# Research Progress and Trend of Storytelling in Marketing Based on Literature Search Visualization Tools: From Independent Creation to Co-creation by Enterprises and Consumers

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**Abstract.** This paper uses HistCite and VOSviewer, literature search visualization tools, to analyze the hot research topics of storytelling in marketing and their logical relations which will provide a basis for understanding and wider adoption of storytelling in marketing in practice. With the aid of HistCite, it was found that storytelling in marketing involves brand storytelling and consumer storytelling. Topical map of storytelling in marketing using VOSviewer in WOS Core Collection database shows Hot topics includes the theoretical basis of narrative the driving factors and effects. Historical evidence reveals that storytelling in marketing is shifting from independent creation of enterprises and consumers towards enterprise-consumer co-creation. Then, in combination with literature on storytelling in marketing in Elsevier and CSSCI databases, a review and comparative study were made on the research hotspots. Finally, a framework for research on storytelling in marketing is set up on the basis of the visualization analysis of the literature.

**Keywords:** storytelling · value co-creation · archetype · HistCite · VOSviewer

## 1 Introduction

Storytelling accounts for an important means of image promotion. It has become a popular tool among enterprises to build corporate images and make forays into new markets [1]. Underlying every successful enterprise is a dazzling brand story [2], and behind every U.S. presidential winner are inspiring life stories of personal charisma [3]. Be it a nation, an enterprise, or just an individual, storytelling turns out a crucial means of marketing [4]. Good storytelling lies at the heart of marketing [5], and storytelling in marketing has become a new research hotspot in the domain of marketing [6–8].

Storytelling, strictly speaking, is a research topic of narrative studies, with relevant works in such domains as literature, sociology, communication, management, and marketing. As narrative studies advance and storytelling in marketing gains growing popularity in managerial practice, storytelling in marketing receives increasing research attention [8, 9]. A systematic study of literature on storytelling in marketing, the research network, and the interaction of contributing factors can provide a basis for understanding and wider adoption of storytelling in marketing.

## 2    Methods

The HistCite and VOSviewer are used to analyze the citation context, keywords, and development trajectory of the top 50 articles among the 238 works on brand storytelling in marketing from WOS Core Collection. It was found that there are two dominating research topics — brand story and consumer story, and there is a trend to shift from independent creation by enterprises and consumers to co-creation. Given the requirements of analysis by HistCite and VOSviewer, articles on storytelling in marketing from other two databases—Elsevier and CSSCI, are collected aside from those from the WOS Core Collection database; a review of research frontiers on brand story and consumer story is made from three perspectives—independent creation by enterprises, independent creation by consumers, and enterprise-consumer co-creation; and a framework for research on storytelling in marketing is constructed.

## 3    Findings

### 3.1    Citation Network of Literature on Storytelling in Marketing Based on HistCite

In the present work, the citation graph analysis software HistCite is used to analyze the literature search results and the citation relations between articles to explore the development trajectory of research on storytelling in marketing and identify the distribution of most-cited articles. With articles on storytelling in marketing from WOS Core Collection as samples, the HistCite software is used to identify the key literature and authors in the field of storytelling in marketing and plot citation sequence diagrams, with a vision to provide a quick and all-round review of storytelling in marketing research.

It is found that following keywords like storytelling, marketing, and research, two other keywords — brand/ brands/branding and consumer/consumers are the most frequently cited (Fig. 1), suggesting that "brand" and "consumer" are two important topics in storytelling in marketing.

The citation frequency, to some extent, reflects the impact of the cited article in the research domain [10]. The five most frequently cited articles in the Core Collection database are from the following authors: Woodside, Sood and Miller [6], Hsu, Dehuang and Woodside [11], Woodside [12], Megehee and Woodside [13], Gilliam and Flaherty [14], as shown in Fig. 2. Woodside turned out to be a co-author for four of these five frequently cited articles, implying that Woodside is a key author of works on storytelling in marketing. The article "When consumers and brands talk: Storytelling theory and research in psychology and marketing" by Woodside, Sood and Miller published on Psychology & Marketing is the largest node, and another article "Brand-Consumer Storytelling Theory and Research: Introduction to a Psychology & Marketing Special Issue" Woodside published on the same journal is the second largest node. These two articles are core literature on storytelling in marketing, where the keywords are brand/brands/branding and consumer/consumers. Both revolve around the two topics of brand story and consumer story, where brand stories are narrated by enterprises, and consumer stories are narrated by consumers.
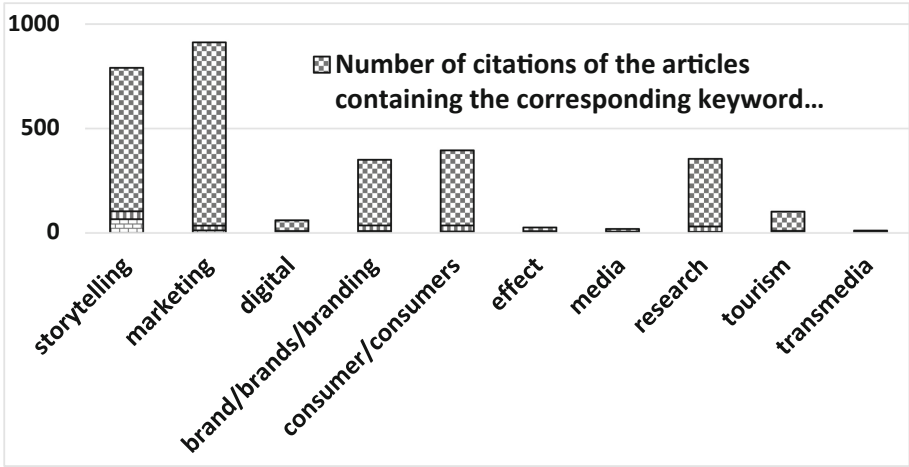
**Fig. 1.** High-frequency keywords in literature on storytelling in marketing in WOS Core Collection
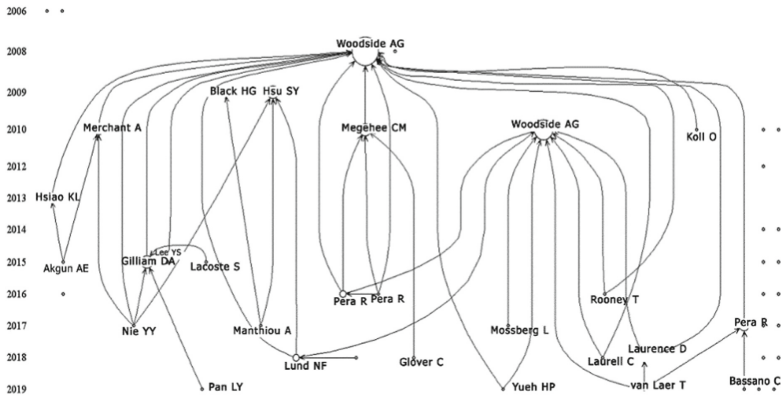


**Fig. 2.** Citation map of articles on brand storytelling in marketing in WOS

Research works on storytelling in marketing from the perspective of enterprise-consumer co-creation have been increasing since 2017. Pera [15], Lund, Cohen and Scarles [8] and Bassano, Barile and Piciocchi et al. [5] mentioned storytelling in marketing based on enterprise-consumer co-creation, and distinguished it from independent creation by enterprises or consumers alone. They have also established enterprise-consumer story co-creation models from different angles, which marked the start of research on co-created storytelling in marketing and a shift from independent story creation by enterprises and consumers to their co-creation.

## 3.2  Hot Topics in Storytelling of Marketing

### 3.2.1  Hot Topic1: Theoretical Bases of Storytelling in Marketing Research: Archetype and Plot

Narratives is one of the hot topics which is the theoretical bases of storytelling in marketing research. (Fig. 3). Be it brand stories or consumer stories, works on storytelling in marketing strategies focus on two theories: the archetype theory and the plot theory [16].

Archetype is defined as a representative image, ideal or model that mainly exists in myth, literature, and arts, and is principally an unconscious image pattern beyond cultural boundaries. Wertime [17] is the first who applies the archetype theory to storytelling in marketing research. Woodside, based on Wertime's work, sorted out 12 archetypes for brand stories: explorer, hero, creator, ruler, siren, outlaw, transformer, sage, loyalist, caregiving mother, jester, and magician. These archetypes are interwoven into brand stories to shape a brand, allow consumers to experience as the leading character by relating to the archetypes in the story [18, 19].

Archetypes are also used in consumer stories to create images. Rebecca et al. [20] found on Couchsurfing, an online travel blog community, that there are archetypes in the couch-surfer's stories, including explorer, hero, creator, ruler, sage, caregiver, member, innocent, jester, siren, magician, and specter, and more than one third define themselves as an explorer, an archetype that has strong thirst for new experiences and constantly overcomes challenges.
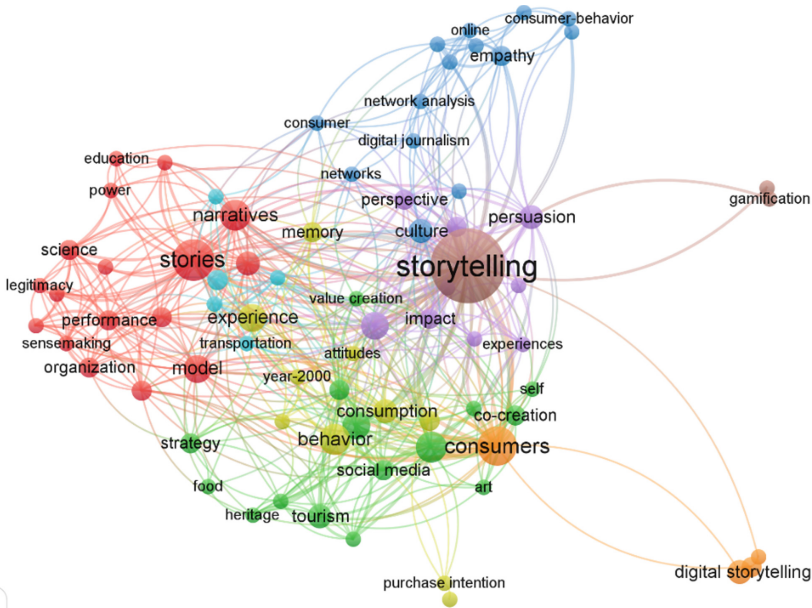


**Fig. 3.** Topical map of storytelling in marketing using VOSviewer in WOS

Archetype theory aside, another theoretical basis for storytelling in marketing is the plot theory, which comprises of the classical plot theory and the plot structure theory.

Delgado and Fernandez [21] analyzed the plot of Spanish brand stories based on the classical plot theory and found that "nirvana" was the dominating plot, followed by "exploration".

Classical plots also prevail among consumer stories. Research on the shared stories by couch-surfers revealed that individual sharing is often a clear trigger that awakens the leading characters or engages them in tensions so that they will take actions towards their goals, start a journey full of crises and turning points before coming to an epiphanic end [22]. Carmela parsed travel blogs by backpackers and found that their stories can be divided into "stories of challenge" and "accounts of novelty and learning" [23].

### 3.2.2 HOT TOPIC2: Driving Factors of Brand Story and Consumer Story

In brand storytelling in marketing, the primary driving force of brand stories is to create and manage brand images by storytelling in marketing. Besides, brand stories are abstract and shapeless, and a key step for a consumer to fall in love with a brand is to experience the brand story via the service environment; the more coherent the self-brand connections, the richer the brand imagination [24], so using brand stories to market services accounts for another driving factor of brand storytelling in marketing. Bitner [25] proposed that the service environment factors include the hardware environment, spatial layout and functions, enterprise labels, symbolic signs, and decorations. For consumers new to hotel brand stories, well-designed service settings boost the consumer's imagination of the brand when they experience the services [26]. Mccabe and Foster [27] maintain that the service environment is a stage where the hotel delivers the brand stories and essence to its customers. In a stage-like service environment, consumers experience the story-based brand services, getting entertained and having enjoyable experiences.

In consumer storytelling in marketing, stories are often used to express feelings and share personal information, such as individual perception, attitude, preferences, and behaviors; continued and consistent expression and social interactions allow consumers to build their expected social roles and self-images [28]. Aside from giving expression to one's voices, the need to discover and change oneself are psychological drivers for consumer storytelling in marketing. Travel stories shared by tourists on social media after trips cannot only help express their feelings, but allow to see who they really are and hence fulfil their need of self-understanding [29]. Tourists not only seeks the experience at the destination, but explore their own feelings when they are experiencing at the destination. In addition, the sense of belonging to a community accounts for the social driver for consumers to create and share their stories. Consumer experience no longer refers only to product experience; instead, it is more about relationship experience [20, 30, 31], and the value exists not only in the object of consumption, but in post-consumption sharing. Last, in sharing economy, a nascent commercial model, consumers become producers and play a crucial part in hospitality, taxi-hailing, farms, catering, and manufacturing businesses.

### 3.2.3   HOT TOPIC3: Effects of Brand Story and Consumer Story

*Effects of Brand Story.*  Research suggests that the effects of brand stories are shown in two aspects: brand management and customer service management (Fig. 3).

The effects of brand stories on branding involves the three aspects: first, compared with conventional marketing methods, brand storytelling allows consumers to take in the meaning and philosophy of brands in a quick and effective manner, and delivers the core value of brands [33]. In addition, brand storytelling attracts employees and stakeholders, delivers to them the core value of brands, improves financing and recruitment outcomes [34], and helps shaping the brand image. Meanwhile, telling stories that encourage and attract consumers, and using narratives to transform the positive effects of the brand will enrich or reshape the brand image, expand markets [35], and achieve efficient PR marketing [36, 37]. Brand storytelling also endows a brand with life and personality [38], introduces beneficial and unique imagination to a brand, affects consumers' perception to a brand, and thereby achieves brand differentiation from competitors, establishes brand reputation [39], and improve consumers' impression of the brand [40].

*Effects of Consumer Story.*  The effects of consumer stories include improving personal image, enhancing the sense of belonging and increasing reputation. In storytelling, the narrator not simply presents the object, location and event, but weaves their personal memories into the fabric of objective existences, making stories a tool for self-expression. Travel stories are not mere narration of travel experiences, but mirror the tourists' feelings. Blogs provide a platform for tourists to share their stories, their feelings, reproduce memories, and make reflection. Tourists, when creating their travel stories, understand themselves better [23] and unveil their hidden value and power. Moreover, storytelling not only delivers the storyteller's views to the audience, but creates emotional ties. In a virtual community, consumers are always drawn to authors with "similar" or "identical" experiences, "play roles" in the story and relate to the storyteller, which forms a trust and worship relationship with the storyteller, getting obsessed or even becoming a fan [41]. In this interactive relationship, both the storyteller and the audience get a sense of community and belonging. Last, individuals are producers in the era of sharing economy. Stories provide meaning to a brand and improve the branding effect; likewise, stories help individuals to find their position, enhance their strengths and uniqueness, draw their target audience, build up their reputation and achieve self-marketing [42].

### 3.3   Development of Storytelling in Marketing: From Independent Creation by Enterprises and Consumers to Co-creation

### 3.3.1   Causes for the Shift from "Independent Creation" to "Co-creation"

Cocreation has become a hot topic Recently (shown in Fig. 3) The causes for the shift from independent creation by enterprises and consumers to their co-creation are explored from two perspectives: the social media and the consumer.

As the Internet changes the ways of connection and interaction between enterprises and consumers and between consumers, enterprises are shifting from the "enterprise-centered" paradigm to the interactive "enterprise-consumer collaboration" paradigm; value creation is shifting from independent creation to co-creation, and value co-creation

grows into a focus of research and practice in marketing management [43]. Some enterprises co-evolve with two special consumer groups—opinion leaders and the civilian center, which gives birth to two paths towards value co-creation marketing: one is building trading media with opinion leaders to boost common consumers' cognitive confidence in the brand; the other is building communication media with the civilian center to improve common consumers' emotional confidence [44].

As social media (forums, travel and consumer blogs, social platform, etc.) emerge and grow, consumers are playing an increasingly active role in brand narratives [45]. The stories are spread as fast as they are created, indicating that brand owners no longer have complete control of their brand or the meaning of their brand [46].

### 3.3.2  Research Perspectives Towards Co-creation Storytelling in Marketing

*Open-Source Branding.*  When brand stories are spread among users through social networks, users may generate different versions of the story according to their interests and personalities. This process of co-creation is defined as open-source branding by Fournier and Avery [48], where consumers can revise or comment on brand stories created by the marketer, and consumer stories gradually change, dilute, or dissolve the original brand stories. Open-source branding provides a way for collaborative storytelling in marketing between enterprises and consumers.

"Years ago a person, he was unhappy, didn't know what to do with himself; he go to church, start a revolution, something. Today you're unhappy? Can't figure it out? What is the salvation? Go shopping." [47] Obviously, shopping (buying or spending) has, obviously, provided a crucial tool for self-expression and identity recognition; commodities and brands are just the media for transmission of value, and by connecting themselves with the brand, consumers use brand stories for self-construal [24]. The brand hence becomes an outcome of collaborative improvisation between enterprises and consumers. In social media, consumers play different roles: they are storytellers and listeners, and they are both directors and audiences.

*Semi-finished Stories.*  Enterprises provide consumers with the necessary digital platforms and "semi-finished brand stories" like brand-related topics [15], encouraging them to generate and release brand stories that combined the semi-finished tales with their life experiences — this accounts for an important means of marketing for enterprises [48]. Instead of trying to reach consumers and drawing attention by promotion means, marketers now need to provide topics and tools for communication, to make conversations with target customers and opinion leaders to draw constant attention from consumers. Social media thus become a space where enterprises communicate with customers to draw consumers' attention and manage their images. In that process, customers are actively engaged to provide their personal stories, complete the brand story with enterprises, and gain emotional and relationship experience [39].

*Collaborative Interaction.*  Bassano et al. [5], Niels et al. [6], Xu et al. [22] have explored the co-creation storytelling in marketing model by enterprises and consumers on social media from the angle of collaborative interaction, and found that enterprises and consumers collaborate and change roles in the marketing process.
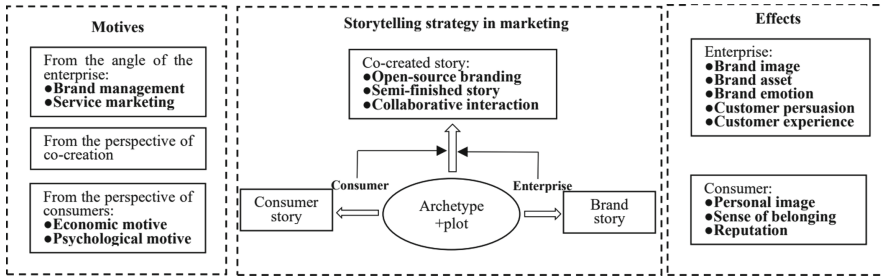
**Fig. 4.** Framework for research on storytelling in marketing

In storytelling in marketing, enterprises who used to be the leading character of storytelling in marketing on the stage now go backstage, serving as a curator or an organizer of social media contents. In the "ambassador" promotion series of VisitDenmark, the tourist administration is no longer the brand storyteller, but invites social media users to post photos taken when they travel in Denmark and share their stories behind the photos; the photos selected by the Administration are then uploaded to the Facebook album of VisitDenmark. In the "Umbria on the Blog" initiative, the enterprise only needs to sponsor ten selected bloggers for a trip to Umbria and invites them to post their travel stories on blogs.

In the meantime, consumers now become the leading character in storytelling in marketing. They "perform" on the stage set up by the enterprise and construct roles they expect to play, with the brand as the background of their stories. In the two examples mentioned above, the enterprise encourages tourists to recreate and share their traveling experience at the destination. Enterprises and consumers thus co-create the story at the destination through interaction, rendering the destination unique and appealing. Through co-creation storytelling in marketing, consumers receive the position and recognition they expect, while enterprises improve their brand awareness and reputation.

## 4    Conclusions and Prospects

### 4.1    Conclusions

Overall, storytelling in marketing remains a new research topic for the time being [2]. In the present work, two types of stories — brand story and consumer story, are summarized based on analysis of literature on storytelling in marketing; meanwhile, based on the shift from independent creation of enterprises and consumers, three aspects of causality, the driving factors, specific strategies, and effects in storytelling in marketing are extracted to build a framework for research on storytelling in marketing (Fig. 4).

### 4.2    Prospect

#### 4.2.1    Applying Storytelling in Marketing of Enterprises and Consumers to Promotion of National and City Images

Most works on brand stories and image-shaping from the marketing perspective focus on stories of enterprises and consumers. In the future, it is feasible to apply the storytelling in

marketing strategies and methods that enterprises and consumers use in image-shaping and communication to national and city image shaping, and improve the image of a nation or a city.

### 4.2.2 Probing Deeper into the Co-creation Storytelling in Marketing Model from the Angle of Collaboration

Existing studies on storytelling in marketing take enterprises as the dominating role, whereas few explore the co-creation storytelling in marketing between enterprises and consumers from the angle of spontaneity of consumers. The specific models, incentives, and influencing factors of consumer engagement in co-creation storytelling in marketing are rarely studied, and future studies can be made from the angles of enterprise-consumer collaboration and value co-creation.

### 4.2.3 Exploring the Outcome of Storytelling in Marketing from the Consumer's Perspective

Despite the plenty of works devoted to the motives of consumer engagement in storytelling in marketing, studies on the outcome variable of storytelling in marketing from the consumer's perspective are rare. It is crucial to explore how consumers benefit from storytelling in marketing, and future research can be made in this regard by combining theories on experience consumption and communication. In addition, the positive experience that storytelling in marketing gives to consumers is emphasized in existing works, but studies on the negative experience are rare [2]. Future studies can be made to explore the negative impacts of storytelling in marketing on consumers.

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