

Unlocking the power of strategic communication: a deep dive into industrial tourism and engaging company openings

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Abstract

Framing of the research: *This paper investigates the role of strategic communication in industrial tourism, specifically focusing on how companies use storytelling during open-door events to shape visitor perceptions and influence their subsequent behaviors.*

Purpose of the paper: *This paper aims to explore the potential of strategic communication in the context of industrial tourism open-door events, investigating how effective storytelling by companies can positively influence visitors' perceptions. This, in turn, impacts their intentions to purchase, recommend, engage, and their overall satisfaction.*

Methodology: *We employed a mixed-method approach to investigate the impact of storytelling ability (SA) on visitors' perceptions during Open Factory 2022. This involved conducting qualitative interviews with company representatives and administering structured questionnaires to 233 event attendees.*

Findings: *The analysis suggests that open-door events are valuable for companies to communicate their brand stories and enhance internal communication processes. Visitors who perceive companies positively during these events are more likely to make purchases and recommend products.*

Research limits: *The research primarily focuses on B2B companies, which might limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader market context, particularly in understanding consumer behaviour typical of business-to-consumer (B2C) interactions. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases affecting the accuracy of our results.*

Practical implications: *Our study highlights that companies can enhance their communication strategies during industrial tourism open-door events. Emphasising product history, quality, local ties, and the production process increases visitor engagement, satisfaction, and positive behavioural intentions. This approach boosts brand equity, trust, and credibility while promoting transparency and community involvement, encouraging positive word-of-mouth and potential purchase intentions.*

Social implications: *The findings underscore the role of storytelling in fostering transparency and community involvement, which aligns with societal expectations for ethical and responsible business practices and contributes to a more socially responsible business environment.*

Originality of the paper: *this research contributes to the literature by exploring the intersection of strategic communication and industrial tourism. It reveals how effective storytelling during open-door events positively influences visitor perceptions, engagement, and actions, shedding light on innovative communication approaches within this underexplored context. Future research should explore the impact of*

strategic communication in different contexts, including B2C interactions, and address the limitations of self-reported data by incorporating more objective measures. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of storytelling on visitor perceptions and behaviour.

Key words: *corporate communication; open-door events; factory openings; storytelling; reputation; consumers' behaviour*

1. Introduction

The domain of industrial-pertaining company visits and open-door events where external people can visit working production plants brims with potential for practitioners across different fields. However, it has received limited attention in academic literature so far.

Indeed, it is worth mentioning that a significant portion of the existing literature addressing the impacts of company openings draws from the field of industrial tourism. Yet, the effects and insights derived from these studies underscore the profound relevance of such events when viewed through the lenses of strategic management and strategic communication.

Specifically, scholars have recognised that company openings and factory visits offer a distinctive platform for companies to employ strategic communication, providing unique opportunities to explore innovative modes of communication. Through these events, companies can establish a multifaceted channel for engagement, as they offer distinct experiences to a diverse audience consisting of customers, suppliers, and the local community (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2001; Mitchell and Orwig 2002). According to Jansirani and Mangai (2013) and Chow *et al.* (2017), factory visits can also help companies build brand awareness by showcasing their operations and products engagingly and interactively. Furthermore, by inviting visitors to tour their facilities, companies can create a positive image of themselves as transparent and open organisations, reinforcing trust and credibility with customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders.

Beyond their value in enhancing brand awareness, industrial tourism in general and open-door events in particular can be used to 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, Ben Youssef, 2022). Last but not least, these events present an avenue for companies to generate revenue by charging admission fees and marketing merchandise, underlining their multifaceted role as both communication tools and income-generating endeavours (Weiermair and Kronenberg, 2010).

Therefore, by using company openings as a tool 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 plays a crucial role, also 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; Zerfass 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).

This study explores how company strategic 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 to the industrial tourism event Open Factory 2022 in Italy, our research investigated the relationship between strategic communication, industrial tourism, and stakeholder behaviour, providing insights into how companies can effectively employ communication to build a favourable reputation and leave a lasting impression on customers.

2. Background and literature review

2.1 Strategic communication: building reputation and relations with stakeholders

Strategic communication is a broad topic based on vast literature, which, over the years, has been explored in depth by both scholars and practitioners from numerous perspectives. Introduced by Hallahan *et al.* (2007), as the deliberate use of communication to serve an organisation's mission, the definition and the scope of strategic communication have changed considerably over the last fifteen years and in recent times, some prevailing interpretations have emerged.

A first interpretation conceives the concept of strategic communication as an umbrella term for all types of goal-oriented communication initiated by organisations to address their stakeholders (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). A second one shifts the focus on the strategic and decisional role that communication takes on in the context of contemporary, large, private, and publicly traded companies (Argenti, 2016; Stanton, 2017; Volk and Zerfass, 2018). The third interpretation develops from this concept, which sees strategic communication as a substantial evolution compared to corporate communication, becoming a defining trait of the organisations themselves. In fact, in their contribution, Invernizzi and Romenti (2018) declare that communication has become one of the functions that govern companies and that it is increasingly used to achieve company objectives.

Indeed, the discourse surrounding strategic communication highlights the dynamic nature of this field. Furthermore, the debate continues between the proponents of strategy as the primary determinant of success and scholars who question its role, arguing that the connection between strategy and success may be more complex and elusive (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018).

Strategic communication is pivotal in moulding and amplifying an organisation, and the strategy behind an organisation's communication, directly swaying its public perception. The enhancement of reputation is indeed tied to the heightened consistency, transparency, and encouragement of feedback that strategic communication offers. Carefully strategised communication guarantees uniform messaging throughout an organisation's channels, fostering a reliable and strong organisational perception. Additionally, when organisations employ strategic communication to convey transparent and truthful details, they cultivate trust and authenticity among their audience.

Moreover, Strategic communication is essential in shaping the intricate web of relationships organisations maintain with their stakeholders, including customers, partners, suppliers, employees, and investors. Clear and purposeful communication is foundational for these networks to thrive. It's through honest and consistent messaging that trust, the bedrock of these relationships, is nurtured. Such communication not only simplifies collaborative efforts within these networks but also delineates roles, establishes clear expectations, and promotes the exchange of feedback. The open dissemination of knowledge and insights ensures the network remains informed and connected. A key benefit of adept strategic communication is the deepening of stakeholder involvement. Engaging stakeholders proactively and keeping them abreast of developments allows organisations to synchronise their ambitions, principles, and aims, solidifying bonds within their networks. This cohesion proves invaluable, especially during challenging times marked by disputes or misunderstandings, as it facilitates swift and effective resolutions.

In conclusion, the literature on strategic communication emerges as a field in transition, marked by various interpretations, challenges, and opportunities. The objective is to discern the distinctive essence of non-physical assets. While intangible assets lack tangible presence, they are instrumental in determining an organisation's worth, public perception, and competitive edge.

Strategic communication is instrumental in determining an organisation's reputation. When clear, consistent messages reflect the organisation's core values, they bolster its credibility with stakeholders. However, lapses in communication or misaligned messages can tarnish this reputation. In short, the quality of strategic communication, both in practical terms, differentiates it from other disciplines, such as marketing communication, public relations or public diplomacy, and in academic terms, to define its research objectives and establish a specific research perspective.

2.2 Open-doors: definition, origins and effects

The concept behind open-doors is relatively straightforward: these are events where access is permitted to buildings not normally open to the public. In corporate settings, open-doors are not as widespread, and are mainly organised within industrial plants. Despite being less common, these events allow organisations to open their doors to a diverse array

of visitors, offering a behind-the-scenes glimpse into their operations, products, and services. This practice falls under the broader concept of industrial tourism, which Frew (2008) defines as involving visits to operational industrial sites where the primary function is not tourism. The emphasis is on “operational,” distinguishing these sites from industrial heritage attractions that showcase former industrial activities (Goodall, 1994). Industrial tourism allows visitors to engage with an industry’s live, functional aspects, providing a unique insight into contemporary production and operational processes (Lee, 2016).

Analysing this phenomenon from a tourism perspective, the origins of factory openings can be traced back to the Sixties, when the US Travel Service and the US Department of Commerce published the guide “Plant Tours in the United States.” Concurrently, European companies also 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, captures the essence of company openings well by describing how a factory visit provides insights into the product, company structure, and production process, and, also, in this specific case, some magic.

However, although these events transcend mere corporate hospitality or public relations exercises, offering a powerful platform for organisations to communicate their brand values and strategic objectives directly to an engaged audience, academic research exploring the convergence of factory openings and strategic communication remains scant. Considering this research gap, it becomes necessary to carry out a literature review more focused on the phenomenon of industrial tourism as a whole. Some of the findings, in fact, pertain to the specific effects of open-doors on organisations.

First of all, these events serve as potent marketing and public relations tools (Novoselova, 2021; Montenegro *et al.*, 2023), providing a unique opportunity for companies to foster engagement with various stakeholders (Otgaar, 2010). Furthermore, organisations can use them to enhance their brand equity, establish a distinctive strategic position within their respective industries (Montenegro *et al.*, 2023) and demonstrate good citizenship (Mitchell and Orwig, 2002).

Existing research has also shown how organising industrial tourism experiences offers a valuable opportunity to better understand the product’s value through the eyes of customer-visitors (Lee, 2015; Friel and Ben Youssef, 2022), create a connection between visitors and the brand (Mitchell and Orwig, 2002; Chow *et al.*, 2015), and promote firsthand knowledge of industrial work and culture (Mitchell and Orwig, 2002; Novoselova, 2021).

Notable implications also 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. Scholars have highlighted how company openings can facilitate learning processes that strengthen internal organisation within host companies (Brunetti *et al.*, 2018; Castellani *et al.*, 2019). Last but not

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least, factory openings are considered a potential source of income and employment (Otgaar, 2010; Roche, 2012; Novoselova, 2021).

2.3 Conceptual framework and research questions

Although scholars have overlooked the intersection between open-door events and strategic communication, existing studies have (at least indirectly) pointed out how these events can be an effective way for companies to develop new communication strategies. More precisely, Chow *et al.* (2017) investigated 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, existing 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.

Building upon these insights, we will delve into another critical facet of strategic communication, namely the effects of storytelling ability on stakeholders' perceptions, and then further analyse how perceptions can influence their purchasing and recommendation behaviours.

A key facet of strategic communication is represented by the company's storytelling ability (SA), which could be defined as the organisational capability to tell an engaging story, addressed to capture stakeholders' attention and stimulate their imagination (Mani and Mishra, 2022). In this information-rich, competitive era, effective storytelling skills can distinguish a company from competitors, captivate the interest of its intended audience, and establish a profound bond with stakeholders (Júnior *et al.* 2023). Through storytelling, companies can mould their brand identity and effectively convey their fundamental values, mission, and distinctive selling points (Gasparin *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, by carefully constructing narratives that align with customers' values, needs, and aspirations, companies can forge an emotional bond, cultivate trust and loyalty (Kemp *et al.*, 2023), and foster a sense of reliability and dedication with their audience. Finally, through the application of storytelling techniques, companies have the power to make their messages and brand experiences more indelible in the minds of customers (Dessart and Standaert, 2023), to the point of swaying customers' decision-making processes when evaluating purchases or seeking recommendations. Finally, the power of captivating storytelling can have a profound impact on 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 emphasise the advantages and value of their products or services, they can shape positive perceptions, foster trust, and inspire customer loyalty (Nyagadza *et al.*, 2020).

Looking at company open-doors events, a first research question arises:

RQ1. To what extent could the storytelling ability of companies that open their doors positively impact visitors' perceptions towards the organisation?

The impact of stakeholders' perceptions on intentions to purchase and recommend products or services is well-documented in marketing and communication literature (Ariffin *et al.*, 2018; Yu, 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) and/or a recommendation (Fileri *et al.*, 2018; Visentin, 2019; Fatmawati and Fauzan, 2021). For the latter, when stakeholders have a favourable perception of a product or service, either through personal experiences or the company's established reputation (Mbango, 2019) they are more likely to share positive word-of-mouth recommendations with friends, family, or colleagues, consequently shaping others' purchasing decisions (Rajendran and Arun, 2021). Conversely, negative perceptions or doubts surrounding a company's credibility, value proposition, or ethical behaviour can discourage stakeholders from purchasing (Pentina *et al.*, 2018).

Based on this literature, understanding how perceptions influence purchasing behaviour could provide valuable insights into leveraging industrial tourism for market growth and consumer engagement.

RQ2. To what extent could positive visitors' perceptions towards the organisation impact their intention to purchase its products?

Moreover, beyond influencing purchasing behaviour, industrial tourism may also affect visitors' likelihood of recommending the organisation to others.

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

In addition to the intention to buy or recommend, 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 different stakeholder groups, (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).

RQ4. How could positive visitors' perceptions of the organisation impact their engagement attitude?

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.*

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, characterised 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 this literature, a final research question can be assumed:

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

To provide a concise overview of the primary authors referenced in this study, the significant gaps identified, and the central themes explored, we provide a reasoned synthesis of the key works and central themes in tourism and strategic communication. The literature on tourism, particularly industrial tourism, underscores the significance of open-door events in enhancing brand equity, fostering engagement with stakeholders, and promoting transparency. Key contributions by scholars such as Frew (2008), Otgaar (2012), and Montenegro *et al.* (2023) highlight the marketing and public relations potential of these events, demonstrating how they offer unique opportunities for companies to connect with diverse audiences and showcase their operational processes. Furthermore, studies by Mitchell and Orwig (2002) and Chow *et al.* (2017) illustrate the potential for creating strong emotional connections between visitors and brands during these events. Despite these insights, a significant gap remains in understanding the strategic communication aspects of these events, specifically how storytelling ability (SA) can be leveraged to shape visitor perceptions and behaviours.

On the other hand, the literature on strategic communication, as explored by Hallahan *et al.* (2007), Zerfass *et al.* (2018), and Mani and Mishra (2022), emphasises the role of strategic communication in building reputation and relationships with stakeholders through consistent, transparent, and engaging narratives. This body of work highlights the dynamic nature of strategic communication and its evolution into a critical function within organisations, essential for achieving business objectives and fostering stakeholder trust. Scholars such as Júnior *et al.* (2023) and Gasparin *et al.* (2022) have demonstrated how effective storytelling can distinguish a company from its competitors, captivate stakeholder interest, and convey an organisation's core values and mission. However, despite extensive research on these theoretical frameworks and practical applications, there is a need for empirical studies examining the direct impact of SA on stakeholders' perceptions in the context of industrial tourism.

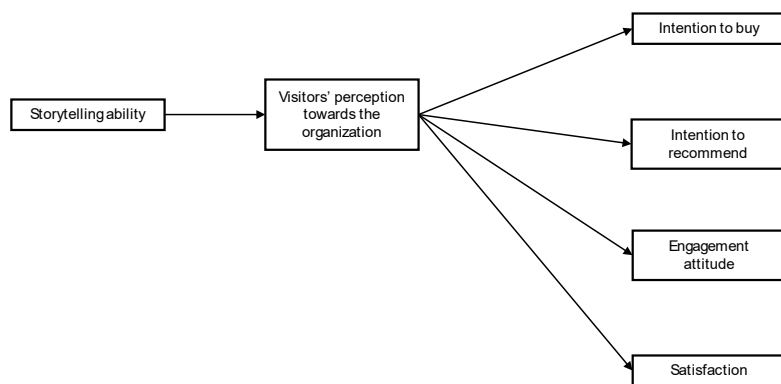
Our study addresses these gaps by exploring how storytelling during open-door events influences visitors' perceptions, intentions to purchase,

recommendation behaviours, engagement attitudes, and satisfaction levels. By integrating insights from both fields, our research provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of strategic communication through storytelling in industrial tourism settings. This not only contributes to a deeper understanding of how these events can be used to enhance stakeholder relationships and brand equity but also offers practical implications for organisations seeking to leverage their communication strategies to achieve strategic goals. Consequently, our study bridges the gap between the theoretical discourse on strategic communication and its practical application in industrial tourism, thereby contributing valuable new insights to both fields.

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

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Fig. 1: Hypothetical research model



Source: own elaboration

3. Methodology and data

3.1 Open factory

To address these RQ, we devised a survey and conducted interviews at the Open Factory's 2022 edition.

Open Factory, organised annually since 2015 by ItalyPost and Goodnet, opens the doors of Italian factories to the public. It aims to showcase companies, foster community connections, and highlight the importance of factories for the country's future. The event includes guided tours, 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. Therefore, it offers 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 companies opening their doors for the event. In contrast, 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. The choice to adopt a qualitative approach using interviews was dictated by the desire to leave more freedom in their feedback, allowing them to delve deeper into the topics in which they already have significant expertise and know-how.

Eleven companies were interviewed, and the selection criteria were based on their involvement in the event, ensuring that they possessed firsthand 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 aspects of the communication strategies employed.

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. Combined with the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire such findings 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 approach to investigate the perceptions and experiences of individuals who visited industrial plants during the Open Factory event. People interested in attending the event were asked to register on the official website beforehand, where they shared an email address. After the event, the generated mailing list served as the channel to forward an email containing a structured questionnaire with 22 closed-ended and Likert-scale items as part of the data-gathering procedure.

It should be noted that, while Open Factory is a B2C event that allows individuals to visit production plants of companies willing to open their doors, it is also true that such companies were mainly B2B-oriented, thus respondents of the questionnaire likely weren't (potential) customers.

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 for SA had three items (adapted from Li *et al.*, 2019), while the measures for stakeholders' perceptions had three items (adapted

from Chow *et al.*, 2017). The purchase intention has been measured using a single item from Kim *et al.*, 2011. Net promoter score had been 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).

The selected questions focused on gathering data about visitor demographics, motivations for participation, perceptions of the company and its products, communication aspects, satisfaction, and industrial tourism habits.

A total of 233 interviews were collected from Open Factory visitors. Upon completion of the data collection phase, responses were entered into IBM-SPSS for statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise elements like 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 analysed.

4. Results

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

During 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 for communicating an organisation's story. Participants had differing opinions: some described Open Factory as moderately useful, stating that it provided a platform for communication but did not significantly impact their storytelling efforts. Others saw it as highly valuable, allowing them to showcase their entrepreneurial journeys and experiences. Interviews also revealed that many managers found Open Factory useful for testing new external communication narratives. However, a smaller group of respondents shared a different enthusiasm, believing these events were less relevant for testing new communication approaches.

Respondents 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 organisation and provide employees with opportunities to engage with one another and even exchange ideas. On the other hand, when it came to 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. Yet, this might be explained by the very nature of the companies involved, as some operate in the B2B segment or in specific niches.

Key elements consistently highlighted for communicating with visitors during the event included the company's brand, connection to the territory, history, and product quality. Some managers also mentioned emphasising the company's innovative approach and commitment to sustainability. In contrast, aspects like employee stories, distribution strategies, and entrepreneurial challenges were considered less important. When it came to promoting participation in Open Factory, most companies preferred using their website and social media, while the company's newsletter and third-party websites and social accounts were less frequently chosen.

During the in-person interviews, participating companies were also asked to express their expectations regarding Open Factory and industrial tourism events. A primary common goal that emerged was to enhance the perception of their production plant's quality. They believed that showcasing high production standards and the professionalism of their staff would help achieve this objective. Another key expectation was to improve the clarity surrounding their initiatives. Companies saw Open Factory as a valuable platform to clearly communicate their objectives and strategies to visitors, providing a transparent 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, capitalise on social media networks, and engage with a broader audience, even though, as previously mentioned, this expectation wasn't met since attendees used traditional word of mouth as their main source of information.

Conversely, while stimulating consumer intent to purchase and enhancing credibility were acknowledged, these aspects were not the primary focus for the interviewed companies. Instead, their central objective was to address the previously mentioned goals to maximise the benefits of their participation 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 utilised by participants, their perceptions of the event, and the subsequent actions they expressed interest/willingness to pursue.

Regarding 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% came to know about the Open Factory event by word of mouth, another 30,3% from the company's social media, website and newsletter, and 23,1% discovered the event from the organisers mailing list.

The reasons for attending the factory opening were ranked on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest level of influence). The most significant motives for attendance included the interest to understand better the production

process, including how the productive activity is organised and how a product is born, with 55,8% and 57,5% of respondents mentioning them as extremely relevant (5 out of 5). The interest in knowing more about a company operating in the local territory is also very important (51,5%).

A specific professional interest in the company or industry was also a significant driver, with 36,9% considering it particularly important. This suggests that participants were driven by a desire to deepen their knowledge and gain insights relevant to their professional pursuits.

In contrast, 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.

Tab. 1: Motivation in 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 understand how a product is born | 3,0% | 2,1% | 10,3% | 27,0% | 57,5% |
| Better understand how a productive activity is organised | 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% |

Source: own elaboration

After the visit, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (70,1% in total) when asked if they would be able to better recognise the company they visited if compared to competitors. Moreover, 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 hosting the visits managed to make them 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 in specific niches, this result is important for the implications on the repeatability of the initiative in different business contexts as well, demonstrating that open-door events can prove to be an effective call-to-action for visitors to purchase products.

Last but not least, the vast majority of respondents (96,6% fall within 4 or 5 out of 5) consider the visited company as reliable, allowing 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).

Tab. 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 recognise 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% |

Source: own elaboration

In terms of the elements well communicated, Table 3 highlights how the majority of respondents (55,7%) expressed that the company's brand was effectively conveyed during the visit. This suggests that visitors gained a clear understanding of 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 company. Yet, the quality of the offer was undoubtedly the best element, 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 generally received 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.

Notably, the stories from employees had the highest number 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 elements the managers deemed as important: the company's brand, its connection with the territory, and the history of the products were considered more important, and so 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.

Tab. 3: Elements well communicated during the visit

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 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% |

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Source: own elaboration

Last but not least, concerning satisfaction, visitors were extremely satisfied in almost every aspect: except for informative material, which got 36,5% of maximum results, the other items were all valued as highly satisfactory in more than 65% of cases (Tab. 4). General satisfaction best represents this trend, with an overwhelming 76,0% of extremely positive judgements.

Findings also suggest that the informative material offered during Open Factory was well-received yet needed to be improved, while the clarity of explanation was a major strength for most of the companies, which eventually led to high levels of satisfaction.

Tab. 4: Elements of satisfaction regarding the 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% |

Source: own elaboration

Table 5 examines the relationship between the SA 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, with a Pearson coefficient correlation ranging from 0.309 to 0.410.

These findings suggest that a strong SA, based on different sources, is positively associated with visitors' perceptions of the company's reputation, reliability, and ethical behaviour, with the history of the company presenting greater effects, while the stories from the employees having a lower impact on visitors' perspective.

Tab. 5: Correlations of 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

Source: own elaboration

Table 6 shows 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 show strong correlations between a positive reputation and the intention to recommend ($r = 0.701$) and between perceptions of the company's reliability and the intention to recommend ($r = 0.555$). Additionally, perceptions of ethical behaviour were positively correlated with the intention to purchase ($r = 0.351$) and recommend ($r = 0.622$). These results indicate that visitors' perceptions of these factors are significant determinants of their intentions to purchase and recommend products from the company. Hence, organisations aiming to influence visitors' behaviour positively should focus on establishing a good reputation, promoting reliability, and demonstrating consistent ethical behaviour.

Tab. 6: Correlations between visitors' perceptions towards the organisation 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

Source: own elaboration

Lastly, Table 7 addresses the correlations between visitors' perceptions of the organisation, 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 ($r = .296$), while the ethical behaviour of the company ($r = 0.382$) and its reputation ($r = 0.489$) have a stronger correlation. A perceived good reputation is also positively correlated with satisfaction over the quality of the products and

the quality of the production plant. Perceptions towards the company's reputation, reliability and ethical behaviour are positively correlated with the engagement attitude (respectively $r=.321$; $r=.336$; $r=.411$).

These results confirm once again that visitors who perceive the organisation as having a good reputation, high reliability, and ethical behaviour are also more satisfied overall and are willing to show their attitude to engage with the organisation.

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Tab. 7: Correlations between visitors' perceptions towards the organisation 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** |

** $p<0.05$

Source: own elaboration

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

5.1 Implications of the research

Our study aimed to explore how a company's SA 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. Open-door 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, Orwig, 2002).

Our results suggest that storytelling is a powerful tool for building positive visitor perceptions, subsequently influencing their behavioural intentions. This finding supports and extends the work of previous scholars (e.g., Kemp *et al.*, 2023), underscoring the importance of narrative in strategic communication within industrial contexts. By incorporating storytelling into open-door events, companies can 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 know more about 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 better understand how a product is born. Industrial tourism experiences can allow visitors to see the production process firsthand, which can help them gain a deeper appreciation for the work that goes into creating a product (Swarbrooke and Horner 2002; Montenegro *et al.*, 2023). Finally, people may be interested in industrial tourism experiences because they want to better understand how a productive activity is organised. This includes learning about the various stages of production, the roles of different employees, and the types of technologies and equipment used in the production process.

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 organisations, 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 recognised as a powerful communication tool that allows organisations to connect with their audience on a deeper level. By creating engaging narratives, organisations can emotionally involve stakeholders, create meaningful connections, and shape perceptions positively. During company openings, storytelling plays a crucial role in conveying the organisation's values, history, and unique selling propositions.

Our research offers valuable insights by exploring both company and visitor perspectives, highlighting how effective communication during these events can boost visitor engagement and actions. To positively influence visitor perceptions, companies should emphasise product history, quality, local ties, and the creative production process, as visitors highly appreciated these. In fact, questionnaires revealed high satisfaction levels, improved recognition, reputation, and trust among attendees. Furthermore, Open Factory attendees showed a strong inclination to recommend the companies they visited, consider purchasing their offerings, and potentially share their experiences on social media. These factors contribute to the event's overall success and impact.

Last but not least, this work offers implications that extend to societal implications beyond business outcomes. As an example, open-door events serve as platforms for companies to demonstrate their commitment to community involvement and sustainable business practices, fostering a sense of local pride and responsibility among visitors. Additionally, these events provide valuable opportunities to educate the public about the economic contributions of local businesses, fostering greater appreciation and support for regional industries and their role in driving economic prosperity.

Therefore, this research's preliminary outcomes are intriguing and provide actionable insights for practitioners into leveraging storytelling during industrial tourism events.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

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However, these initial results warrant a more nuanced examination, especially when considering the constraints inherent in this study. A key limitation to note is the homogeneity of the companies involved. While relevant for assessing communication strategies, the predominance of business-to-business (B2B) companies in the sample might have influenced the results, particularly in terms of the visitors' purchasing behaviour. This focus on B2B companies means that the study's insights may not fully encapsulate the consumer behaviour dynamics typically seen in a business-to-consumer (B2C) market.

In B2B transactions, purchasing decisions are often driven by factors like long-term value, return on investment, and the relationship between businesses, which differ significantly from the impulsive or emotionally influenced decisions common in B2C interactions. Therefore, the willingness of visitors to buy products in a B2B context might not accurately reflect consumer behaviour in a more varied or B2C-focused market.

Moreover, B2B markets often involve more complex decision-making processes and longer sales cycles compared to B2C markets. This difference could affect the applicability of the findings to broader market scenarios, where quick purchasing decisions and individual consumer preferences play a more significant role.

Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data could introduce biases, such as social desirability or recall bias, affecting the accuracy of our results.

To address these limitations, future research should explore several key avenues. Firstly, expanding the sample to include a more diverse array of companies would be beneficial. This diversity should encompass not only different sectors but also a range of scopes and orientations, particularly incorporating more B2C companies. By doing so, future studies can offer a more comprehensive understanding of market dynamics and consumer behaviour, ensuring that the findings are more broadly applicable and reflective of diverse market scenarios. Such an approach would enhance the generalizability of the results, allowing for a more accurate and holistic understanding of the factors influencing purchasing decisions across various types of markets.

Second, investigating the role of storytelling in diverse cultural settings can shed light on how cultural factors influence the effectiveness of communication strategies during open-door events. Additionally, longitudinal studies that track the long-term impact of strategic communication on visitor perceptions and subsequent behaviour would be valuable. These studies could examine how repeated interactions and evolving narratives affect brand loyalty and stakeholder trust over time.

Lastly, future research could explore the integration of technological advancements such as virtual reality tours and digital storytelling into industrial tourism to understand their potential for enhancing visitor engagement and satisfaction.

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