

Giovanna Bertella

Assistant Professor
School of Business and Economics
UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway

Alessio Cavicchi

Assistant Professor
Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism
University of Macerata, Macerata, Italy

From sharecroppers to “flying farmers”: new forms of tourism entrepreneurship in rural areas

The purpose of this study is to challenge the view of the rural environment as a static environment and the view of farmers as conservative actors. The focus is on mobile innovative practices by rural entrepreneurs who bring to life some of the features of the experience economy. An exploratory study concerning an association of rural entrepreneurs in the Italian region of Marche and a specific project of this association is conducted. The findings suggest that sociality and sense of belonging embedded in local rural communities can become a tool for promoting rural tourism through entrepreneurial mobile practices.

Keywords: rural entrepreneurship, mobility, experience economy, practice

Giovanna Bertella

Assistant Professor
School of Business and Economics
UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway
Email: giovanna.bertella@uit.no

Giovanna Bertella is Associate Professor at the School of Business and Economics, UiT The Arctic University of Norway. Her research interests are: small-scale tourism, food tourism, rural tourism, nature-based tourism, active tourism, event management, knowledge and networks.

Alessio Cavicchi

Assistant Professor
Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism
University of Macerata, Macerata, Italy
Email: alessio.cavicchi@unimc.it

Alessio Cavicchi is researcher in Agribusiness and Rural Tourism at University of Macerata (Italy). His main fields of interest and research are consumer food choice, economics of food quality and safety, sustainable tourism and innovation in the agro-food sector. He has served as expert for the European Commission (DG Research, DG Agriculture, DG Environment and JRC). His works have been published in several international books and journals.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to challenge the view of the rural environment as a static environment and the view of farmers as conservative actors. Rural entrepreneurship is viewed as the process of overcoming the constraints and exploiting the opportunities related to the rural environment (Stathopoulou et al., 2004). According to such a conceptualisation, entrepreneurs, on the basis of their understanding of the physical, socio-cultural and economic characteristics of the rural environment, perceive or create an economic opportunity and realise it with the objective to gain some profit, social power, personal satisfaction or employment.

Among these opportunities, some are related to the recent shift from a goods/service-economy towards an experience economy (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013). In this sense, and focusing on rural tourism, Fuglsang and Eide (2013) have adopted a view of innovation as practice. The authors argue that the “knowing” of rural entrepreneurs can be related to their awareness about tourism as an asset in the experience economy, and their “doing” can be related to the implementation of this idea through everyday actions.

In line with this approach and such considerations, our study focuses on mobile innovative practices by rural entrepreneurs who bring to life some of the features of the experience economy. Thus, the research question addressed in this paper is: how are mobile innovative practices in rural areas developed and performed in line with experience economy trends?

This work is structured as follows. In the next paragraph a theoretical background on rural entrepreneurship as practice and its relationship with the experience economy is presented. Then, the materials and methods are described. The subsequent section outlines the exploratory case study of “flying farmers” in Marche region. Finally, after the presentation and discussion of results, a concluding section with some suggestions for future research is outlined.

Theoretical perspective

Rural entrepreneurship as practice

This study adopts a practice-based approach to entrepreneurship (Johannisson, 2011; Steyaert, 2007). Practice is understood as a twofold phenomenon where “knowing” and “doing” are strictly correlated and constitute the fundamental components of strategy (Corradi et al., 2010; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Wittington, 2006). Moreover, practice is viewed as resulting from the specific contextual conditions and are occurring within such a

context and in relation to other contexts (Gherardi, 2000; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Rasche & Chia, 2009).

From this perspective, any social phenomenon can be viewed as the result of an ongoing process that involves reflection and emerges through people's recurrent actions (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Adopting this approach, entrepreneurship (sometimes referred to as *entrepreneuring*) is defined as the ongoing practice of creatively organising people and resources according to the opportunities and constraints present in a specific context (Johannisson, 2011; Welter, 2011).

In line with these considerations, rural entrepreneurship is here understood as a practice consisting of day-to-day cognitive and performing activities by problem-solvers who operate between the local and the global context (Cope, 2005; Corradi et al., 2010; Fuglsang & Eide, 2012; Minniti & Bygrave, 2001).

Rural entrepreneuring practices in the experience economy

The main idea of the so-called experience economy is that today's consumers tend to purchase products and services not only for the products and services *per se*, but also to experience something meaningful and memorable (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013). More specifically, experiential consumptions are understood as potentially belonging to four realms that differ on the basis of the customers' participation and involvement and these are: education, entertainment, escapism, and aesthetic. Thus, the development of social and personalised relations between the providers and the consumers is a crucially important factor for the emergence of value that is not viewed as something delivered by the providers to the consumers, but as the result of a joint-process of co-creation (Eide & Mossberg, 2013; Grönroos, 2008, 2012; Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Prebensen et al., 2014; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Such considerations have been related also to rural settings. Here, the development of a regional brand centred on the experience of something unique, the introduction of typical foods and the personalisation of the selling channels have been presented as developmental strategies directed at a specific market niche (Sidali, 2013). These processes can be understood as a way of profiling and selling the countryside, which moves away from a pure commodification process towards an individual customisation process directed at those customers who have characteristics related to the emerging experience economy.

Furthermore, recent studies have challenged the traditional conservative view of the rural environment and farmers, suggesting the possibility of viewing rural entrepreneurship as

a process within the experience economy. The emergence of a new type of farmers and rural entrepreneurs has been discussed in the literature, including their background and competencies (Akgun et al., 2011; Herslund, 2011; Paniaga, 2002; Vesala & Vesala, 2010).

Some studies have used the mobility paradigm to comment on some innovating aspects of rural entrepreneurship (Bell & Osti, 2010; Cheshire et al., 2013; Marsden, 2009; Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014; Oliva, 2010). In particular, Cheshire et al. (2014) and Moscardo (2014) argue that, in some cases, mobility becomes a regular component of being economically active in rural areas. These authors refer explicitly to the new mobilities paradigm by Sheller and Urry (2006). Cheshire et al. (2014) view “globally engaged farmers” as being usually well-educated and with strong and strategically important connections both within and outside the local context. Moscardo (2014) problematises the dichotomy of insider-outsider and identifies place attachment, social skills and motivation as potentially important variables in the study of rural entrepreneurship farmers’.

Materials and methods

An exploratory study, concerning an association of rural entrepreneurs operating in the Italian region of Marche (the Agritur-Aso Association), and a specific project of this association (the “Marche in Valigia” project) was conducted. Qualitative data were collected through the combination of in-depth interviews with key informants and consultation of documents such as press releases, economic reports, websites and blogs. Particularly, the key informants’ technique provided valid and credible information and has been crucial in gaining a better understanding of the case and its context (Casini et al., 2008; Montanari & Staniscia, 2009; Tremblay, 1955). Snowballing technique method was used, starting from two local government representatives and then interviewing owners of agrotourism facilities and innkeepers, farmers and farm-owners who know the region and its current transformative dynamics particularly well.

Moreover, one of the authors is involved as a facilitator for stakeholders’ engagement in “Gastronomic Cities”, a European Urbactproject on city branding development in the town of Fermo (<http://gastronomiccities.org/>). Thus, by means of an action research approach (Santini, 2013), there was the opportunity to collect data, deal with stakeholders, highlight case studies and discuss potential economic development paths during the whole of 2014 (Table 1). All these opportunities to gather information allowed for data triangulation, contributing to the study’s reliability and for framing the specific entrepreneurial initiative investigated in a broader context of territorial development.

| | |
|---|---|
| Stakeholders meetings in Fermo | Four meetings with 25/30 participants in each |
| Web survey on gastronomic events and activities | 35 respondents |
| In-depth interviews with key informants | Two local government representatives, four owners of agrotourism facilities and innkeepers, two farmers |

Table 1. Materials and methods adopted to collect data during the “Gastronomic Cities Project”.

The case of “flying farmers” in Marche

The context

Marche is a region of approximately 1.5 million inhabitants located in central Italy. Flat lands run along the Adriatic coast and rivers. Rural areas account for 95% of the regional territory and host 81% of the population (Cavicchi et al., 2013).

Marche pertains to the part of central Italy which is called *Terza Italia* (Third Italy). The Italian sociologist Arnaldo Bagnasco (1977) notes that the *Terza Italia* industrial structure is largely composed of small, family-owned and family-managed enterprises, and is closely linked to the *mezzadria* agricultural management system (sharecropping). After the Second World War, managerial skills and entrepreneurial attitudes, based on the growing experience of the sharecropping family, were broadly available in the region (Belfanti, 2009). Such skills were implicitly developed while organising the family members’ work, hiring labour and managing the incomes of the farms that, according to sharecropping contracts, had to be shared with the landowner.

In line with Becattini’s studies,¹ Belfanti (2009) observes that from the cultural heritage of ancient rural society some relevant assets emerged, including rural work ethics, flexibility and public-private partnership. This led to the establishment of a growing number of SMEs when the organisation of sharecropping began to collapse in the period after the war. Sharecropping, as a managerial method, which for centuries had characterised the daily

¹ “Giacomo Becattini has been one of Italy’s most influential social scientists worldwide during the last twenty-five years. His contributions to the history of Marshallian economic thought and to the field of local economic development are internationally acclaimed” (Trullén, 2010, p. 2).

lives of families in rural areas, was hence a crucial aspect of the transformation of the social and economic structure in *Terza Italia*.

Against this background of entrepreneurial creativity, Marche led the ranking of several socio-economic indicators in Italy until the current economic crisis. It was identified as the leading region for international exports, extreme production flexibility, craftsmanship and technical specialisation (Mucelli et al., 2015). Moreover, Marche was among the 15 most industrialised regions in Europe, with the highest ratio between companies and inhabitants (ISTAT, 2011).

Nevertheless, the recent economic crisis has contributed to a change in the environment and the local economy of Marche is suffering from movement towards delocalisation. OECD (2011) stresses that the lack of economic restructuring and adaptation to globalisation has made the region more vulnerable to the current financial and economic downturn in the world economy, and recommends to speed up the restructuring process in order to become more knowledge-intensive and innovative. One policy recommendation put forward by the OECD is that of “integrating agricultural and tourism industries to exploit entrepreneurship opportunities throughout the region, taking advantage of the natural scenic resources of Marche” (OECD, 2011, p. 34). In light of this clear transformation of the economic setting, many local entrepreneurs are changing the core of their business, at least they are trying to differentiate their production activity, and rural and gastronomic tourism is becoming a new source of innovation.

The Agritur-Aso Association

The Agritur-Aso association was founded by six owners of rural accommodation facilities and farms in 2007 in Valdaso, a valley between the Fermo and Ascoli provinces. This area is characterised by picturesque landscapes with small medieval hill towns, strong culinary traditions and many typical local products.

According to the association’s website (<http://www.agritur-aso.it/>), the aim of Agritur-Aso is to create projects for a better quality of life based on solidarity and sustainable tourism. Agritur-Aso promotes the collaboration between several stakeholders who operate in rural tourism offering different kinds of gastronomic products, hospitality services and also environmental education.

The data suggest that Agritur-Aso’s approach to business is rooted in the local region and, at the same time, it has an international outlook. From the data, it emerges that the

business model used by Agritur-Aso is based on strong traditions about mutual assistance, viewed as an integral part of the local farmers' lifestyle and ethics. This is evident in the local expression "*Lu rraiutu*", literally "re-help", according to which agricultural practices are shared on a voluntary basis between neighbouring farmers.

In the last few years, Agritur-Aso has promoted an initiative to increase the local communities' sense of belonging and pride, the "Laboratory on Mediterranean Diet". A research project called "The Seven Countries Study" (<http://sevencountriesstudy.com/>), which began in 1958, explored in detail the correlation between diet, various risk factors and cardiovascular disease rates across different countries and cultures. Montegiorgio, one of the municipalities in the Fermo area, was selected to represent the Mediterranean lifestyle. In 2014, as a result of numerous meetings, workshops and dissemination activities, the "Laboratory on Mediterranean Diet" was joined by professionals active in various sectors like tourism, agriculture, medicine, art, journalism and media. Nowadays, this project represents the cornerstone of many cultural initiatives focusing on food and ruralities.

In a broader context, it is important to note that in 2008, the Agritur-Aso received approval to join the international chain of Wigwam² Club, a Social Promotional Association, which has its headquarter in northern Italy and manages a network of more than 300 clubs in 15 countries. The Wigwam clubs seek to promote projects and activities to improve the quality of the environment, culture, traditions and life in general. Some clubs and projects are focused on organic agriculture, traditional food and drinks and rural tourism.

Rural tourism experiences of Agritur-Aso

With regard to tourism, data from the interviews suggest that Agritur-Aso's approach is in line with Wigwam's approach mentioned above, in terms of its focus on quality, and it also corresponds to recent developments in the experience economy. The elements typical of the experience economy outlined in the literature, in particular close contact and dialogue with customers, as well as the involvement of customers and the educational, escapist, entertainment and aesthetic profile of the consumption experience, are implicitly considered

² "Wigwam is the hut used by the Red Indian tribes who lived in the Great Lakes area of Canada for public meetings, talks and feasts. The reference to Red Indians suggests the sense of a just and balanced relationship with the environment and the need to protect local cultures, this being seen as a single people's contribution to the worldwide patrimony of knowledge and experience. 'Wigwam', the agreed meeting place where discussions are held and decisions are made regarding issues of common interest, allegorically expresses the principle of aggregation as the solution to problems and the conquest of an improved quality of life" (from Wigwam website <http://www.wigwam.it/Great-Britain/>).

in the development of rural tourism products. For instance, during the last few years, the association entrepreneurs have enhanced the relationship with their guests by offering them the opportunity to present their books to the local community, play classical music in the historical theatres and organise painting exhibitions. Such opportunity to express creativity contributes consistently to a form of escapism for entrepreneurs and the public, tourists and local people. This special attention to the performing arts is considered one of the key successes of the association, as pointed out by one respondent:

Through public events many encounters between foreigners and local artists, writers and journalist happened. This is a way to foster tourists' active involvement in the culture of the territory.

The Agritur-Aso events include folkloristic and religious festivals, rural cultural celebrations and exhibitions, and attract both local people and tourists. They are always performed in scenic settings, historical theatres in medieval town centres or natural areas with attractive landscapes. The attention to location is indicative of the willingness to offer aesthetic experiences. Beauty becomes the backdrop, if not an integral part of the event experience.

Many of the events have an entertainment component and some, especially those directed at tourists, also an educational one. The tourists are often offered educational experiences in the form of cooking classes, fruit picking and bread baking, arranged by the owners of agritourism facilities participating in the network. In this respect, one respondent commented:

This kind of experience is based on the use of local products, traditional recipes and the involvement of older people locally who can demonstrate and show and explain old traditions and customs.

Figure 1 illustrates some examples of Agrotur-Aso experiences using the framework developed by Pine and Gimore (1998) in relation to the experience economy.

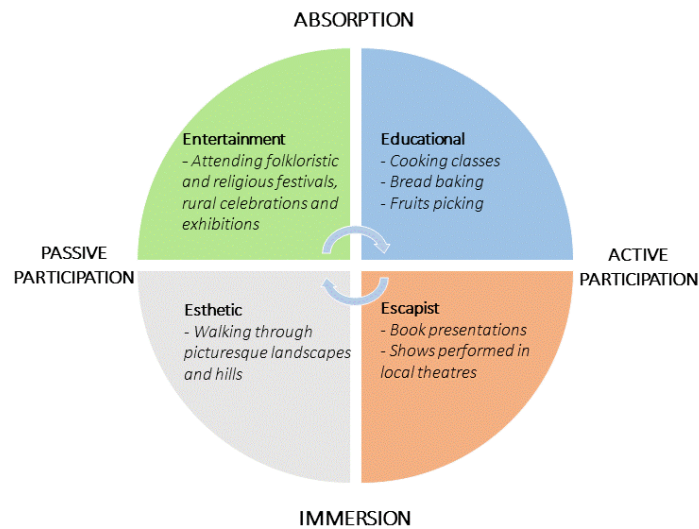


Figure 1. An illustration of the experiences offered by Agritur-Aso in relation to the four realms of the experience economy as presented by Pine and Gilmore (1998).

The data suggest that one of the main strategies used to develop rural tourism products in an experiential way can be related to the entrepreneurs' mobility. The project "Marche in Valigia" illustrates well how mobility for Agritur-Aso is an integrated part of a new form of rural entrepreneurship operating in line with some of the main features of the experience economy.

The "Marche in Valigia" project

The "Marche in Valigia" project was initiated by Agritur-Aso in 2009. As one of the most active members of the Agritur-Aso reveals:

The project idea, summarised by the title (literally: "Marche in your suitcase"), is to put in your suitcase pictures, videos, information, food and wine of the Marche and take them around Europe to export your territory abroad.

The main activity that is promoted by the project is the mobility of the members who, often without any economic incentives from local governments, organise meetings abroad during the tourist low season. The trigger for such meetings is often an invitation by those who have travelled to Italy and are keen to share with friends and relatives their holiday experiences. These meetings are public and often held in facilities offered by municipalities or chambers of commerce. They consist mainly of video presentations, photographic images and music

from Marche, cooking sessions, thematic dinners and food and wine tasting. These gatherings end with an invitation to visit Marche.

The entrepreneurs' social skills such as friendliness and affability during these meetings generate a sort of virtuous circle. This can be defined as a word-of-mouth promotional strategy. According to one respondent:

We don't need to spend money for brochures or famous testimonials to promote our land. We like to call this activity "relational tourism".

Similarly, the owner of an agritourist facility comments on the relational and personalised aspect of the experience:

We don't want to treat guests as anonymous tourists. It's a sort of antithesis of the common practice to relegate visitors in their rural facilities and apartments in a sort of "Indian reservation". When we have guests, we treat them as a part of our family and we leave them the chance to visit other country houses and hospitality facilities if we don't have availability of beds. According to the old "*rraiutu*" model, we recommend other facilities whose owners share with us our commitment for sustainable and ecological tourism and where we are sure that tourists can find only local products.

Since 2009, entrepreneurs have travelled to several European countries and for 2015 Japan has been added as a new destination. There is no specific planning for such travels; ideas for possible meetings and events arise through the active engagement with the tourists during the high season (spring and summer time), whilst the visits and exhibitions abroad are during winter time. This schedule of entrepreneurial activities allows an efficient redistribution of the workload during the whole year, "providing opportunity giving to exploit the scarce activity of the low season", as one of the entrepreneurs explains.

Before their visit overseas, the representatives of Agritur-Aso communicate their intention to travel to several stakeholders, inviting them to join the trip personally or through shipping their products. This invitation is directed to a wider audience than the official members of the association, as the aim is to bring real benefits to the whole region. In a recent trip to Belgium, products from 14 different producers were collected, including olive oil, wine, pasta, fruit in syrup and vegetables. There are usually three professionals on these trips, one of whom is a chef. After a cooking session and, sometimes, an exhibition, the producers' direct contact details are given to potential customers.

Recently, there have been various international agreements and business matching activities, for example, a new joint partnership between artisanal brewers from Belgium and

Italy, which was described by an associate as an initiative that aims “to share know-how and start new co-marketing activities”.

Findings and discussion

The main research question of this study addressed the link between new forms of mobility involving rural entrepreneurs and the experience economy approach. The investigated case concerns an entrepreneurs association in Marche (Italy) that has an approach to tourism and business that in general can be related to the main features of the experience economy. Even without explicitly mentioning the four experiential realms, the Agrotur-Aso activities, both in Italy and abroad, integrate the aesthetic, entertainment, educational and escapist aspects of consumption. This has been illustrated with the example of the “Marche in Valigia” project.

From the case study, it emerges also how the experience economy in the context of rural tourism is put into practice by the local entrepreneurs. Here, sociality and sense of belonging still embedded in local community seem to be important tools for promoting rural tourism. Particularly, it is evident how rural entrepreneurship, when explicitly referring to old farming habits like re-help (*lu rraiutu* in local dialect), is still alive among different stakeholders in rural settings, and can generate positive externalities for the whole community.

Interestingly, the entrepreneurs interviewed stated that their type of business model can be defined as “relational tourism”. This term, as reported in the previous section, was coined by Grolleau (1987) and it is related to the open-spiritedness of country people and their capacity to share through actions the *genius loci* or local identity of a region. In this specific case, stakeholders refer to something greater, a sort of “next level”. In fact, hospitality here becomes bi-univocal. Once tourists experience the Fermo area, they become so involved and passionate about the place that they often invite the owners of restaurants and country houses they have visited to make presentations, and hold workshops and tasting events abroad. Thus, through word-of-mouth, which starts with their visit to Italy, a virtuous circle is created.

If, on the one hand, the planning and management of this business seems unstructured and lacking long-term perspective, there is a clear understanding that every tourist can be the first ambassador of the region and, for this reason, an invitation for a visit overseas is a *leitmotif* of their daily hospitality activity. Thus, from this point of view, the business model is very simple and clear.

Moreover, it appears that, as suggested by Moscardo (2014), some complex patterns of interaction between tourism entrepreneurs in rural areas and other actors belonging to the local community exist. As evidenced above, several times the concept of re-help as an approach to increase the welfare of the local community emerged. This concept is part of the historical farming model of the Marche Region, formerly transferred as a bundle of know-how to the industrial districts, and now returning to rural settings. Thus, this behavioural approach represents a powerful tool to deal with the economic crisis and confirms the view of tourism as a resource or tool for wider community development. Moreover, such an approach can help to reintegrate agriculture within a diversified rural economy, addressing the local population's needs and contributing to sustainable development (Marsden, 2002).

Conclusions

The study concludes that innovative rural practices are developed collectively and in quite pragmatic ways. This process is based on the entrepreneurs' attachment to place, set of values, lifestyle motivations and mutual assistance.

The findings confirm the results of previous studies, suggesting that entrepreneurial processes in rural area can have more similarities with those in urban areas than is usually recognised. More specifically, the investigated practices include mobility and creativity, and are similar to the approaches of the experience economy. The Marchigiani farmers show flexibility in adopting a cosmopolitan lifestyle, travelling and performing food-related activities and engaging the interest of tourists. This is a holistic approach to regional development, whereby the local agricultural products are promoted in a way that local food becomes a "facilitator" in the process of experiencing the region. Agriculture and tourism are integrated in the process promoting the local area in an innovative way based on personalised and engaging channels.

The findings show that local entrepreneurs have quite an elaborate approach to the marketing of agricultural products and tourism, as well as in relation to local development. This seems to correspond to the conceptualisation of entrepreneurs as reflective practitioners. In particular, the central role recognized by the entrepreneurs to relations, with other entrepreneurs and also with the local communities and tourists, emerges as an important success factor and could be further investigated in future studies. In the case of relations of mutual help among local actors, the historical and cultural background of the area investigated seems to be relevant. Therefore, future studies could include cases from various areas that differ in terms of historical and cultural background.

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