

THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

THE IMMERSIVE EFFECT IN COMMUNICATION OF TERRITORY: A NEW DESIGN APPROACH TO SATISFY CULTURAL TOURISM DEMAND

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ABSTRACT

Tourism industry registers several interesting new trends in the cultural tourism demand. On the one hand, there's an increased interest of travellers towards less popular destinations in search of an authentic contact with the place identity. On the other, the concept of travel has taken the form of an exploration aimed at finding meaningful experiences, especially from the emotional point of view.

In this context, we argue the need of a new approach in the communication of territory that should have an engaging, memorable and therefore immersive effect on tourists.

The starting issue of this research regards the term "identity": a polysemous concept that requires a multidisciplinary approach to be understood. Here, it's considered as the sum of tangible and intangible elements which are often hidden or not immediately perceivable. Their combination creates meaningful landscapes as they are defined by the European Landscape Convention. In this sense, landscape is the metaphor of local identity but also a perceptual phenomenon that belongs to the domain of aesthetic experiences. Hence, the research focus will be on the relationship between content, form and meaning in order to develop a linguistic ecosystem and a set of design guidelines for the communication project.

Considering that cultural tourism is a connection element between people, place and cultures, this research needs to be nurtured by the skills and knowledge of humanities/social sciences, which may inform and drive all the research process.

Keywords: Communication Design, Design and Humanities, Immersive Effect, Cultural Tourism, Place Identity

1 EXPERIENCE AND IDENTITY: NEW TRENDS IN CULTURAL TOURISM DEMAND

We can observe several interesting new trends in tourism industry, especially those concerning the demand for the so-called 'cultural tourism' which is moving away from the traditional model of mass cultural tourism consumption. As evidence, the data provided by TourMIS (reported by Richards. n.d.) show a progressive decrease in the rate of growth of the most famous Italian cultural capitals. The reason is simple: cities like Rome or Florence rely mainly on their physical legacy of the past which is represented by their tangible heritage, but, as pointed out by Du Cros (2012) and Richards (n.d.), nowadays the public attention is shifting from tangible capital to intangible heritage. Furthermore, the current cultural tourism is mainly a kind of local tourism; it's characterized by short break holidays and an increased interest of travellers towards less popular

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destinations, in search of authentic experiences that involve at the same time natural, cultural and social aspects of the place.

In this context, the traditional model of place promotion doesn't work anymore because it mainly leverages on icons and stereotypes: the mainstream and well-established symbols that produce an affected image of the place – like a postcard view – distant from the actual reality as it's perceived by the local community. The current cultural tourist isn't interested in the *mise-en-scene* of the already seen but rather he or she wants to be surprised by discovering less known and more authentic places. To valorize territories that seem lacking of strong tourist attractions in traditional terms we need communication models able to leverage on the intrinsic features of those places, revealing so a complex and articulated *destination image* – the sum of beliefs, ideas, impressions, and expectations about a tourist destination area (Crompton 1979, cited in Chon 1990) - which is coherent with the local cultural heritage.

In other words, to satisfy the demand for cultural tourism the destination image has to disclose the *place identity*. For a communication designer this is a very complex task to deal with because every territory doesn't have only one identity. Actually, it's the result of the overlapping of its past identities - the *identities of transition* (Baule, Calabi & Scuri 2015) - which have shaped the place over time. These identities are always present even if not always visible or easy to represent. Being able to show them means allowing to better understand and enjoy the place. As suggested by Calabi (2013), many times we can identify these identities only by *minimal traces*, both tangible and intangible, that must be gathered, interpreted and made accessible through an operation of decoding and translation. So conceived, the *destination image* creation process involves both poetic and aesthetic action in order to develop an interpretive model through which contents and meanings are conveyed. It regards the process of meaning creation that is a matter of design and the core of a communication designer's expertises.

Starting from these assumptions, the research presented in this paper argues the need of a completely new communication approach for the cultural promotion of territory. As suggested above, the concept of cultural travel is changed. It has taken the form of an exploration aimed at finding meaningful experiences, especially from the spiritual and emotional point of view (Martelloni, 2007). Therefore, the cultural supply must go beyond the boundaries of product to become *experience*, especially in terms of communication as it's the first and most relevant contact we have with a tourist destination.

But what does "experience" means from the communication point of view? How we can provide it? This research is trying to answer these questions by focusing on the linguistic aspects (expressive languages, interactions between different multimedia contents and User Experience as a whole) involved in translating the place identity.

In this design context, the research process can and should be nurtured by humanities and social sciences. As it will be better explain below, knowledge and skills coming from these fields can add value and strengthen the research presented in this paper. On the one hand, they have informed the problem setting and driven the development of the research question. On the other, they're fundamental to support the data analysis and drive the elaboration of results.

2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW COMMUNICATION DESIGN APPROACH DRIVEN BY HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

2.1 PERCEPTION AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE: THE LANDSCAPE AS A METAPHOR OF PLACE IDENTITY

The starting point of this research regards the definition of the term "identity": a polysemous concept that requires a multidisciplinary approach to be well understood. In fact, many are the disciplines which have to do with "identity" (individual, social, local, etc.) and as a consequence it doesn't seem to exist a unique definition of the term. Nevertheless, it's possible to find some shared aspects which allow us to understand this broad concept. For example, the Italian sociologist Remotti (2001) claims that identity «is made also by otherness» (Remotti, 2001, p. 63; translation mine). It recalls simultaneously similarity and difference, therefore we can perceive the identity as something that is "our" or "far from us". It's based on an uninterrupted negotiation between assimilation and separation, so it's an entity always in transformation that can't be set a priori. Remotti defines its process of formation as a "matter of choices" because it entails the selection of elements and connections among a limitless range of possibilities. In this sense, the Italian sociologist Sciolla (2002) considers the identity as a narration aimed to finding coherence and continuity.

These general statements well-reflect the ways in which the identity of places arises, evolves, and can be considered. In fact, territory is an organism always in transformation whose identity is not an established unicum but rather a multifaceted composition that arises from the overlapping, into space and time, of its tangible and intangible characters. The selection of these characters, made more or less consciously by inhabitants or tourists, produces the image of place (or rather one of the many possible). So, we can affirm that *place identity* and *place image* are strictly linked because the latter comes from a synthesis of the former. In the article 1 of the *European Landscape Convention* (Council of Europe. 2000) we find a similar statement. Here, the role of the natural and/or human factors in determining the character of an area is put in relation with the meaning given to them by people. In other words, perception is considered at the basis of *landscape* shaping process. Professor of aesthetics Paolo D'Angelo (2003) seems to agree with this statement because defines "landscape" as a perceptual phenomenon which, for this reason, belongs to the domain of *aesthetic experiences*. Therefore, the environment suggests relations and distinctions but finally it's the observer that selects, organizes and gives meaning to what he sees, by following a process similar to the ascending scale of knowledge theorized by Aristotle. According to the philosopher, the first level of knowledge (the *experience*) comes from sensation passing by memory - that is, when we're in a given place, the instinctive act of recalling (and comparing) the images of the same place which we have previously seen, for example, on tv. From this viewpoint, the relationship between people and landscape is not bound up merely with perception. Landscape is also the expression of local cultural heritage; it conveys identity (Council of Europe. 2000, article 5, letter a) because involves the experience, which is a means to gain knowledge. In this sense, the metaphor of "landscape", and even more the one of "landscape as theatre" proposed by the geographer Turri (2001) - simultaneously the background and subject of social action -, well serves the purpose of developing a destination image able to tell and valorize place identity. Landscape is the result of a dialogic process between human being and environment which leads to experience/knowledge by means of perception: we perceive the territory as it

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is and also as it seems; we can understand or simply grasp its meaning through our mind and senses.

2.2 THE IMMERSIVE EFFECT AS AN AGENT OF EXPERIENCE

The idea of *immersive effect* as the link between communication and experience has come from the cross-fertilization between different disciplinary fields. At its basis there is the work of Francesco D'Orazio, researcher and PhD in Social Science and Digital Media. Analyzing the literal meaning of the term "experience", D'Orazio (2003) states that it's strictly connected to the idea of immersion because both of them proceed from the interaction between space and body. To be more precise, he argues that experience is a quality of immersion. Starting from this assumption, the research in object is trying to demonstrate that an immersive representation could be the communication answer to the need of experience.

Nowadays immersivity is a very hot topic. Unlike the common belief, the idea of immersion has not risen with the new media and in the past it has been already applied to the communication of territory. For example, the 18th century Panorama, which was aimed to literally envelop the observer in a staged landscape. Today, with the evolution of technology, the immersive experience of place is no more conceived as merely mono-sensory. In fact, the tourism supply is often enhanced by playful and multi-sensory supplements, as demonstrated by the introduction of tools like interactive tours or augmented reality guides. Nevertheless, as D'Orazio suggests, with the 1990s debate on Virtual Reality «the semantic dimension of immersivity seems reduced only to this kind of experience» (D'Orazio, 2003, p. 272). In other words, nowadays the concept of immersivity is almost at all considered a prerogative of Virtual Reality Environments and so it is meant to be related with technology rather than to its meaning from the communication viewpoint. However, technology itself is not a synonymous of immersivity, rather it's only one of many tools to produce a sense of immersion. For example, we can talk about immersivity also with regard to the convergence of multimedia contents and therefore in terms of multi-sensory stimulation. In fact, a message able to involve the human senses in a coordinated way is defined by literature as "immersive" (Ortoleva, 2009).

Furthermore, in the current communication context the sensibility of users toward contents is changed. On the one hand it has become synaesthetic rather than focused on only one sense; on the other it leans towards interaction rather than pure fruition (Ortoleva, 2009). In this sense, to develop a communication that has an immersive effect on the observer we have to manage different multimedia contents which have value *per se* but also influence each other. The complexity – and the role of design – consists in keeping together different kinds of representation within a communication product and managing their interrelation. In other words, we have to design a multimodal experience of fruition within a complex and articulated system of signs.

In this preliminary phase the contribution of humanities and social sciences is evident. On the one hand they helped to face the issue of "identity". On the other, they reveal and give substance to the topics on which this research is pivoted: perception as a vehicle for the *experience*, and *landscape* as a communication metaphor and a tool to gain knowledge. Moreover, the cross-fertilization between different disciplines has informed and driven the development of the core concept of the research, changing the perspective through which immersivity is commonly faced.

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3 THE ADDED VALUE OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCE IN THE DESIGN RESEARCH PROCESS

This research keeps together and tackles several issues: starting from the communication design considered as a translation tool, it focuses on the topics of immersivity and perception in order to satisfy the need of a more intimate and experiential approach to the contents which represent the image of a place.

Since this is a research in communication design, the focus will be on the relationship between content, form and meaning in order to develop a linguistic ecosystem for the communication project which produces an immersive effect on the users – therefore able to represent and describe the landscape as a space to experience and perceive.

To this aim, the research process is structured in three main phases and the contribution of humanities and social sciences in terms of knowledge and skills, as it will be better described below, is fundamental in each one of them.

The first phase is completely theoretical and aims to deepen the issue of the immersivity from different perspectives. Firstly we intend to analyze the concept in a broad sense, looking at how it's tackled by the other disciplines, in order to understand what could be its meaning from a communication point of view. Secondly we are going to focus on the evolution of the "immersive communication", especially with regard to the experiential representation of places and, more in general, of the physical environments. Simultaneously, the relation between immersivity and experience will be deepened. The cognitive, perceptual and emotional aspects which influence the experience of an environment will be investigated in order to understand how they affect (or may affect) the sense of immersion. To this aim, the theoretical references come from several disciplinary fields: for example, the perceptual analysis of the city carried out by Kevin Lynch (2006) in the field of urban studies, or the work by the Chinese geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (2001) on feelings, sensations and perceptions of human beings towards spaces and places. Other interesting contributions may come from art, for instance the work of Studio Azzurro (2011) whose interactive expositions are an example of how it's possible to represent places in an emotional and engaging way by leveraging on different multimedia contents and storytelling strategies.

The second phase of the research involves a phenomenological inquiry on a collection of communication projects that, coherently with the results of the previous theoretical analysis, seem to have an immersive effect on the user. The case studies gathered will be analyzed and systematized considering three main linguistic components of the communication project: a) expressive languages and representation styles, b) structure and interaction between different multimedia contents, c) User Experience as a whole. It is clear that the humanistic knowledge which emerges from the theoretical analysis will be embedded in and influence all this phase. In fact, the cognitive, perceptual and emotional aspects that will result to affect the sense of immersion, may contribute to the selection of the case studies on the one hand, and support the analysis on the other.

The last phase aims to develop a framework for designing communication projects which produce an immersive effect on the audience and/or provide an experiential fruition of contents. The process is based on the elaboration of results gained through the case studies analysis and aims to develop a set of

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guidelines for handling the three components of communication project mentioned above. These components have been identified and treated with a linguistic approach. The first one is at the basis of what we call *project of translation*. It consists in interpreting, decoding and representing a given content, in order to make it comprehensible and immediately perceivable. Developing models for the *project of translation* means to identify a set of expressive languages and representation styles which allow the interpretation of contents both on a cognitive and emotional level, leveraging on the rules that influence human perception. The style of the representation is conceived as the minimum element of language and it will be evaluated on the basis of the meaning it conveys: for example, a photographic detail may suggest the existence of a significant element which requires a more attentive gaze, whereas a panoramic photo predisposes to the contemplation of a wider space which should be enjoyed as a whole. Therefore, for each selected style of representation and/or expressive language it will be defined a set of semantic rules for shaping different typologies of content (texts, photos, videos, audios, etc.) so that they can be comprehensible and engaging at the same time. The second component – interaction between different multimedia contents – is behind the *narrative project*. It concerns the arrangement of different texts whose meaning depends on the way we order and combine them. The *narrative project* focuses mainly on cognitive and perceptual effects elicited by the interaction of multimedia contents. It aims to define guidelines for managing hierarchies and relations between different contents in order to develop immersive communication formats. In this sense, it has a lot in common with syntax: the branch of linguistics that studies the arrangement of lexical elements to provide a comprehensive and meaningful expression. The User Experience as a whole is precisely the subject of the *experience design*. It deals with the structure of the communication product, its internal hierarchies and so the whole experience of fruition. The *experience design* takes into account the user and the effect of his or her active interaction with the communication system. Hence, it's logically linked with pragmatics - the area of linguistics and semiotics dealing with the relation between signs and the context in which they are used. So conceived, the third phase of the research process needs to be supported by disciplines like linguistics and semiotics which may provide interpretive models useful to drive both the elaboration of phenomenological analysis results and the development of the design guidelines.

4 FURTHER DEVELOPMENT: THE DESIGN APPROACH EVALUATION

A further development of the present research could be the assessment of the actual benefits of the suggested design approach in cultural tourism industry. To this aim, we should develop a pilot project based on the application of the design guidelines identified and then test its effectiveness by evaluating the user response in comparison with a more traditional communication project for tourism promotion.

Since the experience of "feeling immersed", as every experience, is basically subjective, a self-report method of measurement seems to be more reliable. The main tools we can use to analyze the users' response and the level of their "experience of immersion" are questionnaires and/or interviews. As pointed out by Harris and Brown, both of them «are important means of obtaining direct responses from participants about their understandings, conceptions, beliefs, and attitudes» (2010, p. 2).

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The literature about research methods usually defines the questionnaire as a more objective tool but also susceptible to faults as sampling/coding errors, faulty interpretation of results, etc, whereas interviews (especially face-to-face interviews) «are ideal for learning exactly how each person feels and thinks about a topic or design» (Ireland, 2003, p. 25). Nevertheless, also the interview is not a neutral tool; «here data are based on personal interactions which lead to negotiated and contextually based results» (Fontana & Frey, 2000, cited in Harris & Brown 2010, p. 2).

However, it isn't our aim to discuss the paradigmatic differences between these research tools, but rather to introduce what will be the possible methodology for a further development of the present research. Questionnaires and interviews have their own pros and cons, and it has been demonstrated that participants respond differently to them. A mixed research method (quantitative and qualitative) seems to be more reliable in this research context because allows us to understand the user's psychological/subjective response and produce generalizable results. For this reason, in order to evaluate the design approach under discussion we propose to use questionnaires and interviews together, comparing the results gathered.

5 CONCLUSIONS

By means of the research presented in this paper, we have tried to highlight how humanities and social sciences can effectively nurture design, especially in terms of knowledge and skills, which may add value to all research process. As discussed, they have informed the problem setting and driven the development of the research question on the one hand, and are fundamental to support the data analysis and drive the elaboration of results on the other.

The approach of humanities and social sciences to the topics of identity and territory on the one hand, and to the relation between content, form and meaning on the other, allows us to consider the new trends of cultural tourism demand from a different perspective. Therefore, if the development of the suggested design approach is informed and driven by the humanistic knowledge embedded in the research process, we can assert that the humanities and social sciences may give a strong contribution to innovate the strategies for cultural promotion of territory.

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