

## Chapter 4

# Symbolic Convergence and Tourism Social Media

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### ABSTRACT

The majority of scholarly contributions in tourism social media have focused on assisting practitioners to optimize online platforms or to describe the digital behavior of prospective individual tourists. These studies are dominated by mechanistic ontological frameworks, which take little notice of the inherently social nature of tourism consumption. Acknowledging the sociality of Web 2.0 communications, this chapter explores the potentials of an alternative analytical framework informed by symbolic convergence theory. The linkages between tourism social media, virtual communities, and symbolic convergence processes are illustrated by examples of postings taking place on the Facebook fan site of Roskilde festival. These examples highlight the significance of symbolic communities in shaping the visitor experience against the backdrop of contemporary consumer culture.

*Keywords:* Virtual communal marketing; symbolic convergence theory

### INTRODUCTION

Social media and virtual communities are becoming significant aspects of tourism consumption, and they may fundamentally change the way people select and consume tourism offerings. Social media platforms present novel

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**Tourism Social Media: Transformations in Identity, Community and Culture**

**Tourism Social Science Series, Volume 18, 55–71**

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**ISSN: 1571-5043/doi:10.1108/S1571-5043(2013)0000018006**

strategic opportunities for marketers, offering unsolicited, user-driven, and more trustworthy ways to construct images of tourism organizations and destinations (Wang et al., 2002). Unlike conventional promotional channels, social media also have the prospect of establishing long-lasting relationships between potential consumers and brands or products. However, as online dialogue and brand ambassadorship has only recently entered the world of strategic communication, marketers must rethink how to address and build alliances with online communities.

To assist practitioners in finding new ways of engaging tourists on social media sites, researchers have mainly offered prescriptive recommendations. These include provision of networking platforms and talking points, involvement of customers in blogs and multimedia promotional tools, enabling of dialogue and customer feedback, and the illusion of exclusivity (Muñiz & Schau, 2007). Scholars have so far focused on finding optimal design solutions tailored to the online search behavior of prospective customers or on simultaneously enabling and regulating consumer sovereignty. Arguably, the preoccupation with a normative agenda in contemporary research practices has resulted in sluggish theoretical development regarding the deeper understanding of social media communications in tourism. Instead of building upon recent contributions conceptualizing digital communications and online communities in general, tourism scholars still adhere to a narrow ontological approach to Web 2.0 communications. The following sections review how two particular schools of communication theory dominate tourism social media studies and subsequently identify flaws in contemporary research practices.

### *Information Systems Theory*

Information systems theory (IST), derived from the classic mathematical models of Shannon and Weaver (1949) and Berlo (1960), conceptualizes communication at the syntactic level, modeling it as a message flow and feedback system between senders, receiver(s), and a mediating channel. These models are helpful in addressing pragmatic problems of how to optimize the transfer of information in a noisy, dynamic system and ultimately assist managers to choose the right channels and instruments for their campaigns to maximize marketing effects. Scholars studying the affective design of social media platforms import the conceptual frameworks of IST, assuming that by grooming various parameters, the “right” interactive setting can be created for customers. In the past few years, a number of practical, how-to-do-it books have been published, offering social

media management recipes within and beyond tourism (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012).

There are a number of problems involved with treating social media communications as analogous to mechanistic systems, where human communication and decision making are thought to follow rational transaction processes. First, it is assumed that social media communications can be manipulated along a Pavlovian scheme: given the right design and choice architecture (or conditional stimulus), individuals will respond in a predictable way. Second, marketing meanings are conceptualized in an essentialist way, maintaining that they are ultimately captured and defined by marketers' messages. However, marketing scholarship is today more inclined toward the tenets of the value cocreation paradigm (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), suggesting that meanings emerge from the collaborative interaction between providers and consumers. The notion of consumers as active coproducers of marketing messages is particularly important for understanding social media communications, where anyone can create, comment, and add to social media content (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Schau, Muñoz, & Arnould, 2009; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). This implies not only that communications happen in multimodal networks (many-to-many instead of dyads), but also that meanings are altered while passing from one messenger to another (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). Furthermore, as Baym (2010) suggests, the patterns and "reach" of social media communications are unpredictable. Hence static models based on the theoretical underpinnings of IST remain ignorant on the dynamics of such creative and transformative processes.

### *Uncertainty Reduction Theory*

Uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) focuses on the pragmatics of communication: the motives of information sharing rather than explaining the structure of communication flows. With its roots in behavioral psychology, this school of thought posits that communication is a goal-oriented action steered by tension-reducing tactics. Research on travel planning maintains that tourists undertake an extensive information search and attempt to maximize their knowledge in advance in order to reduce risk and uncertainty (Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; Holloway & Robinson, 1995; Wang et al., 2002). Following this thread, the majority of studies on the online tourism domain are preoccupied with the role of social media in the online tourism information search (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Virtual tourism communities are regarded as peer-to-peer review tools, allowing members to

search for various functional, socio-psychological, and hedonic benefits (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). Consequently, the operationalization of online behavior and satisfaction of prospective tourists revolves around the conditions of convenient and effective information search (Chung & Buhalis, 2008b) or the factors influencing trustworthiness of different types of review sites (Dickinger, 2011).

Chung and Buhalis (2008, p. 79) regard social media review sites as “an information source [...] and attractive virtual market place,” which can be turned into appropriate channels for targeted messages, if only marketers succeed in developing “an informative and substantial online community.” However, none of these scholars deals with the question of how exactly a substantial online community arises or how to design marketer messages suitable for social media platforms. Facebook is full of autocommunicating walls owned by tourism firms and destinations, mostly featuring informative postings from their own employees or project managers, and a few “external” fans. This implies that people’s involvement in virtual communities may go well beyond activities of information search and the facilitation of travel decisions.

### *Consumer Tribes and Virtual Communities*

By focusing on identifying individual needs and behavioral characteristics of social media users, tourism research to date fails to take the *collective nature* of social media into account. Consumers do not exclusively use new digital platforms to exchange information (and hence, reduce decision-related uncertainties) but also to build clusters of social affiliations with like-minded peers across geographic or temporal divides. Marshall McLuhan’s prediction of society being retribalized based on computer-mediated, inclusive forms of communication, seems to be coming true (in Kozinets, 1999, p. 253). Today, there exists a variety of forms of e-tribes converging on social networking sites, online gaming worlds, and collaborative knowledge projects. People sharing (sub)cultural traits are today gathering in virtual communities, and the emergence of these “tribes” is often due to brand fandom or other consumption interests (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007). Common for these affiliative groups is that their online interactions “are based upon shared enthusiasm for and knowledge of a specific consumption activity or related activities” (Kozinets, 1999, p. 254). As such, consumption-related interests and social interests often intertwine. Kozinets (1999) introduces a typology of online communities based on two differentiating features of

interactivity: social structure (loose vs. strong ties), and interaction focus (information exchange vs. socialization). For instance, chat rooms are characterized by weak social ties where the primary reason to participate is to socialize with each other; members of lists or rings are strongly connected, but their interaction is more focused on discussing specific themes. Each e-tribe has its own social hierarchy, ceremonies, and practices, which are shaped by shared behavioral norms and moral standards.

These differentiating features (social structure and interaction focus) define four ideal member types in virtual consumption communities, such as devotees, insiders, tourists, and minglers (Kozinets, 1999, p. 255). Devotees and insiders are assumed to be more involved with the consumption activity than tourists or minglers, and their relatively higher knowledgeability would ensure them higher ranks in the social hierarchy of the tribe. Marketers are eager to find ways to use these individuals as opinion leaders to market messages and to harness the inherent trustworthiness of peer-to-peer communications. This could, for example, entail giving away free samples of newly released consumer goods to bloggers for community reviews. Kozinets et al. (2010) demonstrate that such managed word-of-mouth endorsements are a result of a delicate balance between promotional messages and the bloggers' credibility among community members. In order to conform to the communicative norms of a forum and to remain loyal to their own virtual identity, bloggers adopt various narrative strategies while transforming commercial information to stories that are relevant to their particular peers (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Shifting the view of social media as e-tribalized communication platforms has several implications. First, as Kozinets (1999, p. 261) puts it, online consumers are "more active, participative, resistant, activist, loquacious, social and communitarian than they have previously been thought to be." Second, depending on the type of the digital platform, interaction among community members often has a social, ludic, and symbolic character. Hence, by posting brand meanings or promotional messages in these environments, marketers must anticipate that these will be creatively altered and transformed to serve communal purposes. Arguably, research on tourism social media must acknowledge the sociality of social media and pursue an understanding of the dynamics of tribal communication, which goes beyond implications for managerial action. How does meaning emerge in coproduced group communications? How does the social hierarchy of a virtual community affect which meanings endure and which perish? How do consumers relate to overt and covert promotional messages on social networks?

## THE NARRATIVE PARADIGM AND SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE THEORY

These issues can be addressed by taking an alternative worldview of communication epitomized by narrative paradigm theory (Fischer, 1984). It offers an understanding of the nature and function of communication as a constitutive force in the forming of social groups, communities, and organizations. It sees human beings as social storytellers (*Homo Narrans*), holding that social reality and human experience are ordered and communicated as stories. Building on the narrative paradigm, rhetorical theorist Ernest Bormann developed symbolic convergence theory (SCT), claiming that sharing common fantasies may transform a collection of individuals into a cohesive group. Voiced fantasies are instruments to share common experiences, meaning, and emotions. Telling and sharing fantasies enable sharing of a common symbolic reality and thus hold the key for building group consciousness:

Shared fantasies provide group members with comprehensible forms for explaining their past and thinking about their future—a basis for communication and group consciousness. (Bormann, 1985, p. 128)

SCT describes the interactive process through which human beings converge by telling individual fantasies, dreams, hopes, or fears in a shared symbol system (Bormann, 1985, p. 188) and offers a stringent analytical framework to capture the dynamic progression of meaning creation in groups. By accounting for the processes and symbolic ground that create and sustain group consciousness, SCT may also contribute to a new understanding of how virtual communities arise and interact on social media sites. This chapter discusses the potential of SCT as a framework to analyze the dynamics of social media communications and the cocreation of virtual consumer tribes on social media platforms. The theoretical challenge is to establish a framework to understand and critically examine unfolding communication patterns on social media that can eventually explain the collective behavior of bloggers, tweeters, and tripadvisors. The discussion below critically reviews the basic assumptions and elements of SCT and its adaptation to different contexts. This is followed by an examination of the implications of SCT in tourism social media and virtual rhetorical communities, illustrated by an example from a music festival's social network site.

*The Tenets of Symbolic Convergence Theory*

SCT is a general theory, combining socio-psychological and rhetorical (humanistic) traditions in communication studies, which offers a theoretical and analytical framework to study the process of group formation through communication. It views communication as a hybrid structuring tool, which creatively constructs and is being constrained by reality. In the beginning of the 1970s, small group communication researchers (Bales, 1970; Bormann, 1972) discovered that group consciousness arises from a particular sequence of communication acts and is sustained through the communication and collective creation of recurring fantasy themes. To illustrate the symbolic convergence process, Bormann introduced a conceptual vocabulary entailing: dramatizing message, fantasy theme, fantasy type, and rhetorical vision. The method of revealing the relationships between these concepts is termed fantasy theme analysis, and it focuses on direct observation of communication with either ethnographic, discursive, or quantitative (Q-sort, content analysis) approaches. Conducting a fantasy theme analysis is a hierarchical sorting process, sifting dramatic content into larger abstract categories (similar to the clustered coding approach of grounded theory). Dramatic content may be traced, for example, in conversations, mass media debates, customer responses to marketer messages, or virtual forum postings.

A central term in SCT is *fantasy*, which refers to the creative, imaginative, and shared interpretation of real events. Etymologically, it stems from the Greek work *phantaskikos*, originally meaning “to show or to make visible.” As Bormann (1985, p. 130) states:

Rhetorical fantasies may include fictitious scripts but often relate to things that have actually happened to members of the group or that are reported in authentic accounts of history, the news media, oral history or folklore of other groups of communities.

A fantasy chain always starts with a dramatizing message, which is a narratively crafted comment or statement put on display by one individual. When individuals publicly share their own interpretation of an event (fantasy), they often do it by using rhetorical effects. Dramatizing messages may take various figurative linguistic forms, such as inside jokes, cryptic allusions, word plays, anecdotes, allegories, imaginary fables, or legends, which all have the capacity to catch the attention of the listeners (Bormann & Bormann, 1990). Dramatizing messages may stimulate the other members of the group to respond and participate in the story by expanding or enhancing it. When

a group of people is caught up in a fantasy, it can develop into an “explosive communication episode” (Bormann, 1983, p. 73), where several people join in to comment. The tempo of the conversation accelerates and similar emotional expressions (happiness, sadness, anger) are displayed. Not only do they appropriate (go along with) the story, but also creatively modify and add to it. The outcome of such a chain reaction is the shared fantasy theme, which will constitute the common symbolic ground to unite the members of the group (Bormann, Knutson, & Musolf, 1997). In other instances, the listeners may respond with apathy and ignorance or reject the dramatizing message by sneering at or ridiculing the messenger. With the sharing of several fantasy themes, common scripts or scenarios emerge. Eventually these develop into broad and consistent views on social reality, pulling together various symbolic elements and fantasy themes into a rhetorical vision (Bormann, 1983). A rhetorical vision could be defined as a grounding symbolic reality that “glues” the community together; the group of people who participates in it is called a rhetorical community. With the structured approach of fantasy theme analysis, one can identify and quantify fantasy themes and types converging into an ultimate (or sometimes several, opposing) rhetorical vision(s). Opposing rhetorical visions demarcate the rhetorical boundaries within communities and may reveal deep roots for cultural conflict.

SCT has been criticized for some explanatory pitfalls (Mohrmann, 1982). First, it does not clarify why people would share fantasies and start dramatizing reality in the first place, apart from referring to the basic assumption of the narrative paradigm (that humans are predisposed toward skilled storytelling). In an attempt to revitalize Bormann’s contribution, Olufwote (2006) suggests bolstering SCT with Karl Weick’s sensemaking framework: a process of organizing and structuring the unknown by “bracketing cues from a past experience in order to construct meaning out of them” (Weick, 1995, p. 464). When facing uncertainty or crisis, people use retrospective sensemaking to anticipate and enunciate predictable future scenarios. Viewed through Weick’s framework, the human predisposition to dramatize reality is essentially a collective sensemaking activity to understand lived experience and ultimately, oneself. Consequently, rhetorical visions may be divided into three master analogues: pragmatic, social, and righteous rhetorical visions (Cragan & Shields, 1981). A pragmatic rhetorical vision is built on rational and utilitarian arguments and practical ways of dealing with problems. Social rhetorical visions are concerned with developing, repairing, or maintaining alliances and relationships among people or social groupings, while righteous rhetorical visions gather elements

symbolizing morals and dedication for a higher cause (Bormann, Cragan, & Shields, 1996).

The second theoretical weakness concerns the convergence ideology itself, which assumes egalitarian group dynamics and conflict-free membership in rhetorical communities (Olufwote, 2006). By focusing on the members subscribing to the rhetorical vision, scholars underemphasize diversity and the potential of conflicting opinions. Achieving a cohesive group and common symbolic ground may be paved with disagreement and negotiations. This tenuous and dynamic process is acknowledged in recent contributions, which are reviewed in the next sections.

### *Applications of Symbolic Convergence Theory*

Despite the weaknesses discussed above, SCT has had a significant impact on communication studies and has been adopted in a wide variety of areas, such as organizational communication, intercultural communication, and mass communication (Bormann, Cragan, & Shields, 1994, 2001; Cragan & Shields, 1995). Its popularity may be attributed to its general applicability to a range of communication phenomena on the individual, collective, and socio-historical levels (Olufwote, 2006). For instance, in an organizational communication context, Cragan and Shields (1992) illuminated how a new corporate symbolic reality may be repositioned by creating new and differentiated fantasy themes addressing distinct rhetorical visions of different market segments. Terry (2001) found that fantasy themes of mass-broadcast political campaigns also work effectively to persuade and engage voters. In the intercultural context, Bormann and Itaba (1992) demonstrated the universality of symbolic convergence processes. By comparing North American and Japanese respondents' reception to four different narrative dimensions, they found that people's predisposition toward sharing fantasies and dramatizing messages is similar across cultures. Last, but not least, SCT may provide explanations for understanding the functioning of groups and member commitment to collective causes.

Coalition researchers have recently identified the potential of the symbolic convergence approach in studying the dynamics of group development and the role of rhetorical visions in constituting, reinforcing, or splitting up a symbolic community (Broom & Avanzino, 2010; Olufwote, 2006; Taylor, 2005). Rhetorical visions are deemed crucial for coalition success as they may guide the actions or serve as ideological underpinnings of individual member's action (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001).

However, rhetorical visions are seldom conflict-free. Considering Foster-Fishman et al.'s claim that a coherent vision is essential for maintaining a successful coalition, [Broom and Avanzino \(2010\)](#) studied and classified emergent fantasy themes in a nonprofit community coalition. They found two conflicting rhetorical visions serving complementary roles in maintaining group cohesion: one to keep members committed to the group, the other to create symbolic group boundaries and distinguish the coalition ("we") from other communities ("them"). However, contrasting rhetorical visions may also lead to potential group conflict and fragmentation. Demarcations between insiders and outsiders may marginalize certain groups or interests and, in the long term, destabilize symbolic communities. Paradoxically, particular fantasies that contributed to the emergence of a coalition in the first place may, if they become inflexible, run the risk of obstructing the sustainment and renewal of the group.

[Bormann et al. \(1996\)](#) suggest a life cycle analogy to describe how rhetorical visions emerge, grow, decline, and come to an end. They illustrate the rise and fall of rhetorical visions in a five-stage model through a genealogical analysis of the Cold War concept. The emergence of the rhetorical vision (stage one) can always be traced back to a distinct dramatizing event, in this case the Truman Doctrine speech. If several people dedicate themselves to the rhetorical vision, by weaving fantasy themes further and altering their behavior accordingly, the rhetorical vision enters into its second, consciousness-raising phase. In the third, consciousness-sustaining stage, members of the rhetorical community maintain their commitment to the vision either by reiterating or restating key fantasy themes or by defending it against criticism and counter-rhetoric. In this phase, it is important to notice how rhetorical visions adapt to change, as this affects their long-term survival. If the characters, stages, and plotlines are adjusted to new situations, then it is a flexible vision; if it remains static, it would be termed an inflexible vision. Over time, rhetorical visions may lose their explanatory power and decline, or give way to alternative/competitive visions. Eventually, rhetorical visions become too inflexible to explain changes in its community and often end with a rapid implosion.

The cyclical engagement in a fantasy theme has also been studied and confirmed in a tourism-related context. [Lanier and Hampton \(2008\)](#) studied visitor participation in five renaissance festivals in the United States to understand the relationships between the dynamics of fantasy engagement (exposure, learning, acting, modification) and control over the resources of the festival experience. They found that as visitors move through a fantasy cycle (from passively being exposed to it to actively modifying it), their

participation in the experience changes. In the fantasy-creating stage, their involvement in the experience is characterized by utilizing resources provided and controlled by the festival producer. In the consciousness-raising stage, visitors enhance their fantasy engagement by codesigning and coproducing stories together with the producers. Finally, consumers may take entire control over the experience, searching for new ways to produce and engage with the rhetorical vision (for instance, by staging medieval reenactment or role-play with other consumers). Consequently, visitor participation differs significantly in each stage and adopts different resources and strategies to enact renaissance fantasies. This approach may also contribute to a more dynamic reading of the archetypal tribal members described by Kozinets (1999). Rather than imposing a structural confinement and seeing devotees, insiders, tourists, and minglers as distinct individuals, one might argue that they could be the same person at various stages of a tribal career (see also the notion of the versatile tourist, Ooi, 2002b).

#### *Symbolic Convergence and Tourism Social Media*

SCT offers a framework that may be appropriate for delving deeper into the social dynamics of tourism social media. By exposing communication strings and online polylogues to fantasy theme analysis, the rhetorical vision of a virtual community may be identified. Such an analysis may also give an indication of the group cohesion and reveal symbolic grounds for group conflicts or fragmentation. For an illustration, this section explores a fraction of the symbolic converging practices of an established Scandinavian rock festival in cyberspace.

Popular cultural events and festivals are typical examples of tribal gatherings where sense of community is as important as the featured artists themselves. Marketers have long acknowledged the collective power of the community in creating, appropriating, and sustaining unique meanings connected with a festival brand. However, such tribal enactments have been so far concentrated within the temporal confines of the event. Social media platforms enable the creation of tribal practices and the negotiation of collective identities throughout the year, thereby offering new marketing opportunities to cater to the existential needs of a tribe.

Roskilde Festival is a Danish music festival established in 1971, currently attracting over 130,000 attendees every year. The essence of Roskilde Festival is labeled “Orange Feeling,” referring to the iconic Orange Scene (the largest concert venue of the festival), but connotatively pointing at

a range of symbolic meanings that embrace ideologies born and cultivated in the 1970s (solidarity, community, rock and roll, liberal attitudes to sex, and boundary-crossing festivities). These (such as the traditional Naked Run competition or the donation of surplus consumables to marginalized groups) are manifested in tribal rituals during the festival as well as frequently mentioned and debated by the online community. Roskilde Festival's Facebook wall offers a particularly rich gateway to study the symbolic convergence of fans, as the virtual community is substantial, both in terms of number of fans (130,000) and average frequency of postings (67/day), with a 32:1 fan/wall owner posting ratio (Larson & Gyimóthy, 2012). For the purposes of this chapter, a fantasy chaining process is illustrated below, revealing contested rhetorical visions.

The distinct communication event started on July 27, 2011 (the day after the festival ended) with the wall owner posting a recurrent post-event question on Facebook: "Do you have a great idea how we can make Roskilde Festival in 2012 even better?" One dramatic response triggered an exalted discussion. Note the accelerated tempo indicated by the time stamps in brackets:

Better music less crap.... don't be like everyone else and make Roskilde Festival one big cleaning, organic beer, unknown music, come-together mekka. Thx. (19:20 by S)

It would be nice if the organization behind Roskilde Festival will use 2012 to decide whether it is a music festival a charity event or a Tivoli. Then the audience have a better opportunity to set their expectations from the type of the arrangement they are participating in. (20:03 by PLH)

Start by playing some damn good music. (20:08 TJS)

No, we need EVEN worse bands next year. They must be TOTALLY unknown and REALLY crap. Thanks in advance. (20:12 MT)

David Bowie...please convince him to come to Roskilde. I would gladly pay more for my ticket to hear one of the real legends. (21:17 AT)

The opening response by the "S" launches a chain reaction of dramatizing comments (Bormann, 1983, p. 73), rich in imaginative language, including allegory ("come-together mekka"), slang ("less crap"), double entendre ("we need even worse bands"), and analogy (referring to Tivoli, a historical

amusement park in Copenhagen). Some days later, another symbolic explosion takes place chaining further on the same theme and highlighting a clear disagreement in the fan community:

How about putting the energy produced by dancing festival guests into good use [link to website]. Join the co-creation of Audience Energy! (11:13 Roskilde Festival)

Use the money on some music instead :-). (12:29 MBR)

More rock n' roll, less Greenpeace bullshit. I'm sick and tired of all that stuff. It is not rock n' roll. (12:53 FBF)

These excerpts show different fantasy themes emerging, highlighting contested notions about the *raison d'être* of the Festival. The discussion starts with the reiteration and re-enchantment of the inherited rhetorical vision of a solidaristic and sustainable event (by actualizing it through the cues of organic beer, concerns about the future, charity event, putting dance energy to good use), which is directly disapproved of by a cheeky fan. In his view, pro-environmental activities are developed at the expense of the musical program, even though the festival claims that there is no irreconcilable conflict between the two:

Rock n' roll doesn't mean being reckless with the environment. (13:28 Roskilde Festival)

That is PRECISELY what it means. But seriously, it could be nice if RF concentrated more on the people who pay 1800 Kr to go to the festival instead of anything else. I just don't like the fact that Roskilde Festival has become a "Greenpeace Festival" and that everywhere you go you see almost religious signs and messages telling you what is right and wrong. The whole is getting on my nerves, because I see it getting more and more every year and the music is getting worse and worse. (13:39 FBF)

In this particular fantasy chain, "Greenpeace" is symbolically reassigned from meaning rebellious environmental activism practiced by a minority group to signifying actual governmental priorities on sustainable development. Hence, the discussion reflects a contemporary debate in Danish society where green is mainstreamed by the political majority. In contrast to egalitarian group dynamics of rhetorical communities suggested by Bormann (1985), the unfolding dialogue on the virtual forum is not devoid

of power negotiations. The fantasy chaining process is abruptly closed by an anonymous member of the festival communication team: “Perhaps you should find another festival to go if that’s how you feel” (13:54 Roskilde Festival).

By using the corporate signature of Roskilde Festival rather than his/her own profile, this person gave additional weight to an arbitrary comment penalizing a rank-and-file member. Instead of letting the majority decide upon the boundaries of the rhetorical community and legitimate fantasy themes to be discussed, the representative of the wall owner takes the freedom to single-handedly “exclude” FBF. Within a few minutes, another fan is taking sides, approving of the new elitist line of the festival management:

The last festival newsletter this year talked about that RF isn’t for everyone. They want creative people who care and not just drunk, “use and throwaway” people. I like Roskilde as it is and willing to pay almost 2000 DKK to get a festival who cares about the future of the world and the problems we will face. (14:09 DA)

Explicit statements of appropriate and less desired attendee behavior (not being reckless about the environment, not for “use and throwaway”) are interpreted as a sign of orthodoxy, underscored by moral and religious metaphors (telling people what is right and wrong, “get-together mekka”). As the rhetorical vision is fixed into black-and-white value statements, the symbolic coalition begins to disintegrate: there are dedicated, fiercely protective fans, telling off others with an alternative vision. Paradoxically, the counter-rhetoric is also justified by a nostalgic interpretation of Roskilde Festival’s cultural heritage (legendary rock music with related negative and provocative attitudes). The fissure within the symbolic community becomes articulated through a trade-off between musical quality and charity:

Lower the donation of money to humanitarian organizations and up the budget for bands this year. The 2011 budget was definitely weighed more on donations than on bands. And personally, I come for the music. (14 July, 17:53 MBR)

However, as argued above, the claimed trade-off between music versus charity or music versus environmentalism points to a deeper issue, which may indicate a mid-life identity crisis for the festival. The values of the 1970s flower-power generation are being mainstreamed by national political agendas and by the Danish middle-class, hence they have become hegemonic

symbols of the neatly streamlined welfare state. Paradoxically, although the rock festival community often defines itself as rebellious, refusing to comply with the rules, the symbolic community is crumbling from within when some members get into conflict over the very ideology that grounded the festival in the first place. Furthermore, the example also shows that despite the international appeal of Roskilde Festival and the potentially global reach of social media platforms, the symbolic meaning creation processes taking place on this Facebook wall are mainly embedded in a local (Danish) sociocultural context.

This case also illustrates the links between sensemaking processes taking place in the physical and virtual fan community, which bear important implications for practitioners. Community dynamics (convergence and disagreement on the dominant ideology and endorsed values of a festival) existed long before the emergence of social media. The decline and terminus of the rhetorical vision and the disintegration of a fan community may be one of the likely causes behind the collapse of festivals with a long tradition. However, such tribal disputes have been so far concentrated within the temporal confines of the event. The online platform extends the temporal dimensions of tribal co-enactment, allowing fans to exchange consumption knowledge, and socialize and simultaneously allows festival managers to tap into tribal discussions and take the “temperature” of the community. As demonstrated above, the online communication behavior of Roskilde Festival representatives may contribute critically to the sustainment of the symbolic community, which may not only include facilitation of virtual tribal gatherings, but also mediation in membership conflicts.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter introduces a theoretical framework grounded in a narrative paradigm to inform studies of tourism social media. It is argued that SCT is appropriate for analyzing the constitution of online communities, owing to its capacity to explain the symbolic roots of group communication. It posits that collective consciousness emerges through a discursive process imbued by figurative language and fantasy themes. Fantasy themes grow into a rhetorical vision, encompassing the *raison d'être* of the symbolic community. Over time, rhetorical visions may become altered, mutated, and obsolete or challenged by alternative counter-visions, which can ultimately lead to the disintegration of the community.

As illustrated above, a similar pattern of sensemaking can be traced by studying communication patterns of online communities. The dialogue excerpts from Roskilde Festival's Facebook wall show that single postings with a dramatizing content trigger equally dramatizing responses and may weave into a fantasy chain. The emotional outbursts of individual fans point to recurring fantasies and socially shared narrations, implying that interactions are rarely about information exchange or targeted advertising messages. Rather, social media augments non-digital tribal practices and ceremonies and redefines the communicative practices of traditional communication channels. Instead of focusing on building dyadic relationships between the individual fans and the festival brand, marketers may now provide the festival tribe with a virtual *agora* with many degrees of freedom.

This virtual agora is characterized by a fluid structure and random interaction patterns. Most postings are autocommunicative (status) messages that are not responded to by the rest of the community. Particularly active, self-acclaimed devotees or insiders are likely to be considered "village tossers" or being collectively ignored, which questions a virtual hierarchy based on posting frequency alone. The wall owner itself (Roskilde Festival) is often subject to critical comments, which is sometimes responded to, sometimes not. However, representatives of the wall owner may use their position to settle debates and arbitrarily expel members from the rhetorical community. By letting fans appropriate the social media platform for a variety of comments, Roskilde delegates the communicative task of enacting and re-enchanting the Orange Feeling. On Facebook, the rhetorical vision is constantly evolving: it is confirmed, questioned, redefined, or reflected upon. In other words, it is *kept alive* by the tribe.

The fragmentation of tribal communications on Facebook also has implications for the conceptualization of a virtual social hierarchy. In contrast to Kozinets and his colleagues' approach, it is suggested here that the social hierarchy of the symbolic agora is indistinct. Anyone can enter a debate and no member can be considered as central over time. Power structures are ephemeral, emerging, and disappearing in fleeting alliances (for instance, when two or more fans endorse a retort with a "like" sign). Similar to a marketplace, convergences and divergences among members are temporal and do not fundamentally evolve into a solid hierarchy.

By bringing insights from consumer tribes and the narrative paradigm into market communications on tourism social media, a whole new array of research avenues lie ahead. There is a need for more empirical research that does not adopt, but problematizes, challenges, and extends SCT in a social media setting. Communications in a virtual community are significantly

different from those of a group meeting face-to-face. It is then plausible that the technological interface may influence the way rhetorical visions arise online. In contrast to Bormann's (1983) fantasy chain model, there is little consistency in the development of fantasy themes into one grand rhetorical vision. Owing to the chaotic and simultaneous character of Web 2.0 communications, sensemaking is partial, rather than hierarchical, and results in multiple collages or snapshots. However, the demarcation between these rhetorical snapshots is not clear-cut, as the contrasted categories are more interdependent than mutually exclusive.

These conditions raise a number of new issues to address. For instance, how do particular characteristics of online communication (simultaneity and lack of co-spatiality) affect coalition patterns in the fan community? How do ideological conflicts and counter-visions emerge and how are they resolved? Is there an asymmetry between posting frequency and tribal positions and how is this addressed by marketers? How and when do "silent" members of the virtual tribe engage in collective meaning creation? These and related questions may contribute with a renewed agenda to tourism social media studies.