

Narrate, Click, and Share

Can Digital Storytelling and User-Generated Content Rebrand Saudi Cities?

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Abstract: This paper explores whether digital storytelling and user-generated content could influence Saudi cities' brands. Furthermore, this study examines which topics—whether in digital storytelling or other user-generated contents—are most effective in encouraging broader online sharing. An online survey was used to collect data from 385 participants, primarily targeting individuals interested in travel. The study demonstrated that over 80% of participants reported a positive or very positive influence of storytelling on their perceptions of Saudi city brands, representing its efficiency as a branding tool. Also, user-generated content shows a strong branding impact, with nearly 70% of respondents perceive this type of contents as positively affecting the perception of Saudi cities. Cultural and historical narratives were found as the most engaging storytelling themes, extensively improving audiences' readiness to share and create content related to Saudi cities. The results of this study provide practical insights for policymakers and city marketing organizations, implying that branding approaches should prioritize culture-based storytelling and support user-generated content to enhance audience engagement and brand credibility

Keywords: Narrate, Click, Share, Digital Storytelling, User-Generated, Rebrand

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid improvements in technology and the transition towards globalization have escalated competition, as cities have strived to attract investors, foreign enterprises, visitors, and new residents. The increasing competition between cities highlights the need for strategic differences to ensure that cities remain relevant and visible on the global map (Kotler & Gertner, 2007; Mihalis, 2005). Social media has developed as a powerful instrument for marketing, empowering cities around the world to intensify their branding efforts and spread to influence wider and more diversified audiences (Sevin, 2016). In contrast to nation branding, which requires comprehensive approaches, city branding needs adapted approaches that reflect the distinct fundamentals shaping cities' identities and attractiveness (Caldwell & Freire, 2004)? Cities are facing financial instability and universal competition and commonly execute renovations, rebranding strategies, and advanced activities to differentiate

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themselves and elicit global attention (Richards & Duif, 2018). Ultimately, city branding is a vital approach to achieving competitive advantage and attracting investments.

1. Evolution of City Branding

The concept of city branding has progressed as a significant field of interest for researchers and policymakers, compelled by the rising competition among cities to attract investment, tourism, and talent. The commercial sector has inspired strategists to apply branding as a tactic for improving quality of life, developing cities, and renewing places (Jojic, 2018). Building city brands involves strategies to showcase cultural diversity, gastronomic offerings, natural assets, and the reformation of public services (Zahrah, 2023). Cities establish their brands by excelling in economic, cultural, or social dimensions (Ooi, 2011). For example, holding cultural mega-events, restoring and promoting heritage, and constructing unique buildings are standard practices to increase the attractiveness and recognition of a city (Hankinson, 2007; Mihalis, 2005). These approaches not only create tangible assets but also contribute to the representational and affective charm of a destination's identity. The significant fundamentals that highlight a city's brand include historical landmarks, iconic architecture, projects, and city life. These elements need to align with the city's primary objectives, such as attracting visitors, investors, or new residents (Jojic, 2018).

Today's digital innovations have heavily influenced city branding; for instance, the tourist sector has undergone immense behavioral changes due to the incorporation of digital tools, leading to new insights for both scholarly inquiry and practical implementation (Gajdosik, 2020). Studies regarding place image have demonstrated its influence on tourists' intentions to visit in the future and have also highlighted the value of understanding how branding forms perceptions and ultimately decision-making (Chew, 2014). Finally, it is clear that the convergence of branding, technology, and audience behavior has created a lively field for academic examination and has galvanized cities around the world to implement innovative methods to sustain competitiveness in a globalized environment.

2. The Main Challenge of City Branding

Although city branding has gained significant importance as a strategic tool for global positioning, many challenges and gaps still exist in its application and research. From an academic perspective, city branding remains an emerging field with very few empirical studies. Compared to product and corporate branding, city branding is still considered to be relatively new, with minimal research accessible (Caldwell & Freire, 2004). Academics have highlighted the scarcity of research in the fields of destination and city branding and have stressed the necessity of further academic research that explores these practices (Kasapi & Cela, 2017). Furthermore, although technology has changed branding practices, there are still misunderstandings regarding the full

outcomes of digital media and UGC (users generated content) on city branding, mainly in terms of shaping perceptions and guiding behavioral intentions (Gajdosik, 2020).

In addition, from a practical perspective, one of the main challenges is the fragmented and partial implementation of city branding in activities, as branding initiatives are typically conducted without inclusive planning or addressing the target audience effectively. This negligence of stakeholder engagement, chiefly among local people, weakens the genuine and efficient nature of branding efforts (Kavaratzis, 2004; Pakarti, 2016). Kavaratzis et al. (2014) who believe that this is a serious issue in branding processes, also support this idea, as it sometimes prioritizes the perceptions of dominant stakeholders, such as authorities and businesses, while sidelining residents. This elimination has created a divide between the message and the lived experiences of the locals who engage with the city daily. Conversely, fully inclusive participatory approaches can fill this void and align branding strategies with residents' values and identity (Sevin, 2016). Finally, a city can present itself as reliable and powerful brands to its people inside and outside audiences by including local residents, leveraging technologies, and encouraging collaboration among stakeholders.

3. Storytelling as a Core Strategy in City Branding

Storytelling has arisen as an influential tool for city branding, providing a strategic approach to distinguish destinations and influence tourists' decision-making (Keskin et al., 2016; Camprubí & Planas, 2020). This approach permits cities to communicate their brand efficiently through stories, legends, or myths that transform experiences into captivating narratives (Camprubí & Planas, 2020). Place branding as a concept revolves around revealing the true core of a location through storytelling and content rather than generating a false or idealistic identity (Mabillard, Pasquier, & Vuignier, 2024). For instance, New Zealand, despite its dependence on an export-led economy, aimed to repair the country's reputation and image mainly through storytelling. The creation and dissemination of a place brand depended on media employing semiotic tools to contextualize social events (Adegoju, 2017). Place brands are increasingly regarded as entities that are formed cooperatively by individuals, storytelling organizations, and social interactions (Kavaratzis, Warnaby, & Ashworth, 2014). Storytelling is a highly complex art that is influenced by many factors, as a city's architecture may influence its storytelling. Whereas skyscrapers engage the visual sense, arcades encourage multisensory exploration and wandering (Grandi & Neri, 2014).

4. User-Generated Content in Branding Cities

City branding has been transformed by digital media, which provides interactive, affordable, and participatory tools to advertise cities' unique features. Social media permits actual engagement, enabling city brands to be formed, negotiated, and transformed in active social contexts, emphasizing the significance of knowing target audiences' perspectives (Sevin, 2016). These platforms allow city brands to progress

through two-way communications between governments and varied audiences when promoting transparency and establishing trust (Sevin, 2016; Ramadhani & Indradjati, 2023). User-generated content (UGC) has surfaced as one of the most Revolutionary aspects of digital platforms. With the rise of Web 2.0, anyone can play a role in the branding process by creating and sharing digital content, such as photos, videos, and written reviews. This forms a process of co-creation, which enables locals, visitors, and other stakeholders to be cities' brand ambassadors (Florek, 2011; Yan, 2011). For example, travelers frequently share their personal experiences on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, bolstering the city's visibility through short videos and posts that showcase attractions, local cuisine, and destinations (Zhang, 2020; Dramićanin et al., 2023). E-tourism reinforces city branding strategies by integrating innovative technologies such as location-based services and mobile apps. They provide users with well-timed, significant information, enabling them to discover cities more easily and make informed travel decisions (Mohammadi et al., 2021). These tools have produced a new generation of travelers who can be regarded as modern travelers. To meet the expectations of modern travelers, cities have started integrating advanced technologies such as virtual realities and social media, not only to improve the travel experience but also to enhance the city's attractiveness in a globalized market (Ali & Frew, 2014). Influencers on social media play a strategic role in endorsing sustainable destinations, supporting positive travel behavior, and shaping the preferences of travelers (Kilipiri et al., 2023). The incorporation of online platforms and UGC has ultimately redesigned the practices of city branding, enabling cities to broaden their reach, connect with worldwide audiences, and adopt participatory branding activities. These technological innovations not only improve the transparency and reliability of branding activities but also solidify emotional and social bonds between these cities and their audiences, thereby elevating digital tools to become indispensable elements of today's city branding strategies (Molina et al., 2017).

Whereas the field of city branding has focused on tangible fundamentals such as logos, slogans, and visual identities, recent research has called for more inclusive, narrative-driven methods that resonate with varied audiences (Kowaas et al., 2024). Storytelling offers a pioneering strategy for forming emotional connections, encouraging authenticity, and showcasing the cultural diversity of cities.

However, in spite of its increasing significance, an outstanding gap remains in the literature regarding the utilization of storytelling techniques in the context of city branding (Camprubí & Planas, 2020). More specifically, there is inadequate research regarding how user-generated content and storytelling can be strategically used to enhance the universal appeal of cities. This is particularly applicable in Saudi Arabia, where cities hold rich cultural narratives that are often understated in universal digital platforms.

By addressing these gaps, this research seeks to contribute to the discourse regarding city branding by offering new insights into how Saudi cities can build more engaging and authentic brands. This research will offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of storytelling and user-generated content in city branding

strategies. It will also examine how historical and cultural narratives can increase audience engagement and content sharing, illuminating practical implications for policymakers and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) in Saudi Arabia.

Thus, this study addresses the following main question: How do digital storytelling techniques and user-generated content shape the brands of Saudi cities and influence audience engagement? Based on that question, the researcher formed the following hypotheses:

H1: Storytelling techniques have a significant positive impact on the brands of Saudi cities.

H2: User-generated content significantly influences the brands of Saudi cities.

H3: The likelihood of audiences sharing and creating content about Saudi cities is significantly higher when it comes to historical and cultural narratives.

II. Methodology:

This study used a questionnaire for data collection due to its effectiveness in achieving the study's objectives. The survey was designed to quantitatively describe opinions within the targeted audience and to test relationships among the variables to offer valuable insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The questionnaire had three primary constructs: perceived impact of storytelling (four items), influence of user-generated material (four items), and involvement with cultural narratives (three items). The questionnaire had three primary constructs: perceived impact of storytelling (four items), influence of user-generated content (four items), and involvement with cultural narratives (three items). Each construct was measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', and relationships between these variables were examined using Spearman's correlation coefficient and the chi-square test of independence. A preliminary reliability analysis was conducted, yielding Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 for all scales, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Content validity was ensured through expert review.

A purposive sampling method was employed to recruit 385 participants through the Prolific platform, which hosts online communities with diverse interests, including tourism and travel. The study's population comprised individuals interested in tourism and traveling; they were chosen because they are more engaged and interactive with tourism-related digital media content relative to the general population. This targeted sample most likely has high financial ability and higher travel intentions, making them directly relevant to the study's focus.

III. Results and discussion :

The following hypothesis was tested to explore the influence of storytelling on the branding of Saudi cities.

H1: Storytelling techniques have a significant positive impact on the brands of Saudi cities.

Response Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Neutral	69	17.90%
Positive	245	63.60%
Very Negative	1	0.30%
Very Positive	70	18.20%
Total	385	100%

Table 1

To test this hypothesis, we investigated the influence of storytelling on the branding of Saudi cities. The analysis of data shows that storytelling has a significantly positive influence on an audience's perceptions and interest in these destinations, which substantially influences the brand of the city. Precisely, 63.6% of respondents stated that storytelling positively influenced their interest in Saudi cities, while 18.2% described the impact as very positive. Only a minority, 17.9%, remained neutral, and a negligible 0.3% expressed a strongly negative sentiment.

On the other hand, to explore the impact of online engagement on city branding, H2 concerns the role of user-generated content in shaping or enhancing the brands of Saudi cities.

H2: User-generated content significantly influences the brands of Saudi cities.

Response Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Negative	4	1.0%
Neutral	112	29.1%
Positive	220	57.1%
Very Negative	2	0.5%
Very Positive	47	12.2%
Total	385	100%

Table2

The findings highlighted a significant positive impact of UGC on participants' perceptions of Saudi cities. A major proportion of participants (57.1%) indicated a positive influence of UGC, while an additional 12.2% expressed a strongly positive perception. The major segment of positive responses highlights UGC as an indispensable mean for city branding. Conversely, a smaller proportion (29.1%) remained neutral, and only 1% and 0.5% of participants reported negative and strongly negative perceptions, respectively.

For an additional understanding of the contributors to audience engagement with city branding, **H3** discovers how cultural narratives in storytelling can increase the probability of audiences distributing and initiating content about Saudi cities.

H3: The likelihood of audiences sharing and creating content about Saudi cities is significantly higher in relation to historical and cultural narratives.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Attracted by historical and cultural narratives (from "most engaging topics")	123	31.9%
Likely to share or create content (positive)	245	63.6%
Likely to share or create content (very positive)	70	18.2%
Neutral or less likely to share content	69	17.9%
Total respondents	385	100%

Table 3
Relationship between historical and cultural narratives and audience engagement

Table 3 illustrates that 31.9% of participants (123 respondents) recognized historical and cultural sites as conveying the most engaging narratives about Saudi cities. This demonstrates interest in narratives that emphasize the cities' rich history and cultural heritage. A significant proportion of respondents exhibited a positive (63.6%) or strongly positive (18.2%) probability of sharing or creating content about Saudi cities. This suggests that most of the targeted audience is highly driven to engage in topics related to culture and heritage and that more strongly resonate with them.

Only 17.9% of respondents were less likely to share content or Indifferent about sharing content. This minor number specifies that content rooted in narratives focused on history and culture has extensive appeal and considerable engagement potential.

The findings highlight the strategic benefits of incorporating historical and cultural storytelling into campaigns branding Saudi cities. Such narratives not only adapt to audience preferences and interests but also bolster active participation in content sharing, thus intensifying the reach and impact of any branding efforts.

The findings of this research have highlighted the potential of storytelling as a tool in enhancing the brands of Saudi cities. This was supported by research proving the efficacy of storytelling in increasing brand appeal. Storytelling can bring brands to life by granting them characters and differentiating them from competitors (Mohamed et al., 2024). In addition, storytelling generates genuine communication and emotional bonds with target audiences, which eventually strengthens the brand (Paquette et al., 2017). Moreover, storytelling facilitates audience persuasion and understanding in comparison to complex information processing (Lu et al., 2023).

The current research findings also prove the important role of UGC in influencing the brands of Saudi cities. Users on the internet play a greater role than

organizations in building city brands through social media (Siswantoro & Ikhwan, 2024). This could be attributed to the fact that user-generated content reflects reliable and relevant experiences, such as reviews and recommendations, resonates strongly with audiences, and fosters trust and enhances the city's brand. Digital media allows users to start brand communities and create content together; as a result, this content is perceived as highly trustworthy and useful (Muinonen & Kumar, 2019). As discussed in other research, audiences are encouraged to create content for numerous reasons, including for sharing experiences, reaping social benefits, and building personal identities online (Hofman-Kohlmeyer, 2020). Schell and Zerres (2022) claim that institutions can leverage UGC to accomplish vital aims such as rising audiences' engagement. Yi Ding et al. (2014) and Vaswani and Kapoor (2024) have highlighted that understanding users' motivations to create contents will lead to sustaining brands to grow and build stronger relations with their audience.

The data underscores a strong alignment between the audience's inclination toward historical and cultural narratives and their intention to participate in content creation and sharing. This highlights the strategic significance of integrating cultural themes into Saudi cities' branding campaigns, as such themes resonate profoundly with audiences. This finding is further supported by other studies, which have demonstrated that user-generated content (UGC) on platforms such as YouTube heavily influences cities' brands, particularly when the content is culturally related. For instance, food-related cultural content has been proven to generate noticeable engagement (Huang, 2024; Siswantoro & Ikhwan, 2024).

Furthermore, the advancement of digital media and new technologies has transformed audiences from passive recipients to active creators of content, effectively blurring the boundaries between broadcasters and audiences (Plebańczyk, 2023). In this context, digital platforms play a pivotal role in curating and distributing cultural heritage, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of cultural values (Thomopoulos et al., 2020).

IV. Conclusion:

This paper addresses a timely gap in the literature by examining how storytelling and user-generated content can shape the brand of Saudi cities. This paper has confirmed that by focusing on cultural and historical narratives, Saudi cities can create reliable and appealing stories that resonate with global audiences. The findings suggest that cultural storytelling inspires audience engagement, while UGC serves as a valuable source for enhancing a city's brand and widening its reach. These insights underline the necessity of implementing more creative, audience-focused strategies in branding approaches to brand Saudi cities successfully.

Hence, it is recommended to prioritize cultural narratives in the branding strategies of cities in Saudi Arabia and to strengthen UGC initiatives that will help in transforming these users into brand ambassadors for Saudi cities.

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