



# Who Am I? How Compelling Self-storytelling Builds Digital Personal Reputation

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## Abstract

The work explores whether self-storytelling is a powerful predictor of personal reputation in a collaborative community of the sharing economy realm. By proposing that powerful self-storytelling allows an attractive positioning in respect to potential others, the paper extends the literature of brand storytelling and brand archetypes shifting the perspective to a personal level. This study adopts a qualitative–quantitative approach to investigate the meanings and stories contained in personal profile descriptions and their relation with reputation. Personal descriptions are interpreted as storytelling activities, labels/glosses that allow members to access the services of the community by facilitating personal reputation building. The findings show that powerful storytelling structures have defined phases and are crucial in reputation building when the story evolves in a metaphoric, symbolic lesson. The presence of archetypes, in particular the Sage and the Ruler, also confers reputational power to the stories. The results reveal opportunities for peer-to-peer communities, traditional companies, and social businesses. Marketers should design tools and platforms able to trigger consumers' desire to express their individuality through personal descriptions and suggest the drivers that affect reputation.

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## Introduction

A new, grassroots model of doing business is emerging, providing consumers with the power to get what they need and want where no transfer of ownership takes place. All over the world, people are renting rooms from strangers through Airbnb, outsourcing grocery trips to TaskRabbits, and traveling with ride-sharing service BlaBlaCar. These empowered individuals are participating in the sharing economy by beginning to function like hotels, taxis, farms, restaurants, manufacturers and other traditional business models. The sharing economy is becoming increasingly popular, and it is estimated, at the time we are writing, at more than

US\$15 billion (PwC 2014). The trend is expected to increase as consumers and firms seek to maximize efficiency in volatile economic conditions (Lamberton and Rose 2012).

The sharing economy is contingent upon one crucial factor: reputation, which is now considered a new currency for transactions in collaborative consumption platforms. Reputation is the enabling factor inherent within all sharing-sector activities. It helps to build trust in certain people and distrust in others. Because of its centrality to the success of the sharing economy, various thought leaders – entrepreneurs, social advocates, academics, investors, journalists – have opined as to how trust is established and maintained among strangers engaging in peer-to-peer transactions. Despite the fact that the topic has received attention, it still has not been theorized.

This work explores personal reputation, understanding its antecedents. The main objective is to assess whether self-storytelling is a powerful predictor of personal reputation in online communities.

The branding literature has long recognized the power of storytelling to provide meaning to the brand, and practitioners

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have used storytelling to enhance consumers' connections with brands (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Escalas 2004; Megehee and Woodside 2010; Singh and Sonnenburg 2012; Woodside, Sood, and Miller 2008). This work explores the use of storytelling tools to position oneself online, proposing that powerful self-storytelling allows a more attractive positioning in respect to potential others. Similar to product branding, storytelling is interpreted as a means to personal reputation that helps in promoting ones' uniqueness to an assumed audience. If once personal reputation was considered crucial for celebrities and politicians, online tools have allowed personal reputation to become an important marketing task for everyday people (Labrecque, Markos, and Milne 2011; Shepherd 2005). In the sharing economy realm, where distinctions between producers and consumers effectively disappear, personal reputation can be considered an even more essential activity that allows empowered consumers not only to access sharing services but also to perform as businesses.

The present study analyzes profile descriptions of community members in CouchSurfing, a peer-to-peer travel community, as self-storytelling activities and communication tools. While blogs (Megehee and Woodside 2010; Woodside, Sood, and Miller 2008) and online reviews have been shown to be storytelling activities and powerful co-creative behaviors in online communities (Pera 2014; Singh and Sonnenburg 2012), digital individual profile descriptions have not yet been investigated in terms of storytelling, despite being a key element in, what we term, online relational communities.

### Foundational Theory and Principles

Our theoretical framework is built on two research streams: (1) self-storytelling studied jointly with phases and archetypes, and (2) reputation building. Both are investigated from a personal perspective, shifting the focus from a corporate level to a personal/private one.

#### *Storytelling by a Co-creative "Tripteller"*

The branding literature recognizes the importance of stories for brands (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Escalas 2004; Singh and Sonnenburg 2012; Woodside, Sood, and Miller 2008). While brand owners have dominated the story content, production, and distribution (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003), this is now changing due to the emergence of social media that enables users to share stories, also about themselves.

In online relational communities the member is often required to create and share his/her identity through profile descriptions. Within this information, storytelling occurs and it is proposed as a means to communicate what is termed "expressive individuality" (Weinberg et al. 2013). In essence it is expressing or sharing personal information about oneself, including feelings, behaviors, as well as information that may reveal beliefs, attitudes, and preferences. Expressive individuality can be used to build one's personal brand (e.g. Labrecque, Markos, and Milne 2011), enhancing the connection in respect to potential others. Herzenstein, Sonenshein, and Dholakia's (2011) findings support

the interpretation that people use narratives strategically to manage favorable impressions.

The process by which people, stemming from a list of descriptive attributes, transform their biographies in narratives is well documented by the literature (Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1988; Bruner 2004). Self-storytelling not only helps the individual to understand him/herself but it informs others about his/her identity. Self-presentation (Goffman 1959) is contextual, based on a specific setting, such as personal web spaces (Schau and Gilly 2003), facing a definable and anticipated audience. Similar to product branding, storytelling is proposed as a means to personal reputation that helps in promoting ones' uniqueness to a certain public.

To explore the key elements that constitute stories, the Phase Dynamics Theory of Travel Epiphany Behavior (Woodside 2010) informs our study. The phase dynamics consist of the following stages: a. Prequel: In this stage, some triggering event occurs and implicitly or explicitly influences a person who recognizes that something is unknown to him or her; b. awakening: A person recognizes a journey might be necessary to complete this unknown aspect; c. journey: The protagonist's experiences will consist of positive or negative encounters which influence memorable good times/moments that normally occur during a journey; d. catharsis: The individual achieves a deep understanding of his or her experience that serves as the capstone of the trip; and e. post-journey storytelling: Reliving the emotional highs and lows in the story serves to deepen the experience and meaning of the journey.

In the story, the protagonist struggles because of inciting incidents and is required to manage different kinds of tensions, which can refer to internal tensions with oneself, personal tensions between people and their attitudes, and external tensions between an individual and nature, society, or the supernatural (McKee and Fryer 2003).

**Proposition 1.** *Profile descriptions of members in online relational communities are stories with defined phases and tension.*

#### *Archetype Enactment*

All narratives, modern and ancient, employ archetypes in portraying characters. The Archetype Theory (Jung 1959) informs our conceptual framework, as it enables understanding the most powerful elements of a modern storyteller (Vogler 2007). Archetypes represent personifications of behaviors — characters who embody behavior patterns. An archetype is an internal mental model of a typical, generic story character to which an observer might resonate emotionally (Jung 1959). While originally Jung believed that archetypes were genetically inherited, archetypes are learned conceptualizations according to the neo-archetypal theory (e.g. Mark and Pearson 2001). Whichever way it goes, the symbolic and affective importance of these story characters derives partially from the fact that they have endured for so long in the culture's literary, folkloric, and artistic history (Faber and Mayer 2009). Table 1 presents the list of archetypes, along with their full definitions according to past literature. In defining the archetypes we present their narrative function as a story gist.

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