

Transmedia Storytelling as a Potential Employer Branding Strategy: Participatory Culture and Recruitment

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Abstract

This article analyses talent attraction and recruitment processes considering the theory of convergence culture and its concepts of participatory culture, collective intelligence and transmedia storytelling. The aim is to understand the potential of transmedia storytelling in the recruitment process, in line with the technological and social changes of the world. A more detailed example of a Heineken campaign using transmedia storytelling is described, exploring how it could be seen as a way of attracting candidates and promoting the image of the company as an employer. We conclude that transmedia storytelling allows organizations to get closer to their target audiences by employing a synergetic process susceptible to influence the image of organizations and the way candidates interact and share information about organizations, choosing their level of involvement.

Author Keywords. Transmedia Storytelling, Recruitment, Employer Branding, Social Change, Participatory Culture.

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1. Introduction

People tell stories to amuse, convince or explain something (Pratten 2011). The interpretations of the world are not based on chance or random facts, they are rather stories told to connect the dots and give meaning to isolated events. As Pratten (2011, 4) says "great stories win our hearts".

Nowadays, companies also seek to voice a wide range of ideas, products, services, belief systems, skills, community expression and individual value in a single employer branding strategy (Pratten 2011). They do this by creating stories that can be developed, shared and modified on several digital platforms.

In an increasingly globalised work context, it is not news, therefore, that the techniques and strategies used in recruitment follow the technological development, with the use of social media, for this purpose. This article intends to analyse the processes of talent attraction and acquisition in light of the theory of convergence culture, starting from the concepts of participatory culture, collective intelligence and transmedia storytelling by Henry Jenkins. Having displayed these opening concepts, we move to storytelling and a contextualisation of its use in organisations. Afterwards we analyse transmedia storytelling as a recruitment tool, supporting it with a framework of the technological and social changes involved in the recruitment. Since this tool combines narratives with candidates experiences in a variety of ways, we present a case study by the author Costa-Sánchez (2014) of a Heineken campaign. The idea is to understand the potential of storytelling in organisational communication, especially considering the impact it can have on the image that candidates/future employees create of companies.

By making their recruitment process interactive, invoking responses and reactions from candidates, companies reveal their narrative as they approach the values, ambitions, and aspirations of candidates. Companies give candidates essential clues and experiences to make career and professional development choices.

2. Convergence Culture: From Participatory Culture to Transmedia Storytelling

The world is a place of constant change that man has been creating and managing in his way of living and connecting/relating. Indissociable from society and its needs, values and interests, technology is one of the major expressions of that change (Castells and Cardoso 2005). We witness today to the emergence of new media dynamics and social technology, to an infinity of audio-visual content and different platforms on which users can access but also experience, giving shape to a new use of the media introduced by Jenkins (2009) through the concept of convergence culture. According to the author the digital era has redesigned the relationships between content, producers and audiences, allowing common people (former passive consumers) to create and share content, assigning them an active role in the development of content that is the expression of users desires and information, gaining form in network discussions and media crossing (Jenkins 2009). So, the convergence concept of Jenkins et al. (2009) assumes a change that is not only technological, but rather social and cultural, which is manifested in the variety of digital platforms, in the cooperation between several media markets and in the migratory behaviour of the consumers, who increasingly seek for entertainment experiences and allow the flow of information to diffuse across multiple media systems through their active participation.

Associated with convergence culture, arises the concept of participatory culture, in which the individual ceases to be a passive consumer of the traditional media production, to become an intervening actor that creates and shares new content, adopting a more productive and sociable posture (Jenkins et al. 2009).

But, as Jenkins (2009) points out in his Convergence Culture book, the new media does not replace the old ones, both coexist: "Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interacts in unpredictable ways" (Jenkins 2009, 29). Adding to this technological convergence is the idea of convergence of time and space, in which, through the new media culture and especially mobile devices, the boundaries between the digital and the real are mitigated (Santaella 2008).

From convergence culture and participatory culture emerges the concept of collective intelligence, in which a single individual does not know everything, but together with others can gather more knowledge by associating resources and competences, obtaining a shared intelligence. This can be developed and used in our daily interactions within the convergence culture (Levy 1998; Jenkins et al. 2009).

The second phase of the web (Web 2.0) is, then, the stage for constant sharing, where content is produced by users. Through social networks, forums and other online platforms, users work jointly to solve problems, add information and create solutions, thus demonstrating the collaborative attitude in this technological and social change. Therefore, the media convergence introduces the need to think of innovative narratives that do not end in a single media but expand through their followers, in different media, to which the concept of transmedia storytelling is associated.

In his article, Jenkins (2003) presents the concept of transmedia storytelling associated to the entertainment industry, corresponding to the development of a particular story or narrative,

with the introduction of new elements in the transition to a new media, rather than a repeated adaptation/reproduction of the same narrative in different media (Jenkins 2010). One of the famous examples of transmedia storytelling is the film "The Matrix", a very embracing narrative that was incorporated in different media besides its trilogy of films with animation series, comic books and video-games, agglomerating in this way the synergy between different platforms and target public (Jenkins 2009).

Unfolding transmedia storytelling, the term transmedia refers to repeatedly promotion/advertising of a product in different media. For example, a t-shirt from the series "Game of Thrones" is propaganda for the series. However, it does not add new content to the original story, just advertises the same story in a parallel context. Smith (2009) refers to this phenomenon as transmedia branding. Though, Bernardo (2011) identifies as a brand extension the adaptations that do not contribute to the progression of content, nor provide complementary alternatives. The term storytelling refers to the process of telling a story to a particular audience, preferably in an interactive way, allowing a dialogue with the public, rather than a mere disclosure of the information (Quesenbery and Brooks 2010).

Nowadays, we are facing an increasingly interactive and participatory audience, willing to create and change provided content, leaving aside the stance of a passive spectator (Jenkins 2009). So, a successful narrative/show in the world of entertainment needs to highlight the participation of its public. In other words, Jenkins (2007) tells us that a good story is the one that captivates the spectator, making him faithful and so immersed in the content to the point of becoming a fan and follow the information to other media. For Jenkins (2009) the experience of transmedia storytelling is truly achieved if the narrative/story is told in different media, where new ideas, different from those transmitted in other media, are introduced in each extension of the storyline, allowing users to obtain a more enriching experience, as a whole.

Thus, transmedia storytelling allows a particular storyline to multiply in a complex fictional world, by introducing new characters that are interconnected. Beyond the evident economic dimension, it maintains the audience's interest, provides new perspectives of the story and/or characters and creates linkages between the different extensions, enriching the narrated universe and enhancing the sense of realism of the experience to its fans/audiences (Jenkins 2007).

3. Storytelling in the Context of Organisations

While closely related to the entertainment industry, the use of storytelling has gained some expression in organisational contexts. In a message-saturated scene, the use of traditional channels has become insufficient to the conception of a human resources strategy that seeks to go beyond a basic description of the company and its open opportunities (Costa-Sánchez 2014). The modern context requires a review of the roles and instruments of human resources in the new social, economic and cultural order. Companies, by depending on their public, need to establish effective organisational communication to create a favourable relationship with this same public (Van Riel 1997 cited by Costa-Sánchez 2014).

Storytelling is characteristic of the human condition: the human being has always told stories to convey traditions and cultures. People like to listen to stories and we can all share them, with more or less detail (Costa-Sánchez 2014). Stories allow us to create other realities and live according to these realities. By using storytelling, organisations create ideological contexts that spark emotions and desires, establishing a greater connection with their audience (Bettendorf 2000 cited by Costa-Sánchez 2014). Hence, with storytelling, organisations intend

to connect emotionally with their public, simplifying the message they want to convey since stories have great potential for engagement and can be memorable. Storytelling also conveys greater credibility and transparency regarding the identity of the organisation, comparing to advertising (Costa-Sánchez 2014).

Some early studies related to organisational storytelling explore the importance of using stories in organisational culture (Luckmann and Berger 1966). Wilkins and Martin (1980) report that the stories increase the level of dedication and organisational commitment. In her book, Parkin (2010) notes that storytelling is an interactive form of sharing and transmitting information, making it more powerful than a passive conveyance of the information, in which the user only consumes closed content.

Regardless of the mentioned examples, storytelling still has the potential to develop in the organisational context, especially in the area of job recruitment, given the need for companies to assume the active role that candidates have been manifesting (Costa-Sánchez 2014). This inclusion of candidates' attitudes can lead to greater involvement and corporate recognition.

3.1. Digital transformation and the changes in the recruitment and attraction of candidates

As already mentioned, technology (especially the internet) brought many changes in the way we relate, in a personal and professional sphere. At the level of organisations, the impact of technology is reflected in several areas, being the focus of this article in the impact related to recruitment and talent attraction actions. By recruitment, we mean the process necessary to select suitable candidates for a given function (Câmara, Guerra, and Rodrigues 2007). Much of the success and competitive advantage of companies depends on their recruitment processes, whilst a good process has a direct impact on reducing the costs associated with it; the loyalty of talents and the company's reputation (Cappelli 2001; Rego et al. 2012).

According to several authors, we can project that the recruitment process is based on a relationship of dichotomy: on one hand, the internet has improved those processes by making them more interactive, placing technology at the service of people (Cober, Brown, and Levy 2004; Mitter and Orlandini 2005; Dhamija 2012); on the other hand, we observe that the traditional recruitment process has been appropriated by the digital dimension, where is possible to verify the same relation that existed before the social media or the use of the internet (with slight adaptations): response to a job add, followed by a validation and subsequent selection. Strictly speaking, online recruitment allows the dissemination of job vacancies through the internet, the screening of applications, the creation of databases and the search of candidates through portals, in a fast and efficient way (Araújo and Ramos 2002; Mitter and Orlandini 2005; Peretti 2007; Dhamija 2012). But, as Dhamija (2012) notes, the online recruitment process can be seen as a “new look of the traditional way”, which, if we think of it, includes some of the methods used in traditional recruitment but transferred online. Melton, Miller, and Salmona (2018) carried out a study about the impact of different types of candidates' presence on social networks, in the scope of recruitment processes. In essence, to the traditional process of screening candidates, often done through the *curriculum vitae*, a new step was added to which the authors called cybervetting, which consists of recruiters seeking for additional information of the candidates in social networks, and the way this content is viewed and interpreted by recruiters, influences the candidate's professional image.

On this wise, we could say the relationship between recruiter and candidate would be an unequal relationship, in which the power of participatory culture on the part of the candidates

would always collide with the decisive power of the organisations in choosing their employees. Yet, this is a dynamic relationship where both parties need each other. The candidates also choose where they want to work, therefore there is a growing search for narratives and clues that allow greater self-knowledge of the individuals and their personal development. Interviews conducted by [Wilden, Gudergan, and Lings \(2010\)](#) reveal that candidates evaluate the attractiveness of companies according to their previous work experiences, clarity and credibility of the company and perceptions of the company as an employer based on their product or service. Other authors also mention how candidates make thoughtful choices and, as well as the companies, want to adapt their skills and characteristics to contexts that can bring value to them ([Collins and Stevens 2002](#); [Erdem and Swait 2004](#); [Berthon, Ewing, and Hah 2005](#)).

Those needs have awakened companies to invest in their image as employers, mirroring the concept of employer branding, implied in the reputation of the company as a professional context and the value imputed to its human resources. People are seen as the main asset of organisations, and there is a noticeable investment in hiring the right people to the right place, thus recruitment is a key element in attracting candidates ([Caetano and Vala 2002](#)). Attracting, motivating and retaining candidates that result in valued appropriation is currently one of the major challenges for companies, that compete to hire the best ones ([Aggerholm, Andersen, and Thomsen 2011](#)).

At the same time, today's candidates face the challenge of making decisions and managing careers in a deeply changed social and economic environment, marked by risk and uncertainty ([Tractenberg, Streumer, and van Zolingen 2002](#)). As [Pallares-Burke \(2003, 8\)](#) would say "everything is now always being permanently dismantled, but with no perspective of permanence". Everything is transient: the institutions, the standards of reference, the way we live, what we believe. All these are converted before there is time to establish it in customs, convictions or instituted truths ([Bauman 2001](#)). [Arthur et al. \(1999 cited by Gothard et al. 2001\)](#) report how in the new economy individuals have to be able to establish or impose their careers.

Some theories allow us to better understand the processes involved in career choices, although these choices are always associated with dynamic contexts in terms of economic, political, social and psychological change ([Gothard et al. 2001](#)). Taking into consideration the analysis we intend to do on the use of transmedia storytelling in the attraction of candidates, our main focus goes to the approach of constructivism, which highlights the idea that in different stages of personal and professional life individuals face the challenge of trying to understand which are the central themes of his life and therefore to build a consistent life narrative. In this way, the capacity of a choice at a professional level can be enhanced by processes of narrative construction ([Santos 2007](#)). It is through the construction and reconstruction of narratives that individuals give meaning to their lives and the world around them. Professional identity is thus the expression of a certain narrative ([Gonçalves 2000](#); [Gonçalves 2006](#); [Santos 2007](#)), which means through narratives we can perceive the meanings used by individuals to make decisions and to get involved in a certain organisational universe. Furthermore, we could look at the recruitment process as an optimised space to tell, deconstruct, and reconstruct the history of the organisation and its employees that could be passed on to the candidates in a productive and meaningful way.

To this point, transmedia storytelling could function as a transmitter of information so candidates could form useful associations and choices regarding an organisation and career. According to Law's theory ([1984 cited by Gothard et al. 2001](#)), the community acts as a

transmitter of motivation and modifier of social functioning. Much of the process of identifying the motivations for professional development occurs through the sharing of information, requiring community participation (peers, groups). So, influences exerted by the community can, for example, be identified as follows: (1) in peer expectations, through suggestions or pressures; (2) in the adaptability to different types of social roles and the meaning that the individual attributes to himself, by belonging to specific groups; (3) in the support, encouragement and reinforcement that membership in a group can have; (4) in modelling, thus, in the opportunity to know and understand different life forms and to identify with particular models of life; (5) in the information and communication of the impressions, images and facts that come from being a member of a particular community. This theory can likewise be transposed into the participatory culture noticeable in recruitment processes, for instance, candidates, turn to forums to share information with other applicants (e.g. forum.officer.com; englishforum.ch/employment/; aviação.pt), search for information about companies and upload videos on YouTube related to recruitment processes (e.g. Cara Dee YouTube's channel: How I became Emirates Cabin Crew - The recruitment process). In this process of sharing, people create their career narrative with personal meanings that make sense, constantly creating and modifying the structures of institutions and their own lives, thus narratives can help people establish professional goals to commit to an organisation.

A professional choice implies “the intention to perform a certain function” (Crites 1981, 134), to pick from several options the one that suits or suggests greater possibilities of success. It is a matter of preference, of wanting or not wanting, in which the peremptory influence of motivational and emotional aspects are emphasised (Campos and Coimbra 1991). Based on this active attitude that the candidates have been demonstrating in their professional choices, it makes perfect sense for companies to innovate their recruitment processes. The transmedia storytelling has a strong power of immersion, a more creative, emotional and social side that can catch the attention of the candidates, possibly granting loyalty/commitment towards the company or as it is said in Portuguese business context: “to put on the company shirt”.

3.2. Case Study: Using transmedia storytelling

Although little mentioned or even studied, there are already some cases in which companies/corporations used transmedia storytelling to carry out recruitment campaigns. In Portugal, Mercedes implemented in 2017, a recruitment campaign in which it transmitted to social networks and through a channel on YouTube ([Mercedes-Benz Portugal 2017](#)), to share a series of job interviews carried out with candidates aboard a Mercedes vehicle at high speed. In addition to introducing a creative and innovative element in the recruitment process, the campaign promoted the involvement of the viewers in the history of the company/brand, attracting them and providing them with an immersive and participative experience. Also, RFM radio involved the public in a process of recruiting a speaker, placing the burden of the decision on their listeners ([SAPO Lifestyle 2016](#)). In addition to the radio experience, it was possible to share and obtain information about speaker candidates through various platforms and social networks.

While not always directly linked to recruitment, one of the most successful companies in terms of transmedia communication is Heineken, the international beer brand, with several award-winning campaigns. [Costa-Sánchez \(2014\)](#) carried out a case study of one of these campaigns called “#Dropped” in which transmedia storytelling is the key element to tell a story and create an experience for users/consumers with different levels of involvement that combined online and offline elements.

In the study, the author explores all components of transmedia storytelling revealed in the “#Dropped” campaign. The objective of the campaign, first launched through a commercial that relates the brand to the theme of travel, was to get participants out of their comfort zone, testing their attitude reaction when exposed to different contexts and situations, in a distant country where they had to complete a challenge, in order to be able to return home. The whole experience is told in successive series on the web, and the protagonists were chosen through a game of roulette, in which anonymous people were randomly selected and invited to accept the challenge of going to their destination in an unprecedented adventure, without any type of preparation. Already at this point, the campaign includes the participation of the public. Afterward, content with small passages of the adventures lived by the participants, was released through social networks, TV ads and social events (Costa-Sánchez 2014).

The story intended to share the idea that people should live in the moment, that life is a constant adventure and that heroes surpass their fears and conquer their destiny with creativity and adaptability. Then, the campaign intended to associate the ideas of adventure, fun, heroism and even naivety to Heineken, through the experience of the participants, in which the storyline is the hero's journey, multiplied into different journeys/travelling's and challenges faced by different players. In this particular case, the fact that the heroes are real people/ordinary citizens increased the sense of identification of the public with the protagonists of the campaign, since many people dream of travelling to distant countries, starring a life with great adventures (Costa-Sánchez 2014).

In the analysis made by Costa-Sánchez (2014), was verified that each media served a certain purpose: the television was used to disseminate the main narrative; the website to pass on non-sequential information from the story, interacting, exploring and participating; social networks to talk and share; the real and online games to create immersion of the user in the narrative; the web episodes to summarise the narrative and create expectations; trailers to preview content and attract interest to the story; and finally a video was used to summarise the best moments of the storyline.

As a strategic expansion of the original narrative universe, Heineken bet on creating parallel stories, through the following: several seasons of the web series (each season with a different person); peripheral stories where the players reported short documentaries with facts of their personal life and the reasons why they had gone on board on the Heineken adventure; content auto-generated by the participants, who published in their own YouTube channels their roulette game experience, for example (Costa-Sánchez 2014). These multiple points of entry to the storyline are important to reach different audiences (Dena n. d. cited by Costa-Sánchez 2014), being the key to transmedia storytelling the exploration and investment of the audiences.

These same concepts of exploration and involvement of the audience can also be partners in understanding the processes of recruitment, professional development and career choices of individuals. In other words, only through exploration, questioning and experimentation is it possible to transform and reconstruct investments, assigned them new values or meanings (Campos and Coimbra 1991; Gonçalves 2006). Accordingly, at the same time as the Heineken campaign served to convey an organisational message, it could also be applied to recruitment, since the ideas and characteristics that the company wants to diffuse would attract candidates who identify with the message and thus would increase the talent “pool” to which the company would have access, promoting the alignment of candidates' expectations towards the company as an employer (Minchington 2006; Lubecka 2013).

4. Discussion

Based on the case study carried out by [Costa-Sánchez \(2014\)](#) and the assumptions already described regarding the technological and social changes in recruitment processes, we can discuss that the development of a good transmedia storytelling framework implies a fundamental effort of the organisations in examining their audiences, building from that base a new scenario of meanings and representations of the brand and its contexts. Representations that candidates may have about an organisation are built on the interaction process individuals maintain with other members of online and offline communities to which they may belong ([Davenport and Hall 2002](#)). Therefore, companies must be able to deconstruct their previous representations/projects and to rebuild new investments. On that account and in order for companies to be able to understand and predict what is important in people's lives, they have to look at individuals daily experiences and their relationships with others, realising in this way, the professional choice of the candidates as the life project that it is and that is, written in the social history of individuals, in their relationships, contacts and experiences.

The potential and communication tools of companies continue to increase in a variety of channels and formats. In this sense, companies must be able to reach candidates who are linked to new technologies and immersed in the multi-screen phenomenon. This target audience can become a strong ally of corporate image, as well as co-creators ([Costa-Sánchez 2014](#)).

In light of participatory culture, candidates and recruiters should not be seen as two distinct and isolated figures ([Deuze 2007](#)). Transmedia storytelling is a synergistic process in which its success and implementation are likely to influence the image development of organisations and how candidates interact and share information about organisations, by choosing their level of involvement. These type of narratives can become a challenge to the organisations/creators since they have to invest and work on the involvement of the public from the outset, yet this is at the same time a way of creating a community of followers ([Costa-Sánchez 2014](#)).

A limitation to the use of transmedia storytelling is already presented by some authors as a general limitation of the use of online recruitment and involves the possibility of attracting a large number of misfit candidates, without the necessary qualifications ([Mitter and Orlandini 2005](#)). Anyhow, this limitation can be converted into an advantage because as well as it can attract less suitable candidates, it can also attract talented ones, since stories establish an emotional connection, generating greater identification of individual's values with organisations' values ([Rego et al. 2012](#)). Besides, companies should also view candidates as potential customers, who share and generate information, depending on the type of connection/relation they may have established in recruitment processes.

Another limitation to be pointed out is that transmedia storytelling can be costly, especially when it comes to small and medium-sized companies. By comparison, poor investment in recruitment processes result in a lack of adequate profiles to the needs of the company, thus turnover processes entail high costs.

On the other hand, the lack of transparency of information often associated with recruitment processes could be solved with transmedia storytelling, which presents a clear advantage in personalising those processes to candidates. Therefore, using these narratives in recruitment processes may create intrinsic motivation, bind and engage candidates.

Adding to the potential use of transmedia storytelling, educational institutions, mainly universities, should also assume an active role in recruitment processes management, integrating transmedia storytelling into students' vocational support and preparation for the job market. Most universities use recruitment platforms, study cases and other challenges/games in order to get together students and companies. That proximity could be leveraged through transmedia storytelling, which for instance would engage students, encouraging them to participate and explore the advantages of opportunities and synergies established between universities and organisations.

Mostly in the recruitment universe, those who manage processes of attraction and selection must assume the role of a marketing expert: quick, insightful and creative (Araújo and Ramos 2002). This means organisations are also exposed to the same forces of change that candidates are faced with. Reflecting on this process and being aware of the nature of these changes is an essential part of maintaining and developing a credible organisational identity. The way organisations work and develop their resources is sustained, to a certain extent, with theory, which acts as a rationale to what is done to promote productivity and wellbeing, requiring basic assumptions of how people learn and change their behaviours. In addition to theory, organisations must put their assumptions into perspective, by reflecting on how the world functions and how to act accordingly, acknowledging people's beliefs, values and motivations. All these influence the ways an organisation develops, works and stimulates employees, clients and candidates, so it must be recognized and reflected by the organization itself so that it cannot jeopardize its relationships.

5. Conclusion

According to observation of recruitment and employer branding processes, we are in the presence of a very challenging and creative field that requires investment from the organisations towards digital transformation in human resources, including an extensive knowledge of techniques and means in recruitment; ability to build relationships with stakeholders (employees, customers, consumers); ability to use suitable brand/image activation techniques to the concerns and interests of society; support staff to identify internal personal factors related to career decisions, including personality, values, interests, attitudes and motivations; ability to recognise and modify employee/candidate's stereotypes about their professional competencies; and ability to identify contextual factors that influence professional choices and may concern family-related decisions, opportunities for growth or socioeconomic status.

As an instrument in recruitment, transmedia storytelling can provide a way for companies to explore candidate's attitudes, skills, interests, values, and competencies, previously identified for a job vacancy or function. As a process, it guides candidates to prospect their future through companies' past and present communication. By implementing it, organisations get closer to their target audience in a rich digital media context, full of interactions that are crucial to organisations to be able to stand out from the rising sea of information, generating competitiveness and adding value to their consumers and employees.

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