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Senior Thesis Prospectus

Introduction

Storytelling. The concept brings forth images of children sharing laughter and scary stories around a campfire or fables, fairy tales, and folktales– notions of innocence, goodwill, and simplicity. In essence, storytelling can be defined as the verbal or physical communication of true or fictional events to an audience that may or may not be present at its live presentation (Anderson 5-6). With functions like entertainment and education, storytelling could be a method for a variety of purposes and contexts. The most common universal purpose is entertainment, specifically entertainment that promotes well-being (Pellowski 230). Therefore, storytelling covers a complex network of communication mechanisms used across history varying from media broadcasting to the performing arts and propaganda.

Within the context of migration, varieties of storytelling influence the relationship between refugees and host communities. Since 2011, trust-destructive versions of storytelling regarding the Syrian refugee crisis are seen in the form of European asylum court hearings and in controversial media representations of the “refugee.” These may be reflective of the distrustfulness of refugee intentions that echoes across host populations and inhibits collective action towards hospitality. For host countries, the massive migration waves may have threatened their sense of border security and fueled fear about rapid economic and cultural adaptations.

Considering the role of communication in trust-building, scholars have seen media storytelling as an indicator of the trust climate in refugee politics. Not only does the media reflect

underlying distrust of host communities, but they may also contribute to further distrust from refugees. For instance, media representations risk tolerating or simply failing to advocate for refugees when populist waves scapegoat them for social and economic issues (Heinderyckx 199). Even when left-wing newspapers in Western Europe condemned harmful stereotypes of refugees, they often still failed to support the agency of those refugees, an identity apart from victim or perpetrator (200-1). Analyzing the “media-policy-migration” dynamic in Europe, Christopher Kyriakides (2017) claims that refugees are assigned a fixed identity as a victim through the rhetorical choices of the media, where they must be victimized in order to differentiate from other types of migrants and demonstrate they are not economically threatening (940-1). This media objectification in turn reduces their agency in assigning their own identity beyond victimhood. With this limited voice, these instances of storytelling are often a shock for refugees who carry with them serious traumas from their homeland and escape. Their expectations to find safety, protection, and autonomy in fleeing to a new land are often shattered by real experiences of discrimination and distrust. These traumas may infringe on their ability to feel safe enough to trust- in the country that takes them in, in their refugee communities, and in themselves.

As media representations and asylum court hearings are forms of storytelling so closely related to trust erosion, then storytelling may also be a method of trust-building. Indeed, in practice, informal and formal organizations of storytelling have been called upon to help the individual groups as well as form healthy relationships with one another, of which trust is understood to be a key component. For example, after analyzing “IntegrArt,” a European digital storytelling project for refugees and asylum seekers, Simona Bonini Baldini (2019) found that the “space,” or the emotional and physical setting of the storytelling, helped the refugee

storyteller articulate their identity. Moreover, on the international institutional scale, UNESCO has also recognized the power of storytelling in approaching extremism, refugee crises, and populism when they published the Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies which establishes practices for “Story Circles” (“Building Resilience”). Worldwide practices indicate the universal power of storytelling in counteracting negative perceptions of marginalized peoples. It seems the “safe space” of empathetic listening created in the micro interaction of storytelling serves as a model and tangible step for creating that physical and emotional safe space within the larger community.

Stemming from this context; I wanted to explore two aspects: how refugees sharing their stories to host Germans could build trust within that small interpersonal interaction; and how the digitization of this exchange, or the showcasing of this interaction into video or audio formats, could become a platform to further trust between both groups at a societal level.

Proposed Research Question:

How can digital personal narrative storytelling act as a third space of emotional safety to build trust between refugees from Syria and the German host communities they interact with—both within the conversation and to society as a whole when it is digitized to the public?

Theory and Hypothesis

My hypothesis to the first aspect is that there is a positive correlation between oral digital storytelling and trust-building between Syrian refugees and the host German communities they share it with. The underlying theory is that storytelling creates a third space, or a psychologically safe space to explore and share emotions without being directly submerged in the traumatic

environments that emoted them. Postcolonial scholar, Homi K. Bhabha, first coined the term, “Third Space of Enunciation,” in his book *The Location of Culture*. In this third space interaction, two differing cultural and power groups engage in an exchange of cultural traditions which forms a new shared hybrid identity apart from their separate origins (Ikas and Wagner 2). Here, a third space brings novelty, as well as potential understanding between diverse groups.

Other scholars have since expanded on Bhabha’s third space theory, adding more disciplines and lenses to the once-postcolonial term. For instance, American geographer Edward Soja combined the idea with those of philosopher Henri Lefebvre to argue that a third space incorporates and extends beyond both its material (first space) and representational (second space) dimensions of spatiality in his book, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Soja). Essentially, an area can be mapped in its first space, represented for its social significance in its second space, or be understood for both in its third space. These scholars used the concept of third space in completely different disciplines; however, both Bhabha and Soja embraced the same argument- that a third space is a zone for hybridity, something new created from two separated entities or approaches. It is this same concept of creating a hybrid meaning that may be represented in the third space formed during storytelling. When the Syrian refugee shares their story with the German interviewer, both bring to the space completely different personal narratives and emotional experiences. Yet, through this intimate sharing of stories, they may leave with a better understanding of both.

Building off of the scholarship, this research will investigate how a digital storytelling archive may build trust between the two different social groups through a newer conceptualization of the third space, or a psychologically safe space for both groups to explore emotional vulnerability. In this instance, I propose that the shared hybrid identity is not so much

a cultural bridge but the creation of shared emotional memory, which I will later investigate through theories in psychology, builds trust. To address the first aspect of my research question, participants within the intimate conversation are able to start building this trust between themselves through the emotional safety offered by the third space. As for the second aspect, I hypothesize that the digitization of storytelling may help to build trust between the two social groups at large. Specifically, digital storytelling embodies and creates a *cycle* of trust-building between participants and society. When the public is able to access the storytelling exchange through its digitization, the trust developed within the intimate conversation now extends to the community (timelessly) because the audience is now able to access the preserved third space indefinitely.

Case Study and Methodology

Empirically, this research will be one of the few to investigate the relationship between trust-building and digital storytelling, and the first to analyze the question with video conversations sourced from “Archiv der Flucht,” a German oral history project. “Archiv der Flucht” is a growing digital public archive of stories of refugees and other displaced peoples to Germany during the 20th and 21st century that is funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation. In analyzing this digital collection, this research will expand upon and interweave theories from divergent disciplines: third space theory and psychological theories of trust-building.

It is incredibly challenging to quantify an abstract concept like trust. There have been well-established surveys like the European Social Survey to measure types like social and institutional trust using questions such as, “Generally speaking, would you say that most people

can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" on a scale of 1-10 ("Source Questionnaire Round 8 2016/2017"). These questions are explicit and helpful in gathering self-selected information on a population scale, but measuring the subtleties of trust as an observer of pre-recorded conversations, like those in the "Archiv der Flucht," require a different third-person approach in analyzing the behavioral and verbal cues. Therefore, this research will use methodologies similar to the ones in therapeutic and intimate relationships, where research centers specifically on the necessity and procedures of trust-building.

Trust-building will be qualitatively measured through a content analysis of several approximately 1-hour long interview films using contemporary theories in psychology. Recent breaks in social psychology are using code-systems to recognize the complexity of trust-building. For example, renowned researcher and professor, Brené Brown, established the acronym of BRAVING (boundaries, reliability, accountability, the vault, integrity, non-judgment, and generosity) to observe the multiple components of self and interpersonal trust (Brown). Furthermore, psychologist and professor at the University Washington, John Mordechai Gottman, has long studied intimate relationships, analyzing the factors that influence divorce and successful marriages. Contributing to his research on trust and betrayal, his graduate student, Dan Yoshimoto, identified the foundation of trust as attunement, with its 6 dimensions measured under the acronym of ATTUNE (Awareness of the emotion, Turning toward the emotions, Tolerance of the emotional experience, Understanding the emotion, Non-defensive listening to the emotion, and Empathy toward the emotion) all of which can be observed in video-taped interviews between partners (Gottman 187). Individuals could choose to either dismiss or attune to their partners' emotions (186). Attunement is the ability to safely communicate emotions, whereas dismissing them develops distrust. As the coding-system of ATTUNE is grounded in

trust-building psychology and originally used in research with interview footage, it will serve as guideline to qualitatively analyze the conversations of “Archiv der Flucht for trust-formation. Therefore, this project will investigate how attunement is used within the storytelling videos, in the content questions, structure, reactions, and responses; and in the big-picture purpose of an oral history archive.

To answer the second aspect of my research question, analysis of the literature on digitization, media studies, and the societal benefits of historical archives will help to determine whether the trust-building benefits of the storytelling exchange extends beyond the immediate interpersonal interaction to the society at large through its virtual access.

In summary, this research will combine theories from diverse disciplines— trust-building through attunement and third space theory. My hypothesis is that when the storytelling, or the refugee’s vulnerable sharing of their personal story, is received with emotional attunement by the German interviewer, trust is being built; and thereby, a third space, or a psychologically safe platform for both groups to develop a shared emotional memory is grounded.

Significance of Research

The tenuous backdrop of multiple refugee crises demonstrates the importance of investigating the relationship between digital storytelling and trust-building between Syrian refugees and the native German communities. Trust is an important element of relationships, from microinteractions to the macro-functioning of a society. As refugees are especially vulnerable in these power-dynamics, the creation of authentic trust can be critical for their safety and for host hospitality. With distrust fueling contemporary issues between the groups like violence and discrimination, finding effective and sustainable solutions is critical.

If my hypotheses are correct, then a storytelling archive's role in responding to negative media stories with true experiences told from the refugees themselves, may be one of the most effective and realistic solutions to deteriorating trust. The same characteristics of the media that make dividing representations dangerous, such as major outreach and repeated influence, can also be the same features that well-intended storytelling can use to override its damaging effects. This research suggests that digital storytelling could act as a mediator in trust-building, offering an empowering opportunity to foster trust with minimal resources and across space and time.

Proposed Outline of Chapters:

Chapter	Content
1. Introduction & Case Study Selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Contextualization of research topic and question ● Case study background ● Relevance and significance of research focus
2. Historical Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Syrian refugee crisis ● German policies and social attitudes towards refugees
3. Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Storytelling (oral/digital/personal narrative) literature ● Trust research (measurement,

	psychology)
4. Theory and Hypothesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Outline third space theory ● State hypothesis for research ● Discuss methodology of qualitative analysis (ATTUNE)
5. Content Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Qualitative analysis of “Archiv der Flucht” using ATTUNE coding
6. Analysis of Digitization Impact/Archive Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Investigates how the structure and impact of an oral history project archive may also build social trust within the community at large ● Analysis of literature on digitization, media studies, and the societal benefits of historical archives
7. Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Significance implications, and limitations of findings ● Future research

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