



11th International Strategic Management Conference 2015

The influence of storytelling approach in travel writings on readers' empathy and travel intentions

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Abstract

As a fascinating concept, storytelling attracts many researchers from a variety of disciplines. Of particular interest is the power of storytelling both on a corporate and on a product level. However, its components and implications on the people and their behavioral intentions (i.e., word and mouth, visit intention) within travel marketing are limited. In this study, we empirically investigated the relationship between the components of storytelling, empathy and behavioral intentions. By studying 155 readers, we found that perceived esthetics, narrative structure, self-reference will evoke reader empathy. We also showed that empathy was found to generate positive emotional response and behavioral intentions toward travel destination. In this sense, we suggested that travel narratives need to consider esthetics, narrative structure and relevance to readers and empathy can be considered as a determinant of emotion in the research of marketing.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the International Strategic Management Conference

Keywords: Storytelling, Travel writing, Heuristics, Empathy, Behavioral Intention, Travel.

1. Introduction

Storytelling, composed of communication instruments (i.e. stories, social media, visual elements...) that has a crucial place in a content marketing strategy, is one of the most powerful, quick and effective ways to breathe new life into brands and to drive market changes (Fog, Budtz and Yakaboğlu, 2005). In this respect, we see that researchers in marketing literature emphasize the storytelling approach, which refers to framing information so that it is understandable, meaningful, and memorable (McLellan, 2006), as an effective and influential technique to shape brands of the future and to create an emotional investment both on a corporate and on a product level (Aaker and Smith, 2011).

Storytelling research is built on a multidisciplinary foundation. According to psychological researches, storytelling have become the building blocks for cognitive reasoning (Friedberg, 1994), social change (Aaker and Smith, 2011),

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memory (McGregor and Holmes, 1999) and view of self and others (Bamberg, 2010). Management scholars have examined storytelling as approaches to problem solving and action research (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1975), collective centring and sense making (Boyce, 1995), organizational renewal (McWhinney and Battista, 1988). Marketing researchers have shown that while storytelling in traditional advertising is used as part of the firm's corporate branding strategy and as a sales promotional tool to generate recognition and identification, it is now used as the central driving force in advertising (Fog, e. al. 2005).

Along with its strategic value as a branding concept, storytelling has gained increasing attention as a global marketing trend in the tourism industry. According to tourism studies, stories about the destination can give the destination a unique competitive advantage and the tourist a more meaningful experience (Mossberg, 2008). With social networking technologies, in particular, storytelling approach in tourism have created the ripple effect. Based on the social network theory, social media provides many advantages to both individuals and companies. For instance, while individuals get opportunity to reach everybody regardless of their emotional intensity and social distance, companies have a better chance of reaching their customers in a short time, directly and more intensely (Aaker ve Smith, 2011). Therefore, travel narratives in social media have become popular instrument to evoke readers' empathy.

Interestingly, it should be noted that while a number of recent research studies have discussed empathy in a sales context in order to understand and satisfy customer needs (McBane, 1995), a few studies have examined empathy in media context in order to influence customers' behavioral intentions through modern marketing communication methods (i.e. storytelling approach) (Hsiao, Lu, and Lan, 2013; Aaker and Smith, 2011). Indeed, empathy can influence readers' behavioral intentions towards destination by stimulating author's experience and feelings in their own mind.

In light of these arguments, this research serves to a dual purpose. The aims of this study are to (1) recognize the elements of storytelling in travel writings and then help travel companies design their travel narratives for optimal effectiveness, and (2) investigate the effect of heuristics on empathy and in addition empathy's effect on behavioural intention. Accordingly, we structure the paper as follow. First, we present a literature review where we discuss and demarcate our area of interest and define our key concepts. Here we attempt to a better understanding of the influence of storytelling on travel writings from a heuristic perspective, consistent with Hsiao et. al. (2013). The literature review is followed by a section where we present the hypotheses guiding our study. Once the hypotheses are outlined, we present the research method section with a description of the research design, the sample and measures used. Thereafter follows the analysis and a presentation of the results. The research ends with a discussion and implications of findings. In addition, the study concludes with a section where we present suggestions for future researches.

2.Literature Review

2.1.Storytelling and Travel Narratives

According to Pellowski (1990:6-7), there are seven salient theories towards an origin of storytelling based on studies from different disciplines including anthropology, archeology, folklore, philology, semiology, linguistics and the discipline of literature. These theories show that: "1) it grew out of playful, self-entertainment needs of people; 2) it satisfied the need for explaining the surrounding physical world; 3) it came about because of an intrinsic religious need in humans to propitiate the supernatural forces believed to be present in the world; 4) it evolved from the human need to communicate experience to other humans; 5) it met an aesthetic need for beauty, regularity, and form through expressive language and music and body movement; 6) it stemmed from the desire to record the actions or qualities of one's leaders, in the hope that this would give them a kind of immortality; and 7) it encoded and retained the norms of social interaction that a given society lived by" (Keshta, 2013:17). Basically, storytelling is an art of describing real or imaginary events with word, photo and audio. From the point of view of marketing, storytelling is defined as a tool to encourage consumer loyalty through entertainment or emotional connection (www.zideate.com, 2015). Other definitions of storytelling are shown in table 1.

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