Who Is the Better Storyteller? The Impact of Storytellers in Destination Social Media Posts on Sharing of Social Media Content

Christoph Pachucki
Seeburg Castle University
Reinhard Grohs
Seeburg Castle University
Ursula Scholl-Grissemann
Private University for Health Sciences, Medical Informatics and Technology

Paper from the 50th Annual EMAC Conference, Madrid, May 25-28, 2021

Who Is the Better Storyteller?

The Impact of Storytellers in Destination Social Media Posts on Sharing of Social Media Content

Abstract:

Destination marketers rely heavily on social media in their marketing communication efforts. Yet, research on how single elements of social media posts impact consumer response is scant. The present study examines how storytellers used in destination posts (third person vs. first person) impact sharing of social media content. Results show that a) first-person compared to third-person storytellers significantly increase sharing of social media content; b) first-person storytellers significantly support linguistic expression of emotional tone and confidence of language; c) contrary to expectations, emotional tone and confidence of language have no effect on sharing of social media content. The study enhances our theoretical understanding of social media marketing for tourist destinations and the effectiveness of storytellers in digital marketing. Findings further support marketers in the design of social media content that is shared by consumers.

Keywords: social media engagement, destination marketing, emotional content

Track: Tourism Marketing

1. Introduction and Research Questions

Social media is considered as a major information source in the pre-travel phase (Hays, Page, and Buhalis, 2013). Thus, tourism destinations create social media accounts (e.g., Facebook) and constantly publish content to support their destination branding activities (Lim, Chung, and Weaver, 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Social media strategies aim to actively involve consumers as social media engagement (e.g., likes, comments, shares) has been found to increase a brand's reach and improve the economic performance of organizations (Kim & Kim, 2020; Sashi, 2012). Social media further facilitate the direct interaction between consumers and brands, and enable the co-creation of customized tourism experiences (Buhalis & Sinatra, 2019). The outbreak of COVID-19 has further strengthened the relevance of digital marketing, because in the wake of the pandemic authorities have (partly) blocked other communication channels that connect tourists and destination managers (e.g., exhibitions, travel agencies). Social media content, in particular stories told by destination stakeholders, can fill the gap, if they are perceived as trustworthy, emotional, and unobtrusive, and trigger a consumer response (Moscardo, 2020; Rossolatos, 2020). Destination online marketing uses stories as a forceful tool to connect with, and to influence, consumers and prospects (Moin, Hosany, and O'Brien, 2020). Storytelling further helps to transform experiences and to develop advocacy (McCabe & Foster, 2006).

The type of storyteller used in posts can be one factor influencing social media engagement. Various authors argue that the type of storyteller (e.g., third person, first person) defines a physical and psychological position from which content is told, that in turn has an impact on consumer perception and communication effectiveness (e.g., De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, and Beentjes, 2012; Livingston, 2009). Ryu, Lehto, Gordon, and Fu (2018) further report that the storyteller affects emotionality and confidence of text content, which shapes response behaviour. Hence, understanding how the type of storyteller impacts consumers is a key concern for (destination) marketing managers (Jehn-Yih, Shu-Ju, and Wen-Hwa, 2016).

Given these previous research findings, we propose that the type of storyteller has an effect on social media engagement in destination marketing. The frequency of sharing a post of a destination by consumers is a typical measure of social media engagement. Sharing of social media content is relevant in that content reposted by consumers is a precondition for disseminating a brand and therefore creating value (Ham, Joonghwa, Hayes, and Bae, 2019). Thus, understanding its triggers and mechanisms is important because it contributes to developing effective social media strategies (Ham et al., 2019; Wallace, Buil, and de

Chernatony, 2012). However, previous studies remain mute on two fronts. First, authors note a lack of research about storytelling, social media marketing, and sharing of social media content for tourist destinations. Second, existing studies on social media marketing – in general, and even more so in destination marketing – do not investigate the impact of storyteller type on sharing of social media content by consumers/tourists (Lund, Scarles, and Cohen, 2020; McShane, Pancer, Poole, and Deng, 2020). Thus, we posit two research questions:

1. How does the type of storyteller (third person vs. first person) in social media posts of tourist destinations impact tourists' sharing of social media content?

2. To what extent do linguistic expressions of emotional tone and confidence of language constitute mechanisms that explain the effects of the type of storyteller on tourists' sharing of social media content?

By examining these research questions, we contribute to research on social media marketing for tourist destinations and identify the storyteller as a trigger of tourists' sharing of social media content. The results of the study also provide insights for tourism destinations into the design of effective social media content.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1 Types of storytellers in social media

Research agrees on the importance of communication for experience-based products, such as travel offers or tourism destinations. Marketing communication is needed to reduce the risk perception of consumers, to increase their response behaviour, and to foster competitiveness (Aiken & Boush, 2006). Social media has emerged as a major communication tool and information source for tourists (Hays et al., 2013). Thus, establishing a strong brand by creating social media accounts (e.g., Facebook) and regularly posting content has become a significant task in destination marketing (Lim et al., 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

One of the elements shaping communication content effectiveness is the storyteller (De Graaf et al., 2012; Peräkylä et al., 2015). Storytellers can be distinguished into third-person and first-person narrators (Tulloch, 2014). In third-person social media posts indicated by third-person pronouns (e.g., she, he, the hotel, the destination) external storytellers present content from behind the scenes (Graesser, Millis, and Zwaan, 1997; Tulloch, 2014). First-person storytellers, on the other hand, use first-person pronouns (e.g., we, our, I, my) and are

actively involved in the content scene. They simultaneously act as storyteller and (main) character (Davis et al., 2004). In (social media) marketing practice, brands themselves, employees or customers function as storytellers, both in third and first person (Delgado-Ballester & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016; Ryu et al., 2018).

Existing studies indicate that consumers attribute higher levels of directness, intimacy and immediacy to first-person content (Davis et al., 2004; Graesser et al., 1997). According to Tulloch (2014), consumers further perceive information presented in a first-person format as more trustworthy as the content is considered as confident and real-experienced. Therefore, we propose a positive effect of first-person storytellers in social media posts of tourist destinations on tourist response in terms of sharing these posts:

Hypothesis 1: In social media posts of tourist destinations, a first-person storyteller positively affects tourists' sharing of social media content compared with a third-person storyteller.

2.2 Emotional tone and confidence of language

Existing studies in (consumer) psychology suggest two (text-based) features that may explain the positive effect of a first-person storyteller on tourists' sharing of social media content.

First, emotionality of marketing content is also shaped by textual features (e.g., emotional words) (e.g., Escalas, Moore-Chapman, and Britton, 2004; Maruntelu & Dumitrascu, 2012). The type of storyteller goes along with specific linguistic features (e.g., first-person storytellers use first-person pronouns) that can influence the level of emotional tone (Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink, 2010; Gundersen Engeset & Elvekrok, 2015). In turn, emotional tone creates emotions, and emotions positively affect consumer behaviour (e.g., Kim & Youn, 2017; Van Laer, Escalas, Ludwig, and Van Den Hende, 2018). Therefore, we propose two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: In social media posts of tourist destinations, a first-person storyteller positively affects emotional tone compared with a third-person storyteller.

Hypothesis 2b: In social media posts of tourist destinations, emotional tone mediates the positive effect of a first-person storyteller on tourists' sharing of social media content.

Second, language features such as confidence of language shape trustworthiness and persuasiveness of marketing content (Larrimore, Larrimore, Markowitz, and Gorski, 2012). Blankenship and Craig (2007) explain that confidence of language can be expressed by

linguistic features and can thus be actively generated. Given COVID-19 induced changes in the tourism industry, such as insecurity among tourists, safety precautions, or travel restrictions (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020; Rossolatos, 2020; Tsionas, 2020), expressing confidence has become even more important, and first-person storytellers could be one way of increasing confidence of language of a social media post. Given the impact of language features on consumers (Larrimore et al., 2012) it can be assumed that increased confidence of language results in downstream effects such as higher consumer trust or greater persuasiveness, and may consequently also influence tourists' propensity to share social media content. Therefore, we propose two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: In social media posts of tourist destinations, a first-person storyteller positively affects confidence of language compared with a third-person storyteller.

Hypothesis 3b: In social media posts of tourist destinations, confidence of language mediates the positive effect of a first-person storyteller on tourists' sharing of social media content.

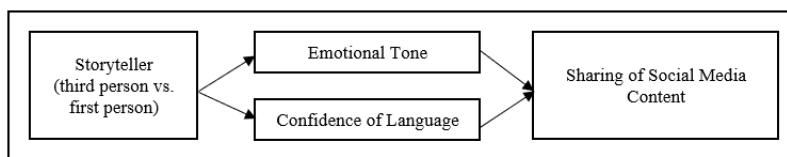Figure 1 summarizes the research model of our study.

Figure 1: Conceptual Research Model

3. Empirical Study

3.1 Research design

To test our hypotheses 1,091 Facebook posts of Austrian tourism destinations were randomly sampled. All posts were published in German language between January 6th, 2017, and August 21st, 2020. Since our research targeted marketing content created by destination marketing organizations, we eliminated posts representing sponsored messages, contests, or event announcements. This resulted in a final sample of 916 posts with an average word count of 42.02. For data analysis we used SPSS and LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry Word Count). The type of storyteller used in the post (third person vs. first person) was the independent variable, sharing of social media content was the dependent variable, and emotional tone as well as confidence of language (i.e., text content) were the mediators capturing the proposed mechanisms.

5

The storyteller (third person=0, first person=1) was determined manually by reading all Facebook posts and confirmed with LIWC. Sharing of social media content was measured by dividing the number of shares of each Facebook post by the number of the destination's Facebook followers. Emotional tone and confidence of language were measured by two output variables of the German version of LIWC based on a dictionary of 18,711 words (Meier et al., 2018). Both are factor variables derived from previous linguistic studies with scores ranging from 0 to 100 (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, and Blackburn, 2015). The higher the score, the higher the level of emotional tone and confidence of language.

3.2 Results

The impact of the type of storyteller in a post (third-person storyteller n=477, first-person storyteller n=439) on sharing of social media content was tested by an analysis of variance (ANOVA). Results showed that first-person storytellers in social media posts of tourist destinations significantly increased sharing of social media content ($M_{\text{first-person}} = .0011$, $M_{\text{third-person}} = .0008$, $p = .038$). Social media posts using a first-person storyteller further indicated a significantly higher level of emotional tone ($M_{\text{first-person}} = 81.44$, $M_{\text{third-person}} = 72.60$, $p < .01$) and confidence of language ($M_{\text{first-person}} = 91.02$, $M_{\text{third-person}} = 74.65$, $p < .01$). These results support hypotheses 1, 2a and 3a.

To test the proposed process mechanisms (hypotheses 2b and 3b) we conducted a parallel multiple-mediator analysis using the bootstrapping procedure (5,000 samples) of the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2013, model 4). The storyteller used in the post (third person vs. first person) was the independent variable, emotional tone and confidence of language were the mediators, and sharing of social media content was the dependent variable. Results showed a significant total ($B = .0002$, LLCI = .0000 ULCI = .0005, $p = .035$) and direct effect ($B = .0004$, LLCI = .0001 ULCI = .0006, $p = .006$) of the type of storyteller on sharing of social media content. Findings further indicated a significant impact of storyteller on emotional tone ($B = 8.8420$, LLCI = 4.5242 ULCI = 13.1599, $p = .001$) and confidence of language ($B = 16.3741$, LLCI = 14.4637 ULCI = 18.2844, $p = .001$). Contrary to expectations, results showed a significant, but negative effect of emotional tone on sharing of social media content ($B = -.0004*10^{\wedge}-2$, LLCI = $-.0007*10^{\wedge}-2$ ULCI = $-.0001*10^{\wedge}-2$, $p = .022$) and no significant effect of confidence of language on sharing of social media content ($B = -.0005*10^{\wedge}-2$, LLCI = $-.0013*10^{\wedge}-2$ ULCI = $.0003*10^{\wedge}-2$, $p = .196$). These results do not support hypotheses 3a and 3b.

| Predictors | Parallel Multiple Mediators | | | | | | | | |
| | M$_1$: Emotionality | | | M$_2$: Confidence | | | Y: Sharing | | |
	B	SE	p	B	SE	p	B	SE	p
X (Storyteller)	8.8420	2.2001	.001	16.3741	.9734	.001	.0004	.0001	.007
M$_1$ (Emotional tone)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.0004*10^-2	.0002*10^-2	.022
M$_2$ (Confidence of language)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.0005*10^-2	.0004*10^-2	.196
Constant	63.7565	3.4351	.000	58.2749	1.5198	.001	.0011	.0003	.001
	R^2=.0174 F=16.1517, p<.001			R^2=.2364 F=282.9606, p<.001			R^2=.0133 F=4.0849, p=.007		

Table 1: Mediation Analysis - Effects of Storyteller on Share Rates

4. Implications and Limitations

Although research agrees on the importance of social media marketing (e.g., Hay et al., 2013; Lim et al., 2012), studies on social media marketing of tourist destinations and tourists' sharing of social media content are scant (e.g., McShane et al., 2020). Thus, the present study investigates the impact of the type of storyteller used in social media posts of tourist destinations (third person vs. first person) on tourists' sharing of social media content (research question 1) and examines two mechanisms that may explain the effects, that is, text-based characteristics of emotional tone and confidence of language (research question 2).

The findings show that the use of first-person posts (e.g., locals, farmers, hikers, skiers) leads to more sharing of social media content than the use of third-person posts (e.g., in the destination XY guests enjoy 180 km of slopes). Analysing linguistic features of the text content further demonstrates that first-person storytellers stimulate an emotional and confident language in social media posts. Yet, neither emotional tone of text nor confidence of language constitute mechanisms that mediate the impact of the storyteller on sharing of social media content.

Our study contributes to the growing research field of social media marketing of tourist destinations. From a managerial perspective, the results encourage destination marketers to use first-person rather than third-person storytellers since they are more effective in making tourists share social media content. Using various destination stakeholders as first-person storytellers in social media posts not only stimulates an emotional tone, but also expresses confidence, which is particularly relevant given the current COVID-19 situation. Most important, the research demonstrates that destination managers can actively generate and manage emotional tone and confidence of language in social media content by using first-person storytellers.

Both mediators, emotional tone and confidence of language, are text-based characteristics, which may be too remote from consumer perceptions and therefore do not

mediate the impact of the storyteller on sharing of social media content. Future research needs to investigate additional text-based characteristics, but above all needs to include consumer perceptions of these characteristics. In addition, further research needs to go beyond the type of storyteller and include other textual and media elements that shape a social media post. Examining how specific story elements of social media content influence text-based characteristics, which in turn drive consumer perceptions of these characteristics, which in turn influence consumer attitudes and behaviours, can then produce a comprehensive model how social media marketing in tourist destinations affects tourists' sharing of social media content.

5. References

Aiken, K. D., & Boush, D. M. (2006). Trustmarks, objective-source ratings, and implied investments in advertising: investigating online trust and the context-specific nature of internet signals. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Sciences,* 34 (3), 308-323.

Assaf, A., & Scuderi, R. (2020). COVID-19 and the recovery of the tourism industry. *Tourism Economics*, 26 (5), 731-733.

Beverland, M. B., Lindgreen, A., & Vink, M. W. (2008). Projecting authenticity through advertising. *Journal of Advertising,* 37 (1), 5-15.

Blankenship, K. L., & Craig, T. Y. (2007). Powerless language markers and the correspondence bias: attitude confidence mediates the effects of tag questions on attitude attributions. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 26 (1), 28-47.

Buhalis, D., & Sinarta, Y. (2019). Real-time co-creation and nowness service: lessons from tourism and hospitality. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 36 (5), 563-582.

Davis, M. H. , Soderlund, T., Cole, J., Gadol, E., Kute, M., Myers, M., & Weihing, J. (2004). Cognitions associated with attempts to empathize: how do we imagine the perspective of another? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 30 (12), 1625-1635.

De Graaf, A., Hoeken, H., Sanders, J., & Beentjes, J. (2012). Identification as a mechanism of narrative persuasion. *Communication Research,* 39 (6), 802-823.

Delgado-Ballester, E., & Fernández-Sabiote, E. (2016). Once upon a brand: storytelling practices by Spanish brands. *Spanish Journal of Marketing,* 20 (2), 115-131.

Escalas, J. E., Moore-Chapman, M., & Britton, J. E. (2004). Fishing or feelings? Hooking viewers helps! *Journal of Consumer Psychology,* 14 (1-2), 105-114.

Graesser, A. C., Millis, K. K., & Zwaan, R. A. (1997). Discourse comprehension. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 48 (1), 163-189.

Gundersen Engeset, M., & Elvekrok, I. (2015). Authentic concepts: effects on tourist satisfaction. *Journal of Travel Research*, 54 (4), 456-466.

Ham, C., Joonghwa, L., Hayes, J. L., & Bae, Y. H. (2019). Exploring sharing behaviours across social media platforms. *International Journal of Market Research*, 61 (2), 157-177.

Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to mediation, moderation and conditional process analysis: regression-based approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

Hays, S., Page, S. J., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media as a destination marketing tool: its use by national tourism organisations. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 16 (3), 211-239.

Jehn-Yih, W., Shu-Ju, L., & Wen-Hwa, L. (2016). Does it really affect me? Tourism destination narratives, destination image, and the intention to visit: examining the moderating effect of narrative transportation. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 18 (5), 458-468.

Kim, M., & Kim, J. (2020). Destination authenticity as a trigger of tourists' online engagement on social media. *Journal of Travel Research,* 59 (7), 1238-1252.

Kim, J. H., & Youn, H. (2017). How to design and deliver stories about tourism destinations. *Journal of Travel Research*, 56 (6), 808-820.

Larrimore, L., Larrimore, L. J., Markowitz, D., & Scott, G. (2011). Peer to peer lending: the relationship between language features, trustworthiness, and persuasion success. *Journal of Applied Communication Research,* 39 (1), 19-37.

Lim, Y., Chung, Y., & Weaver, P. A. (2012). The impact of social media on destination branding: consumer-generated videos versus destination marketer-generated videos. *Journal of Vacation Marketing,* 18 (3), 197-206.

Livingston, P. (2009). Narrativity and knowledge. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 67 (1), 25-36.

Lund, N. F., Scarles, C., & Cohen, S. A. (2020). The brand value continuum: countering co-destruction of destination branding in social media through storytelling. *Journal of Travel Research*, 59 (8), 1506-1521.

Maruntelu, L. C., & Dumitrascu, E. (2012). Emotional marketing as a strategy of relational marketing. *Ovidius University Annals, Series Economic Sciences,* 12 (1), 1037-1040.

McCabe, S., & Foster, C. (2006). The role and function of narrative in tourist interaction. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 4 (3), 194-215.

McShane, L., Pancer, E., Poole, M., & Deng, Q. (2020). Emoji, playfulness, and brand engagement on Twitter. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 53, 96-110.

Meier, T., Boyd, R. L., Pennebaker, J. W., Mehl, M. R., Martin, M., Wolf, M., & Horn, A. B. (2018). *LIWC auf Deutsch: The Development, Psychometrics, and Introduction of DE-LIWC2015*. Retrieved from https://osf.io/tfqzc/ (Last accessed: October 13, 2020).

Moin, S. M. A., S. Hosany, & J. O'Brien. (2020). Storytelling in destination brands' promotional videos. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 34, 1–12.

Moscardo, G. (2020). Stories and design in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research,* 83, 1-12.

Pennebaker, J.W., Boyd, R. L., Jordan, K. & Blackburn, K. (2015). *The development and psychometric properties of LIWC2015*. Austin: University of Texas at Austin.

Peräkylä, A., Henttonen, P., Voutilainen, L., Kahri, M., Stevanovic, M., Sams, M., & Ravaja, N. (2015). Sharing the emotional load: recipient affiliation calms down the storyteller. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 78 (4), 301-323.

Rossolatos, G. (2020). A brand storytelling approach to Covid-19's terrorealization: cartographing the narrative space of a global pandemic. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 18, 1-10.

Ryu, K., Lehto, X. Y., Gordon, S. E., & Fu, X. (2018). Compelling brand storytelling for luxury hotels. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 74, 22-29.

Sashi, C. M. (2012). Customer engagement, buyer-seller relationships, and social media. *Management Decision*, 50 (2), 253-72.

Tsionas, M. G. (2020). COVID-19 and gradual adjustment in the tourism, hospitality, and related industries. *Tourism Economics*, published online June 12. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354816620933039.

Tulloch, J. (2014). Ethics, trust and the first person in the narration of long-form journalism. *Journalism*, 15 (5), 629-638.

Van Laer, T., Escalas, J. E., Ludwig, S. & Van Den Hende, E. A. (2018). What happens in Vegas stays on TripAdvisor? A theory and technique to understand narrativity in consumer reviews. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 46 (2), 267-285.

Wallace, E., Buil, I. & de Chernatony, L. (2012). Facebook 'friendship' and brand advocacy. *Journal of Brand Management,* 20 (2), 128-146.

Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism Management,* 31 (2), 179-188.