The Dynamics of Social Media Storytelling: An Indian Digital Audiences Perspective

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Abstract. Social media storytelling has connected souls in the new world of digital technologies. Stories have touched the hearts and souls of human mankind. Be it listening to grand mom's bedtime tales, reading a novel or comic book on the couch, or being engrossed watching thrillers on big and small screens. With new-age digital technologies, social media users are documenting their personal stories in a free-flowing conversational styles on popular social media networks for online audience engagement.

In view of this backdrop, the researcher attempts to explore the genesis of social media storytelling networks and its growing connect with the audiences worldwide. The paper attempts to understand and deep dive on the power of social media storytelling with audiences through successful brand stories on rapid spaced-digital and social media platforms.

The researcher concluded that social media stories are extremely powerful form of digital communication with the shorter attention span of young and old audiences. Social media stories can create millions of emotional bonds in achieving business, social, cultural, economic, cultural, and sustainable goals.

Keywords: storytelling · social media networks · audience engagement · emotions

1 Introduction

Storytelling has evolved, like the way communication technologies has shaped our digital societies. It has been a part and parcel of everyone way of life—right from listening to grandma's bedtime tales to expressing our emotions through digital communities' platforms. In these dynamic times, social networking platforms have created both enabler and multiplier change effects in the world of storytelling. Through the power of social media storytelling, it has helped to create compelling narratives to build stronger creative, social and business digital communities.

In fact—it has evolved from 'WE' to 'ME' form of storytelling. Since the beginning of 21st century, people have documented their stories about their personal life experiences and day to day happenings on social media formats. Interestingly, social media storytelling has become an indispensable tool towards achieving long term sustainable business goals. The primary goal of deploying social media tools is to build a consistent brand loyalty among all stakeholders—which is slowly the most preferred digital marketing tools.

2 Literature Review

Over the past decade, media have undergone a major fundamental shift in term of its understanding communication and its varied influential styles. While the popular communication theories like Shannon & Weaver Model, Agenda Setting, Users and Gratification, Hypodermic Needle Theory and others were primarily focused on the one-way communication and emphasized that the feedback process is highly influential in nature.

However, with the rise of social media, the erstwhile communication theories have posed different challenges to existing media related studies in the age of social media. To understand this perspective, the researcher has embarked upon understanding of theories of communication technologies. From Marshal McLuhan to Mark Posters, communication theorists have evolved new media theories with the emphasis on convergence, interactivity, audience and accessibility.

Giraud Eva [1], New Media Theory focused on the implications of digital technologies. He emphasized that it is the converging technologies that is responsible for creation of digital culture in terms of aesthetic and social-cultural configuration. Mark Poster strongly suggested that the Internet of the future would be an enabling platform for consumers, producers and distributors [2]. With this school of thought, the researcher felt that 'Social media' is the power of digital media technologies and the Internet as an enabling platform.

Carr and Hayes [3] has termed social media as Internet based channels that allows users to interact asynchronously or real time to both diverse and niche audiences. The interaction with audiences is to those who derive value and perceive from user generated content.

Moreno and Koff [4] felt the term social media could be termed interchangeably to new media and interactive media which provides endless content creation opportunities to both consumers and creators of media. Hence, they felt they could be manipulatable, compressible and interactive.

Weber and Grauer [5] strongly believed through their study that storytelling is an effective strategy in communication through the power of innovation. The author felt that for any stories to be popular on digital platforms, it must delve deeper as to what constitutes innovation understanding as well as the developmental aspects of positive behaviour. Through their series of experiments, the participants were exposed to innovative experiments to in terms of high and low narrative quality styles as well as the messages that were expressed on social media sites. The author concluded that innovation plays a crucial role in understanding quality narratives on social media.

Lund, et al. [6] interesting research paper on the power of social media storytelling in destination branding. The authors explained as to how social media users are perceived as storytellers who plays the dual role of co-creators of brands. By doing so, they attempt to influence perceptions and buying behaviour. The author explored that destination and tourism brands must cope with real realities where the storytelling strategies forms a larger part of marketing and branding decisions. They suggested a unique interpretation of brand engagement and stimulating techniques to create a long-lasting experience.

Ridder and Bauwel [7] paper has investigated the perspectives of how young audiences understand the perspectives of gender, relationships and sexuality on Netlog--the

social networking site. The author argued that social networking platforms are important online spaces for intimate stories where there is voicing of different opinions. These stories are perceived as representational media practices through diverse media cultures. The author concluded that intimate stories emphasize on creativity, authenticity and anonymity on these networking sites.

3   Research Objectives

a. To explore the social media storytelling timeline down the ages and the reasons behind its growing popularity.
b. To deconstruct the meaning of social media storytelling as a popular storytelling form.
c. To understand the innovative social media storytelling networks and techniques as a tool for powerful audience engagement through successful brand stories.
d. To be able to understand the impact of social media storytelling in audience engagement.

4   Research Methodology

Research Time Frame: To study the varied objectives of this paper, the researcher has chosen the period from 2016–2019 for the purpose of the study. Based on the induction research approach, the reason behind this period was chosen primarily because there was a rise in the number of Indian digital audiences as well as the growing popularity of stories being narrated on social media both by consumers and businesses.

Qualitative Research Methodology: With limited research studies being done in the Indian perspective, the researcher has adopted primarily the qualitative research methodology. Through the combination mix of narrative and content analysis, the researcher primary focus of narrative analysis was to gain insights on the various aspects and purposes of social media storytelling and its audience engagement.

Through content analysis, the researcher analysed through different varied digital data content like blogs by social media experts, social media news portals, media marketing and branding journals that concentrated on Indian context. It also deployed the different perspectives of brand storytellers by logging into the social media handles to be able to understand and study different social media campaigns with impactful brand stories.

Data Collection Techniques: As the research paper is qualitative in nature, the researcher has relied on both primary and secondary data collection techniques. By primarily data collection, the researcher conducted a series of interactions with select social media experts primarily based out Mumbai & Pune. This is because of the sizeable presence of social media agencies and web production firms where social media campaigns and strategized and executed. Through secondary data collection, the researcher logged into various web portals, social media networking, blogs and vlogs to understand the viewpoint of digital audiences and its set of experiences and emotions.

Qualitative Data Validity: For validating qualitative data of this research paper, the researcher has adopted the data triangulation techniques to check and establish data credibility. Under the data triangulation, the researcher has identified a set of data sources like social media portals, blogs and e-journals. Based on this data triangulation was later classified on digital audiences, storytelling formats (to understand the nature of emotions), social media networking sites, audience engagement and its importance. The researcher has also relied on the data which is reflected in terms of the social media followers, likes, tweets and online subscribers to authenticate the credibility of the website.

5 Result

Part A: Understanding the Origin from Oral Storytelling to Social Media Storytelling

The Origin in a Nutshell: From Cave Drawings to Social Media Storytelling
Storytelling styles & techniques has been passed down generation to generation by word of mouth. It has evolved right from the times of cave paintings to the virtual chatrooms on the digital platforms.

Mendoza [8] describes storytelling is an intrinsic human characteristic. It originated with visual stories like cave drawings (Chauvet Cave in France) and **Hieroglyphics (Ancient Egypt) thousands of years ago.** It then shifted to oral traditions—which stories in the form of songs and poetries have descended from one generation to another by word of mouth. Thereafter, storytelling progressed to written, printed and typed stories through Phoenician alphabets. These were formed into words and narratives.

According to her, the power of technology has allowed human beings to enhance all forms of storytelling down the years—right from printing presses, photography, motion pictures, radio, television, World Wide Web & social media platforms. It has given mankind the ability to become visual individuals [8].

Lambert [9] described that communication technologies has created an ocean of imagination where it has invented content creation tools to shoot, sample and share media through search engines, blogs, podcasts, iPods, smartphones and tablets. This has been possible through emergence of giant media conglomerates like Apple, Microsoft, Google & Facebook.

These giants have given rise to prosumers—where content creation, distribution and monetization lies with the content creator through new media platforms. This has provided tremendous opportunities to create content from iPhone apps to produce and edit digital content through creative social media projects & build their own digital communities for sharing their stories.

Dichotomising the terms social media & Storytelling Into 'Social Media Storytelling'

Social Media: In simple words, social media are interactive technologies that helps enables people to network, share opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives with

each other through interactive platforms. Axel Schultze explains social media intrinsically by bring into line digital technologies and communication needs. He defined: "Social media is the collection of tools and online spaces available to help individuals and businesses to accelerate their information and communication needs" [10].

Storytelling: According to the National Storytelling Network's has interpreted as follows: "Storytelling is the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a story while encouraging the listener's imagination" [11]. Adrienne [12] strongly believed that 'Storytelling is a behaviour that is unique to our species. While every generation adds to a new narrative, storytelling is one of the things that defines us as human with the rest of the animal kingdom. Through stories, it attempts to help us to understand ourselves and the world that we are living in and create history" [12].

Social Media Storytelling: Several academicians and practitioners are using the words social media storytelling in different contexts and usage of social networking platforms. Lately, the concept of social media storytelling has been popularly associated with businesses, marketing and communications.

In this context, social media storytelling has been interchangeably coined by industry practitioners as *Brand Storytelling* or *Business Storytelling* or *Corporate Storytelling*. Hence, the researcher felt that the usage of social media is to tell your brand stories through different forms of social media content and networks.

As a social media storyteller, you play the role of a creator and the voice of any brand through consistent audience engagement, and simply not a gimmick or tactic to sell your products or services [13].

Social Media Storytelling Networks

Storytelling through social media interaction helps to be touchpoints with all types of target audiences. Depending on the type of target audiences, social media storytelling is an interactive process whereby you narrate your emotions by sharing or personal experience through varied conversational both offline and online context through different types of social media networks.

Hootsuite-a social media management consultancy firm has grouped the different social network as per the functional capabilities from the perspective of the marketers. They have listed ten types of social media networks [14].

a. **Social networks:** These are termed as relationship networks which helps people to connect with people, brands and non-profits organizations online. These kinds of stories are expressed on platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn & Twitter ranging from product awareness, market research findings, reputation building, employee relations and much more.

b. **Media sharing networks:** These kinds of social media network enable marketers and business firms to share their photos, videos and live platforms online to their audiences. Gaining popularity these days, media network platforms are Instagram, YouTube & Snapchat where stories are used to create brand awareness, audience interaction and lead generation.

c. **Discussion Forums**: Hailed as the oldest forms of social media, discussion forms to the likes of Quora, Reddit & Digg are excellent platforms for high audience engagement. In most context, they share their views, opinions and thoughts by protecting the privacy of the users online.

d. **Bookmarking and content curation networks:** Pinterest & Flipboard are examples of content curation networks where there are platforms to discover, save, and share new trending visual content. Through innovative visual storytelling appeals, it proves to be effective in driving website traffic, brand promotion and stakeholder engagement. It is ideally suited for professionals with high-skilled creativity and imaginative skills.

e. **Consumer review networks**: With e-commerce and online start-ups booming, consumer review networks to the likes of Zomato, Yelp, TripAdvisor and much more helps us to find, review and share information about your brands, products and services. Businesses and marketers are cashing on consumer review networks to improve customer relations and grievances.

f. **Blogging and publishing networks:** Ideally suitable for content marketing, these kind of networks like WordPress, Tumblr & Medium helps marketers to publish, discover and comment online. It is highly effective towards audience engagement, brand-building and lead generation and sales. Through these platforms, they could opt for different blogging formats like vlogs, photo-logs and many others.

The Innovative Social Media Storytelling Techniques

Social Media Storytelling is unique in its own way. Jade Nguyen—a content creator and social media strategist believes that: Storytelling is powerful only if triggers communications [15]. Both are sync in with each other. Stories that connect with people is hailed as one of the highest forms of social communication. She strongly advocated that storytelling has psychological superpowers in terms of powerful marketing and communication tool. A social media storyteller should be able to raise personal connections and deeply attachments with the brands through the power of emotions, action, memory and value [15]. Depending upon the usage of social media networks, social media storytellers can utilize any platforms depending upon the target audiences, brand personalities, archetypes, emotional appeals, and other factors.

a. **Facebook Storytelling:** Facebook storytellers have an upper hand in terms of its creativity and imagination. Unlike the limit in terms of posts and words, Facebook storytellers are exploring multiple ways to reach out their stories depending on the storylines. You could possibly create a story in a long post form with 'See More Options'. For example, The Humans of Bombay Facebook Page (1.1 million viewers) is the classic example of social media storytellers. This platform chronicles the journey of individuals with positive and inspiring human-interest stories [16]. Other forms of Facebook storytelling formats are *'Creation of Facebook Photo Albums'*, *'Long Facebook videos', 'Going Live on Facebook'* and *Sequencing of Facebook Ads* are newer formats of Facebook storytelling [17].

b. **Instagram Storytelling:** This type of storytelling format is currently popular in rage. Here the visual storyteller could attempt to create a visually appealing Instagram

profile. He/she could narrate the same with three to nine separated visuals or videos to create series of Insta grids. To illustrate, Sabyasachi—India's leading fashion designer (with 3.4 Insta followers) creates stories to showcase his latest Indian bridal and vintage jewellery exclusive collections through captivating photographs and videos attired by Bollywood celebrities. Each Insta grid has a story of a line or two describing his inspirations [18]. The most popular form of Instagram storytelling is the creation of boomerangs or short videos of 60 s which is gaining popularity among Indian brands.

c. **YouTube Storytelling:** Among all popular content types, videos are the most popular form of storytelling formats. Compared to other forms of storytelling, video format captivates emotions and create maximum impact. To illustrate this point, Google Search: Reunion (3.32 min video) — by Google India proved the celestial impact of YouTube storytelling. To prove the effectiveness in terms of search engine usage, the story creator—Ogilvy India—visualized the theme of Partition India-Pakistan of 1947. Having separated millions of families and friends overnight, the plot revolves a granddaughter who decides to surprise her grandfather on his birthday by reuniting with his best friend from Pakistan after six decades. She reunites and demonstrates through the Google Search Engine Product. The impact of this story has enabled Google India to hit 13,678,350 views on YouTube as on March 1, 2019 with nearly 7,000 comments [19].

d. **Twitter Storytelling**: Twitter storyteller's popular uses a 140-character limits to create a storm or a brand story through hashtags. Very popular in journalistic stories, these hashtags are used in the tweets for trending stories.

e. **Infographics Storytelling:** Infographics is a popular visual storytelling content. To simply put it, infographic is the collection of imagery, minimal text and charts to provide a simplistic view of any subject or story [20]. In other words, it is the visual representation of any data to narrate into a story. To illustrate a point, Digital Authority Partners—an Indian Financial Planning Consultancy-used the simple educational infographic—Five Strategies for Financial Product Marketing in 2019. It's used to explain the five strategies to adapt in tapping right audiences in selling financial products [21].

Part B: Why Social Media Storytelling is Critical for Audience Engagement?

Over the last few years, the storytelling formats have undergone a drastic revolution in the world of content generation. Lately, social media storytelling is deployed for triple-fold purposes in audience engagement. One, social media stories are narrated to entertain, inform and empower through the power of audio-video visuals to grab faster attention. Two, social media stories are becoming interactive and conversational in nature. Three, social media storytelling has gained its popularity for marketing, branding and advertising goals.

Studies have proven that social media storytelling techniques has heightened business performances—irrespective of capital size of organizations. Today, social media storytelling requires a strong business acumen. If created and utilized in an effective manner, it could achieve in achieving high audience engagement—creating either of the positive and negative impact.

a. **Heightened Brand Awareness:** Popular food delivery aggregator-Zomato—has used social media to narrate interesting stories targeting to the niche young food lovers. When the popular crime thriller detective television serial—CID was coming to an end after 21 years, Zomato created the famous dialogue from the serial into its brand communications on Facebook & Twitter Campaigns. It created a Facebook Post—*Daya, Dharwaza Khol Do.* We shall be with you shortly. The tagline was Zomato for all cases of hunger. Likewise, to promote the Goan Food Festival, Zomato has created interesting taglines—*Keep it Shrimple*—to convey the Goans love for shrimps [22].

b. **Product Demonstration & Launch:** Social media stories could be effective for product demonstration, teasers and launches. They create a create impact when it is created by CEO/Founders of Business corporations. For example, in 2007, Steve Jobs used storytelling to introduce iPhone. Likewise, Sunder Pichai-CEO of Google India narrated a four-minute video on YouTube by explaining new features of how to use Google Photos. It created a narrative as to how to improve photo-quality and sharing [23].

c. **Skyrocketing Start-ups Boom:** Social Media storytelling is a continuous process. Nykaa—a popular e-commerce beauty platform has extensively used content strategies driven by users and promotes on social media platforms with a fan following of over 1.4 fan following [24]. In a span of short time, they have created opportunities for wannabes beauty on YouTube Channel-Nykaa TV to provide guidance and secrets on fashion and beauty through tutorials. Their channel has very interesting storytelling formats like *Expert Masterclass, What's trending, Vlogger Tutorials and Hindi videos* [25].

d. **Social Change, Tool for Empowerment:** Interestingly, real life stories through social media can create a powerful impact. SBI Life Insurance—A General Insurance Firm has run a social media campaign 'Thanks a Dot' where breast cancer survivors narrated their journey through #RealLifeRealStory their personal and professional struggles to seek financial independence. The purpose behind this campaign is to highlight to the people the power of touch through simple self-breast examination across urban and rural India.

e. **Developing Long-Lasting Customer Relationships:** One classic example that defines long-lasting customer relationships through social media storytelling—is Parle Products. Known for this popular chai-biscuits combination for many years through its famous Parle-G communication campaigns. Veteran in the biscuit segment, Parle-G has emotionally touched the chords of customer across all generations.

- To renew the brand loyalty, Parle G focussed on social media campaign--#YouaremyParleG—a crowd sourced storytelling campaign—where the brand requested consumers to write their descriptions of who they would associate their lives with Parle G. Besides this, they have asked consumers of different age groups to share their brand-connect through photographs, infographics and videos through weekly contest [26].
- Interestingly, Parle-G has attempted to give meaningful and educative stories for young children and adults. Most of the emotions expressed through these stories

focussed on love, emotions, family bonding and friendships. Most of these themes are promoted through YouTube platforms.

6   Result and Discussions

Based on the detailed analysis, the researcher has made her select concluding remarks after comprehension of powerful social media stories.

a. Social media storytelling formats are always high on emotions as audience's engagement is in real time conversation.
b. Social media stories are always relatable. They represent relatable characters and are influenced from real life experiences and personalities.
c. Social media stories lead to increased multi-audience engagement—particularly across all types of customers in the world of business or brand stories**.**
d. Social media stories emphasis on different kinds of emotional connect with its audiences—from happiness to sadness. It high on humanizing a brand and its transfer cultural values and beliefs.
e. Social media storytelling needs constant innovation and experimentation to maintain high audiences' engagement.

7   Conclusion, Suggestions and Recommendations

To conclude, the author has concluded that storytelling on social media runs extremely high on emotions in terms of digital audience engagement. Two, the content on social media is influenced from life experiences in Indian households. It is interestingly to note that Indian digital audiences utilize social media stories to express their emotions. The researcher suggested that the future scope of research could possibly deep dive in the areas of narrative analysis of social media stories with comparative analysis of social media stories on different social media networks. Other possible areas of studies should also emphasis on social media storytelling for varied types of audiences on the basis of gender, income, economic class and cultural upbringing.

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