrators, we adopted the critical incident method developed by Flanagan in 1954. McKee (2003) argues that the best way to persuade someone (students, friends, deans, and family members) is to tell a compelling story. This technique is prevalent in online communities. Therefore, storytelling is more effective than simply extolling the virtues of something. As recommended by Lund *et al.* (2018), analyzing social media user stories requires a qualitative approach. This involves a detailed description of an event, derived significantly from customer expectations, and memorable for the user, whether positive or negative (Flanagan, 1954). Since a storytelling experience can encompass multiple incidents or events, the unit of analysis in this study is the experience, within the boundaries defined by the participants. Therefore, Critical Incident Testing (CIT) is appropriate for studying past experiences by asking participants to recount their own storytelling experiences in their own words.

The Critical Incident Test is conducted in two steps, as suggested by Flanagan (1954):

- 1) The observed situation: identifying the situation to be studied: this refers to the Tunisian storytellers' past experiences with Tunisia as a destination.
- 2) Relevance of the overall objective: It is necessary to verify whether the behavior is relevant to the objective of this study: the narratives (storytelling) to be studied fit within the framework of our research, since they concern past experiences.

4. Discussion of Results

Several factors explain the desire to develop storytelling within the community.

3.1 Influence and Help from Others

First, the storytellers admitted that they engage in storytelling particularly when they feel recognized and influential: "*I feel fulfilled when I see someone else visiting a destination I recommended,*" or simply to help others: "*I think sharing helps people get a better perspective and provides them with the information they're looking for,*" "*I like to give others good tips.*" For many of the storytellers interviewed, the information they provide helps others with their future travels. These storytellers demonstrate responsible behavior towards others. As K.J. commented, "*To share good addresses for group members, for those who are planning a trip or looking for adventure.*" These results are consistent with previous studies (Lund *et al.*, 2018), confirming that tourists are increasingly connecting on social media, where sharing

personal stories influences their behavior. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that storytelling has influential effects.

3.2 Citizenship

Narrators with a sense of citizenship have strong intentions to continue sharing stories about their destinations. In this regard, the narrators revealed that during the coronavirus pandemic, they increasingly promoted their countries. They confirmed that they felt compelled to promote their countries, given the dangerous situation created by COVID-19. Furthermore, the narrators within the community mentioned phrases such as "*Tunisia, the best country in the world,*" "*You are beautiful, your desert is beautiful, my country,*" "*Tunisia, pearl,*" and "*in love with this beauty.*" More specifically, they felt an emotional connection to the destination. "*I wanted to share my videos about Malta in the group to show that Malta can be visited during the winter too, and it's still beautiful during this season.*"

3.3 Community Social Engagement

It was suggested that engaging in intensive storytelling had a significant impact on community engagement. The narrator thus feels a sense of responsibility towards others. Although not all participants explicitly expressed their community engagement, most drew our attention to their behaviors of social responsibility towards others. Some of them repeatedly reminded us of their commitment to the community. Community engagement can be defined as "*all possible interactions between an internet user and a brand, as well as between members of a social group*" (Mejri and Gharbi, 2016, p. 103). It is not simply about producing compelling stories, but also about becoming an integral part of these online social channels where individuals socialize, interact, converse, and share stories primarily for non-commercial reasons. In particular, a consumer may be inclined to engage in storytelling simply to feel a sense of community involvement. The main behavior reflecting this engagement is reliance on the community and its other members.

3.4 Entertainment

During the interviews, this variable was highlighted by several expressions such as: "*for the simple reason of pleasure,*" "*I'm looking to entertain myself.*" This theme emerged from participants' reflections on the pleasure generated when watching videos about a destination. It revealed some of the benefits of storytelling, such as the pleasure of sharing and influencing. This may be consistent with previous research that suggests pleasure is triggered by sharing stories with others, thus satisfying self-esteem. As Carlson *et al.* (2008, p. 285) and Lund (2018) aptly state, storytellers share their experiences seeking to build social and psychological connections. Azhar (2021) argues that technology can offer engaging forms of storytelling, designed inclusively to meet the wide range of consumers' social and emotional needs.

3.5 Satisfaction

Discussions with interviewees reveal that those who engage in storytelling seem to be highly satisfied with their travel experiences: "*And since I am satisfied, I shared my experience to thank all the people who advised me.*"

3.6 Co-creating Value

As demonstrated by Leclercq *et al.* (2016), co-creating value involves consumer participation in engagement platforms (such as blogs, online communities, etc.), where this participation generates interest and contributes to value creation. We observed that online communities foster the consumer-destination relationship by facilitating communication and easy access to information, meaning that members are in continuous interaction with the brand. This is due to the significant role of social networks. Members admitted that "*the page is a good place*" and "*we see reviews of destinations on the page.*" By sharing their personal experiences on social channels, storytellers co-create value with the destination and with other tourists.

4. Conclusion

Sharing experiences is not new. It has a long history. What is recent is the growing awareness among brands and destinations of the importance of storytelling within their marketing strategies. This study expands our theoretical knowledge of storytelling techniques, supporting destination managers and the entire tourism sector in crafting effective destination brand stories to revitalize the tourism industry during the pandemic. It enables the expansion of destination marketing through social media channels. In fact, this study provides an opportunity to encourage Tunisian businesses to foster storytellers to share their experiences on social media, especially given the decline in the use of this technique observed after the pandemic. This presents a distinct challenge for destination marketing, which must adapt to a new reality where destination brands are increasingly producing shared tourism experiences (e.g., storytelling on social media) rather than traditional marketing strategies. It aims to promote both domestic and international tourism during the pandemic, particularly given the precarious situation of the Tunisian tourism sector. From a theoretical perspective, our study contributes to the growing body of research on brand communities, where consumers receive support from others and develop a deeper understanding of the brand/destination, especially as consumers place more trust in the opinions of others (Lund *et al.*, 2018).

Managerial Implications: First, destination marketing must recognize the importance of storytelling by increasingly encouraging storytellers to share their experiences. In fact, storytellers need to feel that they have a real impact when they share their experiences. If storytellers feel excluded from the conversation, social connections will cease, and influence will diminish. Therefore, destination marketing should focus on influential storytellers with large social media networks, for example, by rewarding them, or by focusing on the most engaging stories that can facilitate reach and goodwill.

Destination marketing must continuously co-create stories with influential and active storytellers. It must consider storytellers within social media channels as partners. Storytellers can be motivated to engage if they feel they can gain something, such as status, appreciation, or support. Take the example of Instagrammers who share various images of their experiences with a particular product or place simply to expand their networks and influence. Consumers are quickly influenced by these storytellers because they consider them a credible source. User photos, videos, and descriptions fuel brand/destination narratives and enhance attractiveness. All these advantages can give companies a very clear idea of the need to focus on storytelling. More specifically, companies must provide more opportunities for storytellers by developing more online platforms to improve the "consumer-brand" relationship and the relationships between consumers themselves, so that they can share more travel experiences by participating in co-creating value. The narrator, in turn, must think like an influential storyteller and reflect on how they play their social role and share their experience within a social network. In short, storytelling is a powerful means of communication.

Limitations and Future Directions of the Research. Despite all the efforts made to complete this study, several limitations must be highlighted. First, we limited ourselves to a purely exploratory qualitative study using the critical incident technique. A quantitative phase will allow us to validate the various propositions retained. A second limitation lies in the choice of a single online environment. Future research should therefore investigate other types of communities to gain a richer understanding of the positive effects of storytelling. A third limitation concerns the study's duration, as the positive effects will change over time. A longitudinal and in-depth study will thus be necessary to track changes in members' usage patterns. Finally, we studied the benefits of storytelling in generating co-creation of value, whereas Lund *et al.* (2019) explored that this technique also allows for co-destruction of value. Future research could study both aspects together. Thus, our research focuses solely on the positive effects of storytelling and has neglected its negative co-destruction effects.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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