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Developing Territorial Identity: The Experience of Historical Italian Companies

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Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the development of the knowledge on intangibles management by analysing the territorial identity concept from a strategic competitiveness perspective. The purpose of this study is especially to clarify the territorial identity concept by exploring and highlighting its dimensions and determinants. This study considers the perspective of two historical Italian companies that have long been embedded in their territory. By integrating a literature analysis with well-documented case studies, this paper proposes a conceptual framework to capture and explain what companies can develop at the local level in order to improve territorial identity.

Key words: territorial identity; historical Italian companies; local embeddedness; relational proximity; sense of territorial belonging; territorial attractiveness.

Introduction

In a globalised world where interconnection and standardisation in business prevail, competitive challenge for local areas needs to overcome the de-territorialisation processes (Roca and Oliveira-Roca, 2007). Although several studies (e.g., Zanon, 2011) highlight that infrastructure projects are at the basis of re-territorialisation processes, we argue the importance of developing strategic abilities of differentiation related to the knowledge-economy principles (Rullani, 2004). The differentiating element is not the material product but the intangible value that accompanies the goods' design, production and sale: it particularly resides in the meanings, services, experiences, and availability of collaboration to create relationships with stakeholders who are hidden behind the material product. As such, local areas can increase their competitive advantage and meet the challenges of globalisation by creating, developing or recreating their identity (Levi, 2003).

This study intends to stimulate the debate on territorial identity, an issue that has received less attention from a strategic-management perspective. Specific studies on territorial identity have been conducted in Italy (e.g., Baccarani and Golinelli, 2011; Rullani, 2013), with a focus on company-territory relationships.

Although many of the contributions to the literature on territorial identity examine the connections between identity, territory and competitiveness, there is no specific study that explores the territorial identity concept for the purpose of increasing territorial competitive advantage.

To discuss this issue it is first important to understand what is meant by the identity of a territory or a local area. This concept is complex because there are many terms and meanings applied to this concept from a number of disciplines. The terms 'territorial', 'local' and 'place' are most frequently used in the social sciences such as geography (e.g., Raagmaa, 2002; Magnaghi, 2003; Pollice, 2005; Luukkonen and Moilanen, 2012; Kaplan and Recoquillon, 2014), environmental psychology and neuroscience (e.g., Bonaiuto et al., 2002; Carrus et al., 2005; Gifford, 2007; Lewicka, 2008; Marcouyeux and Fleury-Bahi, 2011; Lengen and Kistemann, 2012), environmental policy and governance (e.g., Happaerts, 2012), viticulture and agri-food (e.g., Cesaretti and Scarpato, 2010; Rocchi and Gabbai, 2013; Begalli et al., 2014), place marketing (e.g., Erickson and Roberts, 1997; Baxter et al., 2013), and tourism management (e.g., Hallak et al., 2012). As place identity is closely related to the process by which, through interaction with different places, people describe a particular dimension of their personal identity such as belonging to a specific place (Hernández et al., 2007), in this work we essentially focus on territorial and local identity which are therefore used interchangeably.

The aim of this study therefore is to clarify the concept of territorial identity by exploring and highlighting its dimensions and determinants. Although we are aware that territorial identity is the result of the contribution provided by all stakeholders of a territory (Baccarani and Golinelli, 2011), in this study we consider exclusively the perspective of historical companies that have long been embedded in the territories of the case studies. We examine the manner in which two north-eastern Italian firms operating in the grappa industry contribute to creating the territorial identity of the Bassano del Grappa territory (Veneto region). By integrating a literature analysis with well-documented case studies, we propose a conceptual framework to capture and explain the territorial identity concept to serve as a starting point for future studies.

This study presents a literature review on territorial identity, followed by a description of the methodological approach that was used to research. After describing and discussing the two historical firms' experience of developing the identity of the territory in which they operate, theoretical and managerial implications are discussed. This study closes by presenting its limitations and proposals for future research.

Territorial identity concept in literature

This literature review is executed through an analysis of the concept of territorial identity in the interaction between place and identity, particularly as theorised by scholars of geography, and by highlighting the main characteristics of territorial identity.

Territorial identity is an elusive concept that can be defined as the qualities that make a place capable of being specified or singled out, as well as unique and separate from other places (Erickson and Roberts, 1997). Territorial identity is a concept rich in meanings such as the 'uniqueness', 'singularity', 'specificity', and 'authenticity' of local/regional material and immaterial assets, systems and networks (Roca and Oliveira, 2007, p 435). It can also be interpreted as an 'identitarian relationship connecting a specific community to its lived space' (Caldo, 1996, p 285). In this sense, territorial identity is not exclusively related to the mere spatial dimension of identity, but is used to express the relationships of belonging that create 'territory'. These relationships of belonging are engendered by shared experiences, heritage, interests or expectations, within a given geographical space (Scriven and Roberts, 2001). Territory is a 'lived space' (Frémont, 1978; Wójcik, 2013) because it incorporates both the physical dimension of the geographical space and the

social dimension of the relational space. Therefore, territory is an 'human space', it is built over time as a product of a process of cultural sedimentation; it is a process that focuses in the identity relationship that develops between a community and the space in which it is located. That is, territorial identity is a self-referential process established by a community that takes possession of a culturally default spatial context (Pollice, 2005, pp 75-76).

In addition, territorial identity is not an abstract concept but a fundamental component of any place (Pollice, 2005). It is closely related to the concept of 'genius loci', which is the perceptual manifestation of territorial identity as the unique set of physical characteristics, cultural messages and emotions that makes the place what it is, that makes it different and unique to any other place (Artusi, 1996, p 3).

The identity of a territory can be also defined in relation to its flows and networks with other places, both near and far, generating a condition of interdependence and modifying the original and historical distinctive features of the territory. While in the past, the inhabitants of a place felt a sense of belonging to a place through its history and by cumulating mostly local experiences, emotions, and relationships, today, in addition to these distinctive elements that come from the past, companies, people and communities have learnt to hybridise the experience of the places with the experience of global networks (Rullani, 2013).

Fundamentally, territorial identity presents four characteristics.

First, identity is not a static (Lim, 2010), but a dynamic concept (Pollice, 2005). It is the result of a continuous interaction between a specific community and its relational space. It shifts as we position and reposition ourselves within multiple context of place. Multiple histories and diverse narratives coexist dynamically and are dialogically engaged to dwell together (Lim, 2010, pp 906-908). As territory as a space of belonging is an affective, social, and symbolic product, if local actors trigger mechanisms of identification and assessment of strategically relevant elements of local development, they can contribute to the creation of a retrospective and perspective local identity (Dai Prà, 2001; Oliveira et al., 2010).

Second, territorial identity is a process because there is no single identity of a territory but a succession of identities (Raffestin, 2003). It can be understood as both the cause ('matrix') and effect ('target') of the territorialisation processes (Turco, 2003). As cause, it means that local identity supports the development process by means of a set of conditions providing opportunity and obstacles to actions. As effect, it can increase the specificities of a place and contribute to the consolidation of the sense of belonging to the local community. Territorial identity is related to local development because it orients both collective actions and territorialisation processes. In this sense, a strong territorial identity stimulates the processes of endogenous and self-centred development, and is able to predetermine directly or indirectly objectives and strategies of local development. It can also contribute to the development of innovation processes at the local level. Territorial innovation is successful if it is the result of choices shared by local community members and stakeholders operating in the territory. Such sharing is achievable if a strong identity exists in a territory. As such, self-referential behaviours are avoided, and social and territorial development is stimulated (Pollice, 2005).

Third, territorial identity is not only a set of exterior manifestations, but also of interior values such as a sense of belonging (Oliveira et al., 2010), social identification and cohesion, as well as a shared representation of a collective self.

Fourth, territorial identity is well constructed through multidimensional (including social, cultural, political, physical, biological, historical and psychological dimensions) interactions in a place, that is a multifaced entity (Lim, 2010, p 901).

By means of territorial identity, any territory can become an actor of its own development. The place is no longer a simple physical space, but becomes an active entrepreneurial subject (Schillaci and Gatti, 2011) that is the source of not only material, but also immaterial resources such as entrepreneurial propensity, cultural level, collaborative spirit, behavioural ethics, and aesthetic sensitivity.

Method

This study is based on an inductive approach. Through this approach, proposing specific cases allows one to attempt to draw more general considerations.

The research strategy consisted of case studies. Italy has many areas that have distinctive characteristics of territorial identity. Through theoretical sampling (Patton, 2002), we have chosen Bassano del Grappa as the area of investigation. Bassano del Grappa is a little town distinguishing by the production of the grappa. It is located in the Veneto region in which 29 firms produce grappa of which 13 are historic companies. In Bassano del Grappa only two historic companies operate in this industry and contribute to the development of its territorial identity. We therefore examined these two companies: Ditta Bortolo Nardini Spa and Poli Distillerie Srl. Effort was made to integrate the (poor) existing literature with the uniqueness of the businesses' experiences to begin a theory-building activity (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). It is believed that such unique businesses experiences offer significant insight into understanding the concept of territorial identity.

To collect data, we consulted secondary sources and conducted in-depth interviews with each of the businesses, as well as consulted their websites. The interview with Ditta Bortolo Nardini Spa was conducted in November 2013 with the external-relations manager, Marta Lazzarin, and for Poli Distillerie Srl, the entrepreneur Jacopo Poli and the external-relations manager, Lorna Geremia, were interviewed between May and June 2014. In both cases, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. The following two principal questions were submitted to the interviewees: 1) In your opinion, what are the fundamental elements that characterise the territorial identity of Bassano del Grappa? 2) What initiatives has your company activated locally to build and enhance the identity of the territory in which it operates? The duration of the interviews was 40 minutes each and the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

The results of the case studies are the basis for identifying the dimensions and determinants of territorial identity in this study.

Contribution of historical companies to the development of territorial identity

Before examining the case studies and the contribution that each company makes to the enhancement of territorial identity, it is necessary to clarify some aspects of the identity of Bassano del Grappa that emerged from the voices of the case-study companies.

Bassano del Grappa is a border town whose identity is closely related to the Brenta canal that runs through it. For centuries, the Brenta has been a crucial passage for the conquest of the plain cities by various invaders of the region. However, it has also represented an important means of connection with Europe. Bassano del Grappa has long been a land of conquest and the people of the town are aware of their limited forces, and therefore, have always desired a peaceful relationship of subordination with the different rulers so that there was an atmosphere that could be beneficial to the thriving traditional peasantry and artisan culture. Over the last four centuries, it has developed a variety of activities related to agriculture such as viticulture and grazing, as well as industry-related activities such as printing, woodworking, ceramics, wool, and the distillation of grappa.

“The old bridge, the castle, the squares, the beautiful palaces, the walls, the churches, make it a closed and also open citadel at the same time. People are industrious, but they don’t forget the pleasure of life, they are prone to diplomatic mediation, but without byzantine malice, their minds are geared to international trade, but with their feet firmly on the ground” (interview with Jacopo Poli).

Bassano del Grappa is a vibrant town thanks to the many cultural events that animate it during the year, and its atmosphere that creates a sense of cordiality that is much appreciated by many visitors. Highlighting these traits of Bassano del Grappa’s identity, which are closely related to those of the general area of Pedemontana Veneta in which Bassano del Grappa is located, is intended to emphasise the features that are most relevant to the research objective for each case study.

Ditta Bortolo Nardini Spa

The company began its activity in 1779 when Bortolo Nardini opened his first distillery in Bassano del Grappa. This company is physically present in this area from over 230 years. It has been able to combine respect for tradition with the ability to look forward. “Innovating in the name of tradition” is the mission of the family Nardini who still today considers its ancient knowledge as a significant source of competitive advantage for the future.

Particularly interesting is the sense of responsibility towards its territory which Nardini company developed, and intends to continue to develop, day by day. It aims to preserve and enhance dialogue and discussion with local actors in order to build more depth relationships with stakeholders of the area.

In this direction, most important are the specific values of historical company that Nardini has developed in time by participating as member of two cultural associations[1]: the first is Les Henokiens, an international association of family and bicentenary companies; the second is Historic Place of Italy, an association that promotes the oldest and most prestigious establishments in Italian history. In addition, Nardini has developed some

[1] For further details, see *http://www.henokiens.com* or *http://www.localistorici.it* [access of: 31.01.2015]

typical value of Bassano del grappa area such as tenacity and passion which have supported the company during the periods of difficulty.

This company pursues the sense of territorial belonging and attachment also through other actions related to the four following broad areas: 1) communication; 2) architecture; 3) art; and 4) promotion of social and cultural events.

The aspect of the company's communication is exemplified by the logo of Ditta Bortolo Nardini Spa being the Ponte Vecchio of Bassano del Grappa, the place where is located also the company's grapperia. The Ponte Vecchio is the old bridge designed by the architect Palladio that is the symbol par excellence of the town; it is synonymous with the culture, history and architecture of the area and is an important source of tourism attraction. This company decision is an expression of its strong sense of territorial belonging and of its desire to be identified with the specific and unique location that is the town of Bassano del Grappa.

Ditta Bortolo Nardini Spa's action within this territory is also important in architectural terms because of the design and realisation of the Bolle building. This building represents a significant contribution of the Nardini family to Bassano del Grappa's contemporary architecture. This building was created to host company and territorial events and also to extend the awareness of the world of distillates and liqueurs: the interior of the building hosts a research laboratory and a quality-control centre, as well as an auditorium in which to receive customers and an ever-growing number of visitors. In addition to the desire to create a more functional research space, the Nardini family invested in this architectural structure to leave a sign of the value that can be left to future generations (Bonfanti et al., 2013). Ditta Bortolo Nardini Spa has transmitted a powerful message of the company's attention for the future and its openness to the territorial needs and to dialogue with other local actors for the evolution of the Bassano del Grappa's territorial identity.

The Nardini family have also demonstrated special attention to and passion for art, creating Garage Nardini to unite the Nardini family's passion for contemporary art and the town of Bassano del Grappa. The Garage Nardini is a space in Bassano del Grappa created to present the creativity of artists from all over the world. The Nardini family also promotes culture and art by sponsoring and hosting dance festivals. Moreover, Ditta Bortolo Nardini Spa promotes many events, as well as national and international conferences, including, for example, Welcome to the Year 2050. The promotion of these events reflects the company's sense of responsibility towards the community in which it operates and it is a representation of the company's particular attention to the social dimension of its activities.

The role of Ditta Bortolo Nardini Spa in promoting socio-cultural events can be emphasised in its commitment in creating the tradition of the meeting place by being an important destination dedicated not only to visitors but also, and primarily, to the people of Bassano del Grappa.

Poli Distillerie Srl

"Only roots that go deep into the land can give such an ethereal fruit as Grappa"[2]. These words effectively explain the sense of attachment, deep love and knowledge of territory of

[2] Further details are available at *http://www.poligrappa.com* [access of: 31.01.2015]

Poli Distillerie. Its activity continues for many generations. Over a period of five hundred years, the Poli family has moved three times, covering the distance of only 18 km, from the native Gomarolo to Schiavon, a village of the Pedemontana Veneta, near Bassano del Grappa, where the family now lives and is current headquarters of the company. This is an important aspect that underlines the continuous physical presence of the family and, then, of the company in a specific territory.

The Poli Distillerie Srl possesses an artisan character and its mission is to change the image of grappa around the world, to create an image of a refined product that is a symbol of Italy such as cognac is for France and whiskey is for Scotland.

To support its mission, the company strongly emphasizes its local roots and also the values, the natural and architectural beauty, essentially the uniqueness of the territory in which it is established.

Moreover, the special attention and sensitivity of the company in the enhancement of its heritage, closely linked to the local tradition, has oriented itself in the choice of being a member of two associations[3]: the Unione Imprese Storiche Italiane, which includes national ultra-centenary companies with the aim of valorising Italian entrepreneurial heritage; and the Museimpresa, which brings together Italian companies that have set up their own industrial museum or archive.

The history, the mission and the sensitivity of this company highlights a close connection between the Poli Distillerie and its territory, not only with regard to its production, but also to the existence of a territorial rooting that reflects a pride of belonging to that territory.

Poli Distillerie's corporate action to support territorial identity is mainly developed in two directions: 1) 'formative' communication; and 2) the reappropriation of knowledge, memory and local culture, as well as the diffusion of the entrepreneurial culture.

The geographical aspects, the characteristics of identity, and the 'soul' of the 'Poli territory' are disseminated on a communicative level through means such as the company's website. We provide a summary of the contents extracted from Poli Distillerie Srl's online communication, which not only informs on issues related to the business and the local peculiarities, but also promotes cultural growth around the "Poli Territory": "This is a land of culture, one that welcomes lovers of beauty to admire the elegant Veneto Villas designed by Palladio, the paintings of Jacopo da Bassano and Giorgione or the sculptures of Canova; a land with a long memory, accompanying those who have the time along the paths of the Great War that left its mark on Mount Grappa and the Pasubio; a land that never stays idle, and likes to sing the praises of those craft industries that have allowed the Veneto economy to flourish; a land with good taste, ready and willing to pull up a chair for those with an appetite for wines and dishes that have earned their rightful place in Italy's food and wine culture"[4].

From this description of the territory emerges the initiative promoted by Poli Distillerie Srl named 'Welcome to our Territory', which refers to five actions to be executed to fully experience the area. Poli Distillerie Srl supports this project by offering a bottle of grappa to any person who provides testimony of having completed the entire path. As such, the

[3] See http://www.unioneimpresestoriche.com or http://www.museimpresa.com [access of: 31.01.2015]

[4] For further details, see http://www.poligrappa.com [access of: 31.01.2015]

visitor will come to appreciate the spirit of the territory to which the company belongs. The five actions are the following[5]: "1) to see at least one of the beautiful Palladian Villas, true jewels of the Vicenza province; 2) to cross the Old Bassano del Grappa Bridge, hand in hand with one you love, exchanging a little kiss of love; 3) to taste a glass of Torcolato wine accompanied by Asiago Stravecchio Cheese; 4) to play chess with living pieces on the large chessboard of Marostica's Cheese Square; and 5) to climb with a bike up to Monte Grappa or, if you are lazy, go by car, it's worth it". Each activity expresses the tradition and the culture at the heart of the Veneto region, that is, the Pedemontana Veneta area that includes Bassano del Grappa. By promoting such activities, the company underlines how its undertakings cannot be separated from its territory, as well as its particular commitment to social and cultural level.

The second aspect in which the company demonstrates its great investment in its attachment to the territory and its passion for its product is the reappropriation of knowledge, memory and local culture, and the diffusion of entrepreneurial culture. The company has established the Poli Grappa Museum in two locations. One is in Bassano del Grappa, and deepens the research on the history of distillation and the diffusion and exploitation of the Italian grappa. The other is in Schiavon, and presents the evolution of the Poli family, a typical family of Vicenza, representing entrepreneurship in the north-east of Italy. These museums also organise various cultural and educational events for the community to witness the traditions and social dimension of local distillation. This project allows to emphasize the company's willingness to dialogue and collaborate with other social actors of the territory. In addition, Poli Distillerie is always open to visitors who want to learn about and see the production process. Jacopo Poli also conducted research on the history of distillation (Poli, 2014), which provides an important example of how it is possible to exploit a specific tradition of the Pedemontana Veneta area and especially Bassano del Grappa territory.

Dimensions and determinants of territorial identity: a conceptual framework

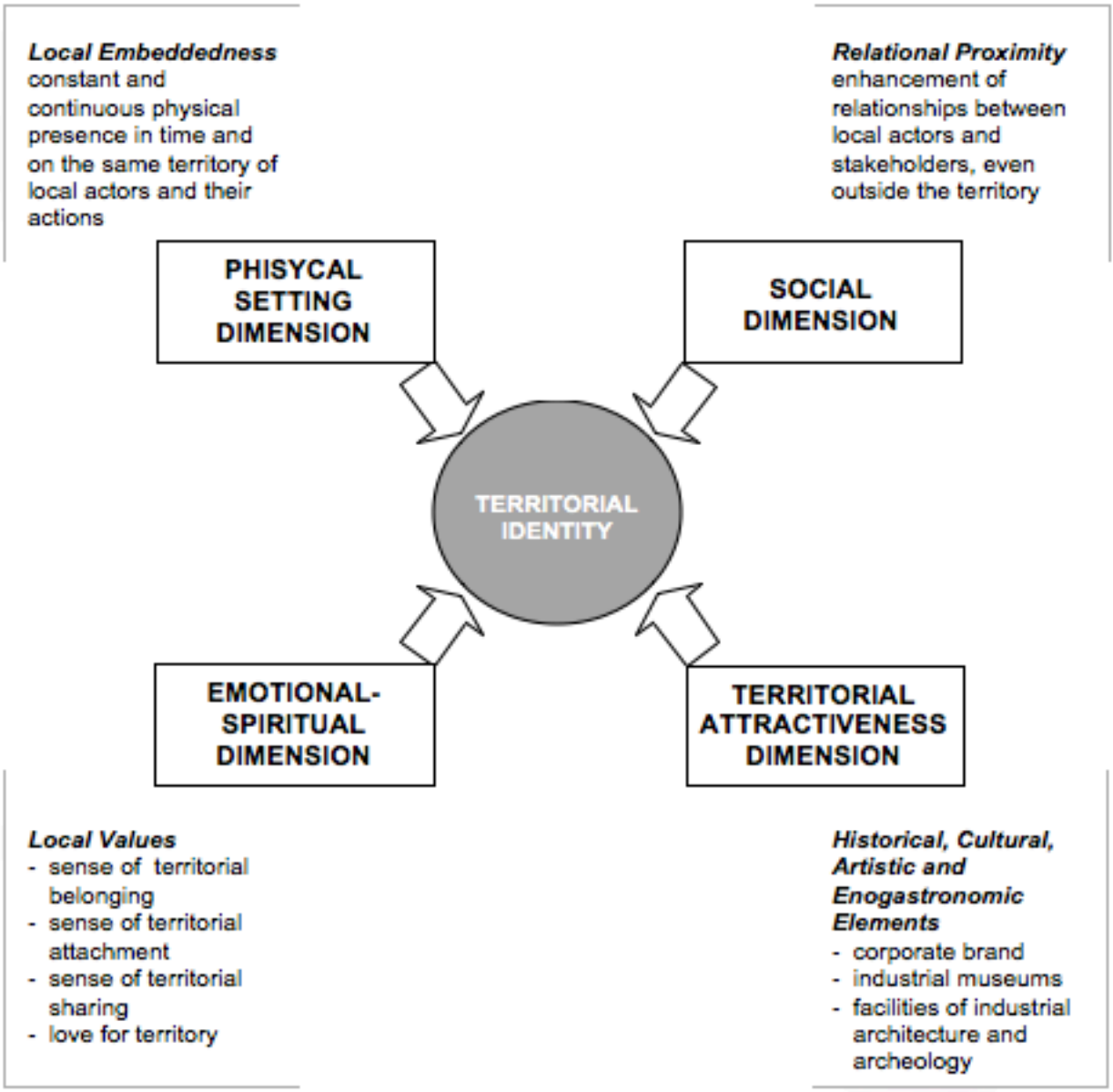
Both companies considered in this paper highlight the importance to operate in the same area from a number of years, develop relationships with different stakeholders, act by following values closely related to territory such as sense of belonging, attachment, sharing and love, and contribute to create attractive opportunities for the territory in order to develop territorial identity.

By integrating these information offered by the companies considered in this study with literature analysis, we propose a conceptual framework to capture and explain the concept of territorial identity. It especially highlights what companies can develop at the local level in order to improve territorial identity.

They can contribute to creating territorial identity by means of four dimensions: 1) physical dimension; 2) social dimension; 3) emotional-spiritual dimension; and 4) local-attractiveness dimension. These dimensions are closely connected along a continuum that defines the territorial identity concept (see Figure 1).

[5] For further details, see *http://www.poligrappa.com* [access of: 31.01.2015]

Figure 1: Developing territorial identity: a conceptual framework



(Source: our elaboration)

The physical setting dimension is an expression of anchored elements of the natural heritage, population and human-made economic in a geographical area that can be considered unique and special in relation to them. The principal determinant explaining this dimension is 'local embeddedness', which refers to the constant and continuous physical presence in time and on the same territory of local actors and the production, distribution and/or consumption of tangible goods and services in that territory (Roca and Oliveira-Roca, 2007).

The social dimension includes the relational proximity. It regards the enhancement of relationships between local actors and stakeholders, even outside the territory. This means creating opportunities for cultural enrichment, as well as for promotion and enhancement of local resources. Such relationships contribute to developing entrepreneurial projects of territorial growth from the socio-cultural perspective.

The emotional-spiritual dimension, as the name suggests, refers to the emotional and spiritual elements of a territory such as its fundamentally local values that stakeholders develop in time by means of their place experience, not only recognizing the place but also knowing how to use it (Lim, 2010). This involves a sense of territorial belonging, attachment and sharing, which can be synthesised in a 'love for the territory' in which one lives and works. Its strengthening could, for example, promote environmental and socio-cultural consciousness, encourage protection of the natural and cultural heritage, improve social relations and community spirit, facilitate efficiency and effectiveness of local institutions, reinforce self-respect and the feeling of security and satisfaction (Oliveira et al., 2010, p 813).

Finally, the territorial attractiveness dimension is the result of historical, cultural, artistic and enogastronomic elements that define the "charisma" of a place. Such elements include, for example, bridges, castles, squares, buildings, walls, churches and culinary specialties. Companies can contribute to developing this dimension by creating, promoting or supporting socialising opportunities in the territory that accommodate a number of art forms (e.g., literature, cinema, music and dance). Several other possible entrepreneurial actions aimed at developing territorial identity are creating a corporate brand, industrial museums, and facilities of industrial architecture and archaeology.

This territorial identity concept may bring to mind some characteristics of the Marshall's districts but Bassano del Grappa territory is not a district. It doesn't have all the traits of a Marshallian district such as territorial aggregations of small and medium-sized firms, presence of widespread entrepreneurship, endogenous process of innovation, monocultural configuration of local area (e.g., Lorenzoni, 1979; Varaldo, 1979; Panati, 1980), and industrial atmosphere (see Marshall, 1980). Essentially companies localised in the same geographic area act in order to contribute at creating and developing territorial identity because they live in and love that territory. If they choose not to invest more also in one of above mentioned dimensions, they may warp territorial identity created.

Conclusions, limitations and directions for further research

This study highlights how territorial identity is a concept that has received very little attention from researchers in the business management field. The analysis made in this study can contribute to extending knowledge of territorial identity in three manners: 1) it clarifies the concept of territorial identity; 2) it presents two Italian business cases that capture useful actions for creating and developing territorial identity; and 3) it proposes a conceptual framework that offers a foundation for future research by outlining the dimensions and determinants of territorial identity.

This analysis is an attempt to examine the territorial identity concept, and offers a number of considerations that cannot be generalised: the subjectivity of the choice of the sampling and the selection of the territory (and companies) mean further study is necessary. In addition, this work considers exclusively the companies' perspective, but territorial identity is the result of the thoughts and actions of all local stakeholders. As such, future research should extend the analysis by considering the perspective of the wider group of stakeholders.

Therefore, this study, which is exploratory in nature, is subject to future developments and applications. Future lines of research could gather around two major themes. One

concerns the development and subsequent testing of the conceptual framework proposed in this study. The other is to explore a number of new research perspectives.

The model presented lends itself to being implemented with other cases studies in other territories to check the dimensions and determinants proposed in this study, and find possible variables that would be useful for in-depth analysis. This framework can also be empirically tested in the future. The analysis of the literature and the conceptual framework are preparations for submitting items to group in subdimensions that can identify territorial identity.

Another promising area for further research is the analysis of the actors that contribute to creating and developing territorial identity. By means of a social-network analysis (e.g., Anzera, 1999; Knoke and Song, 2008; Scott and Carrington, 2011), it is possible conduct an ego-network-centered study to identify key stakeholders that are strategically fundamental for creating and developing local identity. It would also be possible to identify other actors such as those that are isolated (i.e., their participation in the network is irrelevant); pendant (i.e., the actor is 'hooked to the network' by a single relationship); bridge (i.e., the actor connects two subgroups); and gatekeeper (i.e., the actor creates relationships between a subset and the outside of group within the network). In addition, it is useful to calculate the indicators of (local and global) centrality to assess the territory's actors that have further connections with other stakeholders, and network density to understand the general level of relationships.

In addition, as competition exists not only between companies but also between local areas (Maizza, 2013), it would be interesting to examine how territories, and their local actors, can develop their identity to compete more effectively in business.

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