

Telling a Story to Share Knowledge: A Case Study of Agrifood Corporate Museum

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Abstract: To respond to changes in the global competitive context, organizations must base their competitive advantage on the enhancement of new knowledge within production and decision-making processes. At the same time, the continuous processes of innovation and technological advancement define a higher rate of knowledge obsolescence. With these premises, organizations find themselves constantly introducing new knowledge into their processes and, at the same time, setting aside knowledge that has now become obsolete. Corporate museums represent organizations that collect organizational artifacts of a parent organization. The main theoretical contributions on the phenomenon of corporate museums have offered a focused contribution on the marketing and corporate communication perspective. In fact, there are few studies on corporate museums in knowledge management studies. From the theoretical perspective of knowledge management, corporate museums represent a place where the knowledge of a parent organization is collected and narrated through its organizational artefacts. This study aims to analyze corporate museums as a place for collecting, exploitation and transferring the organizational memory of a parent organisation. The study is based on the analysis of a case study. A corporate museum connected to the agrifood sector was analysed, through interviews and analysis of company documents. The findings of this study can be traced back to theoretical contributions and practical implications. From the perspective of theoretical contribution, this study analyzes the corporate museum as “ba”, or as a place for collecting and sharing knowledge. From the perspective of managerial implications, the results highlight that the corporate museum can take on a strategic role in the valorisation and diffusion of organizational memory. It follows that the museum can be considered as a BA capable of generating new knowledge and innovation to be transferred within the parent organization. The results of this study offer new theoretical and empirical contributions to studies on knowledge management, on the phenomenon of corporate museums linked to the agrifood sector. The agrifood sector has demonstrated a greater need to enhance and implement knowledge in its organizational processes, through mechanisms that take into consideration the peculiarities of the sector.

Keywords: Knowledge Transfer, Corporate Museum, Agrifood Sector, Story Telling, Organizational Memory, (max 5 words)

1. Introduction

In recent years, companies have learned that they must base their competitive advantage on the valorization of knowledge. Knowledge, therefore, can be understood as a strategic lever to increase and maintain competitive advantage (Mårtensson, 2000; Vesperi and Gagnidze, 2023). Consolidated literature on knowledge management has highlighted that some sectors have a greater propensity to enhance and implement knowledge in their internal processes. Within KM studies, it is possible to identify empirical observations linked to specific sectors such as automotive (Canonico, et al., 2021) or hospitality (Hallin and Marnburg, 2008; Fauzi, 2020). At the same time, it is possible to distinguish contributions within knowledge management studies on public administrations (Syed-Ikhsan and Rowland, 2004; Massaro, et al., 2015) or small and medium enterprises (Lim and Klobas, 2000; Yew Wong and Aspinwall, 2004; Durst and Runar Edvardsson, 2012; Durst, et al., 2023).

Despite the strategic role that the agrifood sector plays in the global economic system, the attention of KM scholars has been scarce. In fact, knowledge management studies appear scarce on the agri-food sector and agri-food organisations. For this reason, the agri-food sector and agri-food organizations represent a new challenge for KM scholars. It is possible that agri-food organizations are micro and small (Ménard and Klein, 2004) with low propensity for innovation and low investments in research and development and characterized by low-knowledge managerial practices. From the point of view of valorising knowledge, agri-food organizations represent an interesting case study as they simultaneously combine the valorisation of traditional knowledge and the need to innovate. With the aim of valorising traditional knowledge, some agri-food organizations have created corporate museums.

There are still few studies dealing with corporate museums linked to agri-food organisations, making use of theoretical frameworks based on organizational theory, and in particular linking corporate museums to knowledge transfer and organizational memory.

This study aims to offer some initial reflections to fill this gap in the literature. This study - in the context of management and organizational theory studies - analyzes the strategic role of the company museum as a form of organizational memory and heritage capable of transferring knowledge. To achieve this objective, a qualitative descriptive methodology based on the analysis of secondary sources is used. We present the rest of this work as follows: after this (i) introduction, (ii) the main theoretical elements on Corporate Museum, Organizational Memory and agri-food organizations are discussed. Below, (iii) the methodological process is illustrated. Finally, (iv) the main conclusions and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Corporate Museum

The first corporate museums began to spread in the early 1900s. Corporate museums can be defined as corporate spaces dedicated to conserving, enhancing, and archiving organizational artifacts of the parent company. Analyzing the literature, various purposes and objectives attributed to corporate museums emerge. It is possible to trace the final aim of the first corporate museums to the "collection" of corporate artifacts (Iannone and De Chiara, 2019; Martinez, 2020). From the perspective of knowledge management (KM), corporate museums can share and transmit the knowledge and values created within the parent organization. The corporate museum, therefore, contains and represents the organizational memory of another organization. The representation and narration of organizational memory allow the organization to improve dialogue with its external and internal stakeholders (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020).

In the vast and varied landscape of KM studies, only a few studies have investigated the phenomenon of corporate museums using the theoretical frameworks of organizational theory, based on the constructs of organizational memory and knowledge transfer. This article explores corporate museums using the theoretical perspective of knowledge management, as a form of organizational memory, and when they are strategically used as a tool to transfer knowledge from the organization. The concept of organizational memory can be traced back to the concept of depository (Huber, 1991; Grant, 1996; Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Following this approach, memory can be defined as a set of knowledge present within an organization in the form of documents, informational material, or any other form that can facilitate internal activities and be easily accessible. From this perspective, the artifact takes on a particular meaning. The corporate museum becomes a tool for transferring knowledge and daily practices through the narration of the culture and organizational memory of the parent company.

Some elements of organizational culture are codified and shared in the organization's formal documents (such as official company documents, strategic plans, internal communications, disciplinary procedures). These documents become organizational artifacts, often displayed and used in corporate museums. These artifacts make an organization distinguishable from other organizations.

Corporate museums are not just passive archives of objects and documents but play an active role in constructing and communicating corporate identity. They can serve as marketing tools, enhancing the company's image with customers and the public. They can also act as training tools for employees, providing a deeper understanding of the company's history, values, and practices. Through curated exhibits and narratives, corporate museums can emphasize the company's innovations and successes, creating a sense of pride and belonging among employees.

Moreover, corporate museums can serve as platforms for dialogue and collaboration between the company and its various stakeholders. They can host events, conferences, and workshops that facilitate the exchange of ideas and knowledge. These spaces can also be used to promote corporate social responsibility, showcasing the company's efforts in sustainability, ethics, and community involvement.

A crucial aspect of corporate museums is their ability to adapt and evolve over time. With the advent of digitalization, many corporate museums are integrating digital technologies to enhance the accessibility and interactivity of their collections. Through virtual tours, digital archives, and interactive applications, corporate museums can reach a wider and more diverse audience, overcoming the physical limitations of traditional exhibition space.

In conclusion, corporate museums represent a key element in knowledge management and the construction of organizational memory. They not only preserve the company's past but also actively contribute to shaping its

present and future by facilitating knowledge transfer, improving communication, and strengthening corporate identity.

2.2 BA and Knowledge Management

The concept of "Ba" was introduced by Ikujiro Nonaka and Noboru Konno in their 1998 paper, "The Concept of 'Ba': Building a Foundation for Knowledge Creation." This concept is integral to understanding how knowledge is created and shared within organizations. Rooted in Japanese philosophy, "Ba" refers to a shared space for emerging relationships. It is a dynamic context, physical or virtual, that fosters knowledge creation, sharing, and utilization.

"Ba" is a Japanese term that roughly translates to "place" or "space", but in the context of Nonaka and Konno's work, it embodies more than just a physical location. It represents a shared context in which knowledge is shared, created, and utilized. According to Nonaka and Konno, "Ba" is a space where individuals come together and interact, and through this interaction, knowledge is created and expanded. "Ba" can be physical (such as meeting rooms), virtual (such as online forums), mental (such as shared experiences), or any combination of these. The key characteristic of "Ba" is its ability to provide a context that encourages participants to share their tacit knowledge, which is personal, context-specific, and hard to formalize, making it difficult to communicate to others. Nonaka and Konno identified four types of "Ba" each corresponding to a stage in the SECI (Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Internalization) model of knowledge creation:

- **Originating Ba:** This is the space where individuals share experiences, feelings, and mental models. It is primarily associated with the socialization phase, where tacit knowledge is shared through direct interaction and shared experiences. For example, informal meetings or social gatherings within an organization can serve as Originating Ba.
- **Interacting Ba:** This space supports the externalization phase, where tacit knowledge is articulated into explicit concepts. Interacting Ba facilitates dialogue and collective reflection, enabling individuals to express their tacit knowledge in a form that can be shared with others. Workshops and brainstorming sessions often act as Interacting Ba.
- **Cyber Ba:** This virtual space supports the combination phase, where explicit knowledge is systematized and combined. Cyber Ba utilizes technology to enable the sharing and combination of explicit knowledge across time and space. Online databases, intranets, and knowledge management systems are examples of Cyber Ba.
- **Exercising Ba:** This space supports the internalization phase, where explicit knowledge is absorbed and converted into tacit knowledge by individuals. Exercising Ba provides the context for learning by doing, where individuals internalize knowledge through practice and experience. On-the-job training and simulations are examples of Exercising Ba.

"Ba" plays a crucial role in the SECI model of knowledge creation. It provides the necessary context for the conversion of knowledge from tacit to explicit and vice versa. By facilitating the interaction and exchange of knowledge among individuals, "Ba" helps to create a shared understanding and collective knowledge within an organization.

Understanding and leveraging "Ba" can significantly enhance an organization's ability to create and manage knowledge. By intentionally creating and nurturing different types of "Ba" organizations can foster a culture of continuous learning and innovation.

In conclusion, the concept of "Ba" as articulated by Nonaka and Konno is a foundational element in the understanding of knowledge creation within organizations. By recognizing and fostering different types of "Ba," organizations can create an environment that supports continuous knowledge creation, sharing, and utilization, leading to sustained innovation and competitive advantage.

3. Methodology

To analyze the phenomenon of corporate museum enterprises it is necessary to also consider the involvement of the parent organization. In fact, analyzing the corporate museum, without taking into consideration the influence and relationship with the parent organization, could lead to a limited vision and create distorted results. For this reason, the complexity of the analysis phenomenon is amplified. To resolve these critical issues, consistently with studies with similar objectives (Nissley and Casey, 2002; Vacca, 2014; Vesperi, et al., 2022), this study adopted a qualitative methodology with an exploratory approach. The present study is based on a

qualitative methodology, through an exploratory analysis, with semi-structured narrative interviews. The qualitative nature allows us to explore a phenomenon that is not well defined and understand aspects that are still unseen. Therefore, a qualitative approach seems suitable for the analysis of a complex phenomenon, such as that of corporate museums. The qualitative methodology based on a case study, therefore, was considered an appropriate method to obtain an overall view on corporate museums and the relationship with the parent company. This methodology has the main advantage of adopting an exploratory and qualitative research design to investigate the phenomenon in detail (Eisenhardt, 1989; Locke, 2020, Budhwar, et al., 2023), considered complex, recent and poorly defined. A company museum connected to a parent company operating in the agrifood sector has been identified.

The data and information were collected between January 2024 and April 2024, integrating multiple sources. We used internal company documents, such as annual reports, internal company reports and company websites. In agreement with the company and the interviewees, all names have been made anonymous and the documents not directly traceable, to guarantee their confidentiality. The manager of the corporate museum was interviewed. 3 interviews were conducted. The interviews, with the interviewee's consent, were transcribed and shared. This allowed us to eliminate interpretative errors and distortions. Furthermore, this allowed us to increase the quality of the interviews, collect comments on the interviews and their content. The interviews were reanalyzed using a narrative approach (Boje, 2001; Czarniaswka, 2004). We analyzed the interviews as texts, identifying the relational dynamics between the corporate museum and the parent company and practices related to knowledge management.

4. Results and Discussion

Since there is a vast literature on knowledge management (KM), but observations on corporate museums still appear scarce; the main objective of this study was to fill this gap. Especially within knowledge management studies, corporate museums are still little explored. This condition has strongly influenced this study. In fact, it was necessary to carry out an exploratory study.

The focus on corporate museums is justified as they represent containers of organizational artifacts, strongly connected to the parent companies. The analysis of corporate museums is characterized by the sector in which the parent company operates. The results of this study confirmed what has just been highlighted. In fact, the interviews revealed the strong bond and the knowledge transfer relationship between the parent organization and the corporate museum. Knowledge is conveyed to the corporate museum in the form of artifacts.

Analyzing knowledge within the corporate museum represents an indirect way to analyze knowledge within the parent company. Understanding the historical evolutions of the parent organization, therefore, appears necessary to understand the different forms of knowledge that are present within the corporate museum. This is the prerequisite for the analysis of the corporate museum. The observed case study has highlighted that the corporate museum is able to simultaneously collect, archive and valorize different types of knowledge, represented in different forms. The representation of knowledge, in the form of organizational artefacts, represents the evolution of KM practices used within the parent company.

The interviews have highlighted different aspects. In particular, the attention has emerged.

The second aspect is the strategic use that is attributed to the corporate museum. In fact, the interviews have highlighted that the corporate museum must not represent a collection of organizational artefacts, but must valorize the knowledge present within the corporate museum and generate advantages for both the corporate museum and the parent organization. In fact, the main studies on corporate museums have limited themselves to defining corporate museums as marketing tools. Without any advantage for the museum itself. The museum, according to these studies, is a tool that shifts all the benefits of its activity to the parent organization. From the interviews, however, it emerged that the corporate museum must be a stable and autonomous organization. The interviews highlight that the corporate museum must generate a competitive advantage for the museum and at the same time for the parent organization. In fact, through the valorization of knowledge considered obsolete by the parent organization, the corporate museum must generate value (not only economic) for itself and for the parent organization. The interviewees, in fact, highlighted that the corporate museum should return new knowledge to the parent organization. In this context, a BA is generated that allows the reuse of obsolete knowledge to undertake new paths of innovation and knowledge creation. The interviewees stated that the corporate museum must represent a shared space with the employees of the parent organization in order to spread the values of the organizational culture of the parent organization and, above all, encourage the development of new ideas, creativity and innovation that return to the parent company in the form of

innovation. The process of creating new knowledge within the corporate museum still appears not completely clear. The interviewees expressed the intent to achieve this goal. At the same time, no certain element has emerged. Until now, no concrete results have been presented regarding the use of the corporate museum as a BA. Our results highlight that it is therefore not possible to analyze the corporate museum independently, but we must understand the deep relationship between the parent company and the corporate museum. From the interviews it was possible to distinguish the phases of acquisition, archiving and sharing of knowledge within the corporate museum. This study is not without limitations. These limitations, however, can offer KM and corporate museum scholars potential opportunities for future research directions. The main limitation of this study is related to the methodology adopted. The study did not take into account elements such as the economic sector, the geographical area and the economic and socio-cultural conditions. For this reason, future studies could focus their attention by trying to consider discriminating variables such as the economic sector and the relative level of diffusion or rate of obsolescence of the widespread technology, organizational size or organizational knowledge.

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