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Research Paper

# The power of social media storytelling in destination branding

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## ABSTRACT

A large part of the global population is now connected in online social networks in social media where they share experiences and stories and consequently influence each other's perceptions and buying behaviour. This poses a distinct challenge for destination management organisations, which must cope with a new reality where destination brands are increasingly the product of people's shared tourism experiences and storytelling in social networks, rather than marketing strategies. This article suggests a novel interpretation on how these online social networks function with regard to generating engagement and stimulating circulation of brand stories by offering a conceptual framework based on the sociological concepts of storytelling, performance, performativity, and mobility. These concepts are characterised as 'technologies of power', for their role in shaping the social mechanisms in social media. VisitDenmark, the DMO of Denmark, is used as a case to put the framework into practice. The case demonstrates how DMOs can use the framework to strengthen their social media branding, and five practical recommendations for how to do so are provided.

## 1. Introduction

Consumers are increasingly connecting in social media where the sharing of personal stories influences their behaviour, including where they go and what they purchase (Adams, 2012). As social media provide popular spaces for people to communicate and share content, they have also become an important source for prospective tourists to find information and search for prices, suppliers, availability and product features (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). Social media have therefore evolved into important channels for marketing (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), with for instance approximately 60% of destination marketing organisations (DMOs) having dedicated budgets for social media related activities (Barnes, 2015). However, social media also elevates the role of consumers in the co-creation of brands and communications. Social media therefore pose a particular challenge for marketers, as they must deal with a new situation where brands are increasingly the product of people's conversations in social networks, rather than formal marketing strategies (Fournier & Avery, 2011). The classic marketing model premised on control and predictability is no longer viable (Fisher & Smith, 2011). The emergence of social media thus requires a fundamental rethink of marketing practices as brands are now co-created through informal conversations by authors largely outside marketers' control. While a brand may initially embody a manufactured commercialised story, consumers' storytelling of personal experiences and opinions becomes absorbed into the brand narrative, hence changing, diluting or disintegrating its identity. Social media are therefore facilitating a democratisation of media production and a power shift towards consumers who can now produce content and publish via communication channels where marketers are not invited (DesAutels, 2011; Kietzman, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Peters, Chen, Kaplan, Ognibeni, & Pauwels, 2013). As Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, and Shapiro (2012, p. 289) suggest, the effects of social media "are sociological and little short of revolutionary in their implications for business".

This article advances on recent perspectives on social media as spaces of storytelling, which focus on consumer generated brand stories, co-creation, open-source branding and improvised performances (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). It offers a conceptual framework that draws on particular sociological concepts to illustrate how a combination of individuals' performative acts, mobilities and storytelling competencies enable stories to spread and influence narratives, discourses and perceptions. Specifically, it is argued that the concepts of storytelling, mobilities, performance and performativity can be conceptualised as 'technologies of power', which are techniques used in the practical operation of power that can be utilised by individuals and groups in social media to exert influence on others (Foucault, 1977).

The conceptual framework is applied in a netnographic case study of Facebook posts by VisitDenmark, the Danish national DMO. This

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brief practical example from VisitDenmark's social media branding practices is provided to illustrate the power of the conceptual framework. The case demonstrates how DMOs can use the framework to strengthen their social media branding, and the paper concludes with practical recommendations for how to do so.

## 2. Social media and marketing destinations

DMOs responsible for marketing tourism destinations offer an ideal case for analysing the potential of the conceptual framework developed in this paper. Tourism is an integrated part of many people's lives, which is observable on social media where the third most popular topic on Facebook after music and television is holidays and travel experiences (Bertino, 2014). Traveling presents countless photo opportunities and experiences in extended phases where social media offers a suitable outlet for sharing these experiences with social networks. DMOs can engage with these social media users and their stories. Particularly DMOs can connect with Generation Y as technology and online social networking is integrated into nearly every aspect of their lives and is a central part of their leisure experiences (Leask, Fyall, & Barron, 2014). As not all prospective tourists are active social media users, the conceptual framework and its implications is therefore applicable to people who are social media users.

The tourism sector is a place with a high visibility of consumption, which make the brands of destinations more susceptible to social media conversations and stories. Research shows that 93% of travellers are influenced by reviews in their travel planning and 80% of people about to make a travel purchase will ask members of their social network for a recommendation first (Digital Tourism Think Tank, 2013). Online stories have the potential to influence substantial numbers of future visitors who go online in search of first-person unbiased accounts (Martin, Woodside, & Dehuang, 2007). Tourism products are sold in advance of consumption, and decision-making in purchases relies significantly on positive stories and electric word-of-mouth (eWOM) via sites such as TripAdvisor and Facebook. If consumers do not trust in the destination or tourism company, they are unlikely to take the risk of buying. The tourism sector is thus sensitive to the countless mediated tourism experiences in social media.

To successfully brand destinations, DMOs have to mine social media data to capture and interpret its visitors' positive and negative images (Kladou & Mavragani, 2015); DMOs must examine their visitors' stories to understand how they enact the myths facilitated by the destinations (Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehuang, 2007). Social media is a key focus area for DMOs' branding strategies (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013). The conceptual framework that follows gives DMOs new insights into the complex social mechanisms of social media and it provides answers as to why some stories become popular and widely shared while others fail to gain traction. DMOs can utilise the framework to analyse the social media behaviour of users and use the technologies of power discussed below to circulate their preferred version of the brand effectively among social media users. It thus facilitates a practical basis for DMOs to improve branding practices and strategies.

## 3. A sociological approach to social media marketing

Even though companies are mainly interested in social media to find ways to market their products, marketing is a moderately small and peripheral part of the social media consumer culture and consumers pay little attention to it (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015). Social media are primarily communication systems that allow their social actors to communicate (Peters et al., 2013), often using relatively informal and organic narratives that exist separate to formal spaces of marketing strategies. Social media are a new tool for speaking with friends, family and organisations, and as such should not be regarded as separate from the offline world. They can be viewed as more than just an evolution of technology. Rather, social media represent a social revolution (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014), as offline and online worlds become intertwined, facilitated by mobile technologies such as tablets and smartphones (Adams, 2012).

As social media generate spaces for socialising and connecting with friends and relatives, thereby resembling social networks in the offline world, it is surprising how few articles within the field of social media marketing have turned to sociology to increase understanding of their social processes. Some exceptions include, for instance, Wang, Yu, and Wei (2012) who apply consumer socialisation theory in social media branding in order to understand how peer communication through social media impacts consumer decision making and thus marketing strategies. Wang et al. (2012) identify socialisation agents (peers) within social media, who transmit norms, values, attitudes, motivations, and behaviours to others via a social learning process. Similarly, Labrecque (2014) applies parasocial interaction theory (PSI) in order to design successful social media strategies. PSI is described as an illusionary experience that makes consumers interact with media representations of presenters, celebrities or characters as if they are present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship. While both Labrecque (2014) and Wang et al. (2012) step into the sphere of sociology, consumer socialisation theory and PSI are still theories that are developed for marketing purposes. One notable exception is the conceptual framework developed by Peters et al. (2013), who draw on social network theory and see social media as a social structure made up of a set of social actors within communication systems that enable them to communicate along dyadic ties. On that basis, a brand can be seen as essentially a node, or an actor, just like any other in a network with no special authority to impose commercial messages on others (Peters et al., 2013).

The lack of sociological approaches in social media marketing is problematic as social media are a sphere for social networking and conversations. If DMOs are to better understand the social mechanisms of social media, there is a need to gain an understanding of how people act, socialise and influence each other within social media using a sociological approach. The conceptual framework developed in this article helps to facilitate this. However, it is first necessary to consider how social media has given a voice to its users for sharing stories and co-creating brands.

## 4. Democratisation and the co-created brand

The emergence of social media facilitates a democratisation of media production, which shifts the locus of market power from firms to consumers as they can now produce and publish content (Berthon et al., 2012; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Tiago and Veríssimo, 2014). This is egalitarian in nature as consumers and social media managers are repositioned as equal actors in the network (Peters et al., 2013). In contrast to the traditional integrated marketing communications paradigm, where a high degree of control was present, social media-based conversations are now occurring outside managers' direct influence (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Once brands are out in the market, consumers now have growing power to renegotiate, alter and fragment the brand narratives according to personal experiences and opinions (Kohli et al., 2015). DMOs therefore have to cope with a new reality where traditional media no longer control the value and importance allocation within the domain of traveling (Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011). As Peters et al. (2013) observe, companies do not have panoptic authority to impose advertisements anymore as this conflicts with the dialogic nature of social media. This new situation make brands more transparent and marketing campaigns more susceptible to parody and criticism (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Users are likely to shut out brands that push too much and are a nuisance (Kaplan, 2012; Kietzman et al., 2011). Consequently, marketers who used to seek people to consume their products, now seek people to produce the value they want to leverage (Berthon et al., 2012). Co-creation entails strategically passing off control of the brand and letting it go (Fisher & Smith, 2011) and

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