

The conceptual framework of Placescape. A new Service Marketing perspective for the territory system.

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to assess the conceptual validity of a new theoretical framework for the analysis of the territory and its attractiveness factors. This work provides a conceptual map based on the “Placescape model” and summarizing the structural aspects related to the territory and the cognitive-emotional aspects related to the stakeholders in a systems perspective for the development and promotion of the territory-system.

Design/Methodology/Approach – This work is developed into two phases: the first one is a reviewing of the national and international literature about the Serviscape, the territory and the systemic oriented perspective; the second one is the exploratory phase through which the integration of different conceptual models is verified.

Findings – The expected result is a conceptual model able to summarize the territory variables and to analyze the Territory-System in a Service Marketing perspective able to enhance relational and systemic aspect and defining actions of actors and stakeholders for their role of protagonists.

Research implications – The research implications are related to the new and dynamic framework definition, suitable for different contexts, through which to improve an innovative strategy of branding and communication to ensure visibility and identity of the territory.

Originality – The original perspective is to overcome the tendency of creating overly fragmented activities unable to express the unitary identity of the territory. The joint analysis of the Placescape can be translated into an innovative systemic strategy for the enhancement of the genius loci.

Key words – Servicescape, territory system, service-marketing

Paper type – Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

During recent studies, the concept of competitiveness has been enriched with the perspective linked to the territory. Not only companies continually seek new and different spaces to maintain, consolidate and increase its identity, but in a broader and systemic view, territories have become real actors and protagonists of an “holistic” competition approach in which a wide number of stakeholders sharing a common purpose of development merge in a single active subject. Therefore, the analysis of the competitiveness rises above the business systems to territorial systems in an attempt to improve a competitive “critical mass” able to withstand the increased competition of near

and far places. In this context, the concept of competitiveness, in reference to the territory, it is closely related to the attractiveness, or the “*ability to attract, develop and retain key resources and expertise*” (Martelli, 2006). It’s on these two concepts - competitiveness and attractiveness – that development strategies and improvement strategies of cities, regions and countries are based and realizing projects of place branding. However, the first phase shows the impossibility of establishing a unique, consolidated model able to assess, predict and measure the competitiveness of the regions^[1], linked to those factors, tangible and intangible, also identified by the *Resource-based theory* (Grant, 1991).

In fact, if in the 70s the territory was primarily intended as an artificial space to organize according to the production requirements (Rullani, 2006), nowadays each local context is considered as a *milieu* of *hard* and *soft* resources capable of communicating a set of shared values and creating a unique and subjective experience. The territory is by its nature “emotional”^[2]: “a geographical space is physical and human, which generated intense emotions and retains the ability to touch the inhabitants and visitors, which has attractive power, historical memories, a rich heritage of goods cultural traditions and folklore” (Ruocco, 2010). The aim of this work is an attempt to contribute to the study of the territory through a conceptual model that feeds on different perspectives. The framework of the servicescape of Mary Jo Bitner (1992), related to the marketing of services, is used to connect the physical dimensions of tangible and intangible environment, the stimuli produced and the resulting behavior of the stakeholders. Through a focus on the relationship between stimulus and response, the present work trying to analyze the behavior of stakeholders according to schemes already tested in different disciplinary areas. A new *framework* has been designed on the result of the study and it could be the tool for the monitoring and controlling of the impact of actions on the territory on the stakeholders behavior. Then, the model could be used for the definition of *value-assets* needed to design and implement *place branding* strategies.

2. The territory variable in the Service Marketing perspective

The territory, hardly describing with a unique and comprehensive definition, is an entity that plays a growing role in the global competitive landscape. Its common definition highlight two main aspects: the structural one, linked to the geographical aspect and the natural amenities of the area, and the systemic one, which refers to a dense network of relationships in which the territory itself lives and feeds. A similar perspective is found in the literature of business management taking increasingly distance from the concept of an area seen as a container of inputs, in order to embrace a vision that interprets the territory as a place of “*activation, interaction and integration*” (Cesaretti *et al.*, 2006) of those distinctive and characteristic features, tangible and intangible, impossible to be reproduced in other contexts.

However, tradition, culture, history, *expertise* as the ability, skills, vocation, emotions and experiences represent just a few of the intangible elements of a territory which are made concrete in reports, exchange processes, organizations, symbols and artifacts that characterize and express the territorial dimension. Therefore, the territory is “*the immaterial living in materiality*” (Tamma, 2010). The post-Fordist perspective that considers the firm as an osmotic organization open to the outside environment, together with the Systemic approach (Golinelli, 2011), give a new perspective of the concept of territory. It seems trivial to define the territory just referring to the geographical aspects that often make hard to identify territorial dynamics in their different levels of articulation (Barile, 2011). The boundaries, in fact, while delimiting a geographical area, become evanescent when the focus is on the systemic dimension and the relational processes. The studies on the development of the territory are strongly linked to the service marketing and systemic approach. The first transfers the concept of service (Carù, 2007) and experience (Schmitt, 1999) to the territorial dimension, the second one focuses on the systemic nature of the territories (Golinelli, 2011) and the ability to create value through a mix of tangible and intangible assets (Gummesson, 1987). A more recent perspective cannot ignore the great contribution that ICT has given to

territories through digital communication. As a result, branding strategies and communication have played an increasingly important role in promoting the country, a need highlighted by a genuine market area in which the offer (natural resources, human resources, infrastructure, services, etc.) the demand (citizens, investors, tourists, influencers, etc.) and exchange dynamics could be found (Caroli and Varaldo, 1999). The variety of offer and demand, becoming a peculiar trait of territorial systems, can only be satisfied through combination of assets, tangible and intangible, and specific marketing and communication strategies built on the territory itself. In fact, a territory is able to propose different offering systems by the co-production of the different actors (firms, individuals, tourists, etc.) (Pencarelli and Forlani, 2003) in order to satisfy a growing and wide demand. Therefore, it becomes a competitive ability which should aim to leverage on the management more than on the improvement of endogenous resources (Doel and Hubbard, 2002). It is not only about the improvement through the *embedded* territorial components, but it is a process that creates value for the region involving all the relevant supra-systems such as citizens, businesses, influencers, etc., even beyond the geographical boundaries. Borrowed from the business world, this approach finds a successful implementation in territorial systems in which there are *many to many* dynamics of value creation (Barile, 2011). It is in the interaction with the various stakeholders, in fact, that value is created (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) and as well as in the business world, the socio-economic development, cannot be detached from political marketing and communication. However, the merging of “*marketing*” and “*territory*” highlights some problems. The complexity of the territorial dimension, in fact, appears to prevent the development of a marketing strategy as a result of “*an explicit act, performed in a given time, by persons specifically identified as exclusive custodians of this function*” (Caroli, 2006). The systemic approach identifies in the heritage of a region the development of territorial vocation and the boost of competitiveness as the three main objectives that highlighting different aspects of the same territory through appropriate marketing strategies are able to express the nature of the territory itself that is multi-dimensional and multisubjective (Barile, 2011).

The application of a precise marketing strategy and communication becomes an important factor, especially for “*Places in trouble*” (Kotler *et al.*, 1993), even after the globalization which requires an increase in competitiveness. Hence the interest of academics and practitioners to the place management that shows the way of global competition involves places and their need to often apply strategies and marketing techniques, in particular those related to branding processes (Go and Govers, 2010), to catch the interest of stakeholders, also beyond national borders. The major interest in the place management was also characterized by others factors: the decline of the manufacturing industry, the growing pervasiveness of information technology and communication (ICT the cc.dd.), the changing in the residential choice of citizens, the strong power of the media, the minor costs for international travel, the unwillingness to international investment, the increase of the power of consumers and the competition to attract highly qualified foreign workers. Along with these conditions, an important role is also exercised by the threat of “*place parity*” (Hanna and Rowley, 2008), i.e. the risk (or perhaps it is better to say the fear) that places could be perceived by the various stakeholders as undifferentiated, giving rise to an attitude of indifference in the choice processes of a place, whether for business or pleasure (Marino and Mainolfi, 2012).

3. Towards a definition: the *Placescape* model

In recent years, the business management literature has paid increasing attention to the evolutionary dynamics of the territories since they were often considered a driving force for competitiveness and the development of firms, social organizations and individuals. In fact, the territory has a social value and represents an organization, just for the fact that it hosts spatial the presence and/or the activities of other organizations on its area. Moreover, the analogy with the business world can be also found in the systemic perspective which interprets the territory as “*a system that pursues the aim of survival through the production of economic and social value for*

other systems using expectations and pressures in the terms of settlement and spatial location” (Golinelli, 2002). Therefore, the competitiveness of the territory can be meant in the *resource-based view* in which it is linked to the stock of available factors (Dierickx and Cool, 1989), the strategic capacity to use these resources in an efficient, effective and innovative way (Nelson and Winter, 1982) and the skills enhancing the local features to create an “offer capable of enhancing the area”. The coevolution among territory and the operating systems is not only related to a specific geographic area, but to the ability of decision makers to activate pathways according to resources and the territorial vocation (Baccarani, 1995).

In this perspective there is the attempt to create a model able to describe the territory, to identify tangible and intangible factors, to analyze the cognitive-emotional behaviors and actions of the various stakeholders. The output of the local system as a whole can be then compared to a service^[3], since it is ethereal and changing, and closely linked to the physical and relational being made up of different cognitive-emotional dimensions. Through the combination of tangible and intangible assets, the territory becomes an “offerings”^[4] (Gummeson, 1995), then is transformed from “*space to place*”^[5] (Carù, 2007), in a space that by artificial, abstract and neutral becomes full of cognitive and emotional elements, and its offer has developed according to the *servuction* (Langeard and Eiglier, 1987) highlighting relevant *service providers*^[6].

Therefore, the focus is on the *physical setting* of the area, not only considered for the allocation of resources, but as symbolic artifact (Davis, 1984) able to achieve their own position in relation to the target audience through the activation of cognitive and emotional dynamics. In fact, existing scenarios, or any design changes, have a strong influence on human behavior, more than any other direct stimuli (Sicca, 2010). People react spontaneously to certain physical signals into the *setting*. In fact, these stimuli activate the “emotional memory”, the process aroused when actions are aligned with the behavior patterns, the status quo or something already experienced. However, if the world of business organization theories seem to highlight a gap in the study of spatial *setting* and its influence on the behavior of individuals, it is also definitely analyzing the territory for its symbolical meaning. Many times, these codes allow the members of a society to put meaning in artifacts becoming a tool for the decision makers: the territorial offer as a whole, for its structural and symbolic features, is able to influence stakeholders behavior that could be analyzed through the *Stimulus-Organism-Responses* scheme (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). This model born in studies of environmental psychology is based on the theory that the tangible and intangible stimuli present in an environment affect the cognitive-emotional behavior of individuals. The scientific production based on this approach, in fact, is strongly linked to the study of emotional effects and the resulting individual behavioral response due to environmental variables monitored by the management. The article by Donovan and Rossiter (1982) is the first one to accept this model in the marketing literature. Originally, the model was not focused on atmospheric variables, but on the environment perception as a whole by the individual. Then, the construct of “payload” (*information load*), composed of three perceptual elements, innovation, space and complexity has been used. Donovan and Rossiter (1982), being aware of the lack of applicability of the construct into management practice and the potential of the model, focused on the building of a taxonomy of environmental stimuli. However, a similar proposal of research is towards the study of external “controllable” stimuli more than individual characteristics of the receptors, then the effects of interaction between environmental and individual variable. As a result, Dawson, Bloch and Ridgway (1990) highlight that is the specific task (*task*) that generates a shopping purchase (i.e. a personal variable), can influence the affective variables that moderate behavioral responses, acting as a “lever” on environmental variables. In this perspective, the role of the customer is not a mere “recipient” of environmental stimuli as initially suggested by Kotler (1973) and the S-OR view (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982). On the contrary, a hypothesis more akin to the “interactionist” framework (Punj and Stewart, 1983) develops in which the variability of behavior is mainly explained by the interaction of both personal and situational (including those environmental) and not only by those atmospheric elements.

The theoretical contribution that interprets this model in a more precise way according to interactionist view is attributable to Bitner (1992).

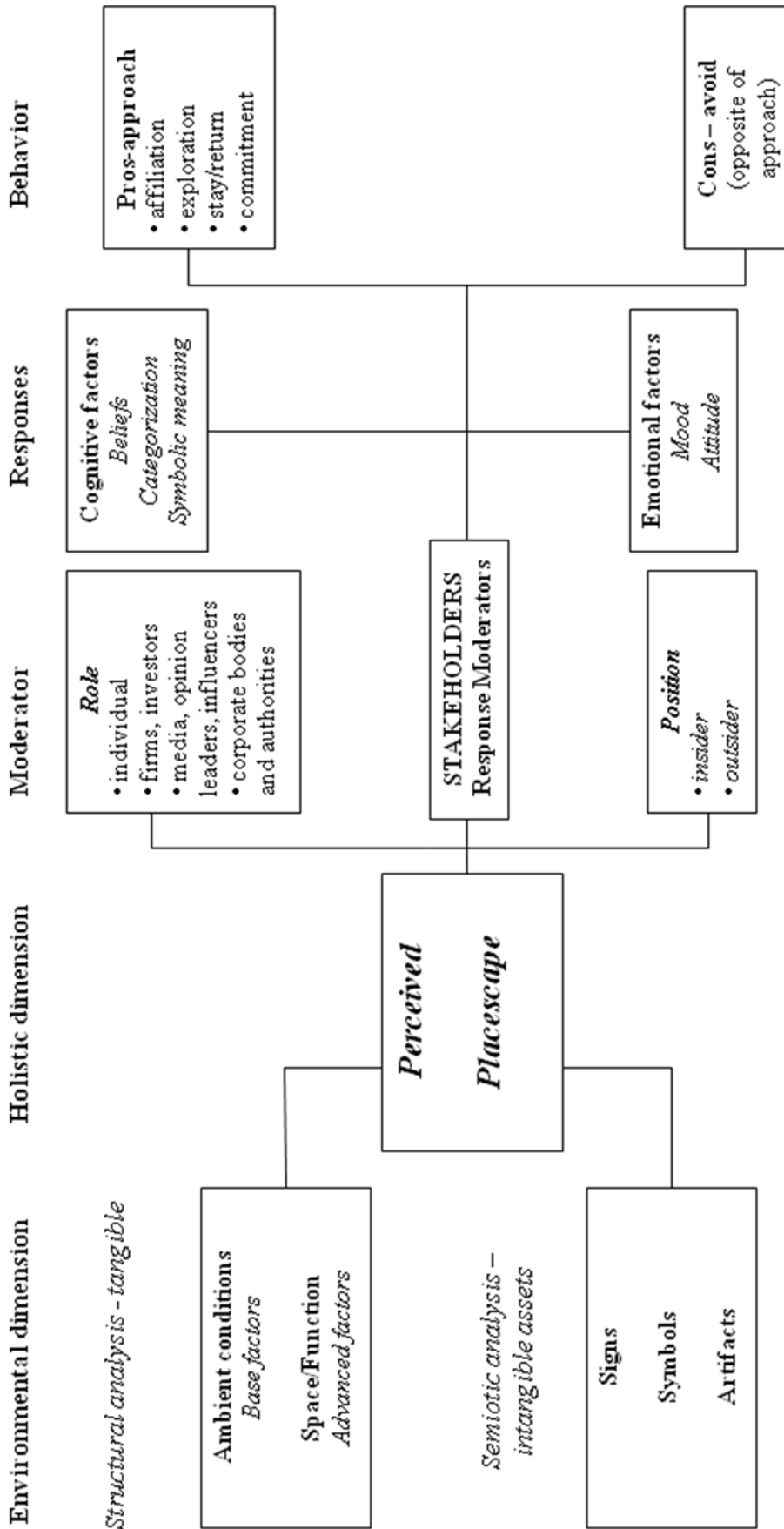
The entire line of studies briefly mentioned above is the theoretical construct on which the *framework of Placescape* is based^[7] (Fig. 1).

The idea is, on the one hand to improve the *service* component in the definition of an offer linked to the territory and, on the other hand, to improve also the relationship between environmental stimuli and response behaviors. Hence the need to pass from the *servicescape* conceptual category to the *placescape* where the physical surroundings does not referred to 'environment where purchases are carried out but the interpretation is extended to the territory as a whole, as the center and driving force of relations and exchanges with and between stakeholders. The utility of a *service marketing oriented* perspective can contribute to a better definition of the impact of government decisions and actions on the behavior of actors in the territory. Moreover, this perspective allows to an immediate integration of offer definition and response / reaction of demand and thus offers a model influencing the choices and decisions to the simultaneous evaluation of the effects.

The *serviscape*, or “the environment surrounding the service” (Bitner, 1992), initially in a purely physical perspective, then also social, can be defined as “the physical and social environment that surrounds the immediate experience of service a transaction or event” (Bitner, 1992, p. 38).

Based on this definition, which overlaps both tangible and intangible attributes to the *setting* where the action takes place, it is highlighted the importance and the role played by the subject of the actor. According to the chosen perspective, in fact, the subject is co-creator and co-activator of value and for this reason, broaden the perspective of analysis to a physical environment planning, could be possible to ascribe to the *setting* of a territory various hard and soft characteristics able to generate value together with its stakeholders.

Fig 1 - The Model Placescape



Our elaboration by Bitner MJ, "Servicescape: the impact of Physical Surroundings on Customers and Employees", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 56 No. 1, pp. 57-71.

In this model, the environment is the multidimensional *Stimulus*, stakeholders are the *Organisms* reacting to it and *Responses* generate behavior. The internal dimension of the *Placescape* influence the stakeholders and their behavioral responses according to internal reactions of the *Placescape*.

The concept of competitiveness typical of firms finds its interpretation in the territorial model of the "Diamond of competitive advantage"^[8] (Porter, 1990) that identifies, in this dimension, four characteristics (conditions of factors, demand conditions, related and supporting industries; strategic environment and competitive) and two exogenous factors (chance and government). In particular, the conditions of the factors are divided into basic factors, i.e. those characteristic of the area, such as natural resources, location and climate, and advanced, referring to infrastructure and technological and investment performance, such as digital infrastructure. These factors are a distinctive characteristic of the territory becoming more important (Godfrey and Clarke, 2002) and creating value for its inability to be imitated and reproduced in other contexts^[9]. "The enduring competitive advantages in a global economy lie increasingly in local things" (Porter, 1998), the territory becomes a composite and complex product, broken down into tangible and intangible factors, as the result of an offer territorial integrity, its natural vocation and identity that become elements of differentiation and attractiveness only if supported and fostered by careful *place management* activities.

The classification proposed by Porter (1990) highlight that a given territory can compete in the global scenario due to the presence of a number of factors that can be considered as structural elements of the territory itself. These are: human resources, physical resources, the resources of capital and infrastructure *assets* that represent tangible asset and knowledge resources that are, however, intangible assets. The first one represent the *ambient conditions* and *Space/Function*; however, the stimuli coming also from other factors, identified in the symbolic component such as *Signs, Symbols & Artifacts*^[10], able to express through marketing and communication means, the values and the identity of a territory (Anholt, 2009). Obviously, the factor analysis also takes into account that the latter can be inherited and/or created. In the first case, the creation of factors can be public or private or informal. In the second case, a territory may decide to create or enhance certain types of factors.

Through this first level, then, the territorial vocation (structural analysis) and local identity (semiotic analysis), both of which result in terms of recognition, uniqueness and distinctiveness of the local system (Golinelli, 2002) is defined.

The natural resource endowment of the area (vocation), integrated with communication and branding (identity) defines *System-territory offer* that generates the *Perceived placescape*, or perceived positioning.

In the second level, *Organism*, refers to the stakeholders classified by their role (individuals, companies and investors; opinion leaders and influencers, organizations and associations) and their position, direct and indirect (*in* and *out*) depending on the residence within or outside the geographic boundaries of the territory. As well as interaction with an organization or in the process of buying, each subject develop a specific purpose and create expectations that may also vary according to role an experience and the same dynamics act in the territories.

Every person who comes into contact with the territory, either directly, through personal experience as the visit, or indirectly, through news or perceptions evoked by the experience of others, develops his own *reaction*, which can be both cognitive and emotional. Both reactions are clearly interdependent. The *Placescape* perceived can directly affect people's beliefs about a specific territory and people and products that are in that place helping to develop a map through

which territories are classified. Beyond to influence opinions, the perceived *Placescape* can directly stimulate emotional reactions, which affect, in turn, the behaviors^[11].

Behaviors be can distinguished in two types: *Pros*, positive and approach, (attraction, exploration, desire to stay, want to return, affiliation and support, ...) and *Cons*^[12], negative and removal, opposite to the first (Bitner, 1992). The stakeholders behaviors can be influenced by decision makers of the territorial system through communication and marketing policies that aim to transform the perceived positioning (*perceived placescape*) in the desired position (*desired placescape*).

The proposed model is not only a theoretical framework for the analysis of the competitiveness of the territory, but a summary map through which to implement a unified and innovative communications policies to enhance the *genius loci*, the direct perception of the stakeholders, influencing *Pros* and *Cons* behaviors to achieve the strategic objectives. This process must also be understood in the light of the crisis that has not only affected the economy, but also the values and relationships (Chalvon-Demersay, 1994). Individuals, as visitors, tourists, influencers, etc., seem to be more concerned in searching experiences and emotions with a strong social connotation. Thus, the territories become places where each individual enacts the “*deconsumo*^[13] of the products and services that isolate and put at a distance” preferring, instead those “*that bind and approach*” (Cova, 1997).

The territory, a unique and complex element, assumes different configurations according to the point of view of the various potential stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995). However it is an objective goal that can only be achieved through the presence and the combination of different skills (Golinelli, 2002). In this perspective, the territory becomes the subject of the marketing policies, often borrowed from the tourist studies (Kotler *et al.*, 2003), which led to the production of “conceptual and operational tools to link the question of the territory to his offering” (Corio, 2005) through the identification of key resources and their organization in a marketing plan.

4. Conclusions, managerial implications and future research

The territory represents the common denominator of enterprises, institutions, organizations and individuals. It is for this reason that even in a broader perspective of resource efficiency the planning of development and growth actions, not related to individual but to system as a whole understanding and enhancing its components, could be considered as an innovation. There are several critical factors emerging from the study and the analysis of the international literature; in fact, the territory suffers of loss of their recognition and its competitiveness and attractiveness, both due the globally uniformity trends (Golinelli, 2002), but mainly of the lack of models and strategies able to express, enhance and promote many features of the territorial dimension. In order to highlight “the personality and uniqueness” of the territories an analysis to identify and interpret characteristics and typical values of each spatial dimension (Corio, 2005), elements of diversification and attractiveness, is required. Because of the nature of complexity of the territory, characterized by multiple and conflicting aspects, it is hard to identify unique tools and strategies for its exploitation. Therefore, to interpret and express this growing complexity, is necessary to refer to the way in which the territory is “designed” and to the way in which the territory itself is experienced by the different actors in terms of cognitive and emotional (Sicca, 2010).

The *Placescape* model has been designed according to this perspective in order to emphasize the reactions on the behavior of players of the territory resulting from the choices and the comparison between them.

The main conclusions concerning the model refer to the strong experiential component of the *frame*, especially in relation to its ability to influence the interaction between the various stakeholders. The assessments of the *setting* of the area impacted not only the behavior of stakeholders that interact in the territory but on the ways in which these interact with each other, or the nature and quality of their interactions.

In this sense, further research might be directed to assess the impact of the choices of *Placescape* on the communication mechanisms (ad. word of mouth), especially for political attractiveness of tourist flows. Indeed, those who were actors in a positive experience can become, for example, direct witnesses of a communication flow that pushes external stakeholders to come into contact with the territory.

In reference to the future areas of research of the present study, can be pointed out that the *Placescape* for its holistic perspective contributes performer more defined choices in terms of placement for its main actors, i.e. firms, organizations and institutions. This process causes a domino effect in the distribution of the value that is created and that will grow over time. Indeed, the attractiveness of the latter generates greater competitiveness especially for those who contribute to the establishment of a specific territory offer and in particular for producers of goods and services, organizations and institutions that raise the quality standards of social welfare.

The major managerial implications are related to the repositioning strategies of the territories such as the transition from *perceived placescape* to *desired placescape* while leveraging on cognitive and emotional aspects (*Responses*) targeting to influence behaviors (identified in *Pros* and *Cons*) to reinforce the area's identity as well.

The *place management* and the *place branding*, that often underestimated the importance of an overall systemic representation of forces and territorial elements, are the two main line of studies defining this new perspective related to the territories. Furthermore, the *place branding* has undergone a major evolution: twenty years ago the brand was seen as a privileged instrument by a strong ethnocentric orientation and one of its first applications can be found in the tourism sector^[14].

^[1] However, there are systems for measuring the competitiveness of countries: every year, the World Economic Forum produces The Global Competitiveness Report. The latest (2011-2012) is available online <http://reports.weforum.org/global-competitiveness-2011-2012/>.

^[2] The term “emotional territory” identifies geographic areas characterized by a number of interesting and characteristic factors as “astronomical phenomena, many human manifestations, mountains, glaciers, rivers, [...], cities, castles, human works, places of historical memory” (Ruocco, 2010).

^[3] The definition of service cannot refer exclusively to immateriality, but it includes other relevant features, such as the process (Grönroos, 2000, p.15) and relationship (Rullani, 2006, p.43).

^[4] The term *offerings* (Gummesson, 1995) integrates the concepts of *goods* and *services*, relying on the latter for the creation of value overcoming the dichotomy between the two elements.

^[5] The *serviscape*, i.e. the physical space or virtual, is designed to stimulate the sensory and emotional aspect of the individual. However, it is not a one-way process, but a cooperative process between business and consumer: it is the latter to give to the space (*space*) a symbolic individual meanings turning it into something unique and subjective (*place*) (Carù, 2007, p. 190).

^[6] The term *Service Provider* indicates all service providers acting in the territories; however, the *Relevant Service Provider* are those that can differentiate and define the positioning of a territory (Sansone and Bruni, 2011).

^[7] *Placescape* is our definition for space becoming authentic, unique and full of subjective meanings by the measurement of structural and symbolic elements, depending on the perspective and the role of different stakeholders. The *placescape*, therefore, corresponds to the positioning of the perceived territory.

^[8] According to Porter, a nation represents a global platform, i.e. favorable environment to develop a competitive advantage on a specific industrial sector. The author identifies four major factors: the conditions of the factors, the conditions of the demand, related and supporting industries, strategy, structure and competitiveness of firms. Using Porter's own words, each of these four attributes defines a component of the “Diamond” of national advantage, the effect of each component often depends on the state of the other. They tend to reinforce each other, as they form a system.

^[9] The advanced factors are divided into *generalized* and *specialized*: the ones are reproducible in other territories and the other are those that cannot be copied or imitated (Porter, 1990).

^[10] The environment can be interpreted as a form of nonverbal communication: the “*object language*” (Ruesch and Kees, 1956) is expressed through signs (visual elements of explicit communication - eg. signs, posters, etc.), marks

(subjective interpretation of signs), and artifacts (physical or intangible functionally signs providing a cognitive function and performing the role of mediation).

^[11] Besides the cognitive and emotional dimension, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) identify a conative dimension that refers to the intentions underlying the behavior.

^[12] The *Prosand Cons* English terms used to define the stakeholders behavior derived from the Latin, *pro et contra*, and indicate the elements in favor of or against a particular topic.

^[13] The “deconsumo” represents the rejection toward individualism consumption that has dominated the social landscape until after World War II. Nowadays, however, we individuals are more aware of the sense of community and belonging, an existential need to satisfy, that leads to the rejection of the consumption of "objects" and to accord preference to the sharing of intangible elements, such as experience (Cova, 1997).

^[14] Especially for the TDI (Tourist Destination Image) (Walmsley and Young, 1998; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000) the visitor is assimilated to the consumer and the territory (place) to the product.

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