Chapter 5

People Make Places, What Do Stories Do?
Applying Digital Storytelling Strategies to Communicate the Identity of Cities and Regions

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this chapter is to explore how cities and regions can use digital storytelling strategies to reach and engage with their target audiences. Despite the growing body of literature regarding digital storytelling, the contributions and examples about regions and cities are still scarce. This chapter analyses the storytelling strategies of promotional campaigns regarding three cities and two regions around the world. Using a theory-driven framework, each storytelling example is dissected and interpreted. This study demonstrates that digital storytelling is worth consideration, as it offers a relevant set of advantages for marketing and communication managers, and enables the development of the place image and a consistent communication of its identity that can be co-created with various stakeholders, including the target audiences. It also shows that there are a diversity of approaches that can be adapted by place branding strategies, namely in terms of narrative, perspectives, and medium components.

INTRODUCTION

Cities and regions have long felt the need to affirm their individuality and identity as they need to position themselves in the global context, namely to influence potential visitors' behavior (Vinyals-Mirabent &

Mohammadi, 2018, p. 91). They are living, working, and studying spaces for different target audiences, investor sites, as well as tourism destinations. Clearly, communicating with such diversified audiences is challenging. Zenker (2018) stresses that city marketing and branding is a crucial part of urban governance, as they help attract not only tourists, but also inhabitants and investors. Indeed, these strategies aim to develop an attractive image and positive reputation (for different stakeholders and target audiences). The image and identity of places are acknowledged as fundamental for communication, as they capture people's attention and foster their imagination (Szromnik, 2016, p. 130). In such a context, storytelling has become an integral part of places' communication strategies in order to promote and differentiate destination brands online (Youssef, Leicht, & Marongiu, 2019, p. 709). Without surprise, local governments and cultural organizations are encouraging the adoption of storytelling campaigns due to their efficacy with respect to the touristic and economic success of a region (Bassano et al., 2019, p. 18).

This chapter argues that digital storytelling is a particularly effective strategy to create a strong and consistent place identity. Indeed, regions and cities are full of stories, and their online presence can be a determinant success factor, as it allows greater reach and interaction with target audiences, creating proximity and familiarity that is expected to enhance positive achievements for tourism and the economy as a whole. If a story has enough appeal and interest, it can spread through social media and potentially be shared around the world, becoming viral. With the right storytelling skills, the stories' potential spread and reach on social media can result in influencing millions of people (Lund et al., 2018, p. 273). Overall, this strategy gives great power to brands to improve connections with their consumers (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012, p. 189). Digital storytelling can help cities and regions achieve greater awareness, effectively reach their target audiences, and create value to the local stakeholders. Storytelling allows for the initiation and strengthening of relationships between actors. As such, it can effectively mobilize and unite public and private actors on multiple governance levels, creating synergies, and overall contributing to development of the place (Hartman, Parra, & de Roo, 2019, p. 96).

In spite of the relevance of the topic for practitioners and governments, and the growing body of literature regarding digital storytelling, the contributions and examples applied to place brands are still scarce, especially concerning cities. Building on this gap, the main objective of this chapter is to explore how cities and regions' marketing and communication managers can effectively use digital storytelling strategies to reach and engage with their target audiences. Despite the fact that cities and regions communicate to several targets, from local stakeholders, to investors and visitors, both the literature on digital storytelling and the campaigns disseminated online by local authorities often focus solely on tourists. Obviously, when exploring local identity, the messages conveyed are also expected to positively impact on other targets, namely the local stakeholders. Consequently, this chapter builds on contributions made by the literature on tourism and communication, analyses the use of place storytelling namely targeted at tourists, highlighting whenever possible the implications for general targets. Considering that there is a diversity of approaches that can be adopted, namely in terms of narrative, perspectives, and medium components, the chapter critically analyses five digital storytelling campaigns of both cities and regions, primarily targeted at tourists. Using a theory-driven framework, each example is deconstructed and explored in order to compare its characteristics and to understand its ability to effectively position the city or region. Overall, this chapter provides interesting cues for cities and regions' communication managers, demonstrating that storytelling can effectively promote place identity, create a reputation, and offer relevant opportunities to distinguish among places in today's global market. It is shown that in spite of some common characteristics of the campaigns analyzed (e.g., classic three-part structure, the use of music and tagline, positive emotional content), both cities and regions from distinct locations are

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