

EXCELLENCE IN DIGITAL STORYTELLING:
EXPLORING HOW BEST PRACTICES OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING ARE EMBRACED
BY PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATORS

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“For people who are interested in new ways of telling stories, I’d encourage them to forget about that . . . Just find something very small and focused that’s really compelling to you. I think too many people are worried about how to tell their story, rather than focusing on what story you’re trying to tell. If you have something unique to say, and you spend enough time exploring that idea and what it means to you, you’ll find a unique way of expressing it.”

—Ian Dallas

Abstract

This study examined how professional communicators attribute value to digital storytelling in the workplace. Specifically, this study analyzed the gap in how communicators are adapting to the changing digital landscape. The study further sought to investigate the following questions: How and to what extent do organizations embrace best practices? How and to what extent does digital storytelling affect the organization's reputation? And how and to what extent is executive-level management aware of digital storytelling's potential ROI and its impact on organizational reputation. This study is novel as it explored best practices in digital storytelling. While the value of storytelling is evident, there is room to explore how digital storytelling is embraced in organizations as we emerge into a new post-pandemic communications world. This study evaluated best practices with an extensive literature review, followed by 12 in-depth interviews and a content analysis that analyzed peer-reviewed digital storytelling content. Finally, ten key takeaways were recommended by the researcher for communications professionals to implement the best practices in digital storytelling.

Key Words:

Digital storytelling, communications, public relations, organizational reputation, reputation management, multi-media platforms, video content, audience engagement, user-generated content

Acknowledgements

To start, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the family, friends, colleagues and professional mentors that have supported me through my journey in the Master of Communications Management (MCM) program.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Terry Flynn, for his ongoing support, mentorship and valuable knowledge throughout this capstone journey. I have been fortunate to have you as an instructor right from the start of the journey up until the finale. I appreciate your infinite wisdom and encouragement, your signature statement “sometimes you got to just shoot the puck!” has been a constant reminder to keep going. Thank you for your encouragement and patience. I would like to also extend my gratitude to the faculty members at MCM, thank you for enriching the MCM learning journey and providing the support that has fostered both my professional and personal growth.

To my MCM 11 cohort, we truly are a community and I’m beyond thankful we have crossed paths. The MCM program has been a wonderful experience because I have learned from each and every one of you.

Special thanks to my close friends and loved ones for checking in on me, I appreciate the walks, phone calls, coffee and poutine breaks. I am deeply grateful to my parents and little brother for the immense support and loving humour through this process, without you this would not have been possible. To my wise grandma, thank you for teaching me resilience and encouragement and to find moments of happiness when times are uncertain.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this capstone to my brilliant uncle, from the start of this journey as a scholar, you have always been an advocate for education. I miss our insightful talks. You would often inquire about the projects I was working on, whether it was academic or a dance performance since childhood. Every time I would visit you, I brought a portfolio gathering all my work and we would sit, discuss and celebrate. Although you are no longer with us, you have taught me that when you are a student of life, the learning never stops. This capstone is for you.

Ashika Theyyil, June 2020

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Introduction

Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of human communication, and as Kent (2015) acknowledges, it is an essential tool for connecting individuals and fostering relationships in the field of public relations. In recent years, digital technology has changed how we tell and consume stories. In this new and evolving media landscape, newsrooms are shrinking, and multi-media journalism and communications platforms are moving far beyond traditional radio and television formats (The Conference Board of Canada, 2015). Edelman (2019) argues that “the most important change [in the PR landscape] is it’s not sufficient to go through media to tell stories. You have to go directly through companies’ channels or social platforms” (para.6).

Innovative communication channels have transformed public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). There are now countless multi-media platforms available for telling stories, including infographics, podcasts, data-visualizations, and, of course, traditional print. But while media technologies have changed, storytelling remains an invaluable tool for public relations practitioners to break through the noise and connect with their audiences. Coombs and Holladay (2018) state that communication is “about creating and sharing meaning” (p.383). For the audience of today, personalized experiences and engagement are essential (McCarty, 2019). Public relations practitioners need to look beyond producing and managing digital content towards creating experiences. By better understanding the methods used to communicate stories and engage with audiences, we can establish best practices in driving experiences.

Coombs and Holladay (2018) assert that storytelling in the changing digital media landscape is a significant challenge in contemporary public relations practitioners. We often hear that content is king, but engagement is the key to connecting with stakeholders. McCarty (2019) insists that traditional linear storytelling is inadequate and proposes that communication

professionals create stories around experiences: “mass audiences transform into audiences of one through micro-targeting and personalization, content consumers increasingly want to be a part of the story” (Para. 12). Grunig, Grunig, and Ehling (1992) point out that organizations lead and deliver best practices when they have a strong relationship with their stakeholders, an argument supported by Coombs and Holladay's (2018) assertion that “organizations and stakeholders understand one another through their stories” (p.388). As Coombs and Holladay (2018) note, interaction enables engagement, and audiences want to “share their ideas, perspectives, expectations, and experiences they are to learn from one another” (p.384).

The theory of narrative transportation outlined by Coombs and Holladay (2018) holds that “people becom[e] travelers when they encounter texts... transported from their reality as they return changed by the experience” (p.386). Telling linear stories through traditional means is no longer enough to capture an audience; far more important is how we connect, and this starts with the communication media we use to convey our stories engage with stakeholders. While the value of storytelling is evident, there is a need to explore how organizations use digital storytelling.

Literature Review

What is Digital Storytelling

Compelling stories have the power to engage audiences and evoke a myriad of emotional responses (Stone, Machtynger & Machtynger, 2015). Across cultures and throughout history, storytellers try to capture their listeners' attention and connect to them on a personal level through stories (Silvia & Anzur, 2011). In the views of Stone et. al. (2015), storytelling is most successful when the narrative told satisfies the audience's emotional and imaginative needs. The strongest links between storyteller and listener are embraced according to Forman (2013), when stories touch the emotions, experiences, and memories of the audience.

Digital storytelling operates the same as its traditional counterpart, except that the stories are shared through a number of online digital platforms (Alexander, 2017). New technologies enable digital storytellers to present narratives concisely (Forman, 2013). Multimedia stories, for example, can engage audiences across a range of social media platforms (Silvia & Anzur, 2011). A series of experiences, digital stories can transform the emotional and psychological states of their listeners (Stone, Anderson, & Cook, 2019).

In corporate communications, digital storytelling is most effective when it includes a diversity of voices (Couldry, 2008). Forman (2013) argues that "people want interaction and engagement rather than being broadcast or lectured to," making storytelling a valuable tool for business (p. 6). Digital storytelling allows an organization to communicate with a broad audience (Couldry, 2008). For example, complex data can be more simply represented through narrative visualizations (Stone et al., 2015). Digital storytelling according to Alexander (2017) "represents the world around us using a shared infrastructure" (p. 374). These narratives can reframe

important issues, encouraging audiences to develop empathy and new understandings of difficult problems (Couldry, 2008).

The Shift in Digital Communications

In 2006, the prime storytelling platforms used by businesses were newsletters, presentations and annual reports (Ioffreda & Gargiulo, 2008). In other words, media storytelling was limited to the traditional media of print, radio, and television/video. Today, public relations professionals have the opportunity to utilize a variety of multimedia platforms (Silvia & Anzur, 2011). As newsrooms shrink and traditional media outlets disappear, many organizations need to be their own newsroom (The Conference Board of Canada, 2015). Broad access to technology has leveled the playing field among both organizations and individuals, allowing them to compete and communicate effectively in a changing media landscape (Argenti & Barnes, 2009). Many organizations now produce their own broadcast content (Davidson, 2016). Rather than relying on traditional outlets, in-house production of quality content to high editorial standards for new media has become the new norm (Dimitrov, 2020).

To describe how businesses now publish content for mass media, Dimitrov (2020) uses the analogy of bread: The original organization or communicator is like the wholesaler that supplies the ingredients and makes the bread; they then pass it to the retailer who distributes and sells the bread/digital content. Companies like Google, Amazon, and Netflix, which are both content producers and distributors, are rapidly changing the landscape of information distribution (Dimitrov, 2020). To get some sense of how much more content is being created and distributed, Rockwell (2020) stated during an IABC webinar that more videos have been produced by organizations in the past 30 days than had been produced by television networks in 30 years.

According to Bonow (2019), “trust is the currency of interactions” (4:16:00) and public trust has in traditional advertising methods has declined significantly. Argenti and Barnes (2009) similarly acknowledge a decline in the trust consumers feel for businesses. Another reason for the decline in public trust is widespread misinformation and “fake news” (Chen & Cheng, 2019). To build trust, businesses must evoke positive sentiments with the public (Locke & Ziegler, 2016). Organizations can combat fake news by sharing relevant content to help guide consumers (Chen & Cheng, 2019). Public relations professionals can now bypass traditional journalism and reach out to consumers directly (Silvia & Anzur, 2011). In the views of Argenti and Barnes (2009), organizations have shifted away from simply providing information towards creating content that resonates with their market audience.

Stories give meaning to raw data (Stone et al., 2015). Forman (2013) asserts that “in a business environment where distractions and lack of trust dominate, stories can cut through the busyness to capture attention, engage and influence people, create meaning, exemplify values and gain trust” (p. 6). Stories work most effectively when they resonate with key stakeholders and inform rather than promote or sell (Hurchison, 2016). As such, digital stories should engage with smaller groups rather than target a mass audience (Lambert, 2006, as cited in Couldry, 2008). Chen and Cheng (2019) also recommend that brand managers take seriously the importance of providing credible information to consumers, many of whom often fail to evaluate content with a critical eye.

Trends and Media

Humans need to connect with one another. Technological platforms, if used effectively, can fulfill this need and at the same time be profitable for businesses (Argenti & Barnes, 2009). Testimonials, memes, personal photos, and hashtags continue to be popular among consumers

and will continue to serve as a common means of online communication (Swann, 2019). Stories that are told across different digital platforms are also known as *transmedia* (Jakus & Zubcić, 2016). Blogs are another effective way for organizations and their target audiences to interact (Kelleher, 2009). Alexander (2017) points to opportunities to tell stories to consumers through eBooks, podcasts, virtual reality, and even games. Jakus & Zubcić (2016) also identify “interactive media, text, photographs, illustrations, motion pictures, audio and graphics” as just some of the media available for digital storytelling (p. 99).

Storytelling through audio is particularly appealing to younger audiences (Newman, 2019). Podcasting is a very popular medium, and audiences are growing as more self-published content becomes accessible (Forbes Agency Council, 2019a). The best podcast content uses descriptive audio to connect the audience with the story (Forbes Agency Council, 2019a). Podcasts are also unique because they appeal to niche groups. Unlike conventional radio broadcasting, podcasters do not need to reach a broad audience to achieve a successful return on investment (Forbes Agency Council, 2019a). Podcasts that are relatively short but still deliver valuable content have the highest retention rates (Forbes Agency Council, 2019a). The most popular podcasts, according to Carey Kirkpatrick (as cited in Forbes Agency Council, 2019a), are those that function as “serialized storytelling rather than a single public relations opportunity” (para. 6).

Live video is another trend projected to continue growing through 2020 and beyond (Forbes Agency Council, 2019b). Rockwell (2020) found that communications professionals consider video an important platform and are developing new ways to use technology to communicate with external stakeholders. Game-changing new media, such as 360-degree videos and augmented, virtual, and digital reality also have the potential to create powerful emotional

connections between users and organizations (Gross et al., 2019). In one example of these new technologies, National Geographic produced an immersive virtual reality, 360-degree video series that allowed their magazine readers to become participants in their story and get up close and personal with wildlife (Gross et al., 2019). Companies such as Apple, Google, Microsoft, and Facebook are also adopting video content to share experiences and communicate with audiences (Hurchison, 2016).

Spector (1995) argued, new trends in how organizations engage stakeholders through digital technologies will continue to develop. Regardless of the digital platform they use to tell stories, companies will engage most thoroughly with audiences when the story communicates a broader narrative of brand value (Gross et al., 2019). It is important for companies to focus on delivering their message to the target audience, rather than focusing on using the most advanced, up-to-date technology (Spector, 1995). One key to compelling stories is choosing the right channels through which to communicate (Bonow, 2019). Effective storytelling builds on the unique elements of each medium to find new ways to interact with the audience (Silvia & Anzur, 2011). Antonietta Mirabelli, a panelist at the annual Canadian Public Relations Society (2019) conference discussed, audiences feel heard by an organization when it focuses less on the technology itself and more on the solutions they provide their stakeholders.

The Emergence of User-Generated Content

Social media gives stakeholders an active voice online (Argenti & Barnes, 2009). According to Swann (2019), user-generated content will continue to be a significant part of the internet. Organizations need to ensure that stakeholders and target customers view their brands positively in the online environment social media can be a useful venue for businesses to understand their stakeholders' interests (Smith, 2012). By disseminating digital stories through

social media, businesses can encourage their target customers to respond and interact. However, Chen and Cheng (2019) note that it “is important to keep in mind that information shared on social media has not gone through editorial judgment for fact-checking”; because widespread misinformation can generate distrust from the public, brand managers must be careful to provide reliable information (p. 9).

Sharing common interests is one-way social media encourages dialogic communication (Smith, 2012). When audiences respond to online information and stories, they become active participants in the conversation (McMillan, 1999). The most compelling digital stories invite consumers to add contribute (Forman, 2013). In response to the organization’s efforts, consumers join online forums and communities to share and learn more (Dass, Sethi, Popli, & Saxena, 2019). In a study conducted by Brubaker and Wilson (2018), users were most engaged and responsive when posts were visually appealing and provided space for public conversation. Furthermore, audiences will be more inclined to share stories when organizations focus on how the stories make audiences feel rather than the specific message (Stone et al., 2015). For example, Starbucks’ *Putting People First* campaign succeeded because it encouraged stakeholders and the public to share their ideas (Argenti & Barnes, 2009). Essentially, businesses that collaborate with consumers can establish a sense of community develop empathy towards their brand (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Public relations professionals, then, are responsible for empowering consumers to contribute to the story (Pera & Viglia, 2016).

Public Relations Involvement in Digital Storytelling

Multimedia communication, or the presentation of stories on several different platforms, involves skill sets from both public relations and journalism (Silvia & Anzur, 2011). Using media platforms to distribute content produced for targeted advertising, however, is mostly under

the role of public relations professionals, who work to engage audiences and to build and sustain strong relationships (Jakus & Zubčić, 2016). Verghese (2019) recommends that public relations professionals focus on digital storytelling, and the responses to a 2006 survey by the International Association for Business (IABC) suggest storytelling is the most effective public relations for businesses to connect with the public (Ioffreda & Gargiulo, 2008). Storytelling can play important roles for businesses to inform, persuade, and inspire stakeholders, and to further public advocacy and thought leadership (Forman, 2013). When businesses understand consumer wants, they can craft compelling story experiences for them (Gross et al., 2019). Besides, employees are often a company's best ambassadors, so involving employees in the process of crafting and telling stories makes them more effective (Forman, 2013). As Grunig (2006) states, the public relations field has a great opportunity to engage with and empower the public through storytelling. However, many organizations still face resistance to developing creative storytelling methods from senior leadership without an interest in communications (Ioffreda & Gargiulo, 2008).

Relationship Building with Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling offers the promise of interaction with a wide audience (Couldry, 2008). By leveraging the appropriate digital channels, companies can engage with and build strong relationships with stakeholders (Kaul et al., 2015). Stories generate positive sentiments when they reframe the brand so that consumers can connect on a human level (Thomke, 2019). Kelleher (2009) has found that digital content that mimics human features such as a voice is the most effective at building trust. In a study of 136 interviews from members of the mechanical watch industry, Thomke (2019) discovered that analogies that humanized their products, like associating a watch with a beating heart, successfully combatted negative consumer perceptions about their quality.

Communication is strongest when an organization balances their interests with those of its publics (Grunig, 2001). Stone et al. (2015) identify three categories of audiences that organizations should consider: tough battlers, friendly helpers, and logical thinkers (para.8). The tough battler views the world through the lenses of challenge and conflict, while the friendly helper values trust and openness, and the logical thinker relies on facts and information (Stone et al, 2015). The key to building and maintaining relationships with the public is ensuring that the different types of consumers feel that their needs are satisfied (Smith, 2012). The stories that brands share must add value to their stakeholders' lives (Hurchison, 2016). To ensure communication is not one-way, Singh & Sonnenburg (2012) argue that consumers and organizations should collaborate in creating stories. Their relationships are strongest when the stakeholders feel that their voices are acknowledged (Hung, 2007). Stakeholders trust an organization when there is a feeling of shared, mutual interests (Arthur Page Society, 2019).

To achieve symmetrical communications, “communicators keep their eyes on a broader professional perspective of balancing private and public interests” (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 28). Communication is symmetrical when both parties are equal participants in the conversation and achieve a mutual understanding (Duhé & Wright, 2013). According to Grunig (2006), the feedback loop created by symmetrical communication is important for building sustainable relationships. When consumers retain value from stories on media platforms, communications become more interactive and symmetrical (Duhé & Wright, 2013).

Although the goal of attaining symmetrical communication has been criticized as too idealistic, its purpose is to bridge the gap between the interests of an organization and its publics (Grunig and Grunig, 2008). Symmetrical communication encourages open dialogue between organizations and their key stakeholders. However, the scope of symmetrical communications is not necessarily limited just to key stakeholders. For example, van Ruler and Verčič (2002 as cited in Grunig, 2006, p. 18) argue that public relations professionals should consider the impact of their communications on society as a whole. In contrast, Roper (2005) states that organizations inevitably communicate asymmetrically communications since they have more power over the conversation than consumers. Macnamara (2016) agrees about the difficulty of achieving symmetrical communications, arguing that organizations prioritize sending messages over receiving. Similarly, Davidson (2016) identifies the inverse situation – when the public’s interests are prioritized over the business – as another challenge to symmetrical communication. Fawkes (2015) also argues that relationships between organizations and consumers lean towards asymmetry, particularly when viewpoints differ, and encourages organizations to engage with opposing views rather than censoring them. Thus Hung (2007) suggests that organizations

require long-term strategies and should not focus only on attaining symmetrical communication. The aggregative model (Davidson, 2016) is one possible alternative that is more attainable that does not rely on an equal distribution of power between parties.

When both parties' interests are met, a win-win situation emerges (Grunig, 2001). Broom and Sha (2013) assert that effective communications are essential to this goal. Hung (2007) writes that relationship management is necessary to build "solid, win-win relationships with strategic publics by listening to public concerns, garnering public supports and helping to incorporate publics' opinions in the decision-making process" (p. 469). Relationships with stakeholders are strongest when public relations practitioners address issues important to stakeholders (Smith, 2012). This type of relationship management is similar to boundary spanning, where communicators advocate for the public, and the interests of both the organization and the public are balanced. (Davidson, 2016).

Reputation in Digital Storytelling

A strong corporate reputation will enhance the value of any company (Dowling, 2006). Storytelling is a critical communications tool that businesses use to persuade, influence, and generate positive sentiment from stakeholders (Dowling, 2006). Dyer, Furr, and Lefrandt (2019) also recommend storytelling as a tool to enhance an organization's credibility and raise its reputational capital. Forman (2013) writes that stakeholders expect authenticity and accountability from the organizations with which they engage. After conducting a social engagement study, the Arthur Page Society (2019) reported that 75% of people do not believe that companies are truthful (p. 3). A brand will resonate with consumers only if it is trustworthy and meets their needs (Dowling, 2006). Organizations earn reputational capital when they show genuine concern for the public conversations that occur around the brand (Arthur Page Society, 2019). Thomke (2019) argues that memorable experiences and positive word of mouth contribute more to customer purchase decisions than fancy features or price. Thus organizations must provide relevant and transparent information to key stakeholders (Rhee, 2007). Dowling (2006) promotes storytelling as a tool for communicators to protect and enhance corporate reputations. Digital channels are a valuable avenue for organizations to communicate compelling emotional narratives (Arthur Page Society, 2019). When organizations tell meaningful stories, they build trust and credibility with their audiences (Newman, 2019). In the words of Dowling (2006), "the art of storytelling, [which] involves creating enough mystery and intimacy to result in a more favorable evaluation of the company" (p. 98).

Several different factors have been highlighted as important to effective storytelling. According to Fombrun, van Riel, and van Riel (2004), the stories most effective at enhancing corporate reputation have two significant factors in common: firstly, they showcase the

company's identity and express "who we are"; secondly, they demonstrate the value the company can offer. Gross et al. (2019) identify credibility, permission, and authenticity as the most important aspects of an organization's storytelling. Organizations establish credibility when their values align with consumer interests. Dowling (2006) also stresses the importance of aligning organizational values with consumer behavior: audiences view a brand as reputable when an organization fulfills its obligations to its stakeholders. Permission describes consumer belief in the brand's authority to share the narrative (Gross et al., 2019). Argenti and Barnes (2009) also list honesty, transparency, and consistency as the essential qualities of effective digital communications that promote brand credibility.

In the view of Singh and Sonnenburg (2012), interaction through storytelling can create brand value. They offer the example of Harley Davidson as a brand that has successfully built a strong sense of community, hosting events where riders connect and share stories that resonate with the brand. Another successful example is Starbucks-led digital story initiative *Upstanders*, which featured original consumer-generated stories (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). In both examples, digital storytelling generated goodwill and a positive brand reputation. On the other hand, Chen and Cheng (2019) found that "fake news" negatively affected consumer trust and Dowling (2006) warns that exaggerated claims and counter-stories can impact the credibility and reputation of an organization.

Best Practices Engagement and Dialogue

Screenwriter Robert McKee (as cited in Stone et al., 2015) warns that audiences prefer simple, brilliantly told stories to those that may be profound but are poorly communicated. The best stories entertain as well as inform (Silvia & Anzur, 2011). Effective storytelling articulates a

company's vision to its stakeholders (Dyer et al., 2019). For example, PepsiCo used storytelling to raise awareness of their "Passion and Purpose" sustainability program, expressing their environmentally oriented vision to consumers (Dyer et al., 2019). Collaboration between an organization and its key stakeholders is a key marker of excellence in communications (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). According to Rhee (2007), organizations build strong relationships with the public through ongoing and patient dialogue. Pera and Viglia (2016), however, note that companies may fear public backlash and are hesitant to gather consumer feedback.

Macnamara (2016) states that organizations create a gap between themselves and their stakeholders when they focus on delivering information without attending to consumers' responses. Audiences are more engaged in stories when they can participate and interact with the content (Jakus & Zubcić, 2016). Grunig and Grunig (2008) argue that two-way symmetrical communication is critical in an organization's public relations. Davidson (2016) agrees that equality in the dialogue between an organization and the public is key to the achievement of excellence in communications. In particular, dialogue gives a voice to marginalized groups (Davidson, 2016).

Brubaker and Wilson (2018) claim that online likes and sharing of content are the best metrics for measuring consumer engagement. The Arthur Page Society (2019) disagrees, arguing that simply counting likes and shares do not gauge users' sentiments. Davidson (2016) challenges organizations to engage with the public more profoundly and not view them simply as consumers. Dell, for example, developed content to help entrepreneurs navigate social media, organically generating connections, and strong engagement with the public (Arthur Page Society, 2019).

In their study on brand communities, Dass et al. (2019) found the highest levels of engagement occurs when the values and needs of both organizations and stakeholders are met. Gross et al. (2019) also note that audiences are most loyal to a brand when it connects to their identity. According to Stone et al. (2015), open-ended stories are most successful at generating such connections. Forman (2013) similarly asserts that the most effective storytelling engages stakeholders both emotionally and intellectually. Thomke (2019) claims that emotional engagement can lead to as much as 85% sales growth. Davidson (2016) urges public relations professionals to build strong relationships and foster two-way communication by “welcoming emotional, passionate engagement, [and] a commitment to make power transparent” (p. 160).

Research Problem

The existing literature demonstrates how organizational storytelling is adapting to the expectations of modern stakeholders. However, there is limited research on the application of these concepts to an evolving media landscape. In the publication *Innovation in public relations theory and practice: A transmedia narrative transportation TNT*, Coombs and Holladay (2018) significantly advance our understanding of how the sharing, development, and consumption of stories have changed due to new media platforms. This research examines how public relations professionals are responding to rapid changes in multimedia platforms and what this means for developing effective stories in the digital space. Coombs and Holladay (2018) propose transmedia narrative transportation theory as a gamechanger in public relations but also note the deficit in its practical application. This suggests that although communications professionals are aware of the theory, few are leading the way in applying it.

Research Questions

RQ1. How and to what extent are best practices for digital storytelling embraced in organizations?

Assumption: The author predicts that organizations are not following best practices in digital storytelling and that significant adaptations to the changing landscape are possible.

RQ2. How and to what extent does digital storytelling affect organizational reputation?

Assumption: The author posits that storytelling can significantly affect an organization's reputation. Further research should demonstrate digital storytelling's important contribution to organizational reputation. The literature suggests the value of cultivating shared experiences and connecting with stakeholders through digital storytelling.

RQ3. How and to what extent is executive level management aware of digital storytelling's potential ROI and its impact on organizational reputation?

Assumption: This question examines whether there is buy-in from the executive level of management for digital storytelling in a changing media landscape. The author assumes that there is a strong return on investment only when C-Suite members engage in storytelling.

Research Methodology

The literature review revealed a significant change in the digital environment that has affected how we tell and consume stories. While the literature recognizes digital storytelling as a valuable strategy, there is a need to investigate whether or not communications professionals are implementing best practices in digital storytelling. The researcher triangulated (Yin, 2014) information by combining the literature review, the findings from in-depth interviews, and a content analysis of digital stories to answer the research questions.

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews to provide insight through guided conversation were the primary method for this multiple-case study approach (Yin, 2014). Interviews help the researcher begin to understand the “why” and “how” (Yin, 2014) of digital storytelling in communication campaigns and the value it provides. The methodology applied in this study was cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) in March 2019. An MREB release form was emailed out to each participant to review. This detailed document included the study's intent, a sample of the interview questions, and consent forms. The researcher obtained verbal and signed consent from each interviewee to record the interviews (Stacks, 2017). The participants in this study were recruited through an email distributed by the researcher's professional network and LinkedIn messaging. The researcher also received recommendations from colleagues for potential interviewees. In total, the researcher interviewed 12 communication professionals that are “self-identified storytellers.” These individuals have published work in blogs and seminars and are

also participating alumni from the McMaster University Master of Communications Management (MCM) community. The interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length.

It is important to note that interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a disruptive time in the communications field, a majority of communication professionals were working on the front lines of the crisis and as a result, the volume of interview responses was negatively impacted by the pandemic. Since this was an overwhelmingly difficult period professionally and personally for some interviewees, the responses should be viewed under the lens of the crisis, and it is important to recognize that participants' perceptions were influenced by the crisis. Thus, the findings are reflective of this period in time. Some sentiments expressed in the findings would not have been relevant before this crisis. Respondents also shared insights on how the pandemic has shifted the role of digital storytelling during the crisis.

After the data was collected from the interviews, it was transcribed and coded by the researcher. After data collection, human coding was used as a method to understand the sentiment and context of the content (Macnamara, 2005). The researcher manually coded the data by themes using Microsoft Word tables and Excel spreadsheets to analyze the data. The researcher then applied the grounded theory (Yin, 2014) to identify reoccurring themes and patterns.

Digital Story Content Analysis

The primary data collection method for this research study was qualitative. In addition, a content analysis was performed to further strengthen the findings. The content analysis was conducted to examine how best practices in digital storytelling are applied. The researcher studied two platforms of shortlisted award-winning content pieces from 2018- 2019. To ensure

replicability, the content analysis examined data that was publicly accessible and peer reviewed. The first platform examined was '*The One Show*'. The One Show is a global award show that rewards the best campaigns in the fields of design and digital marketing. This prestigious platform has been operating for over 40 years and sets the highest standards in honoring creativity and ground-breaking ideas (One Show, 2020). Furthermore, the content was also analyzed from the '*Digital Dozen*' showcase. The Digital Dozen, affiliated with the Columbia University's Digital Storytelling Lab, is a renowned showcase that displays innovative narratives featured across a broad spectrum of multimedia platforms, including journalism, video, marketing, games, art, theatre, augmented/virtual reality, and experimental narratives. The Digital Storytelling Lab's purpose is to "break free of rigid, industrial-age classifications and evolve in ways analog media could not" (Digital Dozen, 2020). It recognizes a dozen creative and innovative digital media pieces annually.

The researcher also analyzed latent content (Stacks, 2017). Latent content is a set of variables that specifically focus on themes that occur in the content to derive insights (Stacks, 2017, p.145). The researcher created a criteria checklist based on the literature review that indicates key elements of digital storytelling. A total of (N=34) digital storytelling content pieces were reviewed and analyzed.

Results

To understand the extent to which organizations apply best practices in digital storytelling, data was gathered through in-depth interviews and content analysis. This research study recruited participants working in the communications industry as communications professionals, consultants, authors, creative directors, and immersive content creators who

demonstrated digital storytelling expertise. A total of 12 participants shared insights on the value of digital storytelling and its use in their respective organizations in the interviews. The participants reserved 45 minutes to answer interview questions (Appendix A). All participants agreed to remain unidentified; the researcher obtained verbal and written consent from each participant that was approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. A summary of the participant's field of expertise, years of industry experience, and region are captured below.

Table 1.
Occupation background of Interview Respondents

Participant ID	Occupation position	Location	Years of experience
A	Chief digital storyteller	Toronto, ON	25 years
B	Immersive content creator (Augmented reality)	Toronto, ON	5 years
C	Digital media strategist	Toronto, ON	26 years
D	Head of brand and communications	Toronto, ON	14 years
E	Senior manager corporate communications	USA, North Carolina	33 years
F	Digital strategist	Toronto, ON	4 years
G	Social Media Public Relations Manager	Toronto, ON	12 years
H	Senior corporate communications consultant	Toronto, ON	35 years
I	Communications Specialist	Mississauga, ON	5 years
J	New Media Officer	Toronto, ON	3 years
K	Media production manager	USA, Maryland	8 years
L	Business storytelling author/Public speaker	Australia	27 years

RQ1. How and to what extent are best practices in digital storytelling embraced in organizations?

The results of this study found that organizations approach digital storytelling in unique ways. A wide variety of digital storytelling media were examined in the content analysis. The content analysis examined (N=34) short-listed digital stories hosted throughout North America, highlighting global contributions from 2018 to 2019. The majority of digital storytelling (Appendix B) was consumed by video (N=10), followed by virtual augmented reality (N=5), interactive websites (N=5), games (N=4), social experiments (N=3), immersive storybooks (N=2), social media content (N=2), AI (N=1), posters (N=1), and live immersive theatre (N=1).

To understand how digital storytelling is embraced in organizations, the interview participants were first asked, "how do you ensure you have a team that cares about delivering best practices in digital storytelling?"

In response, 41% (N=5) prioritized having an established team already equipped with digital skillsets and knowledge of storytelling techniques. Specifically, 25% (N=3) stated that the first step is onboarding talent who showcase the necessary skillsets. According to Participant G, "It's about finding individuals who are interested and passionate, it's about building a culture and making sure from a hiring perspective you are bringing in the right people". Participant D added, "Look for multi-skill sets when hiring people who have experience in a lot of different categories and channels". To describe effective storytelling, Participant H stated, "When you tell a story, you're telling a story that reveals something about your vision and your brand values."

58% (N=7) of participants stated that digital storytelling requires the whole team to work together and that ideas in digital storytelling are most effective when they involve the whole team: "You need to have that open discussion and dialogue, you want to have that diversity of

thought,” said Participant C. Participant K expressed a similar sentiment: “Everybody’s opinion is valuable, they should feel like they are part of the team, everybody needs to be heard”. In contrast, 41% (N=5) thought that the primary responsibility of digital storytelling rested on the communicator (See Appendix C). These participants stated that they are required to take the lead in their organizations. Participant B raised concerns about the role of the C-suite agreement in embracing digital storytelling: “It starts with the management level and then it will just become part of the process, as long as you continue to work at it, if I lose sight of that it is a trickle-down effect”.

To further understand the best practices in the workplace, the researcher asked participants to share their advice, resources, and inspiration for story development. Amongst the participants, 33% (N=4) said the best way to learn is to study award-winning campaigns and tailor those concepts to your organization. Two participants found inspiration reading case studies profiled in industry publications. Participant D highlighted valuable examples in North American publications, including, but not limited to, *Adweek*, *Strategy Magazine*, and various showcase awards. Participant C added *Tech Crunch*, *MIT Technology Review*, and *Fast Company* to the list of useful resources. Participant I found it effective to study companies with the same target audience in the same sector but with higher budgets.

The participants acknowledged that the digital space is changing. As a result, 33% (N=4) suggested adapting to the changing digital landscape by ongoing learning. One participant advised learning from experts in the field and attending professional development seminars. Participant B, an augmented reality content creator, drew inspiration and techniques from traditional media such as books and journals.

41% (N=5) of participants stated that organizations embrace best practices in digital storytelling when the intended audience is valued. The participants further emphasized the need to understand the target audience's habits and behaviors. Five participants agreed that both audience interest and meeting audience needs are fundamental concerns.

41% (N=5) of participants stated that digital stories are most effective when the narrative takes priority over trends in media technology. Participant J stated, "Just because there is a trend, doesn't mean it is the best platform". In a similar vein, Participant G said, "I feel that people sometimes get so focused on their channel of execution that they forget about the story itself, it is important to step away from the medium to come up with the story then figure out what specific medium is appropriate".

One interviewee who works as a media production director stated that digital storytelling is most effective when it engages with relevant issues occurring in the world. Participant K shared the example of the popular Disk Jockey (DJ) Dnice known for hosting live quarantine parties on Instagram from his living room during the 2020 global pandemic, connecting to people all over the world. The participant also suggested that storytelling on social media has changed during the pandemic and is in high demand: "People who are working behind the scenes are gathering audiences from hairstylists, makeup artists, and barbers. These people are telling their stories about the job they perform. There is an audience for everything".

33% (N=4) identified the communication of brand values as a best practice in digital storytelling. Participant H mentioned Patagonia as an example of a successful brand: "Patagonia tells stories that are based on their fundamental vision and values, the brand suggests you should buy what you need, why buy something new if you can repair something old? When you think of that, that's counter to the selling approach. This works because nobody is trying to sell anything.

What they are trying to do is just say, here's who we are as a brand. Here are things we value and a vision for how people can live better".

One participant who wrote about effective storytelling suggested that it is not enough to convey value solely by using words like "integrity," and that brand values should be demonstrated in the organization's actions. Another participant offered a different perspective, stating that products need exposure and awareness and recommended the marketing funnel, a sales-based strategy used to track the customer's journey from awareness to purchase, as the essential framework for best practices.

25% of participants (N=3) responded that organizations that prioritize storytelling in their communications strategy embrace best practices in digital storytelling. Participant G conducts thorough stakeholder analyses using the acronym RACE (Research, Action Planning, Communication, and Evaluation) as a model for developing strategic insights and establishing a foundation for storytelling. Participant B emphasizes the importance of an organization's internal culture in implementing the design thinking process. When asked to explain, the participant described the design thinking process, also known as rapid ideation, as a group of people sharing various ideas to reach a common goal. This strategy can be highly effective: because many people are working towards the same goal, they can bring a diversity of thinking to their project. Participant B continued, "There are a lot of people that work in digital storytelling that are not necessarily creative. I don't think that you have to be creative to work in digital storytelling, but you have to at least be open to creativity otherwise it is not going to work. Especially when I work with executives, you have to work at trying to integrate that creative". The summary for these findings is showcased in Appendix D.

RQ2. How and to what extent does digital storytelling affect organizational reputation?

The content analysis focused on examining concepts about reputation. Based on Gross et al.'s (2019) findings, the key factors in creating a strong reputation through storytelling are credibility, permission, and authenticity. The researcher measured credibility by identifying which cases informed the audience of the brand's identity and value. Upon examination of digital story content, 61% of content addressed credibility, 82% addressed permission, and 97% addressed authenticity. Additionally, 80% of content was interactive, while 58% provided value to the user. Overall, 91% of the content exhibited strong visual appeal, and 88% showcased stories from diverse points of view.

To understand how digital storytelling influences organizational reputation, the researcher asked interview participants to discuss their organization's reputation and if its reputation was evaluated and tracked.

All participants agreed that measuring reputation scores and tracking them over time is a marker of an effective reputation and indicative of a return on investment. Specifically, 58% (N=7) stated that reputation measurement is an essential part of analyzing reputation. Four participants spoke about online dashboards and how social media analytics measure the bounce rate on websites. Participant A stated, "data tells a story to me; if you are following the numbers, you can see how clients are responding and the combination of that tells a whole story". Participant G explained, "We do not put something out without measuring its impact to make sure that we have understood the intent". Similarly, six participants stated that it is important to understand how an organization's reputation changes before and after the launch of a digital storytelling effort. Participant C asserted that "Reputation and trust are long-term. You could erode it quickly, but it takes time to build". Three participants stated that regular tracking occurs

yearly to measure reputation scores. Two of these respondents further explained that regular tracking includes analyzing how sentiment changes with scores. The third participant used a return on investment strategy to determine if a strong reputation would lead to success.

Participant I stated, “Reviewing the campaigns and reports is generally important because it gives us leverage and eventually gets to dollars”. They went on to state that “Measuring the success of a program comes down to the analytics and the brand effort you put forward”.

Two participants noted that post-analysis helps to determine if the initial objective set before the effort has been met. Participant F stated that post-analysis reporting provides information on how audiences have conversations about the content: “It doesn’t ultimately have to come down to just clicks to the website. It comes down to did we grow our audience? Did we reach an audience that we may have not reached before?”

25% (N=3) of participants thought reputation in digital storytelling was highly effective when collaborating with other reputable brands to enhance the organization’s value. Two participants explained that when one brand is affiliated with other established, trusted brands, messages become more credible. All twelve participants believed that collaborating with other brands has helped leverage their organization's brand. Participant A observed that when partnering with other brands, “You have elevated yourself into the midst of these industry thought leaders”. The respondent shared a hypothetical example: “On the weekend I’m going to be hanging out with hip hop artist Drake. He said as long as I wear my COVID gear, I can go to his house. All of a sudden, I’m hanging out with Drake and my reputation goes up. Nobody else [at his house] knows me, but Drake wants to hang out with me, so I must be cool. It’s really about leveraging, borrowing the brand of others”.

Often, reputation is expressed and enhanced through the organization's mission, vision, and goals. The researcher asked interviewees if and how digital storytelling was embedded in their workplace's mission, vision, and goals. Interestingly, 41% (N=5) of participants stated that it was an integral part of their mandate (Included in Appendix E). However, 100% of participants (N=12) agreed without hesitation that reputation and digital storytelling are mutually bound concepts and that one cannot exist without the other. As a result, more than half of the participants stated that digital storytelling was the core of all activities. 33% (N=4) of participants felt that organizations should be honest, authentic, and intentional about their mission, vision, and goals. Participant A argued that the "Mission, vision and values reflect how we help our clients". Participant L stated that organizations should communicate values internally and then produce digital stories based on those ideas. According to Participant I, "It does not always have to be stating your exact mission or vision statement and having it scripted, it's a matter of looking at the magnitude of the story and understanding how we can get it out there to people". Participant I also felt that "The curation of content from the messaging to the copy is the way organizations engage with their users, reputation, and digital storytelling – it's the same; they are married at this point". Participant D stated that digital storytelling no longer is an isolated channel or tactic: "Everything we do is digital storytelling – almost every interaction people have with brands is in a digital space these days". Less than half of the respondents mentioned the user-friendliness of digital stories as a factor in having a positive impact on reputation. However, two participants who work at a junior level raised concerns about creating user-friendly experiences regardless of what digital platform is used. Participant B argued that "If something is going to reach a user in an engaging and innovate way, it needs to be easy for

them to use and understand and be enjoyable – it needs to at least maintain some kind of retention".

41% (N=5) argued that brand reputation should be considered in everything that an organization does, and two participants identified the COVID-19 crisis as a valuable time to build a reputation. Participant G suggested that "It's really about cultivating strong relationships internally to even find these stories". Speaking about the COVID-19 crisis, Participant H suggested shifting focus away from selling products: "Instead, thanking the people who work for the company and put themselves out there, that has a greater impact. I know students that work as Starbucks baristas and their commitment to the company has increased because they feel that the company is putting less emphasis on advertising and more weight on recognizing contribution".

RQ3. How and to what extent is executive level management aware of digital storytelling's potential ROI and its impact on organizational reputation?

To investigate the value of return on investment, interviewees were asked to share considerations and strategies for digital storytelling. The responses varied as the interview participants addressed different concerns.

When it came to the level of involvement and buy-in from the C-suite, 33% (N=4) of participants felt that it was valuable to have support from executive management. Two junior respondents stated that it makes a big difference when the whole company is on the same page. Participant B also stated, "There is a really big disconnect between executives and specialists, so you have to work at trying to integrate that creative; the C-suite does not understand what they are asking for, in digital storytelling, they are using specific buzzwords and have no idea what it

means” . Similarly, Participant C advised, “Listen to younger people that have experience with the digital platforms, trust them, it is important for senior leadership to be open to things beyond their comfort zone”. Participant L, another senior executive, argued that companies that produce corporate videos with enticing music and fancy settings fail to gauge the emotional aspect that makes a story: “it’s only a nice marketing video”. Participant A stated that techniques in traditional storytelling such as creativity will always be effective.

Four participants stated that a higher return on investment was dependant on the duration of the video content produced in digital storytelling. These participants equated short and concise videos to high levels of engagement. Two participants suggested the first 30 seconds determine if a user will continue to watch. According to Participant I, “Even if something is compelling, be mindful of length”. Participant G expressed the same sentiment, stating that “We receive videos that are five minutes long and we do want to promote it but in the first two minutes if it does not get to the hook of the story, no one will consume it”. One solution was proposed by Participant I: “We are trying to add a lot of subtitles. People won’t click on the audio but video, they can read subtitles if they are scrolling at work”. Participant I’s team has also tested the elevator pitch approach that frames a concise story that delivers its message in the first 10 seconds.

Half of the participants (N=6) indicated the importance of user-friendly content. The participants found that mobile-friendly digital stories that use plain language are highly effective. Participant G explained that “large words in sentences during a time of stress will trigger more questions, we have to make sure we are doing what we can to help”. 41% (N=5) emphasized the importance of creating content that is relevant to the audience, while also acknowledging the importance of user behavior and how the audience wants to consume the story. For example, even if the audience does not have access to content online, they might prefer printed memos

instead. Participant D emphasized the need to make content relevant to the audience's personal experience, asking "How is your presence on their phone or their computer relevant to their lives? You need to have relevance so that you are not tone deaf, also know what is going on in a broader societal context". Participant I stated that the most engaging content is both authentic and diverse: "Diversity is the biggest one, it is my pet peeve when I go to the doctor's office and see commercials or posters with the same family structure or same ethnicity in all of them". Participant L also stressed the importance of diversity and sharing different perspectives; not all stories need to be from the CEO.

Several participants raised the issue of having a content strategy as a proactive means of decision-making. 58% (N=7) had developed a content strategy specifically for digital storytelling. Participant J said that since there are multiple multi-media platforms, organizations must reflect on how stories are told. Participant B stated that when designing augmented reality stories, important considerations include, "What is the purpose of integrating this? What problem is it solving or what opportunity is it creating? And is this solution solved by integrating augmented reality? Because a lot of times it's not. A lot of times people just want to use digital storytelling or augmented reality because it is a buzzword and does not have a good use".

Participant H named five elements in a content strategy: purpose, audience, content, design, and technology. The participant explained the problems faced by the organization that does not follow this structure: "Often companies will start with technology first, they say we want to be on Instagram. They ask, 'what is a story we can tell on Instagram?' instead of thinking about the purpose of doing this. How does your audience feel about it? What kind of content is going to reach the audience? How does this look? Then figure out where the best place is". Participant K suggested that rather than looking at platforms separately, organizations should

have a unified approach so that a good story can be shared across multiple platforms. The participant referred again to DJ Dnice, who has boomed in popularity as a live Instagram DJ during COVID-19: “If Dnice became Instagram’s DJ and Youtube invited him to participate in a show, Youtube is where you’re getting all your tutorials, all your uplifting information. That content might go out to Twitter and Twitter is reposting central content that can be reposted and reshaped – Twitter can also make content go viral”.

Because digital media platforms are constantly changing, 91% (N=11) of respondents identified that the ability to adapt and learn is vital to thriving in the industry. Participant C pointed to a gap in training academics and PR scholars to adapt to analytics platforms, video production, editing, and podcasting, and suggested there is an opportunity to harness these skillsets starting in the classroom.

Participant B, an augmented reality designer, spoke about how technology can be used effectively to combine digital storytelling with the world around us, pointing to examples such as Pokémon Go and animal emojis on the iPhone. The interviewee shared the case of the mixed reality company Magic Leap that developed a large, 3D animated whale to crash into the middle of a school auditorium and spray water everywhere. Such opportunities are endless.

Because the in-depth interviews took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, more than half of the respondents addressed the pandemic’s influence on their outlook towards digital storytelling. Four interviewees strongly felt that pushing sales information was inappropriate during the COVID-19 crisis. “Newsletters and emails with sales during a time of distress seem desperate,” Participant C explained. Participant H added, “It shows that they are not thinking of me”. The participants agreed that emphasizing sales at a time of crisis is insensitive. Participant J observed, “I’m seeing a lot of stories appear related to cancel culture because there are a lot of

brands, small and big, that are latching on to COVID-19 to promote their products and services”. In contrast, two participants found that feel-good stories were better received. Participant H stated that even if a business is based around selling products, it is a good opportunity to shift the storytelling spotlight to employees working on the frontlines. Participant B, on the other hand, suggested that companies use this time to enhance their products and services: “It can present a lot of opportunities for transformation and new ideas, a window to our new normal”. Participant K explained the effectiveness of counter-programming: “No one wants to hear a story about quarantine, right now we want to hear a story about being free, being able to move the way we desire to”. Additionally, 33% (N=4) believed that establishing human connection during times of crisis is more effective in the long haul than promotional content. Participant H suggested that companies consider how they can be of service to their audience: “How can you make sure you are not spamming them by saying we are concerned but show it don’t say it”.

Discussion

Digital storytelling can create powerful, engaging experiences for an organization’s target audiences. Past research on this topic has focused on the changing nature of the media landscape. The present study has addressed the narrative transportation theory articulated by Coombs and Holladay (2018), which proposes that best practices in digital storytelling focus on audiences’ experiences. Previous research has not addressed the extent to which public relations professionals adapt to the changing media landscape and follow best practices. This research study explored these issues in order to recommend how organizations can employ best practices in multimedia storytelling.

RQ1. How and to what extent are best practices in digital storytelling embraced?

Prior to conducting the study, the researcher hypothesized that few organizations embrace best practices in digital storytelling, which suggests a great deal of room for improvement. One key best practice suggested by content analysis is the use of various media platforms, a recommendation also noted by Jakus and Zubčić (2016). Most of the digital stories examined for this study were video-based content, confirming assessments by the Forbes Agency Council (2019a) and Rockwell (2020) that video content is currently the most popular medium for digital storytelling. Statements by some interviewees further support these ideas. Participant K pointed to the popularity of live-streamed videos by Disk Jockey (DJ) Dnice during the global pandemic as one example of the successful use of live video. Participant A suggested that organizations can “make [stories] like a Netflix series, where you leave a cliffhanger at the end, these are techniques filmmakers have used overtime to take stories interesting for readers”, echoing a study by Alexander (2017) that found serialized storytelling was highly effective at engaging audiences.

Few interview participants stressed the need for a team equipped with multi-media skillsets. Only three of twelve interviewees stated that they actively search for new team members with digital skillsets. This could be a possible area for further development. Other participant responses support the argument made by Coombs and Holladay (2018) that the communications industry is slow to adapt to changes in media technology. Very few participants named digital storytelling as an important part of their organizations’ communications plans or indicated that they are actively looking for ways to learn from case studies, other successful campaigns, or industry leaders. These responses suggest that although there is widespread awareness of the opportunities available through digital storytelling, few public relations professionals are taking the time to learn and implement best practices.

This study did find, however, that organizations are more likely to embrace best practices when their internal culture prioritizes digital storytelling and collaboration. More than half of respondents declared diversity in thinking and perspective an essential element of team decision making. Such ideas are supported by the literature: Bonow (2019) states that trust between an organization is built through positive interactions, and Forman (2013) argues that a company's employees its best advocates.

Due to the rapid emergence of new trends, media platforms, and applications, organizations and creators can be overwhelmed by technological possibilities and options. Responses from interviewees support the notion previously advanced in the literature (Spector, 1995) that public relations professionals should prioritize the story they wish to tell and the experiences they wish to evoke in their audiences prior to choosing a particular media platform: most participants agreed that audiences engage more fully with stories that provide solutions to their needs than those that simply take advantage of a platform's technological capabilities.

RQ2. How and to what extent does digital storytelling affect organizational reputation?

The researcher hypothesized that storytelling could play a significant role in building organizational reputation, an argument that is partially supported by the study. Most respondents agreed about the importance of organizational reputation while also indicating the need for further development.

The researcher analyzed how organizations communicated credibility in storytelling, based on Gross et al.'s (2019) identification of credibility, permission, and authenticity as the key factors that create a strong reputation. Credibility was measured by how well produced content informed the audience about the featured brand, and examination of the showcased

content indicated that credibility scored lower than permission or authenticity, a finding inconsistent with the previous literature. One possible explanation for this difference could be a focus on engagement and interactivity rather than on promoting sales and brand identity. Singh and Sonnenberg (2012) suggest that this better enables audiences to participate stories. Similarly, Forman (2013) argues that audiences become active participants when they can contribute user-generated content to a story. Essentially, audiences resonate with brands that communicate their value rather than push sales.

The interviews also introduced the idea of collaboration with other brands to enhance credibility and value as a best practice in digital storytelling. All respondents agreed that it is crucial to leverage the brand recognition of industry leaders to promote one's own brand.

Participants agreed that efforts to build reputation through digital storytelling should be measured by how well they conform to an organization's overall goals. The Arthur Page Society (2019) has previously found that the measurement of online "likes" and "shares" failed to adequately assess audience sentiments. Some interviewees echoed this sentiment and suggested post-analysis and reputation scores as more effective means of evaluating storytelling efforts. The findings demonstrated that organizational reputation is a long-term investment that involves all of an organization's activities, and that the current global pandemic will be a testing ground for how many organizations will be perceived after the crisis.

However, even though all participants agreed on the importance of building reputation through digital storytelling, surprisingly fewer than half identified digital storytelling as a central tactic in their organizations' mandate or mission. This was a new finding that had not been addressed in previous literature. The lack integrating digital storytelling in the organizations

mandate yet recognizing it holds high value insisted there is a gap amongst valuing digital storytelling and actually implementing it in practice.

RQ3. How and to what extent is executive level management aware of storytelling's potential ROI and its impact on organizational reputation?

The researcher hypothesized that a strong return on investment only occurs when C-Suite members support digital storytelling efforts. Previous studies reveal widespread resistance to exploring new means of creative storytelling within senior leadership (Iofredda & Gargulio, 2008). Chen and Cheng (2019) argue that disinterest in digital storytelling among senior leadership as a failed opportunity to develop reliable and trustworthy content to communicate with audiences. The results of this study found a disconnect between senior leadership and junior specialists, which was acknowledged by both executive and junior-level participants in the interviews. Respondents argue that executive leadership should disregard popular technological buzzwords and instead trust junior team members to take the lead in developing new storytelling methods. Results also demonstrate the importance of a team approach to digital storytelling, backed by support from upper management. Evidently, there is room for improvement in how organizations implement digital storytelling. Academia also has an opportunity to develop training in multimedia skills for public relations professionals.

Content duration was also linked to return on investment. To create user-friendly content, creators must understand user behavior and how audiences consume content online. Participant I stated that the most compelling videos deliver their key message in the first 10 seconds. Participant D emphasized the need to make content personally relevant to audiences: “how is your presence on their phone or their computer relevant to their lives? You need to have

relevance so that you are not tone deaf, also know what is going on in a broader societal context”. Moreover, Participant A stated that techniques in traditional storytelling such as creativity are always important.

Overall, digital storytelling through multi-media platforms is most effective when organizations develop a unified approach that enables them to share stories across multiple platforms. Participant K illustrated this idea with the example of the DJ Dnice: “If Dnice became Instagram’s DJ and YouTube invited him to participate in a show, YouTube is where you’re getting all your tutorials, all your uplifting information. That content might go out to Twitter and Twitter is reposting central content that can be reposted and reshaped – Twitter can also make content go viral”.

Finally, the current global pandemic has made digital storytelling more relevant than ever before for connecting people to one another. Studies by Thomke (2019) and Kelleher (2009) have demonstrated that stories focusing on human experiences create the strongest positive reactions. Newman (2019) also argues that organizations establish trust and credibility with audiences when they tell meaningful stories. There were a few participants within this study that argued that organizations that promote sales during times of distress risk being targets of “cancel culture.” Previous research supports the effectiveness of positive stories for building a sense of community and empathy with stakeholders (Singh & Sonnendberg, 2012). Participant K called this counterprogramming, explaining that “no one wants to hear a story about quarantine, right now we want to hear a story about being free, being able to move the way we desire to”. This echoes previous studies by Dowling (2006) and Smith (2012) that organizations build strongest relationship with the public when they show genuine concern about issues important to their audience and try to meet their needs. In perspective of the 2020 global pandemic, Participant B

stated: "It can present a lot of opportunities for transformation and new ideas, a window to our new normal".

Limitations

There are notable limitations to this study to consider for future research. First, the interviews were held during the COVID-19 global pandemic crisis; as a result, factors including personal stress during a period of change and adjustment in professional and personal lives should be considered when evaluating responses. Because this study is reflective of this time, some answers shared may not have been relevant before the pandemic. Also because of this crisis, the researcher was only able to obtain data from 12 respondents to explore the phenomenon of digital storytelling; hence responses are not be generalizable to all digital storytellers due to the nature of the study and the research sample size. Secondly, the researcher was the only person involved in evaluating the collected data. Thus, bias from the researcher may be present as there was no opportunity for inter-coder reliability.

Another consideration is the limited access available to some pieces in the content analysis. Some of the digital stories were delivered through platforms such as video games and live interactive theatres formats that would require the researcher to be physically present or have special equipment to fully engage in the story; however, trailers, written descriptions, and testimonials were able to capture many aspects of the immersive experience.

Finally, previous research focused specifically on how innovative digital storytelling is evolving and embraced by organizations. Due to the changing digital landscape, limited research existed in this context. The viewpoint of this study is novel and fills a research gap, yet further research is encouraged to examine how digital storytelling will evolve post-pandemic.

Future research

Further study in digital storytelling is recommended, as this study built on the growing knowledge in this field. This study was conducted during the midst of a global pandemic, and it would be fascinating to study shifts in digital storytelling as organizations navigate to a new normal, post-pandemic. Future researchers can look at how reputation patterns influenced by digital storytelling have been tracked through the course of the pandemic to conduct a post-pandemic analysis. As there may be a higher demand for digital content, future studies also can analyze how different sectors create relevant content to adapt to this demand. This study confirmed that video production in digital storytelling is on the rise (Rockell, 2020), and it also began examining the increasing role of live video. A relevant example noted by the researcher was the historic SpaceX launch that took place on May 30th2020. The event was available for live streaming on NASA's platform. Additionally, NASA continues to provide live coverage streaming of 360-degree views in space. This is an example of how live video content continues to engage publics.

Also, this study examined the best practices of digital storytelling from an external perspective. An interesting future study could be examining user-generated content by various audiences and analyzing audience sentiment based on the variety of digital storytelling mediums. This study was a broad overview of digital storytelling in organizations. This study could be furthered by examining how digital storytelling is used specifically for public advocacy, as well as its impact. Another avenue to further explore is the concern raised in the interview regarding how to implement digital storytelling in public relations academia. This study briefly examined the value of continuous learning and keeping up to date with the changes, further research is encouraged to bring this practice into the academic sphere for communications professionals. A

common sentiment raised in this study was developing digital stories that are user-friendly, accessible, and diverse. In this study Participant [I] noted that adding subtitles was deemed effective for audiences who want to multi-task while watching video content. Further research can delve deeper into exploring digital stories that are accessible to different audiences.

Conclusions

This study on digital storytelling explored an ever-changing media landscape. Limited research exists concerning this innovative space. The evolution of multimedia platforms continues to transform the way stories are consumed. Previous research by Coombs and Holladay (2018) identified a gap in research concerning how communicators are adapting to the changing digital landscape. Previous studies have focused on engagement as a best practice in digital storytelling. The narrative transportation theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) argues that the most effective stories allow an audience to “become travelers when they encounter texts ...transported from their reality as they return changed by their experience” (p. 386). Narrative transportation theory enables analysis of content in terms of its levels of engagement.

This study examined how organizations use digital storytelling as a tool to build organizational reputation through the following research questions: How and to what extent do organizations embrace best practices in digital storytelling? How and to what extent does digital storytelling affect organizational reputation? and How and to what extent is executive level management aware of storytelling’s potential ROI and its impact on organizational reputation?

The content analysis found that the best practices in digital storytelling showcase a scored a high degree of interactivity, strong visual appeal, authenticity, and permission. The content analysis also revealed shortcomings in the limited degree to which organizations promote credibility through communicating their identities and brand values. At the same time, this shortcoming was due to content being less promotional in nature and more focused on user experiences.

Communications professionals recognize the importance of multimedia skillsets; few participants, however, have made digital storytelling central to their organization's mission or practices, suggesting room for growth. Such improvements require a team effort, employee involvement, and diversity of thought. In terms of organizational reputation, this study found that it is best tracked and evaluated by how well it conforms to an organization's goals and by post-analysis after digital storytelling campaigns. Also, the return on investment is strongest when executive management supports and engages with digital storytelling efforts. Finally, digital content itself produces the best return on investment based on duration and audience retention: shorter content translates to more user-friendliness and higher retention. Ultimately, the key findings in this study add to the existing body of knowledge in digital storytelling while providing recommendations for further improvement in professional and academic practices.

Recommendations for Communications Professionals

The findings in this research revealed there is significant room for development required in the digital storytelling sphere. While this study found insights in regard to how communications professionals embrace digital storytelling, continuous research and practical application are required to further knowledge in this field. Below are the top 10 key recommendations to implement best practices in digital storytelling.

The following recommendations by the researcher are as follows:

1. Develop a digital tool kit: Cultivate a workspace culture that encourages ongoing learning for digital storytelling (this includes reading case studies, learning multi-media platforms, studying other campaigns). Another suggestion would include hosting multi-media workshops to close the gap between senior leadership and junior specialists this also serves as a team-building opportunity. It is also valuable to prioritize this right from the onboarding stage and look for these skillsets.

2. Be open to creativity: It is far more valuable to utilize multi-media platforms with intent rather than using it because it is a trend. Exploring creative avenues is vital to best practices. For instance, in the content analysis, there was a digital story where the New York Library used Instagram stories to promote classical novels (One show, 2020).

3. Ensure content is user-friendly: For the audience to actively be engaged ensure that digital stories are user-friendly. Examples include conceptualizing ideas within a short duration also including subtitles with audio to follow is another tactic.

4. First strategize story then figure out platform: In the previous literature Robert McKee (as cited in Stone et al., 2015) argued that simple and well-told stories have a long-lasting impact rather than a poorly communicated one. Thus, prioritizing the story itself is the key to best practices. In a similar vein, an interview participant stated that if a story is well communicated it will thrive regardless of platform. This notion also aligns with the idea of developing stories that have a serialized format to keep audiences engaged long-term.

5. Include digital storytelling in the mandate: The best way to improve and ensure best practices is to make it an ongoing priority. Interviewees have claimed that it is relevant to everything that is done in the workplace. If this is the case, why is it not an active part in the mandate? To practice it, first, it should be implemented.

6. Focus on long-term reputation building: The interview insights suggest that responses to the global pandemic have shifted audiences' views on certain organizations. Whether they choose to highlight their employees or push sales, attitudes are influenced. One interviewee highlighted that cancel culture may prevail if companies push to sales during the pandemic. The best way to pandemic proof reputation is to consider all actions that follow long-term impacts.

7. Humanize content: The previous literature has highlighted that stories were more relatable when the focus was on humanity. The content developed should be relatable. It is effective to treat the brand as a person while evaluating the reputation score over time.

8. Visual elements are always a win: Video content is successful due to its strong visual appeal. Also, the video has been the most frequent content used in the digital showcases analyzed. In the wake of the pandemic, live video has produced a shift in avenues of public advocacy, and major events that are streamed. A prime showcase of this is the 2020 historical SpaceX launch that was streamed live.

9. Collective team effort is required: From senior executives to junior specialists, the gap can be bridged as there are lots of opportunities to learn from each other. Moreover, including perspectives from a team ensures diversity in thought leadership for content development.

10. Find solutions to meet audience needs: This concept is best applied when the focus is value-based rather than sales-based. Continue to look for solutions to meet audience needs, while also being relevant and relatable.

Finally, communicators are encouraged to look for opportunities where digital storytelling can inform audiences and have practical implications. For example, during this study, the researcher created a mini case study (Appendix F) based on a news feature showcasing the video conferencing company Zoom and its struggle with combating misinformation. Digital storytelling, if used effectively, can strongly contribute to an organization's reputation. There are boundless opportunities to explore.

Appendix A

Interview Questions guide

Best Practices of Digital Storytelling in Public Relations:

Researcher: Ashika Theyyil (Master of Communications Management)

Department of Communication and Multimedia Studies – McMaster University

Information about these interview questions: This gives you an idea of what I would like to learn about in the subject of Digital Storytelling. More specifically, understanding how stories are told in organizations using technology and what makes these stories compelling, best practices can be different for each organization. Interviews will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just “yes or no” answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking such as: “*So, you are saying that ...?*”), to get more information (“*Please tell me more?*”), or to learn what you think or feel about something (“*Why do you think that is...?*”).

- 1) How do you ensure that you have a team that cares about delivering best practices in digital storytelling?
- 2) What advice do you seek in regards to delivering best practices for storytelling?
- 3) How do you evaluate/measure the reputation of your organization after a campaign/ digital storytelling effort is launched?
- 4) How is digital storytelling embedded in your organization’s mission, vision, and goals?
- 5) What do you think are important considerations/strategies for digital storytelling? Do you think there is any value in considering brand reputation?

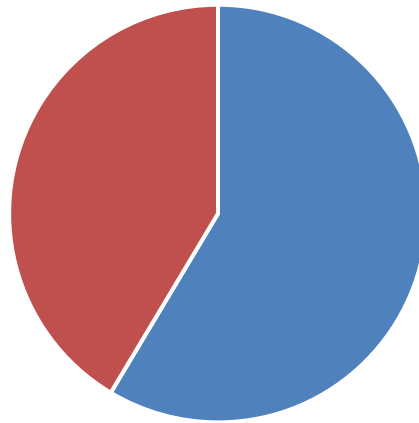
6) Is there something important we forgot? Is there anything else you think I need to know about digital storytelling?

APPENDIX B



APPENDIX C

Who is responsible for Digital Storytelling?

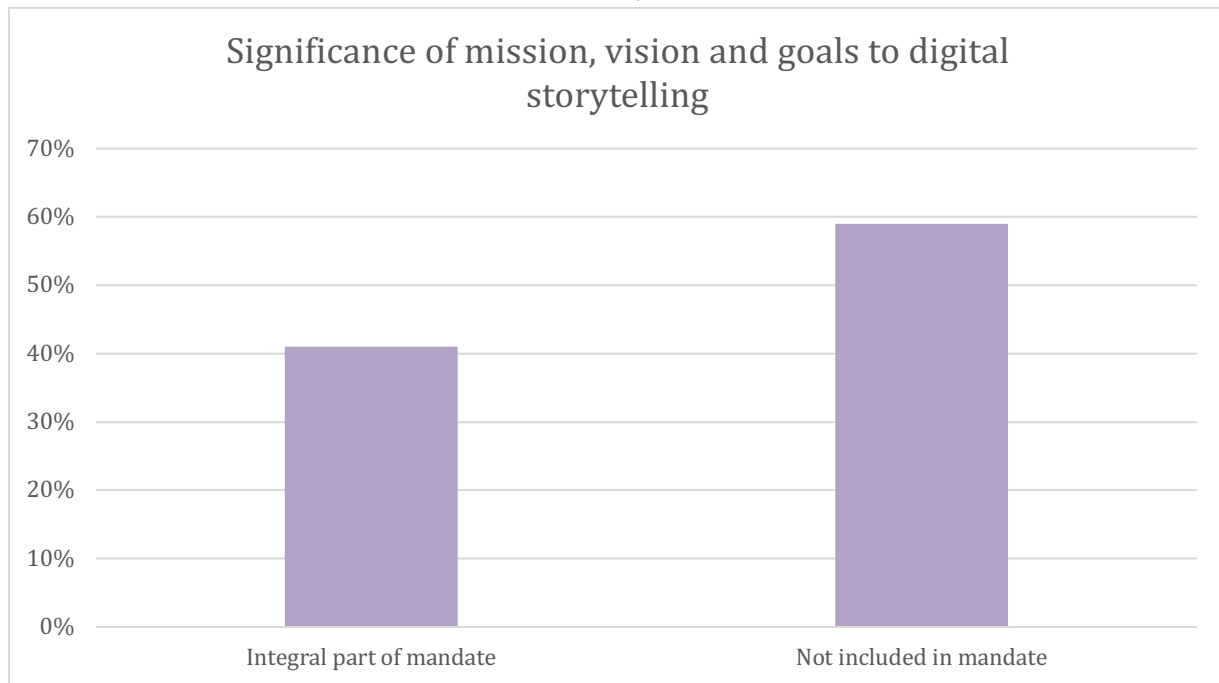


■ Team cohesiveness

■ Role of communicator

APPENDIX D



APPENDIX E

APPENDIX F

BACKGROUND ISSUE AND OPPORTUNITY CASE STUDY

BACKGROUND:

Connects **PEOPLE** through video, voice and content sharing.

Founded in 2011 by ERIC YUAN → 



“I EAT. SLEEP AND ZOOM ”

The application has been in **HIGH VIRAL DEMAND** during the 2020 **GLOBAL PANDEMIC**.



Founder **ERIC YUAN** was interviewed by **CNN** business to discuss concerns about **Zoom**



ISSUE:

Concerns of **PRIVACY** has risen the company has faced security flaws and vulnerabilities with **“ZOOM BOMBING”**.



I KEEP EVERYTHING TRANSPARENT
I am a Chinese - American the **ZOOM** company is American, maybe we did not communicate this well why did we not communicate this well before? I was very busy, Why didn't I meet with Nancy Pelosi before?
THIS WAS OUR PROBLEM ”

Companies have banned Zoom
“IT’S A CHINESE ENTITY WE CAN’T CONTROL”
Nancy Pelosi





OPPORTUNITY:

- 1 TECH COMPANIES** often are primarily focused on the success of the technical aspects that there is a gap when it comes to communications.
- 2 THE RESEARCHER** finds that there is an opportunity to raise awareness about the companies identity to combat misinformation with digital storytelling.
- 3 DIGITAL STORYTELLING** can be used for public awareness and humanize Zoom as a company while reclaiming the brand identity.

“If the world misunderstands us, then I don't blame others, it's our problem... We are a very proud American company. The company is a public Nasdaq company, headquartered in San Jose. I'm Chinese-American. I truly believe... as long as you do the right thing, sooner or later they will know it... just be patient.”- **FOUNDER, YUAN**

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