

MARIA FERNANDEZ-OSSO FUENTES
CARLOS SÁENZ-TORRALBA

COMMUNITY-BASED URBAN STORYTELLING AND DOCUMENTARY: THE POTENTIAL OF DIGITAL PLACEMAKING TOOLS

Abstract. This article examines the evolution of digital-era documentary practice, focusing on the intersection of participatory documentary, digital storytelling, and digital placemaking. It investigates how digital technologies mediate the symbolic construction of a territory, shifting the community's role from passive subjects to active "filmmakers" and co-authors of urban narratives. The study addresses authorship, the role of mobile platforms in place branding, and ethical challenges like algorithmic bias and homogenisation. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, utilising global questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with international experts ($N = 27$) in digital culture, place branding, and interactive media to ensure a comparative perspective. Results introduce the "participatory city model", where residents act as content producers, transforming place branding from a top-down product into an organic narrative. Mobile apps serve as vital bridges between physical and digital spaces, enhancing community attachment. The study identifies risks and concludes that effective digital placemaking must be a bottom-up process prioritizing authentic, diverse voices over "Instagram-worthy" curated images.

Keywords: digital placemaking; participatory documentary; place branding; digital storytelling; advertising communication; digital marketing

MARIA FERNANDEZ-OSSO FUENTES, PhD, Lecturer at Centro Universitario San Isidoro affiliated to the Pablo de Olavide University; correspondence address: Centro Universitario San Isidoro Calle Leonardo Da Vinci, 17-B, 41092, Isla de la Cartuja, Sevilla, Spain; e-mail: mfernandezdeosso@centrosanisidoro.es; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0544-6426>.

CARLOS SÁENZ-TORRALBA, PhD, Scholar at University of Seville, Lecturer at Universidad de Cádiz; correspondence address: Av. de la Universidad, s/n, 11405 Jerez de la Frontera, Cádiz; e-mail: carlos.saenz@uca.es; <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0779-417X>

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1. INTRODUCTION: FROM REALITY TO STORY

The concept of documentary has long represented a cornerstone of non-fiction filmmaking, serving as a medium through which reality is observed, interpreted, and communicated. Traditionally, the word “documentary” refers to a non-fiction narrative form that attempts to capture and share stories grounded in truth (Gifreu, 2011; Terry, 2019). Yet the meaning of the term has evolved significantly over time, adapting to the shifting technological and cultural landscapes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In today’s digital environment, documentary practice has undergone profound renovation to embrace the interactive and participatory possibilities of the digital domain (Arda, 2020; Gaudenzi et al., 2021; Podara et al., 2021; Terry, 2019).

The digital era has redefined the spatial and temporal dimensions of communication, altering the meaning of distance, accelerating information exchange, and transforming the ways in which audiences engage with audiovisual narratives (Sáenz-Torralba and Polo-Serrano, 2025). These changes have introduced new modes of storytelling that are distinctly fragmented, multilayered, and interactive, also affecting communities beyond mere communication to a health or emotional aspects that may also benefit them (Fernández-Ossó Fuentes and Sánchez-Gey Valenzuela, 2024) and our understanding of the communication of the stories shown by Pulido and Vazquez González (2019). As a consequence, novel documentary forms, such as the database documentary, the interactive documentary, and the multilinear documentary, have emerged, signalling a major reconfiguration in the articulation of non-fiction narratives. This shift also foregrounds the question of authorship and participation: who tells the story, and to what extent can audiences or communities become both subjects and co-authors of their own realities?

This study presents a discussion that situates the evolution of the documentary’s definition within the broader context of digital transformation, focusing on interactive, participatory, and co-creative developments that redefine the traditional relationship between the filmmaker, subject, and viewer.

1.1 THE CONNECTION BETWEEN TRADITIONAL DOCUMENTARY AND TODAY’S DIGITAL WORLD

The origins of the term “documentary” illustrate the centuries-long human desire to record, interpret, and preserve reality. The word was first employed in French by Bolesław Matuszewski (1898), to describe the historical and archival potential of moving images. Matuszewski’s recognition of film’s capacity to

act as a historical artefact highlights an early awareness of cinema's documentary power as a record of truth. Later, Urban (1907) advanced this view by identifying non-fiction filmmaking as a means to store and preserve information, envisaging film as a permanent record capable of safeguarding factual reality. Building on these early reflections, John Grierson's articulation of the term in 1933 reframed the documentary as a specific style of filmmaking rather than merely an informational tool.

For both Urban and Grierson, the documentary represented a social instrument, a medium of improvement, education, and enlightenment. Beyond illustrating events, documentaries could communicate values, cultivate empathy, and contribute to social transformation. This conception elevated the documentary from a technical process to a meaningful cultural practice, one that captures human experience and encourages collective reflection on politics, culture, ideology, and daily life (Gifreu, 2011). Accordingly, documentary filmmaking should not be understood solely as a genre but as an evolving mode of engagement and social dialogue.

The notion of the "new documentary", as framed by Bruzzi (2000), extends this understanding by emphasising the relationship between factual reality, the filmmaker's subjectivity, and the interpretative act. Bruzzi argues that documentary creation is a process of negotiation between the filmmaker's experience and their attempt to understand or represent the real, oscillating between observation and interpretation. This conceptualisation shifts the emphasis from documentary as an objective record to a dialogic process in which meaning emerges through the interaction of perspectives.

There is a move towards multiplicity and co-creation, which aligns naturally with the tendencies of contemporary media. Gaudenzi et al. (2021) describe co-creation as a collaborative process grounded in power-sharing, where the documentary emerges from collective engagement rather than top-down direction. Such projects are mediated by professionals but developed within communities, placing dialogue, inclusion, and shared responsibility at their core. Through this participatory approach, documentary becomes a mechanism for community-building and solidarity. Its aim extends beyond representation to the creation of spaces for communication and care. Digital technologies and social media platforms have amplified this potential (Elías-Zambrano et al., 2025), enabling collaborative documentary practices where individuals contribute to the recording and interpretation of shared experiences, an approach particularly visible during social disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet while digital technologies lower barriers to access and encourage diverse participation, they also present challenges. Power imbalances persist in production processes and participation structures, and questions of authorship, ownership, and representation remain vital (Auguiste et al., 2020). Ensuring plurality and equity among participants is critical if co-creative documentary models are to fulfil their democratic and emancipatory promises.

1.2 NEW MEDIA AND THE DIGITAL DOCUMENTARY

The concept of the new media documentary (Arda, 2020) encapsulates the shift from linear, mass-oriented narratives towards interactive, user-centred communication forms. Drawing from Rogers' (1986) framework, new media are characterised by mutual interaction, demassification, and asynchronicity. These attributes redefine the flow of information, offering individuals greater access to alternative narratives. However, as Arda (2020) observes, the critical evaluation of digital communication tools remains essential. Issues of accessibility, control, and ownership intersect with broader questions about media literacy and the power relations underlying content production.

New media documentaries integrate interactivity, multimedia, and open-ended narrative structures, allowing audiences to navigate stories non-linearly and at their own pace. Despite the technological innovations, literacy remains a prerequisite for active and critical engagement: the viewer's understanding of truth depends on their awareness of the producer's ideological frameworks and the medium's representational conventions (Arda, 2020). While this digital transformation holds the potential to increase global understanding, promote social cohesion, and enhance democracy, it also introduces risks associated with technological dependence, monopolisation, and the homogenisation of content under commercial pressures.

1.3 INTERACTIVITY AND THE REDEFINITION OF REALITY

Interactive media have redefined the nature of documentary experiences, expanding them beyond traditional cinematic viewing into participatory environments. Gifreu (2011) describes the digital interactive documentary as a form whose definition continues to evolve, yet it consistently centres on interactivity as a means of engagement and exploration. Such documentaries provide factual information about reality while allowing users to make choices that shape their experience of the narrative (Podara et al., 2021). The element of choice distinguishes interactive documentaries from other non-fiction forms, positioning the audience as an active participant rather than a passive observer.

Gaudenzi (2009) introduces the concept of the open code documentary, which reflects the multiplicity of realities and grants every participant the power to document their own viewpoint. In these works, the audience's physical and emotional involvement becomes indispensable, where the documentary operates as a relational object connecting creators, users, and subjects. Interactive documentaries function not just as representations of reality but as communicative acts that foster participation and reflection.

Although some scholars, such as Berenguer (2004) and Miller (2004), distinguish between interactive narratives, interactive documentaries, and games, the boundaries among these forms are often porous. The open-source character of interactive documentaries, however, brings specific challenges, notably the loss of a single narrative voice and the necessity of coordinating multiple perspectives. Nonetheless, such multiplicity enriches the representational landscape, allowing diverse forms of knowledge and experience to co-exist (Gaudenzi, 2009). This shift further contributes to the reconceptualisation of the consumer from a passive "audience" to an active "media user" (Podara et al., 2021).

2. DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND PARTICIPATORY FRAMEWORKS

Digital storytelling exemplifies the fusion of technology and narrative in the contemporary documentary. Employing multimedia tools and interactive mechanisms, digital storytelling seeks to attract and engage audiences while maintaining a focus on real events and experiences (Podara et al., 2021). Within interactive documentary typologies, Podara et al. (2021) identify four key modes of interactivity: conversational (docu-games), experiential (blurring virtual and physical spaces), hypertextual (click-based navigation), and participative (collaborations between audiences and producers that generate evolving, open databases). These categories highlight the flexibility and adaptability of digital documentary structures, which integrate user input into the narrative process.

Contemporary interactive documentaries thus operate as collaborative creations between the filmmaker, the medium, and the user. Central to this approach is the concept of digital placemaking, where participatory documentary practices allow citizens to become storytellers of their own environments (Hurley, 2023), influencing the identity and perception of their communities. Such processes bring to light a critical question, what happens when the recording tool is not in the hands of a filmmaker but those of the community itself? In addressing this, a combination of participative and experiential interactivity

emerges as a promising model (Podara et al., 2021), sustaining collective understanding while positioning the audience, now redefined as a media audience, at the heart of the documentary process.

3. DIGITAL PLACEMAKING AS A NARRATIVE TOOL

The concept of digital placemaking derives from placemaking practices, common in architecture and urban planning to foster innovation and knowledge activities (e.g. Pancholi et al., 2019). Throughout the years, it has evolved into a range of subconcepts to address different aims of the practice, such as critical placemaking (Moodley and Marks, 2023), platform placemaking (Törnberg, 2022) and digital placemaking (Halegoua and Polson, 2021). However, no agreed or established definition has emerged from the literature, posing a definitional dilemma described by many scholars (Fernandez-Osso Fuentes, Keegan, Jones, et al., 2024; Głowczyński, 2022).

Digital placemaking presents the potential to include a variety of technologies (Chen et al., 2022) to help foster a sense of attachment (Halegoua and Polson, 2021) within a community (Courage, 2021). Examples of this concept could be from the famous augmented reality game Pokémon Go (Clowater, 2021), to the use of social media channels (Breek et al., 2018), projections on to a building (Petrovski et al., 2024) or artefacts to disseminate the stories of a place (Stokes et al., 2021). The key aspect of the concept is the combination of the physical space with a digital layer of meaning (Hespanhol, 2022; Głowczyński, 2024).

Recent studies present key aspects to understanding the differences from digital placemaking to other technologically mediated experiences in place. In digital placemaking, four aspects are key (Fernandez-Osso Fuentes, Keegan, Jones, et al., 2024): it should be a community engagement activity, where inclusion and accessibility of all members of the community should be key, mediated and augmented using technology creating a hybrid experience, to promote place attachment and sense of place. Currently, the works of Fernandez-Osso and colleagues are aiming to present the first consensual definition of the concept, aiming to help the field arrive to a mature state and to continue evolving.

4. STUDYING PARTICIPATORY DOCUMENTARY AND STORYTELLING IN CITIES

This work is part of a broader study that explores digital placemaking as an emerging strategy within place branding across different urban contexts on a global scale. The overall objective of the research is to examine how digital technologies are transforming the symbolic construction of places, as well as the narrative processes associated with the community identity in the place and the urban identity.

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques (Morgan, 2014; Pilcher and Cortazzi, 2024). In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2023), which then informed a structured questionnaire (Cisneros-Caicedo et al., 2022; Contreras Cázarez and Campa Álvarez, 2022). The sample consists of 27 participants ($N = 27$), selected based on their professional and academic expertise in fields related to digital placemaking, place branding, digital culture, interactive media, and participatory practices in urban environments. Participants come from different countries and cultural realities, allowing for a comparative and international perspective.

This article presents preliminary results of the study, specifically focusing on the role of participatory documentary and digital storytelling as tools for mediating territory and constructing place identity.

5. DIGITAL PLACEMAKING AND THE POWER OF CO-CREATED DOCUMENTARIES FOR AUTHENTIC TERRITORIAL NARRATIVE

5.1 THE COMMUNITY AS A “FILMMAKER”

The preliminary results suggest the community as a potential filmmaker, since the digital placemaking experience contributes to the inclusion of co-creation processes. The community transforms from a passive role in top-down experiences (Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale, 2023) to an active role where digital tools such as social media, augmented reality platforms or interactive apps, could allow residents to record, share, and co-create stories about their surroundings.

This evolution reflects a broader democratisation of the narrative process, where the “recording tool” is transferred from the professional documentarian to the citizens themselves. As one interviewee noted, “When we gave residents

the recording tools, they stopped being ‘targets’ of the experience and started directing the story themselves.” As inhabitants engage in these practices, they transform from subjects of study into primary narrators who document their own daily routines, memories, and personal experiences. This shift ensures that the symbolic construction of the territory is not a static image imposed by external agencies, but an organic, ever-evolving narrative shaped by those who live within it. Consequently, the community acts as a collective filmmaker, producing a multifaceted portrait of the city that prioritizes lived experience over curated urban marketing.

5.2 PARTICIPATORY DOCUMENTARY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL PLACEMAKING

As a consequence, these results also describe the community beyond its position as the subject of the study, but an author/co-creator/filmmaker that records their own experiences and stories. The community could be understood as an author of a participatory documentary. Thus, aligned with participatory documentary theories (Hurley, 2023), extending the vision of the audience in digital media as “users” to “media audience”. This alignment mirrors the “open code” documentary framework, which grants every participant the agency to document their own viewpoint, thereby creating a relational object that connects creators, users, and subjects. One expert explained: “Our role is to hold the frame, but the chapters are written by the neighbours.” This multiplicity enriches the representational landscape of the city, moving away from a single, institutional narrative voice toward a pluralistic approach. In this sense, digital placemaking fulfils the “emancipatory promise” of participatory documentary by ensuring that the stories recorded are authentic reflections of the community’s challenges and strengths, rather than homogenized versions of local reality.

5.3 AUTHENTICITY AND PLURALITY IN BRANDING AND COMMUNITY-LED PLACE STORY-TELLING

Early results show that place stories often serve as a thread to voice other issues affecting the community, which could focus on the inclusion and accessibility within the community, power dynamics and risks, or other areas that may affect these individuals. One participant remarked, “We start talking about the square or the market, and very quickly people talk about who feels welcome there and who doesn’t.” Therefore, we find place stories to be a common thread in explaining and diving into other areas that affect the community. Connected to place stories, the participants defended the value of storytelling

in connecting communities and providing value to the place image and identity. Participatory place branding projects were mentioned where the promotion of the place image could foster belonging within the community. One key example is the use of this communication strategy to give voice to marginalised communities (Gonsalves et al., 2021; Hudak, 2019; Zins and Abbas Adamu, 2024). The impact of storytelling in place branding is found to act beyond inclusion or brand equity (Giannopoulos et al., 2021) towards areas related to wellbeing (e.g., Fernandez-Osso and Sánchez-Gey Valenzuela, 2024).

5.4 MOBILE APPLICATIONS AND THE CO-PRODUCTION OF PLACE IDENTITY

The preliminary results of the study indicate that apps play a key role as mediators between citizens' everyday practices and the symbolic construction of territory. These platforms function as a bridge between the physical and the digital, enabling digital placemaking to materialize in interactive, situated, and contextual experiences. An expert participant described a co-created walking-tour app: "People told us they started to see their own street as part of a bigger story once they heard their neighbours' audio guides." In this sense, digital communication becomes ubiquitous, embedded in daily routines and in the ordinary experience of urban space. The rise of artificial intelligence has opened new possibilities for digital placemaking through mobile applications, enhancing content personalisation, route recommendations, and real-time adaptation of urban narratives to users' interests and behaviours. However, these technologies also amplify ethical and critical challenges, such as algorithmic opacity, bias in the visibility of certain stories, and the automation of decisions regarding which narratives are highlighted, potentially affecting the plurality and authenticity of territorial representation (Sáenz-Torralba, 2025).

5.5 OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

In this context, we find a number of challenges or risks that can affect these experiences. First, it is important to ensure the process is bottom-up (Latorre, 2011) to overcome power dynamics, which tend to focus on entrepreneurial goals rather than defending the community needs. To overcome these power imbalances, practitioners must ensure that the "filmmaking" tools are truly accessible and that the decision-making power regarding narrative direction remains in the hands of the community. A participant reflected: "We invite residents to workshops, but in the end the big decisions are still taken elsewhere. Digital tools don't automatically change that." Moreover, the stories recorded

should make sure diverse voices are included to overcome mainstream stories and images (Gonsalves et al., 2021; Szaszák and Kecskés, 2020), leading to preventing homogenisation (Główczyński, 2024; Özkul, 2021). The results highlight the critical challenge of homogenisation and representation. For digital placemaking to be effective, the stories recorded must actively seek to include diverse voices, deliberately moving beyond “mainstream” or “Instagram-worthy” images, which tend to dominate digital platforms. It is important to include ethical considerations from the democratisation of digital narratives such as the potential risk of exploitation of community voices, privacy and safety or algorithmic bias. Overcoming this requires a conscious effort to include marginalised communities and to give voice to issues that are often invisible, such as accessibility, socio-economic inequality, and internal power struggles.

5.6 EMERGING IMPACT ON PLACE IDENTITY AND BRANDING

To conclude, we find the overall impact of participatory and co-created documentaries in place identity and branding to focus on three aspects as follows.

First, there is a shift from curated to co-created branding. The new forms of storytelling alter the traditional “place branding” model, which used to be a one-way process (promoted by government or agencies) (e.g. Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale, 2023). The place brand becomes an organic, ever-evolving narrative shaped by the stories of their own inhabitants.

Second, there is an identification of diverse scales when exploring the stories within a place. The place brand does not need to focus on large scales, as smaller micro-scales can also develop their own identity (Fernandez-Osso Fuentes, Keegan, Rowley, et al., 2024). The diversity in scales helps exploring diverse realities within diverse groups.

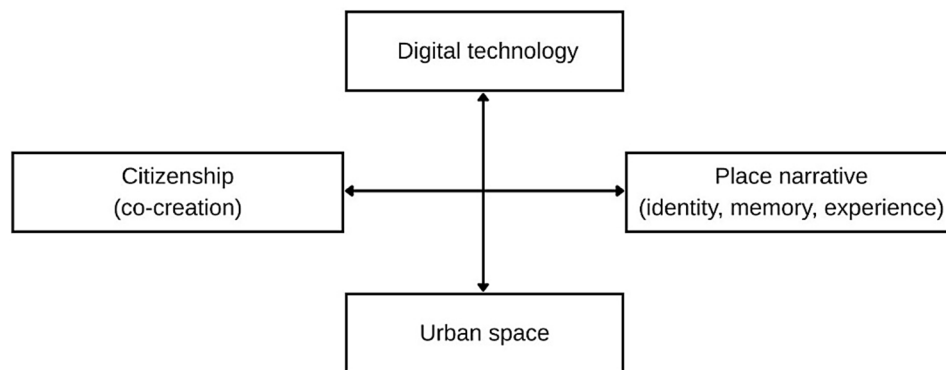
Third, the authenticity of the identity in a place is key. Participatory documentary, through digital placemaking, could foster a more authentic and resilient place identity since the community members create and share their own stories. This authenticity is based on an honest and diverse portrait created, reflecting both a community’s challenges and strengths. This diverts from the curated image that tends to be created specifically in these branding projects (Casais and Poço, 2023). The value of this approach for tourism is crucial, as visitors increasingly seek genuine experiences and narratives, not just “Instagram-worthy” spots.

6. TOWARDS A COLLABORATIVE FUTURE: THE PARTICIPATORY CITY – DIGITAL PLACEMAKING AS SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY

Based on the theoretical framework and the preliminary results of the study, a conceptual model is proposed that frames digital placemaking as a practice situated at the intersection of participatory documentary, digital technology, and urban identity. The participatory city model is structured around three interrelated dimensions (see Figure 1 below).

1. Citizenship and co-creation: Residents act as content producers and narrators of their own environments, displacing the traditional role of the single author.
2. Digital technology: Mobile applications and interactive platforms mediate the experience of place, facilitating participation while simultaneously introducing new power relations.
3. Place narrative: Territory is symbolically constructed through multiple, affective, and situated narratives that influence both place identity and place branding.

Figure 1. The participatory city model



Note. Own elaboration.

This initial model synthesizes the idea that digital placemaking should not be understood merely as an urban marketing tool, but rather as a powerful medium for social documentary. Citizenship and co-creation are the starting point, residents generate narrative material about their everyday spaces. Digital technologies mediate this activity by offering the tools and infrastructures through which stories are produced, filtered and disseminated. The resulting circulation of narratives feeds back into place identity and branding, as institutional actors

and external audiences increasingly rely on these citizen-generated representations when imagining and managing the city. Through these practices, citizens are transformed into creators, a more authentic and plural place identity is fostered, and a fundamental shift occurs in how urban environments are understood and managed.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has highlighted the convergence of participatory documentary, digital storytelling, and urban identity construction, emphasizing the potential of digital placemaking as a medium for collective representation of the territory. Preliminary results show that digital technologies, particularly mobile applications, enable new forms of participation and co-creation, challenging traditional models of authorship, audience, and narrative in documentary filmmaking.

The democratisation of narrative transforms the way citizens engage in the symbolic construction of their environment, while also raising significant ethical challenges related to data management, the visibility of participating voices, and the plurality of stories. Ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives and preventing the homogenisation of local narratives emerges as a central concern for the responsible development of these tools.

Digital placemaking emerges in this study as a critical and socially committed practice, capable of fostering authentic place identity, strengthening community cohesion, and transforming the dynamics of interaction between citizens, technology, and urban space.

Future research may focus on the ethical implications of the democratisation of digital technology narrative, examining how the redistribution of authorship and representational power affects responsibility, accuracy, and the plurality of stories. It is also essential to analyse strategies that ensure inclusive processes in the use of digital placemaking tools, promoting diverse voices and preventing the exclusion of less visible or less technologically connected communities.

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WSPÓLNOTOWE NARRACJE MIEJSKIE I FILM DOKUMENTALNY:
MOŻLIWOŚCI CYFROWYCH NARZĘDZI W KREOWANIU MIEJSC

Streszczenie

Artykuł bada ewolucję praktyki dokumentacyjnej w erze cyfrowej, skupiając się na formie, która łączy dokument partycypacyjny z cyfrową opowieścią (*digital storytelling*) i cyfrową kreacją miejsca (*digital placemaking*). Badanie sprawdza, w jaki sposób technologie cyfrowe pośredniczą w symbolicznej kreacji jakiegoś terytorium, gdzie z pasywnych obiektów mieszkańcy zmieniają się w aktywnych „twórców filmowych” i współautorów miejskich opowieści. Praca podejmuje tematykę autorstwa, roli platform mobilnych w budowaniu wizerunku miejsc (*place branding*) oraz wyzwań etycznych, takich jak błąd algorytmiczny i homogenizacja. W badaniu przyjęto podejście mieszane, wykorzystując globalne kwestionariusze oraz pogłębione wywiady półstrukturyzowane z międzynarodowymi ekspertami ($N = 27$) w dziedzinie kultury cyfrowej, brandingu miejsc i mediów interaktywnych, co pozwoliło zapewnić perspektywę porównawczą. W omówieniu wyników wprowadzono pojęcie „modelu miasta partycypacyjnego” (*participatory city model*), w którym mieszkańcy występują w roli producentów treści, przekształcając branding miejsc z odgórnie sterowanego produktu w organiczną narrację. Aplikacje mobilne służą za główne pomosty między przestrzenią fizyczną a cyfrową, wzmacniając przywiązanie do lokalnej wspólnoty. Autorzy identyfikują zagrożenia i kończą wnioskiem, że skuteczny *digital placemaking* musi być procesem oddolnym, w którym większe znaczenie mają autentyczne, różnorodne głosy nad obrazami wykreowanymi na potrzeby choćby Instagramu.

Słowa kluczowe: cyfrowa kreacja miejsc; dokument partycypacyjny; branding miejsc; cyfrowe opowiadanie historii; komunikacja reklamowa; marketing cyfrowy