



## Storytelling about places: Tourism marketing in the digital age

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Place storytelling

Governance

SS

VSA

### ABSTRACT

Storytelling about places is recognized as a tool to enhance the reputation of regions as they compete for tourism and economic development spending in the digital age. Through digital media, people can be encouraged to tell their tourism stories and share their experiences.

Our design approach integrates Service Science, Management, Engineering, plus Design, Arts and Public Policy (SSME + DAPP, so just SS) and Viable Systems Approach (VSA) perspectives. Storytelling can be managed in a local service system to enhance brand competitiveness. The way local governments and cultural organizations understand and encourage storytelling about places ("place storytelling") can have a significant impact on the success of a region competing for tourism and development spending. Place storytelling enables local stakeholders to tell their personal stories about their beloved places.

Our analysis and cases demonstrate that place storytelling enables strategic communication that supports sustainable competitive advantage. By means of an analysis of "Umbria on the Blog", which is an innovative project which joins place and web 2.0, and "Il Mangiastorie", which promotes wine and food and tourism of some Campania internal area, we highlight the relevance of managing place storytelling as a strategic communication involving stakeholders in the place-identity-building process.

This paper presents a model of place storytelling that local governments and cultural organizations can use to encourage and manage stakeholder engagement in a multilevel process for improving regional service system marketing and communications in the digital age.

"Oh, the places, you'll go!" is the title of a famous and beloved Dr. Seuss (1990) book that introduces children of all ages to the wonders of visiting places and the enrichment of travel. Stories about places have the power to enchant the listeners and enliven the storytellers. Places are metaphorical signposts that mark the passages of our lives. Stories about places are also the essential memory of tourism service experiences.

### 1. Introduction

Stories are so essential to human life that we can be described as the "Storytelling Animal" (Gottschall, 2012). Stories and storytelling help define the nature of humanity (James & Minnis, 2004; Tobin, 2006). Stories, including myths, legends, and folktales (Reamy, 2002), pass on

wisdom, knowledge, and culture for thousands of years (Sole and Wilson, 2002, p.73). Storytelling activities are ubiquitous throughout human history, including day-to-day activities, at meals, while traveling, in work songs, and even while dreaming. "Storytelling begins with the very history of mankind, there has never existed anywhere a people without stories" (Barthes et al., 1969). Hence, stories are devices to organize thinking and preserve memories (Ong et al., 1986), or sometimes to making sense of ongoing change, interpreting and re-interpreting the present looking at the past and the future (Dawson & Sykes, 2018). Story narration is an existential and organizational condition in which we are immersed (Fontana, 2013). The power of myths, legends, and parables in illuminating the essential elements of a cultural text is widely accepted. The fact that every great religion and culture have expressed their central tenets through one or more

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2018.12.025>

Received 21 June 2018; Received in revised form 9 November 2018; Accepted 21 December 2018

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narratives is testimony to the power of stories to preserve and consolidate these tenets (Guhathakurta, 2002).

Across the centuries, people have always told each other stories about the places they are from, the places they live in, and the places they have visited. A sense of place is essential to human life. People like to tell stories, and people enjoy listening to storytelling. People who live in a specific place have considerable experience in that place and often develop a deep love for that place. Through modern digital media, they can tell their stories and share their experiences of their beloved place. Such deeply felt stories can stimulate interest and motivate tourists (and even residents) to expand their experience in the place.

In the digital age, storytelling about places will be transformed by a range of technologies, including augmented reality (Spohrer, 1999). Digital-age storytelling is increasingly important as places compete for tourism, for economic development spending, and to convey culture and knowledge. In this sense, digital place storytelling is an innovative communication modality about regions through anecdotes, experiences, and stories shared with stakeholders (Hagen, 2008). Such a communication process needs to align the region's value proposition and the value co-created by local partners, governance mechanisms, and targets. Place storytelling is part of such new communication modalities and is related to the ability of an integrated territorial system to narratively present itself to the market and achieve distinctive competitive advantage.

Increased travel and competitiveness between regions has led to place storytelling becoming an active area of research. New forms of place storytelling are now possible in the digital age. The value of storytelling as a central tool for communicating the experiential value of a place should be given greater recognition. Our paper shows the strategic role that the storytelling process can play in defining the reputation of a place, enhancing its competitiveness, and embellishing its meaning.

The next section summarizes the storytelling literature. In the second section, place storytelling management is proposed as a strategic communication process. Third, we present a place storytelling framework that integrates the Service Science, Management, Engineering, plus Design, Arts and Public Policy (SSME + DAPP, so just SS) and the Viable Systems Approach (VSA). Fourth, we explore the conceptual implications of investigating the role of place storytelling in regional marketing and communications from a SS&VSA service systems perspective. Fifth, the practical implications of these conceptualizations are explored through two case studies that demonstrate that place storytelling enables a strategic communication process, which contributes to building sustainable competitive advantage.

## 2. Literature review

Little research has been done on place storytelling. Studies of corporate storytelling, a related area, take three perspectives on storytelling, which informs this literature review: social construction perspective; organizational symbolism (organizational storytelling); and storytelling management.

Within the social constructivist perspective, humankind is characterized by a universal need for meaning and order. As individuals engage in the construction of their personal meaning, they collectively engage in the construction of a social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) through legitimization and socialization. The salient aspects of this stream of study are that: a) stories are useful for commitment; b) familiarity with dominant stories can be an indicator of adaptation; c) a story can be a vehicle for social control; and d) meaning can develop consciously and/or unconsciously.

The second storytelling perspective informing this review is that of organizational symbolism. Organizational symbolism involves the construction of meaning in organizations and “expresses the underlying character, ideology, or value system of an organization” (Dandridge et al., 1980). The starting point is the idea that stories, legends, myths,

rituals, and ceremonies are the expressions and results of the deep core of a culture (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975; Schein, 1984).

In the third perspective, storytelling management is a technical tool that can make communication more engaging and appealing (Denning, 2000; Snowden, 1999a, 1999b; Swap et al., 2001). Corporate storytelling is a useful tool to spread corporate culture (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993; Boje, 1995; Czarniawska-Joerges & Morra, 2000; Fontana, 2013).

While there is extensive literature on the use of storytelling as an organizational tool, we found no formal academic research on place storytelling. Consequently, our paper bridges this literature gap by exploring the value of place storytelling within marketing and communications activities. Place storytelling is conceived as a useful management tool (Boje, 1991; Snowden, 1999b; Sole & Wilson, 2002), which may have positive impacts in various ways. In this context, managers should seek to govern uncontrolled stories about the organization, i.e. those generated spontaneously. Place storytelling is more than a simple “telling of a story” or a mere chronology of facts. Based on the literature about corporate storytelling, storytelling may be applied to a region to (Barone & Fontana, 2005; Denning, 2002, 2005; Denning, 2006; Fontana, 2013):

- share specific place goals;
- spread and justify place values;
- motivate tourism visitors and local residents to visit a place;
- maintain the memory, ensuring a continuity of knowledge and guidance of behavior;
- create trust, confidence, and sense of belonging;
- share tacit knowledge;
- share norms and values;
- reformulate place stories and re-engineer place image narratives;
- provide value categories and interpretative patterns (Barile, 2009).

The thesis we propose is that storytelling may be applied to place storytelling, whenever “place” is conceived as a service system and in building competitive identity to obtain reputation through value co-creation processes (Piciocchi, Bassano et al., 2011; Piciocchi, Siano et al., 2012; Piciocchi, Spohrer et al., 2012; Bassano et al., 2012; Håkansson et al., 2002). In other words, we intend to highlight the strategic role of place storytelling in marketing and communications activities, not limiting its contribution to mere operational aspects. Therefore, we seek to conceptualize and understand how place storytelling should be managed to support local government in marketing and communications activities that enhance regional competitiveness. The originality of our work is to explore new models of storytelling for involving stakeholders in the multilevel process of local governance of tourism resources.

## 3. Place storytelling management

Given the novelty of place storytelling, this research is exploratory. To propose a framework for place storytelling management, several contributions on corporate storytelling were considered (Boje, 1991; Denning, 2005; Fombrun & Van Riel, 2003; Swap et al., 2001). As a result, storytelling management can be divided into three macro-stages.

A member of the place governance group is the decision-maker on corporate strategy and corporate communication activities (Siano et al., 2008) and, as such, also on place storytelling activities. The decision maker manages the process of storytelling through the three stages of creation: building a place story (storybuilding); telling it to place stakeholders (storytelling); and listening to story feedback (storylistening).

As Fig. 1 shows, the preliminary stage of storybuilding is divided into three sub-stages:

- Autobiographical analysis, which selects the unique aspects that characterize a region (the past actions of its members, place culture

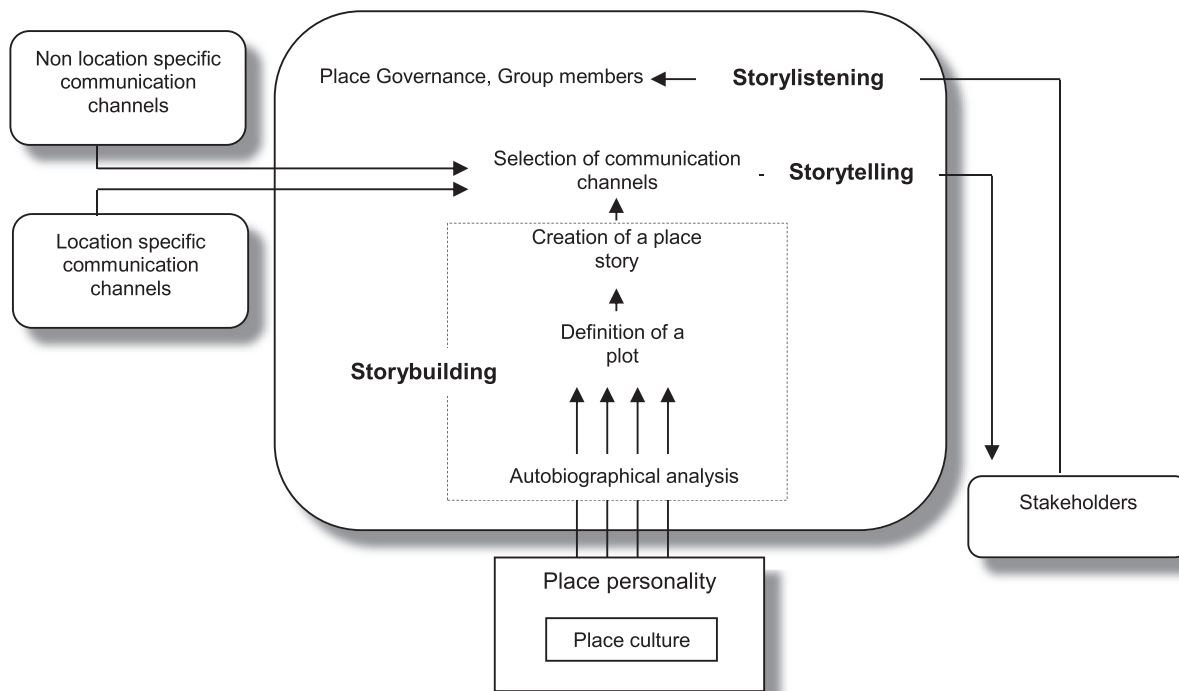


Fig. 1. Place storytelling management: the three stages of storybuilding, storytelling, and storylistening (Piciocchi, Bassano et al., 2011).

and values) and important events already memorably associated spontaneously by stakeholders to a region (Longo, 2008; Schultz et al., 2000; Traini, 2008). Place stories should be based on distinctive aspects and critical factors of success (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2003) to enable the region to differentiate itself from competitors;

- Definition of a plot - narrative structure - to be used (epic drama, melodrama, comedy, evocation, etc.) (Fontana, 2013; Reilly & Ward, 1997);
- Creation of a place story. A place story is a structured textual description (usually between 400 and 600 words), conveying the essence of a place to its stakeholders, to strengthen the ties that bind people to the place, to successfully position a place against competitors (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2003).

Storytelling requires various media to spread the story effectively. A wide range of alternative media channels may be used and it is possible to distinguish between local communication media (journals created to convey news about the area, signage, kiosks that are placed in the region, corporate portals, local television about a place, etc.). The use of local resources does not ensure the visibility and notoriety of a place. To contact nonresidents, it is necessary to select communication channels and services (advertising and communications agencies, public relations agencies, dealers, press agencies, providers, information mediaries, etc.) that are available outside the region. Also, traditional media can be bypassed through the creation of a blog where users can post new blog entries and re-post their stories on their social networking profiles.

The last story step is storylistening, which is monitoring the success of the story. This is carried out to check the popularity of the story, which is made even easier by the interactivity of digital media. Furthermore, any misunderstood story can be revised, improved, or removed based on a logic of content co-creation.

#### 4. Place storytelling framework

Our methodology integrates the Service Science, Management, Engineering, plus Design, Arts and Public Policy (SSME + DAPP, so just

SS) and the Viable Systems Approach (VSA) from a storytelling perspective. This integrated approach strengthens the power of storytelling, because it clarifies how it could be managed in a local service system for enhancing brand competitiveness. The integrated SS&VSA approach to storytelling shares important premises with Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) (Vargo & Lusch, 2008): 1) operant resources are the relevant sources of competitive advantage; 2) customers are always co-creators of value; 3) service systems are customer and stakeholder oriented; 4) value, in service systems as well as in service arts, are experiential, contextual, and relational.

Place storytelling increases the communicative value of place identity. However, to make storytelling effective, local governments have to conceive of place marketing and place storytelling from a service systems perspective rather than an individualistic perspective.

The key concept that contributes to a shift from a static to a dynamic view of the concept of place is that of systems (Golinelli, 2010), which is a core issue of the VSA. This approach is designed to analyze the viability of the systems in complex contexts (Barile, 2001; Barile, 2009; Barile et al., 2011; Golinelli, 2010; Simone & Calabrese, 2017) and argues that the survival and development of a system depends on the government's ability to create value for itself and for stakeholders (Simone et al., 2015; Simone et al., 2018). From this perspective, a region is a complex system that has to improve the harmony/consonance of relationships with its stakeholders (potential for value creation) and develop resonance interaction (flow and distribution of widespread value).

Territorial consonance can be observed from the internal and external point of view. The harmony/consonance between the internal components of the system refers to the ability to share resources to achieve the common goal of sustainable and participatory development. This potential depends on the structural compatibility between the components of equipment (which already exist) and systemic components (which can be attracted and connected to the local system), or from collaborative participation. The latter characterizes the external consonance with indigenous systems and it is not necessarily derived from structural compatibility of the territorial system with the expectations and needs of stakeholders (investors, funders, users, etc.). In

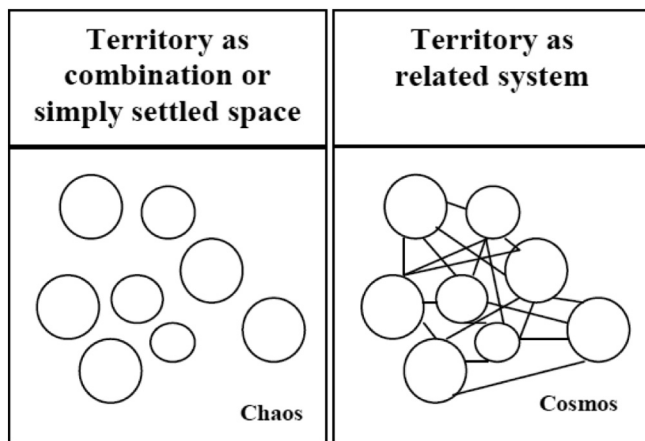


Fig. 2. Region as combination or as a system (Piciocchi et al., 2009).

this perspective, the consonance ensures a shared understanding of the context, which is an essential prerequisite for realizing synergy of relational vocation and identity.

Structural consonance does not guarantee the durability and stability of the relationship. Durability and stability depend on the resonance (participation and sharing) developed within the interaction and the perception by internal and external stakeholders of the characteristics of the activities offered and the behavior of the territorial system. Therefore, as part of the system, the role played by local governance is crucial to establishing guidelines to share with stakeholders (Piciocchi et al., 2009) (Fig. 2).

As Fig. 2 shows, according to the VSA, a region should not be construed as a defined space in a simplistic way (static view), but rather as the result of interactions between systems and resources, which are aimed at achieving a common goal (equi-finality) for survival (dynamic vision). The concept of a region as a viable system represents the central element of local cultural planning: a method through which policy makers identify the needs of the local community.

Besides the VSA, the SS approach is determined for the qualification of a Local Area in terms of a Smart Local Service System (SLSS). It combines various disciplinary perspectives to drive innovation, competitiveness, and quality of life through the services (Spohrer et al., 2007; Spohrer et al., 2010; Spohrer & Maglio, 2008). From this premise, viable systems are designed as “systems of local services”, i.e. dynamic configuration of resources (people, technology, organizations and shared information) capable of creating and providing a service (Ifm and IBM, 2008). In particular, the SS considers service as an interaction between the provider (in VSA terms, the region) and the client (in VSA terms, stakeholders): the main actors of a system of services. Both contribute to the co-creation of value of the services: the provider with knowledge and expertise and the client with resources.

Contrary to the assumption of Goods Dominant Logic (G-DL) or Service-Dominant Logic (S-DL) (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), which consider goods and services as two distinct and opposing entities, this approach considers goods and services as two sides of the same coin. While the goods relate to the tangible assets of the region (structural dimension), the services are related to those intangible assets (systemic dimension - processes, interactions, exchange of information, adaptability). Consequently, according to this new approach, the service is “the systemic configuration of goods”, the “product in action” (Golinelli et al., 2015), because it comes from a process of semantization (sense-making) of the good, which is useful for creating the best conditions of consonance and resonance with the context.

The integration between SS and VSA highlights the concepts of structural variety - the region as a static set of resources - and systemic interactions - and equi-finality resonance between the different actors of the network (Barile & Polese, 2010). In this context, the SLSS can be

qualified as a network of services oriented to the value co-creation internally and externally to the physical environment of the system. To strengthen the competitiveness of the region, a SLSS must:

- Provide the structural conditions for the definition and sharing of a value proposition (place identity and location branding) that is recognizable and consistent with the internal local characteristics and externally aligned with the expectations of stakeholders, in order to attract the same region on the basis of a correspondence between the value proposition of the SLSS and the required value;
- Systematically engage stakeholders in the process of defining and co-creating the service, to obtain a valid and solid value proposition of the SLSS and improve the overall competitiveness of the SLSS (place reputation) by the mutual satisfaction of interacting systems (Grönroos, 2007).

A SLSS can be defined as a combination of human and material resources intended to amplify value co-creation: any socioeconomic entity participates in distribution of value, according to the law of increasing returns (Arthur, 1994) or the win-win logic (Gummesson, 2009). At the systemic level, a SLSS consists of a network of cooperation and collaboration able to strengthen the competitiveness of place reputation (Siano et al., 2009) through smart multilevel governance (Bassano et al., 2018).

The reference to governmentality (Dean, 2010; Rose, 1999) should be seen in the direction of the necessary structural changes of government, or new forms of governance, based on the concepts of power/prestige and competence distributed and related to the configuration of multilevel governance systems: a new form of governmentality characterized by shared paths of government authority and the awareness of the need of a collaborative decision-making perspective (Piciocchi, Siano et al., 2012; Piciocchi, Spohrer et al., 2012).

Finally, matching these two contributions, (Piciocchi, Siano et al., 2011) we have defined a tourism territorial configuration as Local Tourism Service System (LTSS) characterized by resource integration and value co-creation processes that are better able to compete successfully in today's globalized scenario, because of competitive advantage based on reputation and strategic co-planning (Fig. 3).

As shown in Fig. 3, the value co-creation process for positioning emerges from a virtuous cycle that, based on a bottom-up process, integrates the two theoretical perspectives adopted herein (SS and VSA). According to this process, it is possible to define the drivers elements on which to act, the dimensions to consider, and the gaps to fill, in order to achieve value co-creation. This integration of perspectives, together with the circularity and feedbacks of the process, allows storytelling to be a useful means for enhancing the value of a territory.

Storytelling represents a new modality of communication consistent with the view of a region as a service system (Piciocchi, Bassano et al., 2011). First, in a context where consuming more experiences than products is becoming established (Lamb, 2008), a story represents an example of extremely evocative content provided to clients. In fact, storytelling allows territories to tell stories which arouse special atmospheres and involve real or future clients emotionally, which increases their sense of territorial belonging and identification. In this regard, McLellan maintains: “Stories speak to both parts of the human mind – its reason and emotion. [...] stories reveal patterns and bring to the surface valuable information that might otherwise go unnoticed, unharvested” (McLellan, 2002). Second, is the dynamic nature of stories, in which the semantic value is never determined by a single entity, but by all those that, directly or indirectly, come into contact with them and, inevitably, contribute to defining their meaning (Grönroos, 2014).

This preamble has enabled us to investigate and explain the effective contribution of VSA-SS to place storytelling.

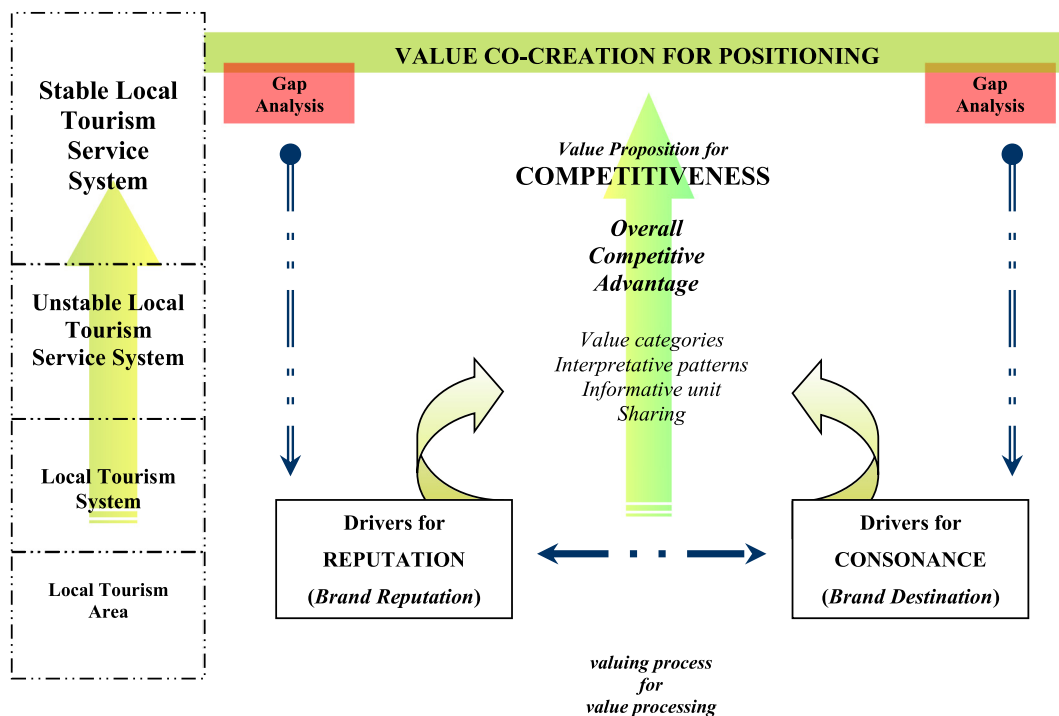


Fig. 3. The bottom-up process to create for LTSS positioning value (Piciocchi, Siano et al., 2011).

### 5. Conceptual implications

Place storytelling enables local stakeholders to identify themselves and to tell their personal stories about their beloved places. We believe that how local governments understand and encourage place storytelling is decisive for success. An authentic storytelling allows leaders a way to communicate their vision and values, to inspire, to bring about understanding and change, and to empower (Driscoll and McKee, 2007, p. 211). Conceiving place storytelling as a process capable of influencing regional marketing and communications encourages the strategic use of narration. This occurs especially in locations that are more structured than others and based on a service systems perspective. Based on our methodological perspective, governmentality (Foucault, 1982) can be configured according to four basic profiles: the project manager who coordinates the development of ideas in the area; the gatekeeper who communicates and shares ideas; the investor who supports collaborative projects; and the promoter who communicates the SLSS to the global market.

As Fig. 4 shows, the territorial government is more “intelligent/smart” and “cohesive” and is defined by the presence of these four types of profiles, which show a highly integrated smart governance (Piciocchi, Siano et al., 2012; Piciocchi, Spohrer et al., 2012).

In a global scenario, a SLSS, driven by a multi-level governance (Spohrer et al., 2012), guarantees:

- the system resilience (how systems persist and maintain identity moving through changing conditions and internal and external perturbations (Carpenter et al., 2001; Cassidy et al., 2010; Holling, 1973);
- the achievement of a distinctive competitive advantage for the region through the creation of positive reputational capital.

The reputation is one of the most important intangible resources to build and maintain the consent of the various stakeholders (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2003), which is an essential condition for the establishment of a trust relationship with the region. The viability of a SLSS requires that the smart governance (Piciocchi, Siano et al., 2012; Piciocchi, Spohrer

et al., 2012) is able to mediate between the expectations of the various stakeholders and to enable shared projects based on the enhancement and coordination of the territorial “réseau”.

We need a conceptual reinterpretation of the government, conceived as an institution (structure) and practice (system). This requires the development of a new art of governmentality (Foucault, 1982). The latter is considered as the result of the political, economic, and technological process characterized by network cooperation and collaboration at all levels of organizations and/or society. Collaboration requires the design and development of strategies (Norman, 1993), tools, and attitudes that build and sustain partnerships between local authorities and stakeholders, and which must ensure “respect for diversity and the learning of tolerance” (Mulroy & Shay, 1997).

In the search for models for smart governance of the region, it is important to reject top-down logic, based on individual and despotic power and embrace the logic of bottom-up governance networks (Piciocchi et al., 2009; Triantafillou, 2004), built on a common knowledge and a relationship of trust between all relevant territorial (in terms of prestige). A ‘good’ land governance is based on system research (Lidström, 2007; Veldkamp, 2009). Only in this way can a local area be interpreted as a SLSS characterized by the integration of resources and processes of value co-creation: a fundamental requirement to successfully compete in today’s globalized context and achieve a competitive advantage based on reputation and strategic co-design.

Modeled on Golinelli’s (2010) scheme and the assumptions of the SSME + D & VSA approaches, it is possible to distinguish different interpretations of the local area according to different territorial configurations (Table 1).

If the region is considered as a “resource to consume”, competitive advantage is based on territorial personality. Personality qualifies “what a system really is” (Siano, 2001), its Structural Variety. In this situation: components interact without a common evolutionary plan; their purposes are independent; relationships have an opportunistic nature; and it is not possible to identify a shared government that provides directions and rules. In the VSA view, this configuration is an embryonic system without a clear identity within and outside the network. The region is conceived as a “good” from which to get tangible

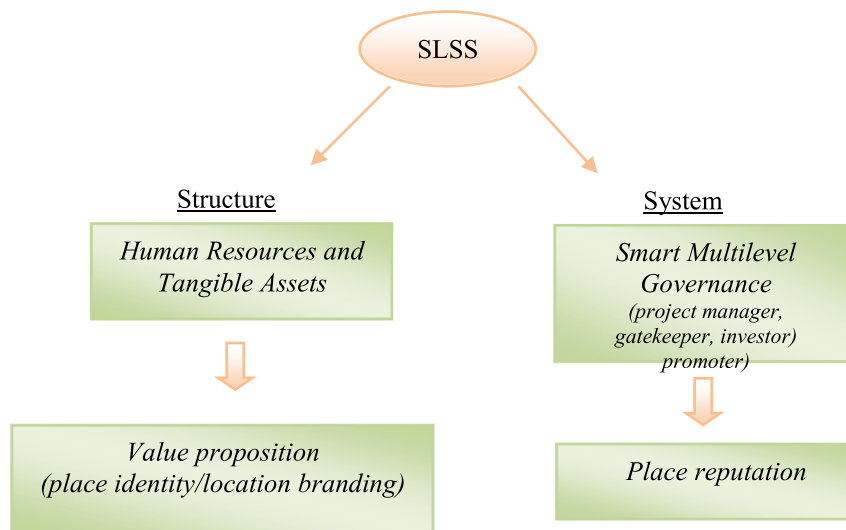


Fig. 4. The SLSS from a structural and systems dualism (Piciocchi, Siano et al., 2012; Piciocchi, Spohrer et al., 2012).

benefits. Focus is on the structure, rather than the system. In the SSME +D view, this means the service component is only expressed by functional use of the region.

If the region is considered as a “product to promote”, competitive advantage is focused on territorial identity. Identity defines the set of visual elements through which a system is represented (Siano, 2001). In this case, competitive strength depends on the ability to read the context and establish communication consonant with stakeholders' expectations. In the VSA view, this territorial configuration is similar to an evolving system. Government can be identified with rules, regulations, and responsibilities. Although the dominant logic is still focused on goods, the service component comes to the fore because the region becomes an “augmented good” (Kotler, 2000), which has only a functional use, but also has the role of supporting and adding value to the product.

If the region is conceived as “scenery”, competitive advantage is based on image. Image corresponds to the perception that stakeholders have of the region at certain periods in time (Siano, 2001). Such perception is unstable because it is the result of fragmented actions on the part of local decision makers, as well as private and public institutions. This configuration qualifies as an accomplished system: a government which provides directions and rules and exercises the power of control. However, this system is not stable because of decision making variability and contrasting viewpoints. The outcome is the incapacity for creating reputational capital requiring action and commitment. In terms of SS, the focus is on the service, but value co-creation is subject to rapid destruction if it is not “shared” and based on a collaborative approach.

If the region is conceived as a “system”, competitive advantage is based on reputation. Reputation is the result of socially shared judgments to create value for and with stakeholders (Siano, 2001). This means the region can be a stable accomplished system/viable system in the VSA view or in terms of a stable service system in the SS view: the offer is not merely focused on product and tangible benefits, but on the product, tangible benefits and intangible ones (in other words, service). In this situation, components co-evolve regardless of political changes and time factors.

The emerging configuration, in SS&VSA terms, is that of a Stable/Smart Tourism Local Service System (S-TLSS) that qualifies as an accomplished territorial configuration that is capable of building a clear brand destination (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Hankinson, 2007) and from a systems viewpoint, a place reputation (Siano et al., 2009). The integrated SSME + D & VSA approach does not change the ontology of storytelling. It preserves the nature of the storytelling process,

regardless of any interpretation that it may stimulate. However, our approach confers a new worthiness to storytelling, because clarifies how it could be managed in a local system to enhance brand competitiveness. As will be explained, place storytelling is related to the processes for increasing the communicative value of brand, as well as place identity. However, to make storytelling effective, territorial government has to conceive place in service systems perspectives rather than individualistic. In an individualistic perspective – i.e. a perspective focused on the single node of the network (in reference to a local tourism system, a restaurant, a hotel, a shop, and so on) – storytelling is used by the various components as a mere operative tool of communication for purposes of individual growth. This is due to the lack of a common view of the region and, consequently, of a shared communication plan. In other words, components interpret the place to which they belong in their own way and end up telling stories that often are inconsistent with those told by other entities. The result is negative communication of place identity that, in all likelihood, will influence stakeholder perceptions negatively. On the contrary, from a service systems perspective, storytelling becomes an effective form of communication of place identity because it is a communication plan shared by all nodes of the network. In this situation, components do not operate in isolation, but in synergy with others: they are conscious that the success of the place depends on the collaborative synergies established between the nodes (win-win logic) (Gummeson, 2009).

The sharing of a common communication strategy allows components to tell stories characterized by a mutual semantic coherence. This enables the communication of a stable identity for the place as a whole and for enhancing the competitiveness of territorial brand. According to this view, the building of place identity and place storytelling management is a process of value co-creation characterized by the synergic contribution of all systems (See Fig. 5). In metaphorical terms, the region has to operate as an orchestra in which each component plays its own instrument to produce a common symphony.

As Fig. 5 shows, this perspective postulates strong cohesion inside LTSS, and thus the search for internal consonance. This means counting on the presence of a local government that must see that all the components share Informative Units (IU) and Value Categories (VC), so that they can acquire a common General Interpretative Pattern (IP) to communicate the place uniformly and avoid dissonances between the messages. This enables building a place story shared by all components. The place story, i.e. the result of a common interpretation of the region, materialized in several stories told to the stakeholders by the various components. By listening and interpreting these stories, stakeholders help the government review storybuilding constantly to answer the

**Table 1**  
Different interpretations of the various territorial configurations (Bassano et al., 2012).

| Territorial configurations | Source of competitive advantage                | VSA   | SSME + DAPP (SS)   | SSME + DAPP & VSA  |
|----------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Region as Resource         | Personality<br>Identity<br>Image<br>Reputation | Embryonal System<br>Evolving System<br>Unstable Accomplished System<br>Stable Accomplished System (Viable System) | Good (GD logic)<br>Extended good (GDL > SDL)<br>Unstable service system (GDL < SDL)<br>Stable service system (SSME + DAPP & SDL) | Tourism Local Area (TLA)<br>Tourism Local System (TLS)<br>Unstable Tourism Local Service System (U-TLSS)<br>Stable/Smart Tourism Local Service System (S-TLSS) |
| Region as Product          |  |   |  |  |
| Region as Scenery          |  |   |  |  |
| Region as System           |  |   |  |  |

audience's needs. In other words, place storytelling corresponds to the moment of producing stories and storylistening corresponds to the moment of consumption of the stories, which nourishes the virtuous circle of place identity definition for positioning or repositioning the territorial brand (Fig. 6).

However, to develop reputation, it is important to tell stories that meet audience expectations, i.e. stories in which stakeholders can recognize themselves and that are different from those of competitors thus promoting competitive advantage. Involving clients in the story building process, constantly investigating their needs, their level of satisfaction, and their complaints is the best approach (Black & Kelley, 1999). In this regard, it should be remembered that stories have a dynamic nature. Their content changes as they are handed down to other people. Therefore, local government has to prepare the narrative structure of the stories but at the same time, it has to monitor the evolution of their content constantly, so as to strategically influence communication.

### 6. Practical implications

Based on our conceptualization, we explore two cases that demonstrate how place storytelling enables a strategic communication process and contributes to building sustainable competitive advantage. First, the case study of “Umbria on the Blog” is analyzed. This case enhances and redefines Umbria's identity with several stories conceived by a blogger team after visiting different Umbrian towns in search of traditional place values, anecdotes, and experiences. Second, the case study “*Il Mangiastorie*” is analyzed. This storytelling initiative by the Wine and Food Chain Integrated Project describes the wine, food, and tourism of the Italian provinces Avellino, Benevento and Caserta.

These cases are interpreted according to a SS&VSA perspective: the places of Umbria and Campania are conceived as potential LTSS and as territories able to express their vocation and identity by the enhancement of hard and soft components (Golinelli, 2010). While hard components refer to the environment (natural, artistic, structural, urban and infrastructure), soft components refer to customs, and traditions that, as is well known, cannot easily be reproduced by competitors. Both of these components become important elements for the construction of the place story and are useful for positioning or repositioning the region. They can otherwise reflect the place personality fully (Siano, 2001), but if inserted in a story, they are certainly able to give an identity to the territorial brand. The case studies are analyzed with the support of Figs. 4 and 5, which clarify the role of place storytelling in defining place identity.

#### 6.1. “Umbria on the blog”

“Umbria on the blog” is an experimental project of innovative tourist destination communication, applied for the first time in Italy and based exclusively on the region. Ten bloggers wrote their experiences traveling, to describe their authentic experiences and identity. The project was carried out by “Confindustria Alberghi”, the Confederation of Umbria Hotels and Tourism. The purpose of the initiative was to experience life in Umbria and to report the experience on the Web.

The ten bloggers were taken for a weekend through the streets of the Region to search for stories to tell and to describe the genuine emotions they lived. The main objective was to emotionally capture the good and beautiful aspects of Umbria and rediscover the traditional values of this region.

Umbria was conceived as the ideal Web platform for the bloggers to narrate their experiences in the region. Bloggers lived in picturesque Umbrian villages and landscapes, and experienced contact with the locals for authentic and indigenous storytelling. The nature and the aims of the project were reported on the web site [www.umbriaontheblog.com](http://www.umbriaontheblog.com), where it is possible to read a short bio of each blogger and the stories they wrote. Analyzing the case study by means

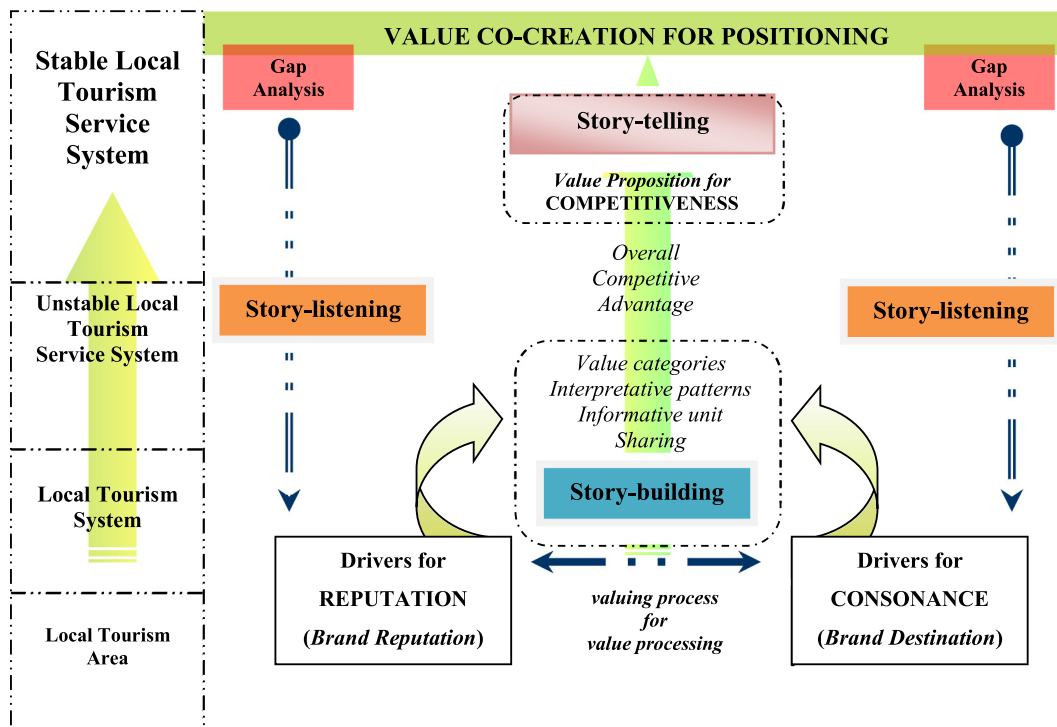


Fig. 5. Place storytelling in a configuration of region as LTSS. (Adapted from Piciocchi, Bassano et al., 2011).

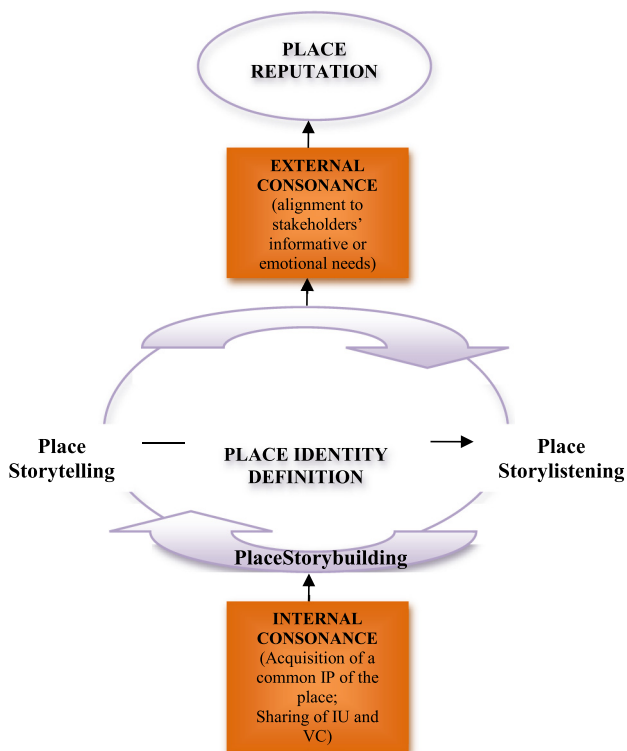


Fig. 6. The strategic role of place storytelling to enhance territorial brand competitiveness.

of the framework identified in Figs. 1, 5 and 6, it can be seen that the role of “Confindustria Alberghi”, the confederation that planned the initiative, is crucial, because it selected the bloggers involved and the places they described. The bloggers provided support in defining place identity, which was not well characterized for Umbria, especially for

foreign tourists. The opportunity to comment on the story through the feedback tool (e.g. “Do you really think this opinion is useful?”, where readers can choose a score from 10% to 100%) enabled the local headquarters of Confindustria to collect information for improving the communication strategy for place identity. In this sense, the effective co-creation of value enabled Umbria to become a S-LTSS. The blog authors mainly chose evocative plots to narrate the place, rediscover the traditional jobs of artisans in the Middle Ages, and experience the joys of typical local life. Local distinctive competences were considered when describing the traditional jobs and skill shield by residents. For spreading the stories, non-location specific channels were used, but online narratives since they provides free expressions and more authentic view (Pera, 2017; Volo, 2010). The stories were reported on various web sites or blogs (e.g. [www.trivago.it](http://www.trivago.it), [www.zoover.it](http://www.zoover.it), [www.minube.it](http://www.minube.it), etc.).

### 6.2. “Il Mangiastorie”

“Il Mangiastorie” is an initiative of the integrated Wine and Food Chain project which promotes, by means of storytelling, wine, food, and tourism in the Italian provinces of Avellino, Benevento and Caserta. The name of this initiative calls to mind a fictional character in the tale of Pinocchio: Mangiafuoco (Fire-eater), puppeteer and theatre owner, known for proposing a different show every day to his audience in which he embodied genuine characters, transposing people’s stories onstage while the audience attended the show. As a spectator, Pinocchio recognizes the various puppeteers as his brothers and joins them in a flurry of embraces [...] neck grasps [...] and nips of friendship [...] and pumpkin of a true and sincere brotherhood.

Similarly, the Provinces of Avellino, Benevento and Caserta perform a great show, “Il Mangiastorie”, the settings are in a diverse region of Campania. They relive stories experienced by real and imaginary people, in which the audience is not merely a spectator, but also an actor. In other words, “Il Mangiastorie” is inspired by the concept of “journey”. A journey from history to history, from country to country, from tradition to tradition, from myth to myth, legend to legend, in the



presence of storytellers, real people, fairytale or imaginary characters who narrate themselves, their land, culture, art and food, in a continuous cross-reference to the past, present and future.

To attract local and foreign tourists, the initiative promotes the knowledge and comprehension of the various places and products of the Wine and Food Chain of Campania. In this sense, a virtual platform registers all itineraries followed by the “sense bus” to enable potential tourists to discover the typical wine and food products of the ancient suburbs of Avellino, Benevento and Caserta.

A dip in the traditional agricultural and food product scenario of rich country regions and their cultural heritage provides an event for developing new tourist routes where the original paths of ancient villages often forgotten are proposed for Italian and foreign tourists. This vision is proposed through food tastings known as taste workshops and moments of performance to describe the excellence of three important areas in the Region.

The stories here are simple descriptions of the typical food products, for instance, of Irpinia. Local products have been used for giving a particular positioning to the image of Irpinia. Apart from this feature, no other element is considered in creating and sharing this story. There is no indication of traditional skills and other marks of traditional local culture. Furthermore, the stories are diffused through an informative brochure, which does not allow for receiving feedback and monitoring, other than in terms of copies distributed.

In this sense, the name of the initiative tends to be misleading, as the stories are only simple descriptions of places and local products. The role of Department of Tourism and Cultural Heritage is limited to promoting the region without receiving any feedback from tourists or residents. This configures the region as a Local Tourism Area, which only assumes a defined place identity, not co-created with people who live or visit the region.

## 7. Discussion: the linkage between theory and practice

Even if we have represented just only two cases, both the examples underline some aspects that are of strategic relevance for storytelling praxis.

First of all, new technologies and internet diffusion contribute to the success of storytelling in several fields such as marketing, media, communication, management, etc. where storytelling has become a powerful weapon of persuasion. In fact, storytelling represents a new narrative manner for generating a virtual reality – that we define “dream context” – where companies can create better relationships with customers and “influence” their opinions and choices. The emotional involvement generated by the storytelling techniques is referred to the capability of the management to take under control knowledge and expectations of customers.

Second, digital storytelling ensures that: a) new stories can be modified continuously; b) stories are non-linear with a not chronological process; c) each user co-creates the story according to its cultural and societal degree; d) the end of the story can be changed according to the different user's expectations.

Into the tourism sector, we can give some answers to the following main questions.

1. *What means doing storytelling in tourism?*
2. *In which way storytelling support the tourism companies' objectives?*

With reference to the first question, if the role of the narrative is stimulating the desire, turning on the imagination, creating empathy - anticipating and/or prolonging the experience, then tourism storytelling means stimulating the desire to tell and to make one's own the narration of the potential and/or actual experience. This implication, on the one hand, makes the company-customer relationship more fitted and, on the other hand, allows the company to use the emotional customer involvement as the most truthful and credible testimonial.

Referring to the second question, storytelling is a useful tool if its application is based on a concrete bidding system suitable to the needs and expectations of tourists. This means that digital narrative rise up to a specific role in each phase of the customer experience:

- a) *awareness* – if we are able to generate a good story: this implies the amplification of identity and reputation;
- b) *valuation and decision making processes*: stories help people to tuning and address themselves to the bidding system, more consonant and compatible with personal needs;
- c) *post sell services*: the sharing of experiences through digital narrative strengthen customer relationship improving trust degree.

So, the good use of storytelling is capable to create a participatory mapping “sites stories” to visit: this is useful for the sharing information process and the value co-creation for positioning which are two critical ingredients for reinforcing the value proposition and the commercial success.

## 8. Conclusion and further research

Our paper conceptualized the strategic role of place storytelling in defining the identity of a region and enhancing its economic competitiveness. Through the framework described in Fig. 6, we showed the close relationships between place storytelling, place storylistening, and place storybuilding. The case examples enabled understanding that different storytelling management leads to different marketing and communications results. This means that the way a government conceives of place storytelling will be decisive for the success or failure of a region. Using place storytelling as merely an operative tool will impede the construction of a strong and distinctive identity. However, conceiving place storytelling as essential for the regional marketing and communications process encourages strategic use of narration from a service systems perspective. This occurs especially in territories that are more structured than others and based on a service systems perspective.

The value of stories for a region are becoming better recognized. People like to tell stories, and people enjoy listening to them even though there may be skepticism surrounding the truth of what is being said. People who live in a place have considerable experience to share with others and through digital media they can be encouraged to share their stories. Digital media, in fact, contributes to transform storytelling in a collective and dynamic process that reinforces members' escalating engagement with the community itself (Pera, 2017).

The value of storytelling in the marketing and communications process should be given greater recognition. Our study represents an exploratory analysis of the issue which certainly deserves more attention from researchers and marketing and communications managers. The case studies considered give an overview of place storytelling and provide an understanding as to its operative use.

In fact, digital storytelling in tourism reinforce the communication management strategies according to two aspects: 1) narrative attraction deriving from the fabulous character of the story; 2) richness and variety of stimuli and meanings, deriving from the high informational density and mixture of codes, formats, events, characters and places that interact through multiple paths and different analogical relations.

In Tourism sector and in Destination Management, storytelling is a narrative manner suitable for communicating value proposition of tourism service systems and improve the value co-creation process of all involved stakeholders. This derives from different elements:

- 1) highly gratifying character of the narrative approach;
- 2) high involvement degree and the consequent strengthening of motivational and emotional variables;
- 3) ability to convey meaningful and impactful information;
- 4) potentiality for collaborative exchange of knowledge, dialogical confrontation and the search for new interpretations;

##### 5) ability of the narrative approach to favor networked knowledge (Popova, 2012).

Storytelling in tourism sector is capable to define identity and improve reputation of tourism service systems. The dynamic change of customer behavior and the continuous research of new experience have been modifying rules for packaging a story of a destination and its identity.

First of all, combining storytelling and the tourism system means taking a leap of mentality before adopting new communication channels or acquiring a blog. This cognitive change brings new opportunities on the one hand, but on the other hand requires special attention and effort to improve communication and marketing strategies, exploiting the potential of digital technology.

This means that we have moved from a classic tourism to an experiential tourism that represents one of the most important economic assets of the XXI century: today “immersive experiences” have value and meaning, with algorithms and human and artificial intelligence able to direct consumer's choices and preferences. Knowing that tourists prefer to build a path based on new styles of use and on the need to live unique and distinctive experiences, inevitably forces to rethink the touristic strategies and questioning how storytelling can be an effective and coherent tool able to exploit at best the potential attractiveness of places, engage, and retain the target.

Further research could identify useful drivers in place storytelling management that can predict greater intention to visit or revisit a particular place. Investigation of visitor perceptions of place stories on intentions to visit a particular place is needed. Furthermore, future research could explore the role of stories from fictional literature or movies on developing place awareness. There are many novels and movies whose place settings draw tourists to those cities or regions.

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