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How is it made? Industrial tourism and company openings for corporate branding

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ABSTRACT

Living industry tourism, understood as visiting working production plants, is an interesting but relatively underexplored niche in the academic literature. Apart from the benefits of this kind of tourism for places, interesting opportunities also arise for companies to test new communication activities while providing unique experiences to a wide and diversified audience made by clients, suppliers and the local community.

By looking at visitors' experience in Italian companies during a factory opening event, the paper aims to examine the impact of companies' key communication themes on participants' behaviours, perceptions, and call-to-action. Specifically, our research explores how strategic communication to company visitors can positively influence brand actions, highlighting communication's significance in motivating visitors. Results of our research show that effective communication can be achieved by utilizing specific themes and strategies, such as sharing compelling stories that highlight the employees and environment. This approach has been shown to enhance visitor engagement and actions, resulting in a positive brand reputation.

KEYWORDS

Corporate communication, Industrial tourism, Storytelling, Reputation, Consumers behaviour

TYPE OF PAPER

Research Paper

1. INTRODUCTION

The industrial domain, which encompasses company visits and open-door events where external people can visit working production plants, has received limited attention in academic literature despite its potential significance.

Existing literature has widely recognized that company openings and factory visits can provide unique opportunities for both places - leveraging tourist influx - and companies to explore innovative modes of communication by offering distinct experiences to a diverse audience consisting of customers, suppliers, and the local community (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2001; Mitchell and Orwig, 2002). More specifically, industrial tourism can help companies to build brand awareness by showcasing their operations and products in an engaging and interactive way (Jansirani and Mangai, 2013; Chow et al., 2017). Moreover, by inviting visitors to tour their facilities, companies can create a positive image of themselves as transparent and open organizations reinforcing trust and credibility with customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders.

Industrial tourism can also educate the public about the company's products, industry, and processes. This can help create a more informed and engaged audience that can better understand and appreciate the value of the company's products and services (Friel and Ben Youssef, 2022). Finally, industrial tourism can also be used as a revenue-generating activity for companies by charging admission fees and selling merchandise (Weiermair and Kronenberg, 2010).

Therefore, by using industrial tourism to build brand awareness, create a positive image, educate the public, and generate revenue, companies can strengthen their relationships with their stakeholders and create new opportunities for growth and success.

In achieving these results, strategic communication is crucial in shaping visitor actions and influencing their perceptions towards a brand (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2011; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015; Nwogwugwu, 2018). An effective communication strategy addressed to engaging with visitors can empower companies to positively influence several intangibles, such as brand reputation, ethical behaviour, and overall stakeholder satisfaction (De Beer, 2014; Zeffass and Viertmann, 2017; Foroudi et al., 2020). The ability to create and convey narratives through employee representation or the materials produced represents a key aspect of the communication process that companies could implement for interacting with visitors (Dessart and Pitardi, 2019; Kang et al., 2020).

Although the academic literature has analyzed the effects of industrial tourism on territories and businesses, few studies have focused on the construction of the tourist experience in companies and on the role of communication strategies in constructing such experiences.

This study seeks to explore how company communication directed at visitors can positively influence brand actions, highlighting the significance of communication in motivating and engaging visitors.

By using primary data collected from 233 visitors of the industrial tourism event Open Factory 2022 in Italy, our research investigated the relationship between industrial tourism, strategic communication, and stakeholder behaviour, providing insights into how companies can effectively employ communication to build a favourable reputation and leave a lasting impression on customers.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a literature review; section three outlines the methodological framework; the fourth section provides the study's empirical results and discusses the analysis's primary outcomes. Finally, the concluding remarks focus on practical implications for companies leveraging industrial tourism to improve stakeholder perception.

2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Industrial Tourism: definition, origins and development

Since the mid-90s, there has been a surge in interest in industrial tourism, marked by the publication of specialized tourist guides such as "Watch it Made in the USA: A Visitor Guide to the Companies that Make your Favorite Products" (Axelrod and Brumberg, 1994). Some researchers, however, trace its origins to the 1960s in the United States when the United States Travel Service and the United States Department of Commerce published the guide "Plant Tours in the United States". Concurrently, in the same period, European companies began opening their doors to the public to promote their products and attract new customers (Otgaar, 2012).

A classic of children's literature of the time, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" (1964) by the British writer Roald Dahl, well captures the essence of industrial tourism by describing how the visit to a factory provides insights into the product, company structure and production process, and, also, in this specific case, some magic.

Since then, as evidenced by various international reports (OECD, 2014), official destination portals, and the success of open-door events such as the World Port Days in Rotterdam, Visitez Nos Entreprises en Pays de la Loire in France, or Open Factory in Italy, as well as other factory visits and product manufacturing discovery attracted an increasingly wider audience.

However, although interest in industrial tourism has grown, academic research on the subject still needs to be explored.

From a tourism studies perspective, existing research explored factors influencing the appeal of industrial tourism and those that determine tourist satisfaction with factory tours (Lee, 2015 and 2016). Moreover, studies examine how visits to operational firms align with the strategies of public and private entities at the local level. Studies have provided insights into the conditions under which industrial tourism can be successfully developed (Otgaar et al., 2016) and the factors that influence the willingness of actors to cooperate at the local level to build industrial tourism experiences. Among these Otgaar (2012) identifies the nature of the visitor flow, co-branding and image alignment, and the potential for industrial tourism products, offering valuable insights on how to reach an agreement on these factors for the future development of industrial tourism.

From a corporate perspective, literature has highlighted the numerous reasons for developing closer collaborations with the tourism sector, both externally and within the company. Studies have shown how embracing tourism offers a valuable opportunity to better understand the product's value through the eyes of customer-visitors (Lee, 2015; Ben Youssef and Friel, 2022), create a connection between visitors and the brand (Mitchell and Orwing, 2002; Chow et al., 2015), and promote first-hand knowledge of industrial work and culture (Mitchell and Orwing, 2002).

Notable implications of tourism activities include fostering intra-company education on corporate values, culture, history, and heritage. This is achieved through the involvement of employees, workers, and managers in public-facing activities, and scholars have highlighted how company openings can facilitate learning processes that strengthen internal organization within host companies (Brunetti et al., 2018; Castellani et al., 2019).

2.2 Industrial tourism and strategic communication: conceptual framework and research questions

Although, to date, academic studies on industrial tourism and the connection between the development of industrial tourism experiences and communication strategies is still limited,

scholars have pointed out how industrial tourism can be an effective way for companies to develop new communication strategies because it allows them to showcase their products, services, and operations to a wider audience.

Studies investigate (Chow et al., 2017) whether there are any disparities in brand equity among tourists who have different experiences while visiting (such as the product-use experience, interpreter guidance experience, and brand orientation experience). Additionally, these studies explore whether visitors to industrial tourism sites enhance their perceptions of brand equity, starting from the lowest to the highest levels, based on factors such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty.

2.2.1 Storytelling ability (SA) and its effect on stakeholders' perceptions

The storytelling ability of a company could be defined as the organizational capability to tell an engaging story addressed to capture stakeholders' attention and stimulate their imagination (Mani and Mishra, 2022). In today's era, characterized by abundant information and fierce competition, effective storytelling can distinguish a company from its competitors, captivate the interest of its intended audience, and establish a profound bond with stakeholders (Júnior et al., 2023). By utilizing storytelling, companies can mould their brand identity and effectively convey their fundamental values, mission, and distinctive selling points (Gasparin et al., 2022). Additionally, through carefully constructing narratives that align with their customers' values, needs, and aspirations, companies can forge an emotional bond and cultivate trust and loyalty (Kemp et al., 2023). This process allows them to establish a profound connection with their audience, fostering a sense of reliability and dedication. Finally, through storytelling techniques, companies have the power to make their messages and brand experiences more indelible in customers' minds (Dassart and Standaert, 2023). This heightened memorability aids in reinforcing brand recall and can significantly sway customers' decision-making processes when evaluating purchases or seeking recommendations. Finally, the power of captivating and meaningful storytelling can profoundly impact how customers perceive a company and its offerings (Burnell et al., 2023). When companies share stories that deeply resonate with stakeholders, effectively address their needs, and emphasize the advantages and value of their products or services, they can shape positive perceptions, foster trust, and inspire customer loyalty (Nyagadza et al., 2020).

2.2.2 Stakeholders' perceptions impacting intention to buy and recommend

Marketing and communication literature has underlined that the intentions of stakeholders to make a purchase could be significantly shaped by their perceptions, spanning various stakeholder groups like customers, investors, employees, partners, suppliers, and the broader community (Ariffin et al., 2018; Yu and Lee, 2018; Aziz et al., 2019). Positive perceptions, influenced by factors such as, for instance, brand reputation, product quality, trustworthiness, and social responsibility, have the power to increase stakeholders' inclination to make a purchase (Visentin et al., 2019). Similarly, negative perceptions or doubts surrounding a company's credibility, value proposition, or ethical behaviour can discourage stakeholders from purchasing (Pentina et al., 2018). Similarly, stakeholders' perceptions can influence their intention to recommend (Visentin et al., 2019). When they develop positive perceptions of a company and its offerings, they are inclined to recommend them to others (Filieri et al., 2018). This occurs when stakeholders have a favourable perception of a product or service through personal experiences or the company's established reputation (Mbango, 2019). Consequently, they are more likely to share positive word-of-mouth recommendations with friends, family, or colleagues. Such recommendations can influence potential stakeholders, shaping their purchasing decisions (Rajendran and Arun, 2021).

2.2.3 Stakeholders' perceptions and their effect on engagement attitude and stakeholders' satisfaction

Stakeholders' perceptions could also impact the level of engagement attitude, intended as "the level of a customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment in specific brand interactions" (Hollebeek, 2011). Overall, positive perceptions create a conducive environment for increased engagement across stakeholders, including customers, employees, investors, partners, and the wider community (Cabrera et al., 2006; Malinen et al., 2013). This heightened engagement can include repeat business, active participation, advocacy, investment, or collaborative endeavours (Viglia et al., 2018). As a result, the overall relationship between stakeholders and the company is fortified, fostering stronger connections and mutual benefits (Hollebeek, 2011; Malinen et al., 2013; Cabrera et al., 2006; Morrongiello et al., 2017). Finally, studies in the marketing and communication fields underline the increasing impact of stakeholders' perceptions on their level of satisfaction towards a company (Chang et al., 2009; Krepapa et al., 2003; Spreng et al., 1996; Galan-Ladero et al., 2013). Stakeholders' satisfaction levels are significantly shaped by their perceptions of a company, its products, and its services. Positive perceptions, such as perceiving exceptional product quality, outstanding customer service, and a favourable value proposition, play a key role in elevating satisfaction (Galan-Ladero et al., 2013). Conversely, negative perceptions, characterized by instances of underwhelming product performance, unresponsive customer support, or inconsistent experiences, can result in diminished satisfaction levels (Chang et al., 2009; Krepapa et al., 2003; Spreng et al., 1996; Galan-Ladero et al., 2013).

Based on the theoretical analysis, the following research questions have been assumed:

RQ1. To what extent could the storytelling ability positively impact visitors' perceptions of the organization?

RQ2. How could positive visitors' perceptions of the organization impact their intention to purchase its products?

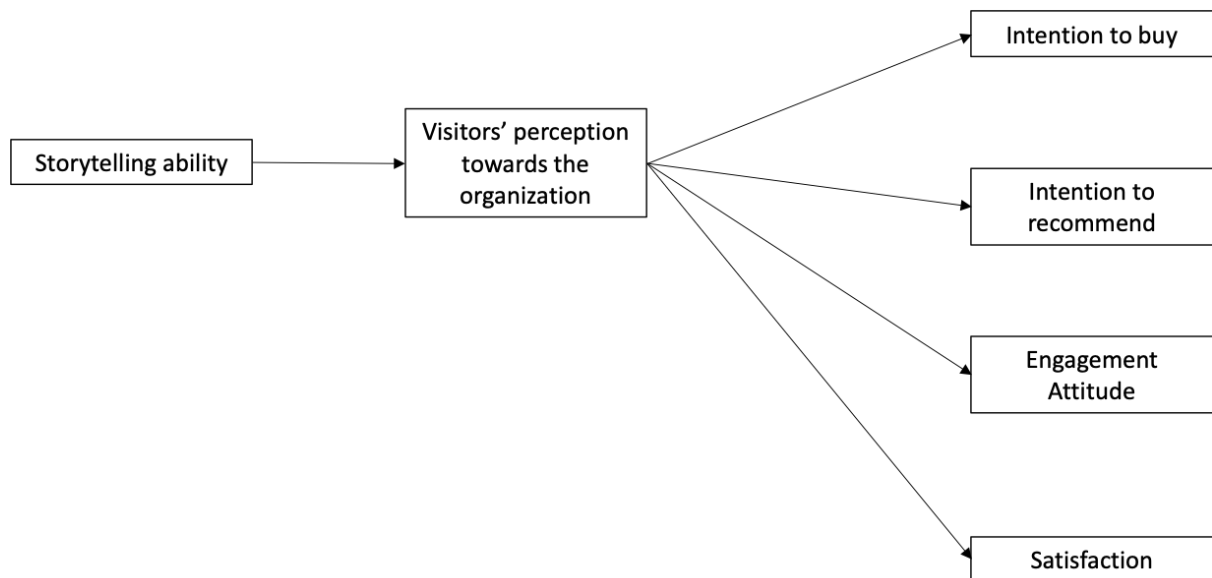
RQ3. To what extent could positive visitors' perceptions towards the organization impact their intention to recommend it?

RQ4. To what extent could positive visitors' perceptions towards the organization impact their engagement attitude?

RQ5. To what extent could positive visitors' perceptions towards the organization impact their level of satisfaction?

Figure 1 graphically synthesizes the hypothetical research model of the study.

Figure 1. Hypothetical research model



3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

3.1 Open Factory

Considering the research questions, a survey was designed, and interviews were carried out during the 2022 edition of Open Factory.

Open Factory is the most important Italian opening of industrial and manufacturing culture, an initiative held in November every year since 2015, both in person and in a digital version, by opening the doors of factories. The event is a project by ItalyPost, a company that organizes festivals, in collaboration with Goodnet, an organization that specialized in developing cultural events. Open Factory aims to showcase companies, strengthen the bond with communities and company employees, and demonstrate how factories are a value for everyone. The event's format consists of four components: guided tours of the company, laboratories and workshops, conferences, and book presentations.

In particular, with guided tours inside the companies and production facilities that participate every year in the initiative, Open Factory offers the public a great opportunity to discover the companies through the stories of employees and management who accompany visitors in exploring the company spaces and production processes.

The uniqueness of this event makes it a suitable field of investigation due to its broad coverage of the national territory and the number of visitors involved, offering a rare opportunity to collect detailed data on Italian industrial openings.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The study employed a two-step mixed-method approach: the first part included qualitative interviews with the entrepreneurs and managers of some of the companies opening their doors for the event; the second part involved a quantitative research component, with questionnaires designed to gather data directly from visitors.

Interviews with companies were conducted to explore the perspectives and practices of entrepreneurs, namely what they believed to be the crucial elements of communication with visitors during the event, the channels used, and the expected outcomes. Eleven companies were interviewed, and the selection criteria were based on their involvement in the event, ensuring that they possessed first-hand knowledge and experiences related to communicating

with visitors during the Open Factory event. Interviews were semi-structured, as this method allowed for greater flexibility in exploring diverse communication strategies.

The qualitative data from the interviews served as a first source of information for driving our conclusions, enabling a deeper exploration of the entrepreneurs' perspectives on communicating with visitors during the Open Factory event. Such findings, combined with those from the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire, provided a comprehensive understanding of the event's communication dynamics, allowing for a robust analysis of the research objectives.

The second part of the study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the perceptions and experiences of individuals who visited industrial plants during the Open Factory event. The data collection process involved administering a structured questionnaire of 22 closed-ended and Likert-scale items by e-mail to participants that registered and participated in the event.

The questionnaire was designed based on a review of the existing literature, specifically focusing on prior research to ensure compliance with established methodologies and capture relevant dimensions of interest.

Each construct has been measured with multiple statements on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from one ("strongly disagree") to five ("strongly agree"). The measure of storytelling ability had three items (adapted from Li et al., 2019), while the measures for stakeholders' perceptions had three items (adapted from Chow et al., 2017). Concerning the intention to purchase, it has been measured using a single item from Kim et al., 2011. Net promoter score was measured by adapting a single item from Mandal and Mati, 2022. Similarly, the engagement attitude had a single item adapted from O'Brien et al., 2018. Finally, the satisfaction level had six items (adapted from Alkilani et al., 2013).

More specifically, the list of questions was selected to gather information in particular on socio-demographic information and geographic origin of visitors; motivations for participating; perception regarding certain tangible and intangible characteristics of the company and its products; evaluations of the communicative aspects of the visit; satisfaction with the experience; participation habits in industrial tourism experiences.

A total of 233 interviews were collected from Open Factory visitors. After the data collection phase was completed, responses were entered into IBM-SPSS for statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participants' demographic characteristics, motivations, channels used and satisfaction. Finally, in this initial phase of the research, the correlations between the different items considered by the model were analyzed.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Communication strategies of companies in industrial tourism open-door events

During the qualitative interviews, respondents expressed their perspectives on open-door events such as Open Factory and their impact on the companies' storytelling.

The first topic investigated was the usefulness of such events in helping to find the best way to communicate the organization's story. Participants had differing opinions: some described Open Factory as moderately useful, indicating that while it provided a platform for communication, it did not have a significant impact on their storytelling efforts, while others viewed the event as highly significant. The latter believed that Open Factory was a valuable showcase, allowing them to communicate their entrepreneurial journeys and experiences to the outside world.

The interviews also revealed positive perspectives on Open Factory as a test for new external communication narratives. Generally speaking, managers considered the event useful in this

regard. Notably, some particularly appreciated the opportunity these kinds of events provide to experiment with different ways of conveying their messages and refining their external communication strategies. They saw Open Factory as a valuable platform for exploring and developing effective storytelling techniques. However, a smaller group of respondents shared a different enthusiasm, feeling that these events are not so relevant in testing new external communication approaches.

Participants highlighted the significance of Open Factory and similar events when discussing internal communication processes. They described it as very useful in strengthening communication channels within their companies. Open Factory was seen as a platform that facilitated better collaboration, knowledge sharing, and internal cohesion. The general feeling was that factory-opening events foster a sense of unity within the organization and provide employees with opportunities to engage with one another and even exchange ideas.

On the other hand, when discussing the usefulness of such events as a new direct sales channel, a majority of professionals expressed that they are not useful in this aspect. However, this might be explained by the very nature of the companies involved, as some operate in the B2B segment or specific niches.

Concerning the elements deemed most important to communicate with visitors during the event, two aspects that consistently received high praise were the company's brand and its connection with the territory. The company's history, the quality of the offer, and the history of the product(s) itself were also frequently mentioned, although not as unanimously. When asked about additional elements relevant to communication, some managers mentioned how they would share with visitors the company's innovative approach and its commitment to sustainability.

On the other hand, aspects such as the stories from employees, the distribution strategies and the difficulties encountered during their entrepreneurial lives were valued as less important by respondents. When it comes to the channels used to communicate participation in Open Factory, the interviews revealed interesting insights into the companies' preferences. Among the various channels, the majority of the interviewees mentioned the company's website and social media as the platforms to be used for promotion. In contrast, the company's newsletter appeared to be less frequently chosen, as well as third-parties websites and social accounts.

During the interviews, participating companies were also asked to express their expectations regarding Open Factory and industrial tourism events. It emerged that a shared primary expectation is to enhance the perception of the production plant's quality, a goal achievable by showcasing the high standards upheld in the production processes, and at the same time to enhance the professionalism exhibited by their staff.

In addition, another key expectation was to improve the clarity surrounding their initiatives. Participating companies believed that Open Factory can offer a valuable opportunity to communicate their objectives and strategies clearly to visitors, while at the same time providing a transparent and comprehensive understanding of their initiatives and aspirations.

Moreover, companies planned to enhance their visibility on social media platforms. They perceived Open Factory as a platform to bolster their online presence, capitalize on social media networks, and engage with a broader audience, even though, as previously mentioned, in the end, this expectation was not met since attendees used the traditional word of mouth as their main source of information.

Conversely, stimulating consumers' intent to purchase and improving the level of credibility was not as prominently emphasized among the expectations of the interviewed companies. Although these aspects were acknowledged, they were not the primary focus of their participation in Open Factory. Instead, companies primarily sought to address the aforementioned objectives to maximize the benefits of their involvement in the event.

4.2 Communication impact on visitors experience

As outlined in the methodology section, a quantitative research design was employed to explore the motivations behind event attendance, the diverse information channels utilized by participants, their perceptions of the event, and the subsequent actions they expressed interest/willingness in pursuing.

In terms of demographics, the majority of the 233 respondents fall within the age groups of 56-65 (29,2%) and 46-55 (24,9%). Concerning gender, the sample is almost evenly split between males (49,8%) and females (50,2%).

Almost 30% learned about the Open Factory event by word of mouth, another 30,3% from the company's social media, website and newsletter, and 23,1% learned of the event from the organizer's mailing list. Concerning the reasons for attending the factory opening, these represent a crucial aspect. Responses were ranked on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating the lowest level of influence in their decision and 5 being the highest.

The most significant motives for attending the event are connected to the interest to understand better the production process, including how the productive activity is organized and how a product is born, with 55,8% and 57,5% of respondents mentioning them as extremely relevant (5 out of 5). Interest in knowing more about a company operating on the local territory is also very important (51,5%).

Another important driver was a specific professional interest in the company/industry, as 36,9% of respondents considered this item particularly important when deciding to attend the event. This suggests that participants were driven by a desire to deepen their knowledge and gain insights relevant to their professional pursuits.

On the other hand, the possibility to directly purchase the products had little impact on visitors' decisions, with only 6,4% of respondents assigning a relevance score of 5 out of 5 to this item.

Table 1 - Motivation for attending the company visit

	1	2	3	4	5
Specific professional interest for the company/industry	18,0%	9,0%	17,2%	18,9%	36,9%
Friends/relatives who work in the company	60,1%	3,9%	5,6%	8,6%	21,9%
Interest in getting to know better a company that operates in the area of residence	6,9%	4,3%	12,9%	24,9%	51,1%
Better understanding how a product is born	3,0%	2,1%	10,3%	27,0%	57,5%
Better understanding how a productive activity is organized	1,7%	1,7%	9,4%	31,3%	55,8%
Interest in having a different tourist experience	28,8%	12,4%	19,7%	16,3%	22,7%
Direct purchase of products	60,9%	10,3%	14,2%	8,2%	6,4%

After the visit, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (70,1% in total) when asked if they could better recognize the company they visited if compared to competitors. Moreover, a combined 90,1% would recommend it to friends, highlighting their willingness to share positive experiences and endorse the visited company to their social circle. This means that the companies that hosted the visits managed to make the visit interesting and to communicate their values, a factor also highlighted by the perceived good reputation (respondents agreed or strongly agreed in 95,3% of cases), and – albeit to a lesser extent – to encourage the sale of its products, as 61,3% of visitors would be willing to buy them after the visit. Despite some of the companies operating in B2B segments or specific niches, this result is important for the implications on the repeatability of the initiative in different business

contexts, demonstrating that participating in industrial tourism events can prove to be an effective call-to-action to purchase products.

Last but not least, the vast majority of respondents (combined 96,6%) consider the visited company as reliable, allowing us to infer that the visit may impact the perception of visitors concerning the ability of the firm to deliver quality products and services, maintain a strong reputation, and foster trust among its stakeholders (Table 2).

Table 2 - Agreement over the following statements

	1	2	3	4	5
I already knew/heard about the company	9,9%	7,3%	6,0%	19,0%	57,8%
I would be able to better recognize the company I visited compared to other competitors	7,9%	5,7%	16,3%	23,8%	46,3%
The company is reliable	0,4%	0,9%	2,1%	15,5%	81,1%
The company I visited has a good reputation	0,9%	0,0%	3,9%	16,4%	78,9%
The company I visited speaks honestly to the consumer	0,9%	0,9%	9,1%	25,1%	64,1%
I would like to recommend the company I visited to my friends	0,9%	4,3%	4,7%	19,7%	70,4%
I would like to buy the products/services offered by the company I visited	20,0%	8,3%	10,4%	20,0%	41,3%
I would like to share the contents of the visit on my social accounts	27,9%	15,0%	19,0%	11,9%	26,1%

In terms of the elements well communicated, Table 3 highlights how most respondents (55,7%) expressed that the company's brand was effectively conveyed during the visit. This suggests that visitors clearly understood the company's brand identity and values. Similarly, the history of the products was considered well communicated by a majority of respondents (56,7%), indicating that visitors were informed about the origins and evolution of the products offered by the company. Nevertheless, the aspect that was communicated in the best way was the quality of the offer, as 73,0% of respondents stated this element was extremely well communicated (5 out of 5).

On the other hand, topics like the personal history of the entrepreneur, the target market and the distribution strategies received generally lower scores in terms of communication. This could depend on the choice of describing the company during the visit in a more narrative and less descriptive way.

It is also notable to mention that the stories from employees had the highest amount of low results (26,0% assigned a 1 out of 5 result), indicating that this aspect was communicated poorly during the visit.

These results are mainly in line with the aspects the organizations deemed as important to communicate: considering them more relevant, during the visit elements such as the company's brand, its connection with the territory, and the history of the products were properly and effectively communicated, as later confirmed by the public. On the other hand, the elements perceived by attendees as less communicated (precisely because managers found them less relevant) were the stories from employees, distribution strategies, and the difficulties encountered during their entrepreneurial lives.

Table 3 - Elements well communicated during the visit

	1	2	3	4	5
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The company's brand	2,6%	3,0%	10,9%	27,8%	55,7%
The personal history of the entrepreneur	13,0%	10,4%	19,5%	23,4%	33,8%
The history of the company	3,0%	4,3%	15,6%	26,8%	50,2%
The history of the products	1,7%	3,4%	13,3%	24,9%	56,7%
The quality	0,9%	1,3%	6,9%	18,0%	73,0%
The connection with the territory	2,6%	7,3%	18,1%	28,4%	43,5%
The difficulties encountered	13,7%	17,2%	25,6%	21,1%	22,5%
The target markets	6,6%	10,5%	18,9%	32,9%	31,1%
Distribution strategies	6,1%	12,1%	25,5%	24,7%	31,6%
Stories from employees	26,0%	19,8%	23,8%	12,3%	18,1%

Finally, concerning satisfaction, visitors were extremely satisfied in almost every aspect: except for informative material, which got a 36,5% of maximum results, the other items were all valued as highly satisfactory in more than 65% of cases. General satisfaction best represents this trend, overwhelming 76,0% of extremely positive judgements.

On the one hand, these findings suggest that the informative material offered during the Open Factory event was well-received yet need to be improved. At the same time, the clarity of explanation was a major strength for most of the companies, that eventually led to high levels of satisfaction.

Table 4 - Elements of satisfaction regarding the company visit

	1	2	3	4	5
Quality of products	0,4%	0,4%	4,7%	27,0%	67,4%
Quality of productive plants	0,4%	1,7%	6,4%	24,5%	67,0%
Informative material	5,2%	6,9%	22,3%	29,2%	36,5%
Staff professionalism	0,9%	1,7%	5,2%	20,2%	72,1%
Clarity of explanation during the visit	1,3%	1,7%	5,2%	16,7%	75,1%
General satisfaction	0,0%	1,3%	3,0%	19,7%	76,0%

Table 5 examines the relationship between storytelling ability and visitors' perceptions regarding various aspects of a company. Results indicate that all the variables under consideration are significantly correlated ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, a significant and moderately strong positive correlation is observed in all cases, as the different elements of the storytelling are correlated to visitors' perceptions, with a Pearson coefficient correlation between 0.309 and .410.

These findings suggest that a strong storytelling ability, based on different sources, is positively associated with visitors' perceptions of the company's reputation, reliability, and ethical behaviour, even though stories from employees present a lower impact on visitors' perspective. In contrast, the history of the company has greater effects.

Table 5 - Correlations Storytelling Ability and Visitors' perceptions

	VisitorsPerceptions1- GoodReputation	VisitorsPerceptions2- GoodReliability	VisitorsPerceptions3- Company's Ethical Behavior
Storytelling Ability1 – Personal history of entrepreneur	.320**	.302**	.379**
Storytelling Ability2 – History of the company	.391**	.410**	.391**
Storytelling Ability3 – Stories from employees	.309**	.309**	.309**

** $p < 0.05$

Data presented in Table 6 show that all variables associated with visitors' perception (good reputation, reliability, and company's ethical behaviour) demonstrate significant associations with visitors' intentions to buy and recommend ($p < 0.05$). The findings revealed that the

perception of a good reputation was strongly correlated with the intention to recommend ($r = 0.701$). Similarly, perceptions of the company's reliability were positively correlated with the intention to recommend the company ($r = 0.555$). Lastly, perceptions of the company's ethical behaviour exhibited a significant positive correlation with both the intention to purchase ($r = 0.351$) and the intention to recommend ($r = 0.622$), with the latter showing a stronger correlation.

These results indicate that visitors' perceptions of these factors are significant determinants of their intentions to purchase products from the company and recommend it. Hence, organizations aiming to positively influence visitors' behaviour should focus on establishing a good reputation, promoting reliability, and demonstrating consistent ethical behaviour.

Table 6 - Correlations between visitors' perceptions towards the organization and the intention to buy and intention to recommend

	Intention to buy	Intention to recommend
Visitors Perceptions1- GoodReputation	.261**	.701**
Visitors Perceptions2- GoodReliability	.223**	.555**
Visitors Perceptions3- Company's Ethical Behavior	.351**	.622**

** $p < 0.05$

Finally, table 7 addresses the correlations between visitors' perceptions of the organization, engagement attitude, and level of satisfaction. Results revealed significant ($p < 0.05$) and moderate to quite strong associations among the variables under investigation.

Specifically, visitors' perception of the company's reliability seems to be the least influential on general satisfaction ($r = .0296$), while the ethical behaviour of the company ($r = .382$) and its reputation ($r = .489$) have a stronger correlation. The perception of a company having a good reputation is also significantly and positively correlated with satisfaction over the quality of the products and the quality of the production plant.

These results confirm that visitors who perceive the organization as having a good reputation, high reliability, and ethical behaviour are also more satisfied overall.

Table 7 - Correlations between visitors' perceptions towards the organization and the engagement attitude and level of satisfaction

	Engagement attitude	Satisfaction- Quality of products	Satisfaction- Quality of prod plants	Satisfaction- Informative material	Satisfaction- Staff professionalism	Satisfaction- Clarity of explanation	Satisfaction- General satisfaction
Visitors Perceptions1- Good Reputation	.321**	.379**	.383**	.306**	.437**	.477**	.489**
Visitors Perceptions2- Good Reliability	.336**	.321**	.331**	.246**	.332**	.328**	.296**
Visitors Perceptions3- Company's Ethical Behavior	.411**	.311**	.388**	.500**	.465**	.475**	.382**

** $p < 0.05$

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our study aimed to explore how the storytelling ability of a company during a visit impacts visitors' perceptions towards the company, and to investigate the impact of visitors' perceptions on their intentions, engagement attitudes, and level of satisfaction towards the company. Events such as Open Factory allow people to visit companies and offer unique opportunities to explore innovative communication approaches, providing distinct experiences to a heterogeneous audience (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2001; Mitchell and Orwig, 2002).

The preliminary findings provide insights into how companies can use storytelling in industrial tourism experiences to improve their business outcomes through increased purchase intention, positive word-of-mouth, online engagement, and satisfaction. Additionally, the results offer important information to businesses to better understand the reasons that drive people to participate in industrial tourism experiences and, therefore, better direct their communication strategies.

The first reason that drives people to visit industrial plants is to understand better a company that operates in the area of their residence. This can be particularly important for people interested in supporting local businesses or wanting to learn more about the economic activities that take place in their community. A second reason is that people want to understand better how a product is born. Industrial tourism experiences provide visitors with an opportunity to see the production process first-hand, which helps them gain a deeper appreciation for the work that goes into creating a product. Finally, people may be interested in industrial tourism experiences to better understand how a productive activity is organized. This can include learning about the various stages of production, the roles of different employees, and the types of technologies and equipment used in the production process.

The findings suggest that effective communication, including compelling narratives that evoke a sense of place and showcase the role of employees, can enhance brand actions and visitor engagement and ultimately contribute to the reputation-building process. Inviting visitors to visit their facilities allows companies to cultivate a positive image of transparent and open organizations, thus strengthening trust and credibility among customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders. To achieve such results, specific and targeted storytelling is necessary. Storytelling has long been recognized as a powerful communication tool that allows organizations to connect with their audience on a deeper level. By creating engaging narratives, organizations can emotionally involve stakeholders, create meaningful connections, and shape their perceptions positively. In the context of Open Factory and similar events, storytelling plays a crucial role in conveying the organization's values, history, and unique selling propositions.

This research provides valuable insights in this sense, as it examines both the companies' and the visitors' point of view, and sheds light on how effective communication during these kinds of events can enhance visitor engagement and actions. First of all, to positively impact visitors' perceptions, the narrative used by the companies should focus on the history of the products and their quality, on the relationship with the local territory, and on the creative and production process that leads from design to the actual Development of the product, as these are all aspects that visitors particularly appreciated during their visit.

From the questionnaires, it emerges that the event recorded high satisfaction levels and successfully generated recognition, improved reputation, and fostered trust among the attendees. Furthermore, results indicate that, after the event, visitors were strongly inclined to recommend the company, considering purchasing its products or services, and, albeit to a lesser extent, potentially sharing their experience on social media, all of which contribute to the overall success and impact of the event.

The commitment of managers to improve their online presence is a remarkable effort, as by leveraging their websites and social media presence, companies can effectively communicate

themselves and their participation in open-door events. However, even if they are going in the right direction, they should remember that best results are achieved by combining different channels, both online and offline. Most of all, the high usage of word of mouth highlights the power of personal recommendations in influencing individuals' decisions and spreading the word about Open Factory.

However, these initial results also deserve further study considering this research's limitations. In particular, the lack of heterogeneity among the companies involved should be considered when interpreting and generalizing the results to a broader context. The sample included business-to-business (B2B) companies, which, although valid for considerations on communication strategies, may have at least partially influenced the willingness of visitors to buy their products. Hence, the findings may not fully capture the dynamics of consumer behaviors that would be observed in a more business-to-consumer (B2C) oriented market. Future studies should then include a broader range of companies, both in terms of sectors and in terms of scope and orientation.

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