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THE CREATION OF AUTHENTIC
EXPERIENCES IN THE RURAL
TOURISM SECTOR: THE CASE
STUDY OF MERILL

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I. Introduction

This essay will evaluate the creation of authentic experiences within a rural tourism context. The example of choice is the social enterprise of Merill Rural Network, where I completed my internship over the last month. A literature review will set the context regarding the concepts of authenticity, rural tourism, and the importance of creating authentic experiences. After this, Merill Rural Network will be introduced along with its history, current-day operations, and its mission. As follows, the effectiveness of Merill Rural Network in creating authentic experiences and its role within rural communities will be assessed.

II. Authenticity in rural tourism

As a kind of countermovement against mass tourism, more and more tourists seek an ‘*authentic*’ experience that takes them off the beaten path. There is a lot of research within the literature regarding authenticity as a concept, but with many conflicting views, the concept remains ambiguous. As defined by Oxford English Dictionary (2021), authenticity is: “*The quality of being true; an accurate reflection of real life*”; however, authenticity in the context of tourism is much more complex. There are three leading schools of thought regarding authenticity: the *objectivist*, the *constructionist*, and the *existential* authenticity approach (Wang, 1999). The objectivist approach sees authenticity as a non-negotiable factor. Authenticity is experienced through identifying the toured objects or attractions as authentic, often depending on external factors of reinforcement such as interpretations or aesthetic aspects (Frisvoll, 2013; Wang, 1999). Contrary to the non-negotiability of objective authenticity, the constructive authenticity approach sees a greyer area where the judgement of authenticity is formed based on an individual's point of view, beliefs, perspectives, and powers (Wang, 1999, p.351). The perceived authenticity is constructed by the key element of the tourist-host encounter (Croes et al., 2013). Whereas the former two approaches mainly focused on the toured objects or attractions, existential authenticity places the importance on the tourist engaging in activities as a distinctive source of the authentic experience (Wang, 1999, p.352). This ‘being’ part of the experience is an experiential way for the tourist to understand and temporarily become part of the narrative of this different host culture (Zhang et al., 2019).

The biggest problem of authenticity in tourism is inauthenticity. The well-known concept of ‘*staged authenticity*’ by MacCannell (1973) was written in the context of the front and back rooms of the tourist experience. The front room is the encounter between host and tourist, whereas the back room is where the host is in their true authentic atmosphere. He identifies the staged authenticity as a play in the front room, turning the host environment into

a living museum. The shift towards the want of authentic experiences, sees the tourist attempting to access the back room (MacCannell, 1973). In his objectivist authenticity approach, MacCannell (1973) does not see the possibility of an authentic experience if the tourist cannot enter the back room. It must be mentioned that the back room is an inherently private space and opening the door for tourists implies a sense of loss of control for the host (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013). Therefore, Daugstad & Kirchengast's (2013) suggestion for a '*pseudo-backstage*' can help create a truly authentic experience. As the host can maintain their privacy and complete control over daily operations, they can remain their true authentic self (Croes et al., 2013). As the social construction between tourists, products and residents can all remain authentic, it can be argued that this has the biggest chance of leading to the creation a truly authentic experience (Frisvoll, 2013).

Authenticity is particularly important for tourism that represents either the past or '*the Other*' as it is a vital element in the tourist's satisfaction (Wang, 1999, p.350). Especially rural tourism uses this authenticity as a key aspect of the experience (Frisvoll, 2013). Although rural tourism sounds like a straightforward concept, tourism in a rural setting; it is much more complex as it deals with historical, infrastructural, environmental, economic, and societal variables. Rural tourism can be seen as a type of tourism in a rural area that is functionally rural where, usually, buildings and settlements are small in scale. These 'attractions' are still traditional in character as the connection to tourism grew slow and organically, ensuring local control and sustainability of tourism practices in these often-vulnerable regions (Lane, 1994, p.14). Within the rural tourism industry, authenticity is created by the interaction between ideas, locality, and human practice (Frisvoll, 2012, p.276).

Especially in small island destinations, such as Malta, original tourism strategies focused on increasing volume to make up for their small market size (Croes et al., 2013, p.3). This, however, led to suffering under the detrimental effects of mass tourism. Today, these destinations are using reinvention strategies to shift the focus from volume to value, often using their unique cultural identity to offer authentic and unique experiences (Croes et al., 2013). As the rural aspect is often a part of this unique identity, rural tourism can be an efficient tool to differentiate the destination while distributing the tourist influx to other lesser-visited locations. This idea can also be seen in the tourism strategy for 2021–2030 by Visit Malta, where recognition is given to the rural dimensions of the Maltese Islands, which can be a strong main brand value in rural zones. Especially Gozo is put forward as ideal for rural tourism experiences (Visit Malta et al., 2021). There is already a company that saw the opportunity for rural tourism in the Maltese Islands a decade ago, namely Merill Rural Network. As they focus on network

building with rural communities and empowering them to participate in rural tourism without giving up their farms or workshops, they are a good case study on how to create authentic experiences.

III. Merill Rural Network

Merill Rural Network was founded in 2010 by Christian and Jeanette Borg. Seeing the need for alternatives to the traditional mass tourism on the Maltese Islands, they created an alternative redirecting the tourists to more rural and lesser-visited places. Merill offered a variety of *eco-tourism* itineraries where tourists, both domestic and international, could experience the ruralness of Malta and its unique nature. These tours were mainly sightseeing-based and were limited to publicly accessible spaces. Including the rural community could offer tourists authentic rural experiences while also engaging in sustainable practices that help protect the vulnerable rural areas (Gilberti, 2022). Merill started to create a network that brought together farmers, breeders, and artisans. This network focused on bringing social and economic value to its members through rural tourism, allowing them to diversify their offer and income and valorise their produce (Merill, 2022b). Although initially a tour operator, Merill now entirely focuses on the role of a social enterprise. The commercial activities have been transferred to the sister company of *Malta Rural Tours*, a collaboration between Merill and Exclusively Malta (Gilberti, 2022). In this relationship, Merill can be identified as the facilitator that provides the right people for the experiences which have been curated by Exclusively Malta. This gave Merill the possibility to entirely focus on the social and eco aspects of the network while also maintaining and improving its relations. During my internship, I worked for both companies where Merill allowed me to meet the farmers and artisans, and the importance of networking, while Malta Rural Tours gave me an insight into the logistics and development of these rural tourism experiences.

As a social enterprise, Merill has the following mission: *‘to nurture alternative experiences for locals and tourists, which contribute directly towards the conservation of the environment and empowerment of the rural communities’* (Merill, 2022b). This is achieved by collaborating with small-scale farmers and artisans, and other stakeholders that help keep the rural areas green and keep traditions alive. The current main aim is to *‘raise awareness about local agriculture, revive traditions, and empower the rural community to diversify their income in a sustainable manner’* (Merill, 2022b). The two pillars upon which the network is built are rural tourism and local products. Merill aims to create value for the hosts and bridge the gap between consumers and producers using these tools. In order to join the network, a (potential)

member must fulfil the three premises of alignment. These are the following: (1) *Operate a functioning bona fide farm or workshop*, (2) *promote 100% local wherever possible*, (3) *Be committed to providing value-added* (Merill, 2022c). These alignments lay the base for the functioning of the network. If one premise is not adhered to, the member cannot enter or stay within the network.

Merill uses the ‘Hub and spoke’ business model, which can be seen on Figure 1. The graph shows that the main enterprise’s goals are empowerment, innovation, and activism. With Merill as the central hub, it supports its spokes (members, partners, and collaborators) in creating its own brands and customer loyalty (Gilberti, 2022). As a social enterprise, Merill does not have any competitors; instead, it sees potential partners in them, which can aid in reaching the social objectives.

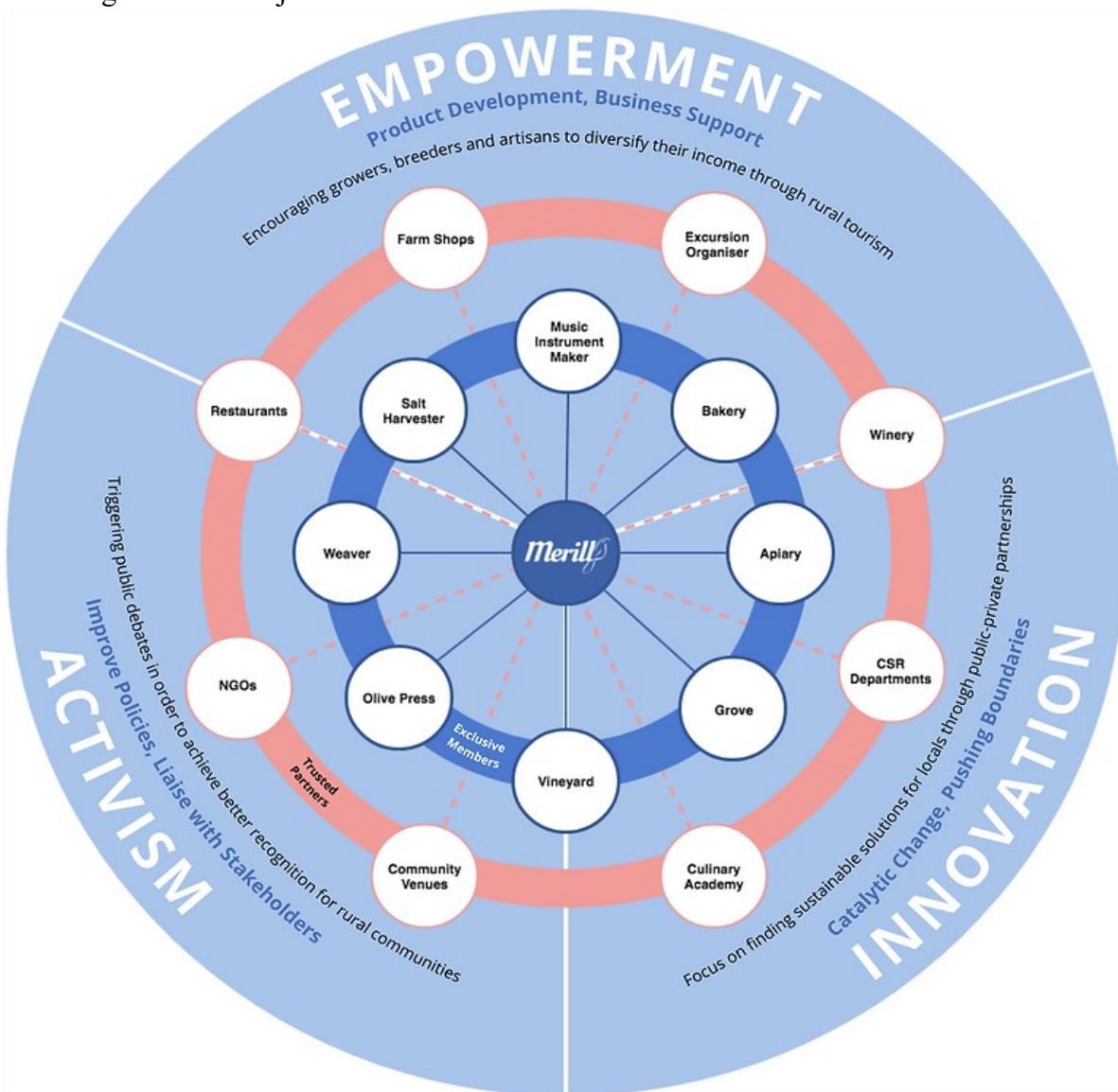


Fig 1 Merill's Hub and Spoke Model (Merill, 2022a)

IV. Merill, in the process of creating authentic experiences

As authentic experiences are such an ambiguous concept, there is no set framework to measure authenticity. However, through Merill's operations and my internship experience, an analysis can be made of some of the prevalent concepts regarding authenticity discussed in the literature review. Applying this to Merill can provide insights into how authentic experiences can be created in a non-invasive and sustainable manner. In line with Croes et al. (2013, p.3) statement that "*the tourist-host encounter is the key component of delivering an authentic experience,*"; Merill commits to empowering the hosts through product development and business support so hosts can stay true to their authentic self, meaning they can offer authentic rural tourism services.

In the Frisvolls (2013) tourists, products, and residents' social construction, Merill directly influences the latter two. Merill provides support for its members entering the rural tourism industry through the network. This can exist from various things, from training to helping hands. On the product side, Merill wants to close the gap between the producers and consumers (Gilberti, 2022). This is done by only using local products during tasting sessions or other experiences with a gastronomical aspect. Keeping both the product and resident aspect authentic, it only needs a tourist looking for genuine experiences to complete the equation fully.

Although my time at Merill was limited, I was able to look at the authentic experience creation from all angles that were identified by Wang (1999), namely objectivist, constructive and existentialist. Through the three premises of alignment, Merill made authenticity non-negotiable, which belongs to the objective authenticity approach. Especially the first alignment that a member must '*operate a functioning bona fide farm or workshop*' (Merill, 2022c), puts the emphasis on staying true to the authentic self of the host. An example of this is the ongoing negotiation of a sheep farmer who would like to become part of the network. The farmer in question wanted to convert some of his property into tourism accommodation to accommodate more tourists. However, Merill wants members to organically grow their brand, with the priority being their current farming operations. Building these accommodations would go against the first alignment without the clear need. If this farmer would turn to tourism as his primary income, it could even be considered as staged authenticity during the farm visits. Instead of farming being his 'lifestyle,' it becomes a type of show for tourism purposes. Moreover, it could be argued that Merill aids in the creation of a certain pseudo-backroom. Merill provides its members, perhaps indirectly, the necessary means to let tourists in the backroom while emphasizing the importance of maintaining control over the situations to continue their daily operations as farmers or artisans.

Looking at Merill from the constructive authenticity angle, the construction of the tourist and host interaction requires Merill to get to know its members' wants and needs. This is a very personal subject and differs from member to member. For example, the owners of Tan-Nixxiegha Olive Grove want limited control during the experience. They prefer a guide to walk the tourists through the experience, while the owner of the Mar Casar Winery feels more comfortable with doing this himself. Both experiences are equally authentic once the tourist engages with the host. As this experience is carefully constructed in cooperation with Merill and the members, it adds a level of authenticity once the members interact with the tourist.

The last approach is existential authenticity, which I think Merill relies upon the most. This existential authenticity is found within the interaction between the host and the tourist. However, as Merill is no longer connected to the commercial side, it can only aid with the needs of the host to let this interaction go smoothly. For example, one of the members is a baker that offers a pastizzi-making experience. This allows tourists to become part of the cultural narrative and enjoy an activity with the host. As the baker has had this bakery for almost his entire life, he continues to practice his craft and share it with the tourists.

As authenticity can be identified from all angles, it seems safe to say that Merill is an example of best practice in creating an authentic experience as an 'outsider' of the rural tourism sector. Outsider in the way that it is not directly part of the commercial aspect of tourism. To summarize it in one sentence, Merill demonstrates the importance of community support when developing authentic rural tourism experiences. Furthermore, the engagement of the host in the experience is the crucial factor in reaching genuine authenticity.

V. Conclusion

Authenticity is a nearly impossible concept to measure or define as there is no size fits all. As authenticity is often one of the main selling points of rural tourism, it is, however, essential to have an idea of how this authenticity is formed. As these authentic experiences directly relate to both the satisfaction of host and tourist, great thought and care should be put into the making of these experiences. Looking at Merill as a case study, the importance of the empowerment and well-being of the host becomes prevalent. From an objective, constructive, and existential authenticity approach, Merill ticks multiple boxes when looking at the creation of authenticity. The main key point is that the rural community should never be excluded nor ignored when turning towards the integration of rural tourism within a region. As these regions are already quite vulnerable, quality authentic experiences will aid in the protection of these areas as well as the preservation of cultural identity.

In short, together with the commercial arm of Merill, Malta Rural Tours, Merill is the perfect placement to learn more about the power of community development and sustainability within rural tourism. Even with my limited time at Merill, I got to learn a lot about the importance of networking, rural tourism, and giving power to the local rural communities.

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