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Storytelling during Pandemics– a Focused Review

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Abstract: Stories have shaped people life since the beginning of humanity. Telling and sharing stories during pandemics and unprecedented times is an inspiring way. In this paper, we study how storytelling could play an essential role in mitigating, and absorbing the challenges or the spillovers of the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The influence of storytelling on mental health and wellness during the pandemic is reviewed.

The paper focuses on how storytelling could be optimised as an effective tool for changing attitudes and behaviours, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the public is forced to change their lifestyle, over the short and long term. The implication of this work could bring more attention to the science of storytelling and its role in community development projects.

Keywords: Storytelling, Pandemics, Social Change, Changing Attitudes and Behaviours, Community Development.

1 Introduction

Stories are unique communication modules for keeping their audience engaged regardless of their environment. This engagement helps people to immerse themselves with the story and its details with curiosity, Dahlstrom (2014). Stories help us to forget about the challenges of what is experienced in reality, or learn to build a tolerance to manage and absorb the problems that are triggered by this environment. Horton and Richard (2016)

The type of stories used, or their theme might define how we deal with or reflect on the way we could deal with the contemporary or future foresighted challenges. Buheji (2019).

In this research, we investigate the requirements for storytelling that would help enhance our tolerance during the pandemic and its spillovers to help us prepare for the worst. The author illustrates how stories open our perspectives through realising the constructs of the story. The uniqueness of storytelling during pandemics are reviewed to show why stories are important during times of crisis, and they play a role in wellbeing. Then, the influence of storytelling on perceptions and behaviours (during a pandemic) are illustrated.

2 Methodologies

This paper explores the published literature to see how storytelling is used in the pandemic and in unprecedented times in general. The conclusion is drawn based on the synthesis of the outcome of the literature reviewed and the reflections that need to be extracted for the utilisation of storytelling during pandemics.

3 Literature Review

3.1 About Storytelling

The paramount and the backdrop of sources of life and livelihood during the coronavirus pandemic created many types of stories that are yet to be told and shared, Miller-Day and Hecht (2013). The pandemic transformed many of what are thought to be routine of life or livelihood due to consistent prolonged lockdowns. Stories in many situations come as a reflection when people have time, and hence while many people around the world are staying at home, they started to appreciate many contents where the media created or through a frequent spike of the virus. IFLA (2020)

Definitely, stories would be different every time the world goes through unprecedented times, especially if they target to communicate optimism. The pandemic created a world

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lab that its outcome could be narrated by stories that transformed smoothly within the next generations. However, storytelling offers even more, a format of particularly high engagement and viewability in different conditions. Horton and Richard (2016)

Hamade (2021) mentioned that storytelling could come in different shapes and forms, depending on the purpose and the targeted audience preference. These stories could come in the form of still media, infographics, comics, audio, and animation.

3.2 How Stories Open Our Perspectives?

Stories help us to see the world in new and different ways, and from a different perspective. The uniqueness of stories is that they shape our paradigm and move us toward action. Stories connect people's brains and make them work to create more new stories over time.

Stories touch people hearts, spirits, minds and influence how they react to the physical contents and the challenges around them. Through stories, we can share happiness, but also share the need for preparedness and lesson about challenges, based on profound experiences.

Price-Mitchel (2016) mentioned that a story might come as a result of an imagination effort, or about facts faced and overcome during a real-life journey. Hence, Polkinghorne (1988) believes that an inspiring story and storytelling might give a better meaning to life. An inspiring story pulls us to get engaged more with people's lives develop, over time, our own views of the world. Thiam (2016).

Whether we know it or not, stories make us take reflection and re-evaluate our life purposes and the values we live for. Choosing the story, we want to share create for us an excitement of curiosity, and thus makes us more curious to discover what is ambiguous. Our curiosity even goes higher if the story managed to engage more people for the cause of change, i.e., as changing a poverty status, or eliminating other risks of socio-economic issues. Buheji (2019a), Buheji (2020), Prasetyo, Y (2017)

A study by Facer (2019), talked about the role of education to engorge storytelling in a time of crisis as a method of teaching as it found it enhance students' perspectives about life and livelihood. Studies of cognitive performance show reduction in cognitive processing speed can be controlled through storytelling. The controlling of cognitive processing helps to improve the speed of speech and coordination. Storytelling was also found to help to improve reaction times and dealing with challenging problems (Berger and Quinney, 2010).

3.3 Constructs of Story and Storytelling

Stories are made of a set of constructs that together try to make a sense for a real or imagined event, Jackson (2005). These constructs are influenced by the way the story is physically presented to the targeted audience. Through sharing a story effectively, accumulated wisdom, beliefs,

and values can be achieved. Through stories, we explain how things are, why they are, and our role and purpose. Baesler and Burgoon (2016)

Today, we know more that stories are even considered to be the building blocks of knowledge that improve the revival of our memory and lifelong learning. Stories connect us with the past, present, and help us foresight the future. Through stories, we can anticipate the possible consequences of our actions. Jackson (2005).

The other part that makes a story more compelling, especially when sharing it with other people, is the act of narrating or telling the story. The act of telling a story emphasises the role of the medium that transforms the constructs of the story into images that can be realised by the audience. As per Hamade (2021), the different storytelling mediums could help to use or to tell or educate the narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic, through still images, comics, podcasts, animation, and social media. Hamade saw that these methods help to encourage more preventative practices. Therefore, the way the story is told would determine its level of communication outcome and the level of persuasion. Dahlstrom (2014)

In order for storytelling to really create a differentiated outcome of the targeted audience, the main character or the subject of the story need to be identified. Through this subject, we experience the story with our five senses, as if we are living within the story. The details of how this character deals with the surroundings in the story are what makes the story exciting and raise our curiosity. Stories improve logical and critical thinking, besides it improves empathy with others and with others' cultures. Buheji (2019a).

3.4 The Uniqueness of Storytelling During Pandemics

COVID-19 pandemic brought many families together again and enhanced their daily communication through storytelling. This communication was found to enhance the collective wellbeing and build hope based on persuasion techniques. Horton and Richard (2016), de Graaf et al. (2011).

Sharing storytelling build a type of communication model that is based on truth and empathy. Storytelling during times of COVID-19 is about caring for quality time with the family and focusing on the most precious things, Coskie et al. (2010). Storytelling is known to be today as an interactive performance platform that establishes strong interaction between the teller and the targeted audience. An audience responds to the teller words and actions, including the tones, the wording, and the pace of how the story is narrated to deliver its purpose. Dahlstrom (2014)

The uniqueness of the storytelling during an unprecedented global emergency as the COVID-19 pandemic is that it delivers the story after interpreting the experiences of the

moments that create the story. The teller would depend on the words of the story with limited visual images to make the targeted audience build their cognitive images about the life and livelihood challenges of the pandemic. This way, the storyteller would leave a space for the audience to experience the theme of the story and move their multi-sensory images to experience the story as a reality. IFLA (2020), Thiam (2016).

The story creates a type of interaction that pull the participants to choose themes as facing the challenge of the pandemic. Storytelling integrates the performance of past experiences and gives unique impressions that develop more visualisation and creativity relevant to the pandemic and spillovers. This approach enhances the involvement of the parties and strengthens communication, social bond and transform the knowledge between all of them. Horton and Richard (2016)

3.5 The Physiology of the Brain during Storytelling Events

Oatley (1992) sees that stories help to organise and integrate the neural networks of the brain as it carries emotions, thoughts, conflicts, and resolutions. A story can stimulate the brain by the series of events and ‘emotional components’ that shapes life, Jackson (2005). The mental templates of the stories help to stimulate the neural networks. Storytelling gives us an opportunity of dedicated time where our story would be indeed heard and understood by other people while creating learning. Jackson (2005)

Creating and writing a socio-economic story helps to deliver a ‘core message’; the structure of the socio-economic challenge along it trigger the thinking about it. Research shows that besides improving the physical and cognitive capacity, involving youth with the elders in storytelling activities create a more positive influence on both the cost-effectiveness and overall mindset transformation. Oatley (1992)

The socio-economic sequence of events can be turned into an exciting story that can be shared between the different generations and extract from them empathetic based solutions. Through stories that reflect the reality of the community, we could involve different experiences and extract better ideas, Jackson (2005). Bringing actual case studies into storytelling help people to think and feel about their worlds and how they should interact with them or create differentiation in them. Coskie et al. (2010)

3.6 Why Stories Are Important During Times of Crisis?

As part of the community development processes, sharing stories or experiences can build trust, cultivates norms, transfers tacit knowledge, facilitates unlearning, and generates emotional connections. Socio-economic issues stories teach us how to deal with the different community

challenges and situations by finding solutions from these problems and working on alternatives as opportunities, Coskie et al. (2010). Storytelling helps the problem facilitator is to show the opportunities available for the socio-economic issue and what type of potential outcomes targeted or achieved.

Storytelling helps to enhance sharing the knowledge as it uses anecdotes to deliver the lessons learned, which is the pillar of community development. Through communicating experiences with socio-economic problems, we can build trust and empathy between the different parts of the community. Buheji and Ahmed (2019).

Managing to turn many socio-economic changes during the pandemic into stories can help to sustain community development initiatives. Its context and basic constructs would influence the story, Prasetyo (2017). The socio-economic issue needs to be covered from its past and present, followed by its societal challenges, Coskie et al. (2010).

Reporting a case study through storytelling help to frame reality and evoke imagination. For example, it would help to frame for the community what are the choices that need to be identified and which could potentially shape the outcome. Each socio-economic story during challenging times constitutes the opportunity for exploring how to engage people in meaningful and lasting change. Storytelling, as an approach, help the problem solvers to connect with a culturally diverse audience and trigger their social capital towards specific social change. When storytelling builds trust, it unlocks the passion, interest, and curiosity of the community. Buheji (2019a); Prasetyo (2017).

Many people are either regretting times from the past, or thinking about a new course of life during unprecedented times. Some are looking and listening to inspiring actions that others have taken during similar conditions now or in the past. This quest and curiosity spark many sources of stories. Buheji (2019a)

Sharing memories and moments for many people around us have become more vital now, as the prospect of losing loved ones during times of devastation and crisis is much higher. Through storytelling, we can share social intimacy even if we stay socially isolated from those we love.

3.7 Storytelling’s Role in Wellbeing

COVID-19 pandemic created a daunting effect on human physical connections and brought a daunting effect in feeling isolation for many people around the world, Baesler and Burgoon (2016). Storytelling could be one of the best ways to bridge this feeling of isolation and its spillovers over bad habits and mental health. Even if people are going through intensive treatments, with storytelling, they can express and talk about their feelings in detail. Researchers believe that this help in their healing and persistence to survive. In posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is one of the mental health disorders that benefited from storytelling. Stories

found to tell mental health patients the courage to tell stories about your life and overcome the challenges to open their hearts to build a stronger relationship that would heal old wounds. Not only does storytelling help us to cope, but it also makes us remember and even celebrate the lives of those who have influenced us directly and indirectly. The stories help us to mend torn relationships. Jackson (2005)

The Institute for Human Caring (IHC) considers storytelling as an important tool for personal wellbeing as it addresses the individual or the group emotional, spiritual and psychosocial needs, Eagly and Chaiken (1993). Storytelling was found to play a role in elderly delirium or dementia patients since it engaged them more, Miller-Day and Hecht (2013). Therefore, many care facilities became part of the collection of arts programs that play a part in wellness. Wise et al. (2018) showed that storytelling could enhance cancer patients' wellbeing and a positive sense of peace, leading to less depressed mood, especially if the stories are about their own lives.

3.8 Storytelling and Empathy Relevant to the Pandemic

Storytelling is about learning about sharing the experience of other people, and being open to their stories creates a sense of empathy. With empathy, we can balance our views of the world after the pandemic, increase our capacity and build better tolerance to handle the challenges of an unprecedented crisis that are experienced with a pandemic that brought with COVID-19.

Storytelling improves our capacity to listening without judgement, and this could make us more engaged in what is said or felt. Sharing stories about the impact of the pandemic helps to remind us of how our life is and was with or without this crisis. The mixture of the pandemic stories with other stories we have experienced in our life, make us associate many things in our life that were meaningless. The stories in this unprecedented time make us see things from the point of the people who matter most to us. IFLA (2020)

Today teachers, parents and many government agencies are using empathy-driven stories for COVID-19 communication and resources. Johnny (2020) believes that storytelling can play a highly important role in today's congested digital environment since the story has the power to break down through a cluttered media landscape, especially during a COVID-19 pandemic.

Erkoboni and Lane (2021) seen the depth of the pandemic created empathetic anxiety, which could be illustrated by the 'doorknob syndrome'. However, Erkoboni and Lane saw that through storytelling, one could promote bonding, creating strong foundations, and easing feelings of stress — for all the family (both adults and children). The family could cope with adversity through telling stories that foster

feelings of safety and security, or facts of life and livelihood.

3.9 Storytelling Influence on Perceptions and Behaviors (during a pandemic)

Storytelling was found to be one of the main tools to change perceptions and behaviours during a pandemic. The stories of survivors from COVID-19 have changed many people perceptions and behaviours. This made a huge impact on changing the outlook on the virus and led to people changing their behaviours. In certain cities, as in New York City, the stories have clearly an impact on people. Prasetyo (2017)

Hamade (2021) emphasised that storytelling is used more today in visualizing different sciences, or to illustrating different scientific messages. Storytelling is now an established methodology in medical illustration, and art in medicine, and other interactive media that enhance the targeted public communication.

Stories are a key to our deep realisation of life and livelihood. Through stories, we can see how to get to the place we need to reach and how to avoid the ones that might affect our human level. When we share and tell stories, we can build the imagination of the type of future we might want to have and the past that we need to preserve. By listening to other stories, we can appreciate what we are or can be. With the increase of complexity of the world problems, storytelling, as per Hamade (2021), could simplify the message and help to grasp emotionally difficult issues, be it cases that came from the COVID-19 pandemic, or its spillovers. With storytelling, we are learning more about how to optimise the science of communication and visualization to distilling information and keep the targeted audience engaged with the goals of the stories.

4 Recommendations and Conclusions

Stories are always realised when we live them and experience them. The use of narrative evidence in storytelling, as seen in the review, shows that this tool is effective for changing attitudes and behaviours, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the public is forced to change their lifestyle, over the long term. The more we create stories of coping experiences, the more communities can build and maintain dialogues with the pandemic sceptical groups.

During a disease outbreak or pandemic, policymakers must deal with the flow of information on multiple media forums. Indeed, storytelling is one of the best media communication tools that can attract the public's attention. As a reflection from the synthesis of the review, the narrative messages make us ready for any type of challenge or intervention. Narrative messages can overcome resistance toward the advocated behaviour, engage audiences that are less

involved, reach audiences with less knowledge, render complex information comprehensible, ground messages in the stories targeted audiences. This would help to improve the targeted audience culture and experience, using aesthetic means, and convey a diffused story over social networks.

Finally, the main implication of this review paper is that it proposes storytelling as a communication model that overcomes barriers, builds role models and creates empathy. Through storytelling, we can build self-efficacy, coping tools in times of uncertainty. Thus, one has to remember that throughout human history, storytelling was involved with crises, disasters and disease outbreaks or pandemics, since it provided an alternative coping approach to enhance life and livelihood. Where through stories, people tailored messaging toward producing the targeted behavioural change. This encourages us to note that this review needs further to be studied to show the impact of storytelling in specific communities with specific quantitative data.

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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