

# *Digital Storytelling. The Impact of User-Generated Content in Social Media*

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**Abstract:** *Stories have always been a very important, compelling and entertaining form of communication from sitting around a fireplace to going to the movies. Through all of the changes and evolution we have lived through over the centuries and decades, stories have been one constant, giving us hope, dreams and entertainment. Networks and their inherent network effects now offer a global audience to anyone, anytime, at almost no cost. With the ever-growing evolution of technology, we can definitely talk about digital storytelling – the art of telling stories using digital multimedia, such as images, audio and video. The aim of this article is to analyse the way in which European capitals of culture are promoted on social media and the impact and contribution of user-generated content in this process. Furthermore, the marketing and promotional strategies based on storytelling, used to reach the target audience, will be closely examined in order to be able to provide useful information for the visual promotion of a European capital of culture on social media.*

**Keywords:** *audience, digital storytelling, European capitals of culture, social media, visual marketing*

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, more than ever, it is hard to imagine the world without social media. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter have totally changed the way we communicate and share information with each other. Social media and virtual communities allow people to connect more easily with one another and with organisations (Holden, 2013: 299). There is no doubt that storytelling works efficiently in getting a message across and that digital marketing tools are being used successfully to raise awareness about causes and campaigns.

Storytelling is a perfect communication strategy to become more transparent and accessible to the audiences. Websites, email, blogs, and social media are all dynamic online channels through which stories can be spread far and wide. More than that, anyone who has access to the Internet and has a desire to document life experience, ideas, or feelings through the use of story and digital media, could be a digital storyteller. Through stories, we better understand both ourselves and those around us. Digital storytelling has the potential for connecting a community through shared experiences and developing tolerance by understanding someone else's story. Due to that, community engagement became a driving force in digital storytelling.

The main purpose of this paper is to identify how a European capital of culture can be promoted on social media through visual storytelling and user-generated content. The most effective way to communicate (the message -> the reception -> the final reaction) and the impact generated by marketing and promotional strategies will be closely analysed in order to draw attention to the way in which storytelling is used to reach the target audience.

This paper is based on the hypothesis that people spend more and more time in the virtual environment, sharing content on social media and wanting to be part of a community. At the moment, of Instagram's 1 billion monthly active users, more than 500 million of them use the platform every day (source: <https://blog.hoot>

suite.com/instagram-statistics/, accessed on March 20, 2019). Thus, the Instagram pages have become a good environment for companies to strengthen their relationships with the target audience. With the Instagram evolution, we can see not only the evolution, but also the importance of visual storytelling. Using this method, the content is more likely to have a strong impact on the target audience, because it is based on the transmission of emotion. This is the feature that differentiates visual storytelling of the text because images have the power to generate faster responses among users.

## **2. Research methods**

### **2.1 Comparative analysis**

The object of the research involves ten European capitals of culture. Using an analysis grid, I will analyse the way in which they use Instagram and digital storytelling in order to promote their culture and reach their target audience. Since for every European capital of culture many different accounts were created, some of them by institutions and some of them by users, I will focus only on the pages with the highest number of followers. In this analysis, I will pursue the type of content published in the last three months (from February to April), the type of content presented, the frequency of posts, the tags and hashtags used and the interaction with the followers.

Following the analysis of these Instagram accounts, I will focus on the following indicators to discover the impact of user generated content in social media:

- the type of the page;
- the description;
- the number of followers;
- the type of posts;
- the frequency of posts;
- the number of likes;
- the types of messages;

- the level of interaction;
- the presence of tags and hashtags;
- the design of page;
- the communication style;
- the language and importance of addressing the public.

To identify the most important elements and strategies used to reach the audience and grow the impact of visual content through storytelling, the common points and the characteristics that differentiate them, I will perform a comparative analysis of the selected Instagram accounts. Moreover, I will analyse the most followed Instagram account created to promote Timisoara, because I want to highlight the differences between the ten European capitals of culture previously analysed and Timisoara, that was designated to be one of the European Capitals of Culture in 2021.

## **2.2 The experimental method**

On the other hand, in order to find more useful data about the audience and how they interact with visual content, I have created an Instagram account to test different types of content through the experimental method. This research method will allow me to manipulate one variable to determine if changes in one variable could cause changes in another variable. The key features of the experimental method are control over variables, careful measurement and establishing cause and effect relationships.

The experiment will be conducted on the Instagram account @exploretimisoara for one week. During this experiment, I will test two different visual posts, image vs graphics, but with common elements. The purpose of this comparative experiment is to identify how users interact with these two different posts, what their reactions are when they see the content and also their actions. This method and statistics provided by Instagram Business are good as it makes the data more valid and less biased.

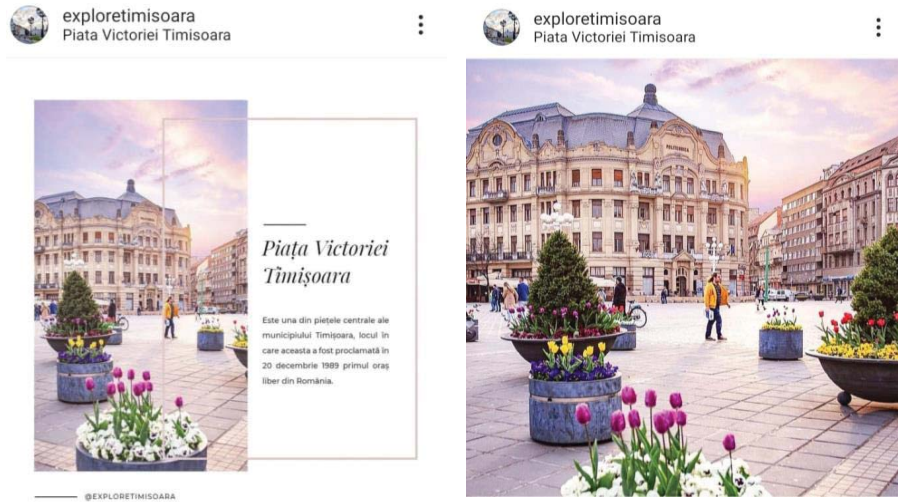


Figure 1: Posts used in the comparative experiment

### 3. Results

Using the analysis grid, I was able to identify the most common elements and strategies used on Instagram in order to promote cultural content. In the following tables, I have registered important data about the visual content published on five accounts included in this analysis.

After the analysis of all representative Instagram accounts of cities named European Capital of Culture between 2010-2019, there are some important elements to be mentioned. The results highlight the fact that regular posts may increase the number of users and their interest, the content type generated by users increases the interest in the cultural content and the presence of tags offers users a quick search of the desired information but, at the same time, it is also a very good point for the Instagram specific search. On the other hand, people interact more with images than with graphics, most of the accounts were created and administrated by users who do not use a template to present the content published.

Table 1: The analysis of the European capitals of culture on Instagram

City		Essen	Istanbul	Turku	Tallinn	Marseille
Variable						
Type of page	Official	✓	-	✓	✓	✓
	Created by users	-	✓	-	-	-
Description	General	-	-	-	-	-
	Informative	✓	✓	✓	-	✓
	Persuasive	-	-	-	✓	-
	Emotive	-	-	-	-	-
The number of followers		34,700	283,000	19,800	53,400	60,100
The total number of posts		7,254	1,428	1,347	1,328	774
Type of content	Picture	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Carousel	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Video	-	✓	-	✓	-
	Stories	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Graphics	-	✓	-	-	✓
	Highlights	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Live	-	✓	-	✓	✓
	GIF	-	-	-	-	-
	IGTV	-	-	✓	✓	-
Content creator	Admins	✓	-	✓	-	✓
	Users	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
Posts frequency	Regular	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Irregular	✓	-	-	-	-
Language	Formal	-	-	-	-	-
	Informal	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tags & hashtags	Yes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	No	-	-	-	-	-
Call to action	Yes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	No	-	-	-	-	-

Table 2: The analysis of the European capitals of culture on Instagram

Variable		City				
		Essen	Istanbul	Turku	Tallinn	Marseille
Message size	Small	✓	-	-	-	✓
	Medium	-	✓	✓	-	-
	High	-	-	✓	✓	-
Interaction with the followers	Frequent	-	-	✓	-	-
	Rarely	✓	✓	-	✓	✓
	Not at all	-	-	-	-	-
The most appreciated post		1,661	33,100	1,767	6,636	4,982
Most comments on a post		24	2,566	26	75	99
Image promotion	Agressive	-	-	-	-	-
	Public interest	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Design	Dominant colour	-	✓	-	-	-
	Template	-	-	-	-	-
Website		-	-	✓	✓	✓
Logo		-	✓	✓	✓	✓

Most of the analysed accounts are based on user generated content and through reposting their images, these accounts are creating a community. Informal language gets the accounts closer to their target audience, through comments and friendly language, because all of these are creating a good atmosphere.

As far as the comparative experiment driven on @exploretimisoara is concerned, which is an Instagram account created especially for this study, it is desired to perform specific analysis of the audience behaviour and interaction with the different type of content involved in this process.

#### 4. Conclusions

There is no doubt that social media can influence the way in which people interact with the different types of content published online. In

the digital age, people's attention and concentration have changed considerably. After carrying out this analysis of the content published on the Instagram accounts included in the research, one thing is clear: visual content gets messages across faster. This happens because for people it is easier to understand something that is represented visually and also because a social media platform allows people to interact, appreciate and distribute the content through simple actions and minimal efforts.

An image that resonates with the target audience can elicit joy, appreciation, sadness, shock, fear or anger. Through the power of communities and visual storytelling, the content is more likely to be shared. In comparison with the text, visuals come in an appealing, engaging format to entice people to interact with the content. Because most of the accounts involved in this analysis are based on the user-generated content, it is very important for the administrators to keep in touch with active followers and, most importantly, to attract the target audience in order to use it as a promotional tool.

In the dissertation thesis, I will analyse all the Instagram accounts selected for this study, including the one most representative for Timisoara in order to collect more relevant data. On the other hand, because Instagram Business offers a series of statistics about customers and their behaviour, through the comparative experiment, I will try to discover what type of content raises the most reactions among the target audience involved in this experiment.

Even if people interact more with the content published online, for a city that was named European Capital of Culture in 2021 it is important to be also promoted offline. Based on the results from the analysis and the comparative experiment, I will propose a graphic package with promotional materials for Timisoara.

Storytelling in the digital age offers various ways in which the content can be presented. This digital age has made the passing of information instant and worldwide, all at the touch of a button. Moreover, social media platforms have changed fundamentally the



way stories are told, the types of content produced, how the audiences are reached and empowered to create content.

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