

Stories of value: Business model innovation adding value propositions articulated by Slow Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes an empirically derived method, Slow Storytelling, to construct and articulate value propositions, as a contribution to Business Model Innovation. Organizational actors and customers must be clear on what value an enterprise, product or service offers. This is increasingly important for products and services that leverage social, cultural, and environmental values. However, few existing models provide the framework and method to facilitate business articulation of value proposition for stakeholders. Our participatory ethnographic study conducted before and during COVID-19 in craft micro-enterprises in Uzbekistan addresses this gap. We co-created a novel method, ‘Slow Storytelling’, to innovate, enhance and articulate value propositions, by mobilizing and communicating the social, cultural, and environmental values; for example, by explaining the lived and sustainable history of the product. The method consists of eight steps to elicit consumers’ emotional connection with craft producers and trigger attention towards their social and environmental impact. Slow Storytelling can be adopted beyond our craft setting, to support the construction and articulation of value propositions.

1. Introduction

This article proposes an empirically derived method, Slow Storytelling, to construct, articulate and enhance value propositions, as a contribution to the field of Business Model Innovation (BMI), by incorporating social, cultural and environmental values, and sustainable modes of production and consumption. This method should, however, be further researched as an efficacious method in other sectors and settings.

Osterwalder, Pigneur, and Tucci (2005) define a business model as “a conceptual tool containing a set of objects, concepts and their relationships with the objective to express the business logic of a specific firm” (p. 7). They state that most business models (BMs) focus on describing the elements and relationships that outline how a company creates and markets value. Thus, value creation and propositions are core concepts of a BM. Value propositions give an “overall view of a company’s bundle of products and services” (ibid., p. 10). Whilst in the literature there is a clear definition of what constitutes a value proposition and its composition, the methods to formulate and articulate them have not been assessed or formally evaluated.

We found that value proposition development is challenging, yet insufficiently researched. Methods to create and articulate a value proposition are always important, but where products and services seek to leverage social, cultural, and environmental values, they are lacking. In our participatory ethnographic study, conducted in an unconventional setting, i.e. craft micro-enterprises in Uzbekistan before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, we observed consumers being particularly sensitive to these values. We demonstrate how Slow Storytelling, a method for value propositions development, supports craft micro-enterprises in overcoming the struggles and challenges of COVID-19. We argue that not only does this method support value proposition development, articulation and communication in the context from which it was developed, but we also postulate that it can be applied in other contexts.

The Slow Storytelling method emerged through an iterative process conducted in collaboration with entrepreneurs who had not previously, clearly, spelled out the unique differentiating advantage of their products and services in the marketplace. This activity emerged as a direct consequence of COVID-19 and the requirement to pivot their BM and engage customers differently – in this case digitally, which was crucial to

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overcome the challenges created by lockdown and the resulting lack of tourism, physical interaction and experience of the value proposition by customers.

Recently, scholars began to establish the importance of the creative revision process, whereby feedback providers and recipients engage in efforts to improve the novelty and usefulness of an idea (Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2015). This research reveals a process that is interactive and evolving, and involves exposing ideas or prototypes to resource providers, customers, or other stakeholders and responding to their feedback (Crilly, 2017). Such a perspective on creative revision is most relevant where entrepreneurs need to commercialize their ideas, requiring them to align their proposed products and services as closely as possible with customers, markets and audiences they need to influence (Bammens & Collewaert, 2014; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). A method such as Slow Storytelling for articulating the value proposition can improve the creative revision process.

We define Slow Storytelling as a method for enhancing, articulating, communicating, disseminating, and delivering meaningful value propositions. When applied to our research setting, this was achieved by mobilizing and communicating the heritage of place and the cultural features of the communities in which they were located, as well as explaining the lived history of the product. As a method it can be adopted in many contexts, but the value proposition is grounded in and inexorably linked to product origins, place and culture. Value propositions developed through Slow Storytelling are likely to elicit consumers’ emotional connection with the producers and the specific heritage of a place. This in turn triggers attention towards the environmental impact through an innovative approach to communicating value proposition, which leverages on the mobilization of its environmental, societal, and cultural values. Our observations of the emergence and adoption of the Slow Storytelling method in micro-enterprises demonstrate that it can be instrumental in redesigning a value proposition through a holistic narrative. The method consists of eight steps, presented in section 5: Discussion.

COVID-19, in comparison to other crises, has been a “tsunami” that has brought SMEs and micro-enterprises into the abyss of a largely moribund economy (The Economist, 2020). From 2020 to 2022, social distancing, lockdowns, and travel bans led to a considerable decrease in pre-COVID economic activities globally. Economies responded by modifying modes of production and consumption. Notably, COVID-19 increased digital working practices (Faraj, Renno, & Bhardwaj, 2021), interrupted established social interactions in the workplace, created opportunities for liminal innovation (Orlikowski & Scott, 2021) and, as we argue, brought forward new methods to develop and articulate value propositions.

Prior research focuses on value proposition development in large organizations and Western economies. This has inevitably led to a paucity of studies on value proposition development in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and micro-businesses. Further, there is a particular decrease in those operating in non-standard business settings, such as: transformational, developing, state-controlled economies; organizations with social, environmental, and other not-for-profit business forms; and non-Western resource dependent contexts.

Researching the innovative business processes and activities of SMEs and micro-enterprises is paramount to understand, conceptualize and theorize the mechanisms that have enabled small businesses to adjust to the new world configuration created through the crisis (Crilly, 2017). Value proposition (Baldassarre, Calabretta, Bocken, & Jaskiewicz, 2017) is core to BMI, which defines an innovative integrated logic of how the firm creates and captures value for its customers and users (Hacklin, Björkdahl, & Wallin, 2018).

BMI literature has been fundamental in understanding models of firm growth (Keiningham et al., 2020), sustaining competitive advantage (Kranich & Wald, 2018) and creating new markets for innovative products and services (Goffin & Micheli, 2010). BMI is defined as “the search for new logics of the firm and new ways to create and capture

value for its stakeholders; it focuses primarily on finding new ways to generate revenues and defines value propositions for customers, suppliers, and partners” (Casadesus-Masanell & Zhu, 2013, p. 464). However, whilst value proposition has been largely researched in stable contexts, it has not been researched in SMEs and micro-enterprises at times of global crisis, such as that resulting from COVID-19.

Through our participatory ethnographic study (in which the foci participants – in this case the craft micro-enterprise entrepreneurs – also proactively participate in the research), we analysed how SMEs and micro-enterprises innovated their BM in unconventional settings (craft micro-enterprises in Uzbekistan). This was achieved through a novel articulation of their value proposition in response to a period of crisis. We conducted the research in Uzbekistan, as this post-Soviet country has only recently opened its borders, providing the opportunity for an in-depth study of micro-enterprises, for the first time. We chose to focus on the creative and cultural sectors (in particular on the craft sector). Creative enterprises experienced enormous difficulties prior to and during the pandemic. Their supply chains were compromised and their survival put at risk by ill-defined public policies, particularly within ODA¹ (official development assistance) countries. This is not surprising, as the pandemic (also in other sectors) has unsettled the flow of economic processes, disrupted economic equilibrium, caused major distortions in labour markets, and made many prevalent BMs ineffective (Morgan, Anokhin, Ofstein, & Friske, 2020). Micro-entrepreneurs in all sectors have been innovating their BMs to find a way to survive and continue trading (Manolova, Brush, Edelman, & Elam, 2020) under localized COVID-19 restrictions, and finding different ways to manage cash flow (Cowling, Brown, & Rocha, 2020). Taking this as a backdrop, our paper asks: how are SMEs and micro-enterprises innovating their BMs through the construction and articulation of value proposition?

In answering this question, the paper makes three contributions, outlined in Table 1.

First, we propose the Slow Storytelling method to articulate and innovate the value proposition. Whilst models for managing innovation are typically agnostic about frameworks for articulating value propositions, our research demonstrates that in communicating value propositions, storytelling is a critical, inherent component. The Slow

Table 1
Contributions of research by knowledge type and in reflection of state of the art.

Knowledge Type	Extant Literature Gap	Our Contribution
Applied	Methods for articulating value proposition unclear.	We propose the Slow Storytelling method to communicate and innovate the value proposition.
Theoretical	Economic focus of existing value proposition literature omits broader forms of value.	We propose a broader value proposition construct than that in economic models which incorporates social, economic, cultural and environmental values.
Practical	Much of the existing data is drawn from studies in a Western, developed context. Those that do look at transitional settings tend to look at selling into these economies.	We strengthen non-Western studies of SMEs. We provide the first study of craft micro-enterprises from Uzbekistan, a transitional economy.

¹ Official Development Assistance (ODA) is a process by which countries identified by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) as being in the lowest-, low- and middle-income brackets are in receipt of loans and funds from higher income countries for multilateral development of their economies and institutions. The DAC refreshes its list of ODA countries every three years.

Storytelling method is outlined in eight steps (Narrating the Organization, Redefining the Audience, Articulating the Heritage, Mapping the Journey, Enhancing Sustainability, Engaging the Ethical Consumers, Involving the Customer as Advocate, and Enriching the Customer Experience). To sustain operations through a digitized world exasperated through COVID-19, micro-enterprises needed a specific approach to BMI. This is one that allows two different sets of architecture and activity systems in the method: valuing and communicating cultural heritage, societal, and environmental values; and, creating a sustainable map for product innovation.

Second, we demonstrate that value propositions benefit from the utilization of social, cultural, environmental and economic values (Gasparin et al., 2021), while defining mechanisms to communicate each value to gain external recognition. Our research demonstrates that beyond the conventional treatment of value proposition as ‘market offering’, Slow Storytelling treats value proposition as a communication system which highlights performer/audience mediation and messages. As a result, social aims, cultural and environmental values, and paths to market, are equally prioritized in storytelling. As such, the Slow Storytelling method innovatively articulates a value proposition by considering the digital world in which these organizations are now operating, catalysed through the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, by producing and communicating evocative stories of the products, by explaining their meanings to users and consumers, by presenting each product’s unique set of values, and by explaining to their customers how they are making an impact on society.

Third, we contribute to the growing empirical research of SMEs from a non-Western perspective. In fact, this is the first study of craft micro-enterprises within Uzbekistan, a transitional economy, and we demonstrate that contributions drawn from these environments are applicable beyond their settings.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, in section 2, we present the theoretical framework consisting of BMI, valuation practices and storytelling. In section 3, we present the data collection process and analysis. In section 4, the findings, we analyse the qualitative data collection, followed by the presentation of the Slow Storytelling method, discussion, and conclusion in section 5.

2. Theoretical framework

The literature on BMs and BMI is constructed from a broad range of management theories, such as effectuation, dynamic capabilities, complexity theory, the resource-based view, those from a demand-side perspective, organization design, transaction cost economics, and industry dynamics (Ritter & Lettl, 2018).

In line with Amit and Zott (2010), this study takes an activity-based perspective on BMI. We first present the literature on BMI, and then reflect upon the activities conducted to articulate the value proposition and create value through Slow Storytelling. As suggested by Ritter and Lettl (2018) and recommended by Burström, Parida, Lahti, and Wincent (2021), we present additional streams of literature to contribute to the BMI literature, by establishing a connection between BMI, value literature and storytelling theory in order to understand the innovative

changes to BMs in SMEs and micro-enterprises during the pandemic (Fig. 1).

2.1. Business model innovation (BMI)

There is long-established literature on the concepts of BMs and BMI in the management canon (Amit & Zott, 2001; Gasparin et al., 2021; Wirtz, Pistoia, Ullrich, & Göttel, 2015). The definition and assessment of BMs and their innovation process has become a topic of paramount importance in the fields of strategy, innovation, and entrepreneurship (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020). BMs are mechanisms which allow an organization to understand and then articulate how they create and provide value to their customers (Teece, 2010). The core functions of a BM are the creation and capture of value (Chesbrough, 2007). A BM fulfils the functions of articulating the value proposition, identifying a market segment, defining the structure of the value chain, specifying the revenue generation mechanism(s) for the firm, estimating the cost structure and profit potential of producing the offering, describing the position of the firm within the value network, and formulating the competitive strategy (Chesbrough & Rosenbloom, 2002).

Traditional BMs focus on converting the various elements businesses put in to their products (technological, labour, materials, time) into economic outcomes that are greater than the economic inputs (Baden-Fuller & Morgan, 2010). Hence, a BM identifies business components (Massa & Tucci, 2013), activities (Teece, 2010), and alliances (Bouncken & Fredrich, 2016) that enable value creation (Baden-Fuller & Morgan, 2010). The BM is a method (Zott, Amit, & Massa, 2011) for companies to create and monetize value (Teece, 2010) through linking strategy and tactics (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010) to accomplish sustainable business (Amit & Zott, 2001), connect what is inside the company with what is outside, engage different groups, and define value capture and its monetization (Baden-Fuller, Giudici, & Morgan, 2017). BMI is “the discovery of a fundamentally different business model in an existing business” (Markides, 2006, p. 20), allowing companies to increase their market share or access new markets (Gambardella & McGahan, 2010).

BMIs are innovative when they: help rethink organizational processes (Spieth, Schneckenberg, & Ricart, 2014); create the conditions for innovating products and services (Goffin & Mitchell, 2005); reconfigure external partners (Sosna, Trevinyo-Rodríguez, & Velamuri, 2010); respond and react to changes to improve organizational performance (Johnson, Scholes, & Whittington, 2008; Sorescu, 2017); create a new market; or allow a company to develop and exploit new opportunities in existing markets (Amit & Zott, 2012). However, BMIs may have shortcomings in achieving a social mission focus (Best, Miller, McAdam, & Moffett, 2021), and in supporting those that have a business and social mission (Moroz & Gamble, 2021). In the recent literature, special attention is given to organizations that are not only focusing on economic value, but also social value and contributing to social well-being (Weerawardena, Salunke, Haigh, & Sullivan Mort, 2021), and its operation in non-Western based organizations (Gasparin et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an urgent need for organizations to adapt and innovate their BMs to deal with the unpredictable business

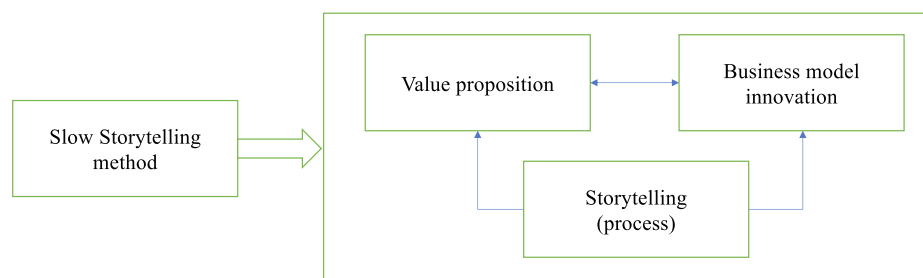


Fig. 1. Analytical framework.

environment. The pandemic interrupted previously established economic norms, supply chains and access to labour and markets. BMs that were successful up to the beginning of 2020 have been rendered ineffective (Morgan et al., 2020), creating an urgent need to understand how to quickly innovate those models to adapt to the new reality.

2.2. Value creation practices

In the mainstream innovation literature, many argue that innovation is the foundation of economic value creation and growth of a society (Schumpeter, 2006). Thus, value creation is intended as the value that emerges for customers when new products, services and production processes are proposed through novel combinations of resources, services and/or new production methods (Torres de Oliveira, Verreyne, Steen, & Indulska, 2021). In the strategy literature, value creation is defined as organizational activities by which firms create value for customers, appropriate value, and capture value from the marketplace in the form of economic rent (Tower, Hewett, & Saboo, 2021). This definition does not encompass the complexities of the value proposition created by micro-enterprises that are embedded in their ecosystem building on holistic values, including environmental, cultural, social, and economic. Digital presence and strategies have been expanded which require micro-enterprises to take advantage of mechanisms to engage with customers and propose new forms of value.

BMs do not typically facilitate non-economic values (Mongelli & Rullani, 2017). Gasparin et al. (2021) argue that the social and cultural values produced by socially innovative organizations, such as those in the cultural and creative sectors, are inherent to the business, and it is important to extract and capture the different sets of values by understanding how value is moving from the business to the customer (Freudenreich, Lüdeke-Freund, & Schaltegger, 2020), how it is being created, and for whom it is being created (Parmar, Freeman, Harrison, Purnell, & De Colle, 2010).

Bridoux and Stoelhorst (2016) outline the concept of joint value creation which involves a range of business actors in the co-creation of value for a business, as the customer is not the only other actor involved (Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008). The customers' role is multifaceted, as they can feed into the production process. Thus, a relational understanding helps to appreciate the collaborative nature of value creation within a varied network of actors and the mutually beneficial nature of the value creation that exists within it (Freudenreich et al., 2020). We need to understand, therefore, how to create an engaging value creation practice to innovate, articulate and communicate the value proposition through storytelling.

2.3. Storytelling in organizations

As BMI needs to take into consideration the experience of stakeholders, including customers (Keiningham et al., 2020), organizations need to create and communicate their experiences and value propositions. Most of the storytelling literature in relation to work and organizations focuses on the use of narratives and stories as an internal communication tool (Barker & Gower, 2010) and on exploring the use of narratives for specific purposes within the organization (Dailey & Browning, 2014). However, no direct connection is made between storytelling and value proposition. Where external storytelling is discussed, it tends to be about how an organization projects an image to the outside world (Boje, 1995; Schembri & Latimer, 2016) rather than about the processes, skills or materials being used in the production of objects. Barker and Gower (2010) assess storytelling as a critical tool for internal communication within organizations. They present a Storytelling Model of Organizational Communication which takes a holistic approach to communication across diverse workforces and acknowledges storytelling and social exchanges as being critical to increasing productivity, enhancing learning, and improving relationships in the workplace.

In the same vein, Sergeeva and Trifilova (2018) explore how

storytelling might be used as an internal communication tool, focusing specifically on the innovation process within organizations. Boje (1995) analyses the storytelling practices of The Walt Disney Company and theorizes how storytelling is used both within the organization and externally to project an image of a happy organization. This process of using “happy” stories suppressed alternative narratives and was used effectively in replacing individual accounts and memories of the organization with a collective, institutional narrative. More recently, Boje (2019) reconsiders this narrative in the light of the digital age and concludes that the storytelling organization he theorized three decades previously is under threat through new forms of communication that make it harder for the organization to control the narrative in the face of fast-moving global news and discourse.

Considering external storytelling, Bublitz et al. (2016) explore how Social Impact Organizations can make use of storytelling to cajole people into action on social issues and how they can use narrative to demonstrate the impact of their work. They develop the concept of metanarrative in forming an organization's story chronologically to bring together its past with its impacts and future aims, and to combine this into an external narrative. Their work focuses on the ways in which stories influence outcomes such as behavioural change and community activism by connecting the audience to the work of the organization. Similarly, organizations use digital narratives to overcome stigmatization of products in the marketplace, to reach new customer bases, and to negate previous conceptions about their products through storytelling (Jain, Bansal, & Misha, 2019).

3. Empirical study

3.1. Field site

Our study takes place in an unusual setting for value proposition research: Uzbekistan. This is the first time that in-depth research solely conducted in Uzbekistan is analysed within the *Journal of Business Research*. Our empirical research takes the form of an exploratory qualitative study conducted over 16 months with four distinct stages (see section 3.2 for a full explanation). As Evers and Wu (2006) demonstrate, generalization from case studies of a single sector or site is reasonable when two conditions are met. First, that a significant amount of empirical knowledge is generated through the study and, second, that an abductive approach has been taken for analysis. Our research is constructed and presented in such a way that meets these conditions so that it can be replicated and generalized. Also, we took into consideration the sociocultural, economic, political, and institutional differences, especially within the context of emerging economies. During the first 25 years of Uzbekistan's post-Soviet independence (1991–2016), the country was relatively closed and not embedded in the global socio-economic system; thus, they did not suffer from the 2008 crisis as they were not connected with global financial systems. COVID-19 is the very first global crisis that they are experiencing, which is catalysing creative solutions. As indicated in the introduction, we focused on the creative sector, in particular on the creative and cultural micro-enterprises belonging to the craft sector. Creative and cultural micro-enterprises are organizations whose creativity and intellectual efforts are the primary inputs to produce tangible and intangible artistic, innovative, and creative outputs, which have the potential for wealth creation and income generation through the exploitation of cultural assets and the production of knowledge-based goods and services (both traditional and contemporary) with social and cultural meaning (Escalona-Orcao, Escolano-Utrilla, Saez-Perez, & Sanchez-Valverde García, 2016). Their activities are aimed at the creation, production, dissemination and preservation of goods and services which embody cultural, artistic, and creative expressions. Cultural and creative enterprises are well known for working with social innovations (Gasparin et al., 2021), and they do not perceive innovation as a driver for sustaining competitive advantage, reaching commercial gain through science and technology

(Nicolopoulou, Karataş-Özkan, Vas, & Nouman, 2017), but as a process for societal change to respond to modifications in social relations with new cultural orientations (Bouchard, 2012).

Craft enterprises in Uzbekistan have an interesting history, which is at times contested. Whilst craft masters have a long family history (the ones we interviewed were 5th and 6th generation), their freedom of expression was suspended during the Soviet period, and trade only recently (re)opened to the global marketplace. During the Soviet era, individual craft enterprises were not allowed; craft makers had to work in mass production factories, and they were unable to work in craft. Nationalization of the raw materials meant resources were confiscated and could not be used outside the factories. After independence in 1991, changes in the craft sector were considerable, and craft makers adapted creative solutions to grow and reach international markets. In the pandemic, their creativity and how to deal with business change has again been challenged.

In fact, the pandemic seemed initially to have compromised the long-term sustainability of the sector, as the physical infrastructures of trade and exchange were relying on markets, touristic trade, and large fairs. It emerged that a transformation into a digital space was urgently needed to: provide access to new markets, socially connect craft communities, share Hunarmandlar (craft masters) craft knowledge, value and celebrate Uzbekistan’s diverse cultural heritage, and translate the offline experience that they were offering to the customers into a digital experience. This is crucial in a transitional and ODA economy. Indeed, craft is the second-largest employer in ODA countries, after agriculture, worth over £25.6 billion annually, and it is an important employer for women (Alliance, 2020). The craft sector is pivotal to the socio-economic development of Uzbekistan, and plays a critical role in conserving and perpetuating a rich culture (Assouline, 2020). Craft processes, defined as the practices, knowledge, and sets of skills that different communities materialize in specific ways, are classified in Uzbekistan as a UNESCO intangible heritage, driving economic growth, supporting local incomes, and preserving the cultural and ancient traditions that are at risk of being lost (Tashkent, 2013). The UNESCO intervention and classification in Uzbekistan has contributed to revitalizing the craft sector during the post-Soviet independence period (Khakimov, 2008), shaping national identity and mobilizing a narrative of being an artisanal country on the Silk Road. In 2018, the then new President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, began important wide-ranging reforms, such as privatizing the economy and providing support to SMEs, which benefited the craft sector. However, the COVID-19 pandemic halted these positive reforms, negatively impacting households in rural areas where, according to the Statistical Office and the World Bank, there has been an increase in unemployment and people living in poverty,

endangering the future survival of craft enterprises. As sales involve face-to-face interaction, during the lockdown craft makers also had no means to communicate stories about the products, thereby interrupting craft heritage knowledge diffusion, which resulted in a loss of the multisensorial possibilities from face-to-face, and urged finding a solution through digital practices. The Uzbek craft system includes two categories of craft makers: entrepreneurs – who learn their craft on short courses delivered by the Chamber of Commerce and who mostly produce replicas of Uzbek craft; and masters – known in Uzbekistan as Hunarmandlar. Hunarmandlar produce original craft that is classified as cultural heritage, have studied craft processes for several years (at least eight years), are arts graduates, and some of them have been awarded honorary PhDs, thereby becoming scholars. Hunarmandlar are the primary respondents in this research.

3.2. Data collection

This exploratory qualitative study was based on a grounded approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), and took place in the field between November 2019 and March 2021. The research was conducted in four phases, as indicated in Fig. 2.

‘Phase 1: Scoping’ (November 2019–December 2019) consisted of three of the co-authors and a research assistant conducting interviews and field observations across five different regions. This approach allowed an in-depth understanding of the field issues to develop, and to capture the richness of the phenomenon under consideration (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). We aimed to understand how craft micro-enterprises were operating, how they were opening up to international markets and their operational struggles. We mapped the craft sector as part of this process and proposed strategies to develop an international market approach whilst maintaining its heritage. We chose the sites and respondents in consultation with experts in the field, namely the Uzbek Craft Association, World Crafts Council, and British Council. Field notes were taken and 15 interviews with craft makers were conducted and recorded. The respondents were chosen based on being recognized as masters by their peers, having international trading, and using sustainable approaches in their business processes. The interviews were based on a protocol divided into the following parts: background information of the micro-enterprise, products sold, interactions with their customers, mobilization of craft heritage, interactions with the supply chain, challenges, and struggles. The interview questions were aimed at discussing the creation processes, who performed them, the network of external stakeholders, tacit and explicit craft knowledge, problems and struggles that arose, and co-creation practices. Interviews were conducted in English with a local simultaneous translator, and each interview

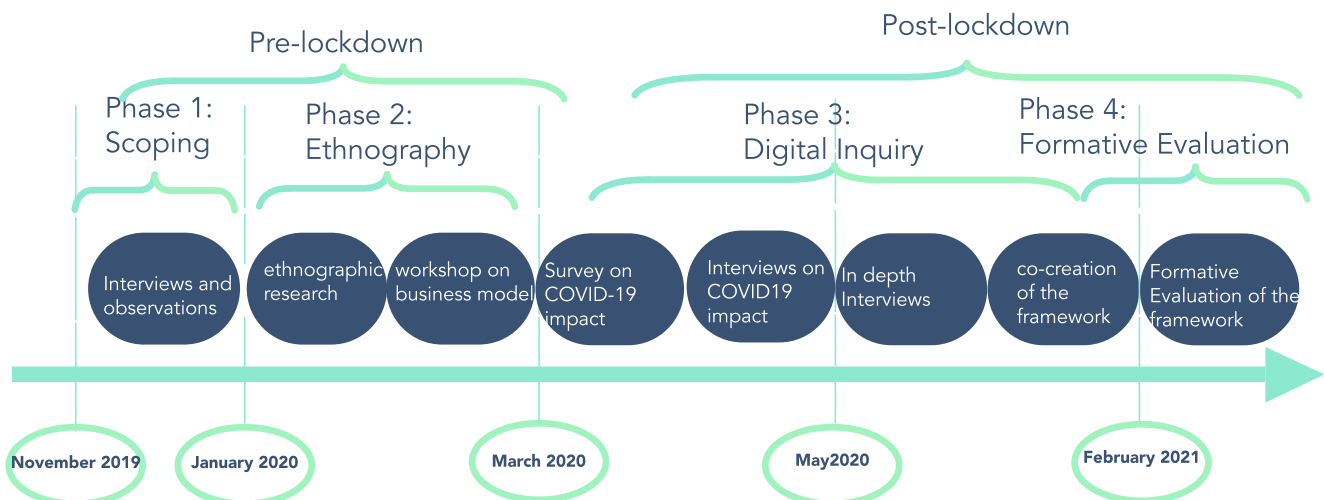


Fig. 2. Data collection process.

typically lasted an hour. We recorded and transcribed all interviews verbatim.

During ‘Phase 2: Ethnography’ (January 2020–March 2020), whilst it was still possible to travel and be physically in the field, Author 1 (Dr Marta Gasparin) conducted further ethnographic research in Uzbekistan (see Fig. 3) focused on sustainable design, and this included 25 in-depth interviews with designers and craftspeople. The interviewees were chosen together with the British Council and Craft Association, and the criteria used were the same as for the first round. During the ethnographic research, Author 1 was accompanied by a translator fluent in Russian and Uzbek. This took place in Tashkent (the capital city), but then other places were visited (Shahrisabz and villages in the rural area of this region, Saroy, Taragay, Varganza, Uchuyli, Dung Qishlok, Samarkand, Bukhara, Urgut and Fergana).

Based on the preliminary analysis of the challenges and struggles of these organizations, we discussed with the British Council and Uzbek Craft Association the delivery of a training event for selected craft enterprises. This consisted of a two-day training workshop in Bukhara (Fig. 4), with 45 craft micro-entrepreneurs, focusing on sustainable BMs for the international market (14/15 March 2020). The participants selected for the workshop were the most representative exponents of their craft, according to the Vice President of the Craft Association. The workshop’s topic was BMI and slow design, debating how craft micro-enterprises could deliver cultural content focused on the preservation of cultural heritage. These topics were selected in agreement with the Craft Association as pertinent approaches to improve the micro-enterprises’ global market opportunities. After the workshop, the pandemic hit and the borders were closed, drastically cutting demand from tourists and visitors. In the middle of the ethnographic fieldwork, the day after the workshop, Author 1 had to return quickly to the UK on the last plane before the airport and international borders were closed. We kept in touch with the Uzbek Craft Association and received follow-on funding to research the impact of the pandemic on the craft sector, which allowed us to develop the third and fourth phase of the research.

In ‘Phase 3: Digital Inquiry’ (March–May 2020), we conducted eight online interviews, one online focus group and a survey (800 respondents, corresponding to 2.67% among 30,000 registered craft-makers) in order to map the impact of COVID-19 on the craft micro-enterprises. The survey was made available in Uzbek Cyrillic, Uzbek Latin Script and Russian. It included questions on the impact of the crisis, response to the crisis, digital and online activity, and support requirements. In total, 792 usable responses were obtained. The data files were cleaned once data collection was halted, and the merged file was analysed using SPSS. Open-ended answers on the age of the company, number of employees and region of operation were recorded for ease of analysis and presentation, splitting the results by a series of



Fig. 4. Workshop in Bukhara.

control variables to test for differences in experience by different characteristics (size of company, age of business, international activity, region, use of digital media and technology).

In this survey, we analysed the impact of COVID-19 on the sector. The data revealed that 62.5% of respondents closed operations during the pandemic. Just 13.9% were able to operate normally, whilst 51% of respondents have seen their income decline, and 22.8% of the sample were unable to survive more than four weeks on their existing financial resources (May 2020), suggesting an urgent need for financial support in the sector. Only 21.8% of respondents were able to pay their staff at the time of the survey.

Micro-enterprises were found to have innovated their approaches to contact their customers and deliver goods. Companies who were already communicating online and those who chose to pivot their operations to be more active in their digital interaction were those that had fewer challenges in surviving during the pandemic.

After this analysis, we conducted a further 15 in-depth online interviews aimed at understanding the struggles, fears and changes in the craft practices in these unprecedented times, loss of income, and lack of interactions within the supply chain.

In ‘Phase 4: Formative Evaluation’ (June 2020, February 2021), we co-created and refined the Slow Storytelling method. Employing Zoom meetings with various respondents, we identified that the micro-enterprises were working to innovate their BMs, in particular through how they constructed and delivered their value proposition. We worked on the data to build the preliminary grounded Slow Storytelling method. During 10 h of digital workshops in March–April 2021, the method was presented to 40 micro-enterprises who had not previously participated



(a)



(b)

Fig. 3. Picture from the fieldwork.

in our interviews. Through this, and the interactions and feedback received during the workshop, we used the information to incrementally improve our findings.

3.3. Data analysis

The qualitative data was analysed using coding. Two authors independently searched for relevant passages from the data collected that referred to how SMEs changed and innovated their strategy, and how they engaged with their customers. In the first order of coding, passages were provisionally coded in Dedoose software with NVivo terms individually, and subsequently discussed collectively with the other co-authors in our weekly virtual meetings. Then, we combined them into axial coding that could meaningfully answer the research aim. To ensure robustness of analysis, codes not supported strongly by evidence across multiple informants were dismissed (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

The resulting 137 first-order codes were associated with quotes and extracts from the data analysis. All the co-authors discussed how to aggregate these into second-order coding. Then, we considered the second-order codes in relation to the literature on BMI, value creation and storytelling in order to develop our conceptual framework. We considered alternative conceptual framing, reflecting until we reached an overarching model that accounted for the dominant codes.

4. Findings

In this section we present the findings from our fieldwork and analysis, which allowed us to construct the storytelling method. These are grouped into three main themes: I) Recognizing the value of Slow; II) Delivery of value proposition pre- and during COVID-19; and III) Innovating the BM: constructing an innovative value articulation process.

4.1. Recognizing the value of Slow Storytelling

Our first finding relates to recognizing the value of slow. During Phase 2 of the data collection (13/14 March 2020), Author 1 led a workshop in Bukhara. The workshop was centred on explaining slow design and the construction of BMs for slow design-driven organizations.

Slow design-driven organizations are ones which produce innovative products and translate the heritage and history of their communities into new products that the customers love and care for. The products that are created are long-lasting, high quality and use local organic (where possible) materials, collected and processed in such a way that it is limiting the negative impact on the environment, throughout the overall supply chain (Gasparin, Green, & Schinckus, 2020). Slow design is an emerging movement in fashion and design that recognizes the importance of taking the time to produce and to think carefully about the configuration of natural resources. Fuad-Luke (2008) depicts slow design as “an approach predicated on slowing the metabolism of people, resources and flows, could provide a design paradigm that would engender positive behavioural change” (p. 1). Slow designers work closely with local makers to mobilize creativity and design processes which reflect upon local identity, understanding what constitutes local heritage, and envisaging how these could be embedded in the shape of contemporary-looking products using traditional technology (Gasparin, Green, et al., 2020). Slow design-driven organizations overtly work using craft techniques, ‘slowing’ time and being part of a cultural movement that minimizes confrontation in favour of developing a broader community united in pursuing shared ideals (Gasparin, Brown, et al., 2020), preserving natural resources and cultural traditions. Slow design-driven organizations seek different modes of relations and the exploration of natural resources. These developments are inspired by the *Slow Food* (2022) movement, which encourages and champions local, high-quality organic food production, and at the same time protects the heritage of the place (Petrini, 2014).

In the workshop, we asked participants to expand the definition of

value proposition to embed and incorporate a set of concerns that were addressed through their practices, such as politics and contested history, the cultural heritage, the marginalization of certain ethnic minorities and the status and voice of women in the craft industry. Furthermore, participants explained they were worried for the future due to the immediate and visible impact of COVID-19, as they noticed the decline in international tourism, although they were hoping (at that point) that tourists would return within a few months. During the workshop, we co-developed possible strategies to cope with the emerging crisis. We discussed how to create and implement digital strategies in a sector that is traditionally non-digital, in order to facilitate not only e-commerce, but also to create an integrated and interconnected platform. Here the craft makers in Uzbekistan were faced with a unique problem compared to their counterparts in the global craft economy. The closed nature of the Uzbek economy prior to 2016 meant that, at the time of the workshops, e-commerce was completely underdeveloped in the country, digital infrastructure was rather absent, and the banking system was not connected with digital purchases and sales. Indeed, the phase 3 survey demonstrates that only around 10% of the sector were already actively using digital platforms for their business activities. Our sample therefore had little access to the technology or techniques needed to take advantage of existing platforms. Indeed, e-commerce platforms such as Etsy or eBay were not allowed in the country, and there were considerable problems with international shipments: the couriers were not reliable, goods regularly got lost and the customs office were known to apply non-standardized fees. The craft makers reported problems at borders, such as the confiscation of goods for having compiled customs forms inaccurately. An initial challenge concerned translating practices of delivering, creating and communicating the value proposition from physical to digital platforms, which we explore in the next section.

4.2. Delivery of value proposition pre- and during COVID-19

Before the pandemic, craft makers engaged with potential buyers and other stakeholders face-to-face creating a multi-sensory experience for visitors in their workplaces, markets, and shops. They spent considerable time with each visitor allowing them to observe and explain in detail the craft processes in their workshop, the history that the product represented, how they were making the products, and the meaning of aesthetic choices. Often, the makers would sit at their workstation and provide a demonstration of the craft process.

Thus, the storytelling process was visual and visceral. In their workshops craft makers would demonstrate how they made the object, inviting the customers to try the object, feel it, touch it, smell it, and observe the raw material. After that, the craft makers would explain the training they undertook, how many years they had to study and practice before mastering a technique and a craft process, the origins of the materials, the techniques that would be used, and the instruments necessary for their realization. Those using innovative aesthetics, techniques or tools, would explain the innovation process as well. They would introduce their apprentices, explaining the importance for children to learn a craft and the local cultural heritage. When the researcher asked how they were presenting the products, one Master suggested:

First, we have to talk about the history of your crafts, and the generation of your dynasty, and then explain that from our grandfathers, what difficulties they went through to keep, preserve this tradition. So, because our dynasty has been doing this work for more than two hundred eighty years, so we look at these patterns, and we know that the patterns of this work are one thousand years of history. (Pottery Master, Tashkent)

Almost every renowned craft workshop has a private museum which customers can visit. These contain ancient items found around Uzbekistan over the years, and they have been collected with the intent of preserving them. The museums were used to explain the aesthetic history of their workshops, and how they were using pieces as an

inspiration for designing new products. The storytelling process would initially start by telling how long their family had been working in their specific trade, and their specific skills, the medals awarded, the recognitions from the President, and the certificates of participation in exhibitions, museums, training courses and fairs.

Exhibiting the family history means incorporating in the value proposition expressions of their identity, providing evidence of skills, expertise, and high-quality craftsmanship. During the Soviet time, craft masters were not able to work on their craft; they were forced to work in factories, due to the collectivization of the land and labour, and they could not use the raw material, as it belonged to the State. Many of the older craft makers we interviewed had spent time, or one of their close family members had, in Soviet prisons as they were caught practicing craft in secret. For example, this pottery master told Author 1:

I am the sixth generation person master who is doing this, my father, his grandfather and prior generations were doing it. The whole family has been doing this for a long time. Before the revolution they had their own plantations of mulberry trees that's for silkworms of course and of cotton. That was before the revolution. Then the Soviets took it away. We lost everything. They took our home as well, our fields and our equipment. (Textile Master, Ferghana)

Visits to ateliers were always concluded with some refreshments offered by the owner, and we had a chance to view their products for sale. While drinking the tea and eating fruits and some homemade sweets (thus involving the five senses also in this immersive experience), they would explain the aesthetic and meaning of the objects and the decorations, why they were unique, how to use the object, if there were connections with the religious precepts and how to best take care of the object. In the background, we could hear the sounds of the busy workshop. A textile maker explained that a good narrative about her product was critical to her ability to sell her clothes:

People buy not just the piece of clothing, but they also buy the story: they buy what's behind it, and, of course, they tell their friends the story. They don't just explain what materials went into it, but they retell the story. I manage my own Instagram and I tell people stories of how my designs are created, they can follow the journey, and understand that a lot of work goes into the designs. (Textile Maker, Tashkent)

Thus, our findings show that before lockdown, the storytelling was a physical multisensorial practice-based process, inviting customers to their ateliers to look at how they were: creating the products, perpetrating a family tradition, and passing it on to the next generation. A craft maker would take the time to explain their value propositions by showing the materials and telling stories to the customers who visited their shops. This gives visitors an experience of the actual craft making and production processes as the products are made in front of them and not merely a 'for show' recreation that you might get elsewhere.

Thus, this represents a "slow" approach compared to fast fashion or large retailers. They do not just stimulate the desire to own the object, but also to own the story, and to be part of a cultural movement associated with the object. The value proposition encourages the customers to make culturally oriented choices, which could support the cultural heritage at risk of being lost. In this approach, value creation involves the five senses, throughout an engaging and slow experience. Each customer could easily spend a couple of hours in the shop, experiencing and discovering the cultural heritage. The pre-pandemic experience for visitors was of the actual authentic craft-making and production process, not some recreated exercise which is put in for the benefit of tourists. However, as our data demonstrates, during the pandemic this physical multisensorial engagement has not been possible. In collaboration with our respondents, we developed a strategy to translate the physical multisensorial approach into an innovative value enhancement and articulation process, which we explain in the next section.

4.3. *Innovating the business model: constructing an innovative value articulation process*

During the local lockdown, and later during international travel restrictions, the traditional, in-person storytelling process to international customers was halted. Also, weddings, funerals, spring celebrations, and other family occasions with large gatherings of people, which were the drivers for local purchases, were suspended. The Craft Association estimates that, in the first months of the lockdown, the craft sector lost 90% of its trade, as the demand dropped both domestically and internationally.

Economic necessity meant that the crafts people could not afford to simply wait for pre-pandemic life to resume. Therefore, micro-enterprises developed an alternative approach to storytelling to engage with local customers, by changing the meaning of their products. In agreement with the Craft Association, efforts were directed towards creating an innovative value proposition for the local market, which consisted of shifting the association of craft with gift-giving at a celebration, into a daily purchase for everyday use.

Telegram channels (the most used digital platform in Uzbekistan) were created to promote local craft. Craft makers changed the way of interacting with the local market in order to explain how craft is a heritage form of expression, which can be used as a mundane object in the household. Posts concerned interviews craft makers made for the radio, TV appearances and short documentaries on their practices. The stories began with an introduction to the product, then provided a description of materials they used, and an explanation of the new value it could have in the household. In taking this approach, compared to prior practices, there was a radical switch in emphasizing more the quality of the material and its natural features. They explained how their ancestors passed on these traditions, and the properties the materials had, creating a continuity between the past and present. Uzbek folklore and religious tales were also used to explain the importance of the materials, which were immediately understood by the local audience.

In their stories, the micro-enterprises also carefully brought forward a feature that was valued by the local market and is synonymous with good quality: the success that the micro-entrepreneur obtained abroad, and how much the international audience would love their products. Even if the success was constructed gradually after years of hard work, it was presented as a heroic gesture built almost overnight, after having visited another country, and having understood how things were done abroad. The construction of this story resonates with the fact that Uzbekistan has been closed for many years, and citizens are eager to learn from international experiences. Furthermore, presenting the rewards and the positive comments of international customers increases the perception of the quality of the product, stimulating internal demand.

In the international market, however, they had to change strategy, and in the online discussion we had, it was decided to focus on engaging with social media storytelling to reach out to their international clients. After having implemented the strategy, we asked for feedback. Many respondents admitted that this was initially perceived as a burden, as their generation did not grow up with digital technologies, and it was hard for them to learn. Facebook was only made available in the country in 2018, with Instagram following a few months after. However, many craft enterprises successfully learned how to engage with social media, even if it was considered a strenuous activity. Thus, we continued to work with micro-enterprises to co-develop – by innovating their channels of communication – the method for digital Slow Storytelling, which we outline in the discussion in section 5.

For example, via social media, live videos were used for sharing ideas, processes and for engaging with the audience to co-create value. The videos were mostly presented in a non-edited way, which gave an authentic and customary perspective. This process would allow craft makers to share their value proposition with international audiences, even if they were not fluent in English. Images and videos were the

medium used to communicate their value proposition. The value proposition explains the difficulties in becoming a master, the passion for their job, their work with local communities, the positive impact they are making, even during the pandemic, and the challenges they need to overcome. Thus, each piece does not only represent a piece of art, of heritage, of community work, but also social engagement. It should be valued and consumed slowly, as it took time to be produced. This is quite the opposite of the approach that is supported by fast fashion and fast-moving consumer goods companies (FMCGs), which encourage quick changes to fashion trends to stimulate fast consumption and purchases. By emphasizing the origins, the meaning of each product, and its history, customers felt connected to the object, and they became proud of owning it, willing to share its story.

They also engage customers through stories that help explain why they should be proud of owning it; vice versa, the customers become good ambassadors for the products, using social media to share pictures showing that they are proud of owning them:

For instance, here, this customer bought some clothing from me and she sends me pictures every day. She's obviously very happy with what she has got. She's very proud of being an owner of Uzbek clothing. But they are wearable, so you can dress it up or down depending on your footwear and everything. (Fashion Designer 2, Tashkent)

In this particular case, the Slow Storytelling method led to the communication of value propositions through new channels, pictures, videos and other digital formats. They explained the meaning of the object, gave the customer a story about their purchase, to make them a proud owner, especially for those unfamiliar with Uzbek culture. It roused curiosity and mobilized interest. At times, the value proposition influenced the experience, as it presented a piece of history, of heritage that the customer was not aware of. Slow Storytelling communicated from where the material emerged. It redirected thoughts on the knowledge of the place and provoked the customer to learn more about the culture and aesthetic. It translated intangible heritage, local history and the resources from the local territory into new products that customers would love, talk about and care for.

The articulation and enhancement of value propositions through Slow Storytelling elicit emotions and emphasize the quality of local materials, the intangible heritage, and the history that is often forgotten. They explain the contributions the enterprises make to society, designed and diffused to create social and ecological resilience, often co-created with local disadvantaged communities and with the engagement of women and youth who participate in productive activities. This contributes to gender equality, self-esteem and social awareness; they are also used to promote environmental values to protect the local biodiversity. Value propositions also explain the efforts made to preserve the local cultural heritage, frame environmental resilience, cultural preservation, socio-economic and sustainable growth in rural areas, as their processes leverage on the heritage of the place and local know-how and translate them into contemporary products and services that consumers will eventually appreciate and enjoy.

5. Discussion: slow storytelling method

Our findings on Slow Storytelling make an important contribution to marketing and management practices, as we describe a novel approach to engage potential customers in an information-saturated, digitalized, media-scape, and we propose a method to construct and articulate the value proposition to innovate the BM and create a roadmap for innovative products. The method is Slow Storytelling which can be adopted and adapted to innovate the value proposition and consequently the BM. Slow Storytelling is not about slowing the process per se, but a method that facilitates the articulation of the value proposition, taking the time to explain the heritage, the issues, and to involve customers, as value is created in the relationships and emotional ties. Although our case study

was undertaken prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, within the Uzbekistan craft sector, we argue that the method which has emerged from our study has the potential for broader utility.

The organizational storytelling literature focuses predominantly on the use of narratives and stories as an internal communication tool (Barker & Gower, 2010) and on the use of narratives for specific purposes within the organization (Dailey & Browning, 2014), but it has not been used as a method for articulating a value proposition. Existing literature focuses on how organizations project their image to the outside world (Boje, 1995; Schembri & Latimer, 2016), how they mobilize it as a critical tool for internal communication within organizations (Barker & Gower, 2010; Sergeeva & Trifilova, 2018) and how they use it to stimulate stakeholders into social actions by demonstrating positive impacts (Bublitz et al., 2016). Instead, in this paper we demonstrate that Slow Storytelling is a method for articulating a value proposition and, in-turn, innovating the BM.

We have seen through our study how, by working with this concept, micro-enterprises have changed their value proposition to communicate stories to their customers about the importance of the territory, heritage, and the considerations they have towards environmental impact, as well as the research process underpinning product development. Customers, who were faced with COVID-19 lockdowns, have started to appreciate locally made, natural and crafted products, which are captured by these stories. Building on the findings of our study and the existing storytelling literature, we create a Slow Storytelling method. This consists of eight steps, as follows:

1. Narrating the Organization: tell the story of the organization, its history, key milestones, its longevity and multi-generational ownership, and the key lessons learnt and skills developed by the organization;
2. Redefining the Audience: redefine the audience for the organization's products and services, and identify their emerging needs and priorities that tie into the story of the organization;
3. Articulating the Heritage: explain the cultural heritage drawn upon by the organization and embedded in its practices, products and services;
4. Mapping the Journey: emphasize the journey of the organization, identifying the struggles and obstacles it has overcome along the way;
5. Enhancing Sustainability: emphasize how the organization is protecting the environment and addressing social challenges through its practices, products and services;
6. Engaging the Ethical Consumer: engage with the ethical customer through emphasizing the organization's values and their alignment with those of these customers;
7. Involving the Customer as Advocate: enrol customers as advocates for the organization and identify how they might promote the organization and its products and services; and
8. Enriching the Customer Experience: articulate additional values (i.e. social, cultural, environmental and economic) and stories for customers to attach to their purchases and experiences with the organization.

6. Conclusions

In our paper, we propose a new method, Slow Storytelling, for innovating the BM by creating and articulating the value proposition, and for creating a roadmap for innovating the products. In relation to this, we propose a novel definition of value proposition where different values are mobilized by the Slow Storytelling method. Whilst our research started before the pandemic, we observed that the micro-enterprises in Uzbekistan had to change their approach and adopt digital strategies to involve both local and international customers, and to convey their business value proposition in a meaningful way. Customers, who with the lockdown have appreciated even more than pre-

pandemic locally-made, natural and crafted products, were captured by these new digital experiences.

While our observations emerged from craft micro-enterprises in a transitional economy, other small craft-based enterprises or even larger traditional businesses in other places and circumstances will benefit from Slow Storytelling to develop value propositions. For example, it may be useful for firms in developed economies competing in oligopolistic markets where the main competitors offer very similar products and where innovating and articulating the uniqueness of their value proposition is challenging. Beyond regular country of origin attributes, innovations incorporating cultural or environmental factors can add real functional value to the core product offering but be difficult to articulate or customize for potential customers. In such cases, the Slow Storytelling model could be applied for innovating, articulating, and more effectively communicating the uniqueness and potential benefit of the firm's value proposition for the specific circumstances and needs of potential customers.

Recent research (Kang, Hong, & Hubbard, 2020) reports on the role of storytelling in advertising, demonstrating that the heritage of a company founder elicits favourable emotional responses from listeners of advertising. In turn, Kang et al. (2020) demonstrate that this increases the listener's intention to share information through word-of-mouth engagements. This would suggest that there is an opportunity for the Slow Storytelling method to be used as a tool for developing advertising narratives, to increase customer attention and engagement with their products, heritage, and culture. Thus, once the value proposition has been defined, future research needs to investigate how Slow Storytelling can be applied to create new/other/different customer narratives.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marta Gasparin: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Martin Quinn:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **William Green:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Michael Saren:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Steve Conway:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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