

Storytelling and experiencescape in living industry tourism: An explorative study within long-lived firms

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Abstract. The offer of authentic experiences based on stories about firms, products, production processes and historical backgrounds is at the core centre of living industry tourism, a type of tourism which involves visits to operational companies. Opening their doors, companies from every industry not only offer visitors the “behind-the-scenes” experience, but give them a privileged view on production processes and traditions that represent the essence of local entrepreneurial culture. Creating extraordinary experiences assumes crucial importance in this specific niche of cultural tourism. One way to stage such experiences is by linking unique stories to the experiencescape, that is an experiential space made up of tangible and intangible elements. Despite its relevance, experience-based research in the field of tourism is scant and, to the best of our knowledge, there are no contributions aimed at exploring how storytelling can be used to improve experiencescape in the specific context of living industry tourism. To reach this aim, a qualitative study based on a narrative approach was conducted on nine long-lived firms in Southern Italy, operating in the food and beverage sectors. Based on in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs, considered as storytellers of both their firms and their territories, the paper offers several suggestions on how to create unique tourism experiencescapes through storytelling. In particular, the present study points out the necessity to integrate different competencies and tools in order to define a wide narrative frame, usable as a powerful vehicle for sharing corporate heritage and local cultural heritage with many audiences.

Keywords: storytelling; experiencescape; living industry tourism; long-lived firms

Literature background and research objectives

The centrality of emotions is a distinctive feature of postmodern consumption, which leads to the attainment of value through all the senses (Fabris, 2009). As already noted more than twenty years ago by Pine and Gilmore (1998), the growing demand for experiences favours products and services that are capable of providing them. In particular, creating extraordinary experiences assumes crucial importance in today's tourism industry, since tourists are increasingly looking for experiences outside the realms of the everyday (Mei et al., 2020). As highlighted by Mossberg (2008), one way to stage such experiences is by linking unique stories to the experiencescape through storytelling. Derived from the longer established servicescape concept (Bitner, 1992), the term experiencescape was introduced by O'Dell (2005), who defined it as a space of pleasure, enjoyment and entertainment, as well as the meeting ground in which different groups move about and come in contact with each other. According to Mossberg (2007), no matter what the destination is, the tourist experience takes place within the experiencescape and is therefore influenced by physical environment, products, but also by visual signals, colours, sounds, artefacts and interactions with personnel and other tourists. Importantly, a more meaningful experience can be offered through a theme or a story about the organization or the destination. In the field of marketing, stories are seen as a means by which companies can engage customers (Woodside, 2010), promoting their immersion and participation (Escalas, 2004). Thus, storytelling techniques have been increasingly used to narratively transport and persuade customers, as well as to create and reinforce positive brand associations (Lundqvist et al., 2013). In an experience-based industry like tourism, narratives can be used not only to communicate the multifaceted nature of places, but also to create and share the sense of tourist destinations (Lichrou et al., 2010). Therefore, storytelling has gained increasing attention also as a key element of destination branding (Drew and Woodside, 2011; Lund et al., 2017; Youssef et al., 2018) and much of the research on the topic has focused on the perspectives of tourists and destination managers (Kompuula, 2014).

The offer of authentic experiences based on stories about products, people, production processes and historical backgrounds is at the core centre of industrial tourism, a type of tourism which involves visits to operational companies and industrial heritage (Otgaar et al., 2010). Even if industrial tourism has a long history, it still remains a relatively unexplored research topic, with a lack of clear concepts and definitions (Frew, 2000). In fact, while many authors focused solely on former industrial sites as attractions of industrial heritage tourism, broader definitions of industrial tourism were adopted to include both former and active industrial sites as destinations of this specific form of cultural tourism (Garofano et al., 2017). In the last years, specific attention has been paid to corporate museums and archives as places of corporate memory (Riviezzo et al., 2021), along with factory tours aimed at witnessing production processes in real time (Xie, 2015). The latter are an essential component of living industry tourism, included in the wider concept of industrial tourism and designed for addressing the needs of post-modern tourists, in search for experiences rather than for mere destinations (Savoja, 2011). Regardless of how it is labelled, tourism focused on living industry deals with visits to operational firms, that may attract different types of tourists interested to understand "how things work" (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2001). Opening their doors, companies from every industry not only offer visitors the "behind-the-scenes" experience, but give them a privileged view on production processes and traditions that are at the core centre of local culture.

Despite its relevance, experience-related research remains underrepresented in the tourism industry (Mody et al., 2018) and studies aimed at understanding and applying experiencescape within this field are needed (Chen et al., 2019). Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, there are no contributions aimed at investigating the integration between storytelling and experiencescape in living industry tourism.

Based on these assumptions, the main aim of this study is to explore how storytelling can be used to create unique experiencescapes in the specific context of living industry tourism. In parallel, we aim to investigate how storytelling activities realized by long-lived firms with strong local roots can help destination development, especially in those areas far from the most famous tourist circuits.

In order to reach the above-mentioned objectives, a qualitative study based on a narrative approach was conducted on nine long-lived firms in Southern Italy, that have opened their doors to living industry tourism. All the firms belong to food and beverage sectors, in which the offer of immersive experiences is evolving to include, along with the traditional tasting tours, a set of activities aimed to address the need of tourists to know what is behind the products and to participate in good business practices.

Methodology

Due to the lack of studies integrating storytelling and experiencescape in the context of living industry tourism, an explorative study was conducted following the qualitative approach of narrative research (Gabriel, 1991; Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004).

After a complete mapping of firms located in the South of Italy and active for over 100 years in the food and beverage sectors, a desk analysis was performed in order to identify entrepreneurs who had distinguished themselves for living industry tourism initiatives (including the organisation of factory tours and the creation of corporate museums). Thus, nine long-lived firms mainly located in inland areas and far from well-established mass tourism destinations were included in the study. The nine firms differ in size (from small to large), but are united by being all family businesses; they are active in the production of food and beverage products that are highly representative of their respective territories (cheese, sugared almonds or “confetti”, biscuits and baked goods, bitters and liqueurs, tuna and canned food, chestnuts and chestnuts-based products, olive oil, wine, liqueurs and spirits). The choice to focus on long-lived firms was related to the growing interest emerged towards the forms and methods of storytelling that such firms may develop drawing on corporate heritage, history and memory (Riviezzo et al., 2016; Napolitano et al., 2018). As highlighted by Riviezzo et al. (2021, p. 11), long-lived companies “can use the process of narrative development to rediscover their organisational identity and culture, to retrace the path and experiences that have made their offer of products or services unique”. Furthermore, the firms were selected in order to represent different stages of the process aimed at opening up to living industry tourism. Therefore, while some of the firms have only recently opened their doors to visitors, in some cases a corporate museum was created and/or factory tours are a consolidated activity.

Once the firms were selected, each one was contacted by telephone to present the research aims and obtain the availability to participate in the project by the entrepreneur (or any other person directly involved in the enhancement of corporate heritage through living industry tourism activities). Therefore, elicited stories were collected through in-depth interviews that had to be conducted by telephone, because of the restrictions aimed at containing the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews, conducted between January and September 2021, were recorded and transcribed. Even if face-to-face interviews are considered the most productive mode for obtaining narrative data, telephone interviews can be assumed as the “second best”

(Holt, 2010). Furthermore, we integrated elicited stories with the stories that had been already produced, such as business monographs, videos, business documents, newspaper articles and so on. However, visits to business sites and corporate museums have been already planned (and in two cases have been already done), in order to integrate our narrative material with spontaneous stories emerging from direct observations.

In order to preserve the essence of the stories told by the entrepreneurs (only in one case we interviewed the marketing manager, responsible for the storytelling strategy), in this first phase we adopted a content-holistic narrative analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Key findings

Through the enhancement of corporate heritage, long-lived companies can offer an innovative tourism experience, only partially overlapping with other forms of tourism (such as shopping tourism or food and wine tourism). The present study shows how the narrative staging of products and productive processes at the core of corporate heritage supports the creation of unique experiences in long-lived firms, as destinations of living industry tourism.

Based on our narrative material, we were able to identify the plots, the actors, the scene, the crucial moments and turns through which our respondents (storytellers) create meaning of corporate heritage and share it with visitors, who can borrow that meaning to create their own stories, based on their living industry tourism experience.

In a nutshell, the story combined with the experiencescape acts as a framework for tying together the firm's products and the place they come from. In fact, in all the cases under investigation the firm's story is told as part of a collective and territorial identity, as well as individual trajectories are reconstructed with regard to the more general context. The entrepreneurial family is in most cases a crucial actor along with employees, to which a leading role is recognized in the main twists and turns of the organizational history.

In order to construct heritage-based tourism experience, stories should be staged on a scene able to connect the past, the present and the future of the company. To this aim, four of the companies investigated realized a corporate museum, where the traces of organizational past are collected and enhanced. However, in all the cases tangible traces of corporate memory (such as historical photos, posters, advertising cards, machinery) are inserted in the physical environment of experiencescape.

In the narratives examined, memory and history are the intangible elements that enrich and differentiate the experiencescape by evoking unique and memorable emotions. In this perspective, corporate heritage narratives contribute to design long-lived firms as original tourist attractions, where an authentic dimension of the place can be directly experienced. Therefore, experiences in living industry tourism can be seen as experiential spaces where corporate heritage and cultural heritage overlap and integrate through individual and collective stories, enriched with emotions and mindfulness.

In line with the seminal contribution of O'Dell (2005), our study highlights the role of culture in experiences, interpreting entrepreneurial culture enclosed in long-lived firms as the basis for constructing experiences that go well beyond the corporate walls. In this sense, the immersive experience of living industry tourism serves to reveal the culture of a place starting from production processes that often combine innovation with long-standing traditions. Another important aspect of experiences in living industry tourism is related to the variety of visitor groups, including also business partners, corporate clients and school groups. In some cases, companies organize factory tours only for business visitors, while tourists and excursionists are only allowed to visit corporate museum or exhibition halls. This

requires the adaptation of narrative techniques to the different audiences, in order to make the experience congruent with the expectations of each one.

Our analysis also revealed the importance of emotional participation of entrepreneurs and members of the owner family in delivering the stories. As noted by Mei et al. (2020), in fact, the storyteller's commitment and enthusiasm generally affects how the story is perceived by the audience.

Implications and concluding remarks

The present study was aimed to provide insights on how storytelling can be used to create unique experiencescapes in living industry tourism, that is industrial tourism involving "visits to operational industrial sites where the core activity of the site is non-tourism oriented" (Frew, 2000). The focus of our analysis were long-lived companies, told and analyzed through the "voice" of effective and sometimes overlooked storytellers, that is entrepreneurs. The key findings of our study have been briefly discussed above and will be supplemented with additional data that we are still collecting.

Based on our preliminary findings, we think that our research has several implications for both theory and practice.

Dealing with theoretical implications, the present study may contribute to advance our understanding of experiencescape within tourism industry, where the concept has been rarely applied (Chen et al., 2019). In particular, research attention on storytelling as a driver of experiencescape improvement is scant, especially in the field of living industry tourism, where many shaded areas still persist (Garofano et al., 2017). Furthermore, despite the necessity to consider the perspectives of different stakeholders in the storytelling about destinations, the role of entrepreneurs in turning firms, communities and their productive cultures into tourist destinations has been offered only sporadic research interest (Komppula, 2014). In order to contribute to fill this gap, the present study focuses on entrepreneurs, as storytellers able to enhance the competitiveness of firms and their hosting territories.

Dealing with practical implications, the paper offers several suggestions on how to create unique tourism experiences through storytelling. In particular, the present study points out the necessity to integrate different competencies in order to define a wide narrative frame, usable as a powerful vehicle for sharing corporate heritage with many audiences. In this perspective, the narrativization of corporate heritage – in its tangible and intangible components – needs to be planned and strategically managed to convey the experiencescape to different target audiences, by using specific channels, tools and expressive schemes. To this aim, the present research is part of a wider project based on the collaboration between marketing and industrial design scholars, for the creation of digital tools that can virtually open the doors of long-lived companies. Thus, long-lived firms are designed as "narrative habitats" where new digital languages can be used to share experiences and co-create contents related to organizational memory.

The present study also sheds light on the necessity of a dialogue between private and public actors for the creation of experiencescapes based on the integration of firms' corporate heritage and cultural heritage of the hosting territories. In this direction, several opportunities lie in the complex but necessary networking among territorial stakeholders, to be involved in the planning of living industry tourism itineraries. In particular, the definition of thematic routes of living industry tourism could be aimed to insert organizational stories in the frame of precious productive traditions that symbolize the uniqueness of made in Italy, especially in those areas of Southern Italy that are far from the most well-known tourist circuits.

Since this study has adopted a qualitative approach, limitations exist in terms of generalisability.

Future studies could focus on the demand side in order to investigate the combination of storytelling and experiencescape in the perspective of tourists visiting operational industrial sites, also in sectors other than food and beverage.

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