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Social sustainability and actor engagement in tourist service ecosystems

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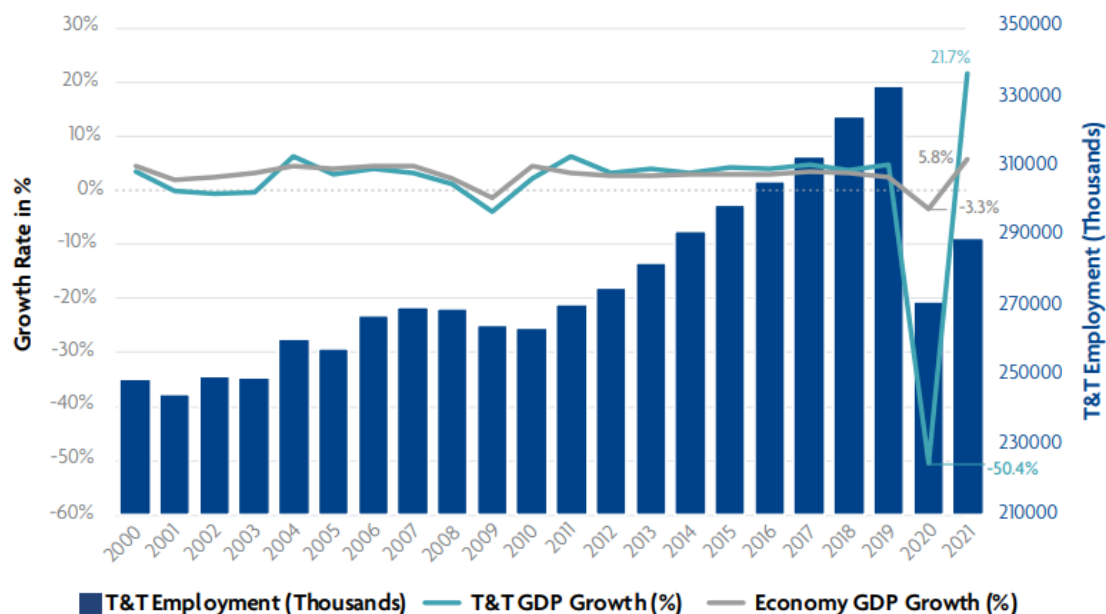
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Introduction

A key sector for global growth, the travel and tourism industry has displayed a continuous growth and a consistent expansion worldwide, especially since the 80s, when the concept of organized holidays was introduced allowing a greater seasonality of tourist flows (Zuelow, 2015). Subsequently, it became an essential commodity for many, establishing globally as a mass phenomenon, and at the beginning of the twentieth century, it began to diversify further, especially thanks to the expansion of the Internet and the development of digital technologies.

This usually constant growth slows down in case of negative economic conditions or in presence of extraordinary events. Indeed, after the exceptional and forced contraction of the global tourism sector due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and its connected lockdowns, it was recorded a negative impact in term of physical travel and social interactions: two fundamental and distinctive pillars of the tourist phenomenon. Nonetheless, in 2021 a slow but steady recovery has started (cf. *Figure 1*), both globally and at Italian national level, although according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) the industry will not reach pre-crisis levels until 2024 (WTTC, 2022).¹

Figure 1 – Economic impact timeline: 2000 – 2021



Source: WTTC, *Travel & Tourism Economic Impact Global Trends 2022*

¹ <https://wtcc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2022/EIR2022-Global%20Trends.pdf>

Specifically, if in 2019 the tourism sector represented one of the largest in the world and the economic impact of global travel and tourism was 10.3% of global GDP, employing 1/10 of the world's workforce, of 333 million, and in 2020 saw the loss of 62 million jobs and a decrease in GDP of 50.4%, in 2021 there was a beginning of recovery, slower than expected – due to stringent restrictions and the lack of coordination among governments to tackle the pandemic – that saw a GDP increase of 21.7% and of 6.7% in terms of jobs recovery (WTTC, 2022).

As for the tourism sector within the Italian national borders, accordingly to ISTAT – The Italian National Institute of Statistics (2020; 2022), 2019 had represented a historical record in terms of tourists flow and turnover, to the point that this industry represented 6% of national GDP and 7% of the country's job employment.² Aligned to the global trends, these values decreased in 2020, and saw a slow recovery in 2021, representing 4.1% of national GDP, but still registering 1/6 of vacant job positions.³

But what has surely emerged as further change, both on a global and national scale, are travellers' behaviours and destinations (Hall et al., 2020; Ramkissoon, 2023). Domestic tourism has increased in many markets, since people tend to travel closer; the focus on health and safety measures has grown, and nature, rural tourism and road trips have emerged as popular travel choices due to travel limitations and the quest for open-air experiences. Moreover, an increasing number of tourists have started to give more importance to issues such as sustainability, authenticity and local hood. Some of the main interests and needs of tourists are linked to the idea of creating a positive impact on local communities, reducing the environmental footprint and increasing the research for authenticity and sense of belonging (UNWTO, 2021).⁴

Not willing to consider only the purely economic sphere, the analysis of the tourism sector can be further framed in a wider and multidisciplinary context. While tourism contributes more and more significantly to the overall development of a territory – mainly considering the economic perspective, it is also conceived as a "local product" that takes its own value for the nature of uniqueness and diversity related to the environmental, cultural, historical and social context of each individual territory (Neto, 2007; Lorenzini et al., 2011). The actors involved in tourism can in fact

² <https://www.istat.it/it/files//2020/12/C19.pdf>

³ <https://www.istat.it/storage/ASI/2022/capitoli/C19.pdf>

⁴ <https://webunwto.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-12/2020 Year in Review 0.pdf>

stimulate processes of development, safeguard and promotion of local resources, tangible and intangible, fostering positive circuits of investment in infrastructures, services, activities and projects (Gato et al., 2022).

Due to this multifaced aspect, the tourism industry is broadly recognised as a strategic sector and a real opportunity in the global economic sphere and is likely to become the leading and fastest industry in the world (Zhao and Li, 2018; D'Arco et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the tourism sector declared a climate emergency in 2020 (Scott and Gössling, 2022).

This recently emerged issue stems from the dual nature of the tourism phenomenon. On one hand it can be seen as an opportunity to create jobs (Fawaz et al., 2014), redistribute wealth equally (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006), and promote economic growth, contributing to local and regional development and cultural heritage preservation (Buckley, 2012; Cárdenas-García et al., 2015). On the other hand, it presents some important constraints and problems. Among these, it is possible to include the enormous energy consumption (Streimikiene et al., 2021); the actual inability to redistribute economic revenues for some developing countries, as in the case of the leakage phenomenon (Niñerola et al., 2019); the crisis of particular traditions and cultures, resulting from their abandonment (Jones and Wynn, 2019); the exploitation of lands and environmental resources that has led to the damage of nature, flora and fauna, and to the transformation of the morphology of the territory, opening the much-discussed debate on climate change (Jamal and Watt, 2011; Scott and Gössling, 2022).

In order to try to avoid or, at least, to limit the increase of the negative effects of tourism, the concept of sustainability and sustainable development and, consequently, of sustainable tourism has been introduced into international research and practice for about 30 years, seeing a peak of interest, especially since 2019 and in conjunction with the strict restrictions due to COVID-19.

Its conceptualization dates back to 1987, with the publication of the report "Our Common Future", also known as The Brundtland Report. In this context, sustainability has been defined as "a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987).

According to this definition, research on sustainable tourism has begun to visualize it as a phenomenon consisting of three related dimensions, namely economic, environmental and social –

or socio-cultural (Purvis et al., 2019), which must be balanced to generate positive effects, such as meeting the needs of host communities and improving long-term living standards, contributing to their development (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005; UNWTO, 2014; Zolfani et al., 2015).

Specifically, economic sustainability concerns the ability of non-compromising the economic growth, so as to maintain its benefits within the local economy and redistribute them equally throughout the community. The environmental sphere is mainly related to actions to protect and preserve biodiversity, since natural resources are limited, and to safeguard places of communities' identity. This last aspect is necessarily linked to the social and cultural sides of sustainability, aimed at respecting the identity and culture of communities, in the perspective of ensuring the well-being of the local population and the safeguarding of cultural heritage (Ciegis et al., 2009; Soini and Birkeland, 2014; Morgan et al., 2015).

Although the “three pillars” have become common and popular throughout the literature, they are not universal. Some scholars consider additional aspects, such as the institutional or political ones to regulate tourism flows (Turcu, 2013), and the technical or technological ones to expand the exchanges of information with devices and application environmentally friendly (Choi and Sirakaya, 2006). As such, all the dimensions of sustainability discussed are strictly interconnected and necessary for the development of sustainable tourism (D’Arco et al., 2021).

Since 1990s, the concept of sustainable tourism became part of the scientific research landscape with countless publications aimed at identifying sustainability indicators, programmes, projects and frameworks applicable to this or other disciplines. Nevertheless, these studies have largely and principally focused on the exchange between physical environment and economic growth, excluding aspects related to the social sphere (Victor, 1991; McKercher, 1993; Milne and Ateljevic, 2001). The integration of extensive studies related to social sustainability has only occurred since 2002, with the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development, and this concept has been universally accepted only after the publication of the Rio+20 document “The Future We Want”⁵, in 2012 (Hák et al., 2016; Kristjánisdóttir et al., 2018).

Indeed, it is only in the last decades that the social and cultural aspects of sustainable tourism have begun to be considered and studied in greater depth. There is a relatively limited literature that focuses especially on socially sustainable tourism, while a broader literature exists on the

⁵ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/733FutureWeWant.pdf>

overlapping concepts of community cohesion, social inclusion or exclusion in tourism (Qiu Zhang et al., 2017; Streimikiene et al., 2021).

Conceptually, socially sustainable tourism aims at the deepening of human relations and the urge for sociality accompanied by the need to create opportunities for cultural enrichment and to safeguard and promote the resources of the territory (Dempsey et al., 2011; Nugraheni et al., 2020). It is therefore able to offer useful ideas and valuable innovative elements to the tourism industry. This is especially true in recent years, when there has been a greater need to investigate certain aspects related to the social, cultural and psychological well-being spheres, as a result of the numerous restrictions and lockdowns related to the pandemic period.

It is precisely because of the desire to respond to the need to understand how sustainable tourism is being reformulated and rethought, in terms of the restructuring of human relations, of rediscovery of one's own identity within a community and redefinition of needs by all actors of the tourism industry, that the topic of socially sustainable tourism can be considered updated and timely.

Furthermore, the perspective adopted by this type of tourism supports the conceptualization of the tourist as a social agent and not just a *homo oeconomicus*. In this view, it is not important merely the tourist – variously investigated by many researchers (e.g., Cottrell et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2010; Ozdemir and Yolal, 2017), but also the community, residents, authorities and all the local actors operating on the territory. In order to better develop strategies for local sustainable development and to improve the proposed offers, all the actors present and involved are required to participate proactively in the activities and projects designed by the local organizations, in the perspective of actors engagement (Thetsane, 2019; Albu, 2020). Defining it in these terms, socially sustainable tourism recognizes relationality as a priority vector of the territory enhancement.

From this preliminary and cursory analysis, it emerges quite clearly that the social and socio-cultural aspect of sustainability has still not been fully addressed, despite the research interest in these topics has grown exponentially in the last five years. And it is mainly on these aspects, linked also to the engagement of the actors that constitute the ecosystem of the tourist services, that this thesis is concentrated.

Accordingly, the general objective is to fill multiple gaps in research on sustainable, and in particular socially sustainable tourism. Specifically, the aim of this dissertation is represented by the willingness to qualitatively explore this topic in relation to the perspective of multi-actor engagement, allowing to provide an in-depth investigation of such a complex and emerging issue and to propose valid theoretical contributions for future research, together with managerial implications. The research question that leads the entire analysis concerns the understanding of how the engagement of local actors is related to the notion of sustainability, in particular of the social and cultural sphere, conceptualised in an ecosystem of tourist services and offerings variously defined, both from the literature side, both in a wider Italian national scenario, and in a context limited to the city of Cremona, so as to consider different levels of analysis, from macro to meso to micro.

In order to achieve these major goals, it was necessary to produce three qualitative articles: one concerns the systematization of the existing literature and the other two are empirical, based on particularly distant contexts and subjects of investigation. The thesis is therefore organized as follows.

The first chapter consists of the first paper, entitled "*Engagement in sustainable tourism: a bibliometric literature review*". This article is conceptualised as a bibliometric literature review, based on the search of keywords "sustainable tourism", "social sustainability" and "engagement". Its purpose is to identify the structure of this field of investigation, highlight the main and emerging themes and outline the most impactful publications and authors for research about engagement in socially sustainable tourism. Specifically, this study aims to answer to different research questions: on which topics is organised the field of research? Which are the most impactful contributions and authors for research on engagement in sustainable tourism? Which are the avenues for future research? Hence, *Bibliometrix*, *CiteSpace* and *VOSViewer* software were employed to support the descriptive, co-citation and conceptual analysis of the selected documents, and the production of co-occurrence network, bibliographic coupling and a thematic map. From this analysis it has therefore emerged that among the relevant topics, not yet widely developed and discussed in the literature related to social sustainable tourism, it is possible to include "participation", "connection" and "co-creation". This has allowed researchers to direct future investigation and the elaboration of the two empirical papers of this thesis.

In addition to the issue of sustainable tourism, what connects the second and the third paper is the topic of co-creation of sustainable value in tourism service ecosystems, building on the service-dominant logic and the service ecosystem literature (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). However, the context in which this specific theory is investigated varies. In an article the context is broad and variable and the focus is on small and medium-sized Italian sustainable tour operators and on the actors involved, with whom they have established relationships over the years, especially in the destination countries of organized travel. In the other the research setting is much more concentrated and is represented by the violin-making system of the city of Cremona, including both the luthiers, both public and governmental bodies working in the promotion of this particular system.

Specifically, the second article "*Actors engagement in sustainable tour operators' service ecosystem*" aims to identify the processes and mechanisms of engagement of multiple heterogeneous actors by small Italian sustainable tour operators, and to detect obstacles related to this practice in order to promote sustainability in tourism. Indeed, the present work proposes to answer three connected research questions: how tour operators define the concept of tourism sustainability? How the process of actor engagement is been developed overtime by TO? What are the obstacle and the benefits of the engagement process? As such, this paper strives to make a contribution to the current research by developing a conceptualization of engagement as a five-staged process. Moreover, among the main challenges emerging from this study, it appears the way in which sustainable tourism is perceived by different actors interviewed and how to manage their conflicting opinions and values. In this respect, a crucial role is assumed by the promotion of valuable communication and learning for effective actor engagement and for addressing the issues of empowerment and governance.

In Chapter 3 is presented the last paper, entitled "*The role of actor engagement in promoting value co-creation and local enhancement: the case of Cremona's traditional-violin-craftsmanship*". This research is conceptualised as a case-study on the Cremona's traditional-violin-craftsmanship, in Italy, inscribed since 2012 by UNESCO on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The present study aims to investigate consequences emerging from the engagement of multiple actors and their contribution in terms of fostering value co-creation and local enhancement answering the following research questions: What effects and consequences emerge by the actors engagement in a territory? How the actors engagement contributes to

produce value co-creation and promote local enhancement? From the interviews – made with 60 violin-makers and five public figures – it emerges that, to produce consistent benefits, every actor need to know their proper role within the ecosystem, to communicate in a clear and open way and to be cohesive and collaborative on the common goal of research, safeguard and enhancing worldwide the local tradition of violin-making.

Finally, some general conclusions are provided on how the results of the three papers contribute to wider research on engagement in sustainable tourism services ecosystems, together with a synthesis of the main avenues for future research.

All papers were written by a single author and none was published or submitted for publication. The article entitled *“Actors engagement in sustainable tour operators’ service ecosystem”* was presented in the conference *10th EIASM International Conference on Tourism Management & Related Issues*, held in Valencia, in September 2022.

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Chapter 1

1. Engagement in sustainable tourism: a bibliometric literature review

1.1. Abstract

Sustainability and sustainable tourism represent one of the emergent and outstanding research topics, however the social sphere of sustainability began to be specifically addressed only from the 20th century. This paper, indeed, is conceptualised as a bibliometric literature review, based on sustainable tourism, social sustainability and engagement. The research, therefore, aims to identify the structure of this field of investigation, to highlight the main and emerging themes and to outline the most impactful publications and authors for research about engagement in sustainable tourism. To explore the existing literature, three software were employed, namely, Bibliometrix, CiteSpace and VOSViewer and were performed descriptive, co-citation and conceptual analyses producing the co-occurrence network, bibliographic coupling and thematic map. After describing the theoretical and managerial implications, this paper concludes by outlining possible avenues for future research.

1.2. Introduction

The tourism sector is seen as one of the leading industries in the world: it has a significant role in the global economy (Zhao and Li, 2018; D'Arco et al., 2021). This business represents a complex phenomenon, generating conflicting results: it brings important economic benefits to states and destinations, such as increasing job opportunities, it is capable of distribute wealth and contributes to urban development (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Buckley, 2012), but it also generates some serious problems, such as excessive energy consumption and the occurrence of environmental damage (e.g., climate change and waste of natural resources) (Streimikiene et al., 2021).

With the aim of decreasing the negative tourism effects, recently, tourism development has sought to integrate concepts associated with sustainability (Butler, 1999; Choi and Sirakaya, 2006). Although there are several conceptual frameworks applicable to sustainable tourism, the widely recognized definition related to sustainable development included in the report of the World

Commission on Environment and Development states that sustainable development should “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 9). Moreover, the World Tourism Organization claims that tourism is sustainable when meets the needs of visitors, industry, environment and host communities (UNWTO, 2014).

According to these definitions, sustainability is generally conceived as a multi-dimensional concept, specifically, as a three-pillar diagram, including environmental, economic and social (or socio-cultural) aspects. In this sense, the purpose of sustainable tourism is to ensure a balance between protecting the environment, promoting economic benefits and preserving cultural integrity, by meeting the needs of the host population in terms of improved living standards and well-being, establishing its development over time (Liu, 2003; Zolfani et al., 2015).

In this conceptualization, environmental sphere takes into account the general non-renewability of natural resources; economic one seeks resource efficiency to achieve long-term profitability; social sustainability encompasses social justice, social capital, community development and social responsibility (Goodland, 1995; Dempsey et al., 2011). If one of these pillars is weak, development could be viable, equitable or bearable, but never unsustainable, since there are interactions between the spheres (Niñerola et al., 2019).

Since the concept of sustainable tourism became part of the scientific research landscape, that is from the 1990s, countless studies have been carried out on the subject, with the specific objective of identifying sustainability indicators, programmes, projects and frameworks applicable to this or other disciplines. However, these investigations have largely and exclusively focused on the exchange between physical environment and economic growth, excluding aspects related to the social sphere (Victor, 1991; McKercher, 1993; Milne and Ateljevic, 2001). This was integrated into the definition of sustainable tourism only in 2002, the year of the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, and has been fully accepted in documents and studies since 2012, with the publication of the Rio+20 document “The Future We Want”⁶ (Hák et al., 2016; Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2018).

⁶ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/733FutureWeWant.pdf>

And it is precisely because of the delay in the inclusion of social aspects in the definition of the sustainable tourism, that this study focuses on this area of research, with still much space for investigation and exploration (Niñerola et al., 2019).

As already mentioned, the social sphere of sustainable tourism mainly considers the components related to social capital and responsibilities, social equity and integrity, community growth and development, and appears substantially connected to ethical issues related to the possibility of improving the residents' well-being and ensuring communities' quality of life (Ciegis et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2015). Furthermore, social sustainability is generally defined as comprising various dimensions of social and cultural change, indeed, it deals with respecting the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, preserving their cultural heritage and traditional values (UNEP and UNWTO, 2005).

Accordingly, the socially sustainable development could be seen as the ability of local actors to collaborate synergistically, according to a shared territorial vision. Therefore, it appears necessary to further explore the relationships established between companies and enterprises operating in the tourism sector, local communities and further actors extant in the area (Van Der Duim, 2007).

Moreover, some research confirm that involvement and engagement of multiple stakeholders is essential for the tourism industry in maintaining a feasible balance between economic, environmental and social dynamics (Byrd, 2007; Nicholas *et al.*, 2009) and this involvement can also be useful for achieving a sense of collective responsibility for sustainable development (Landorf, 2009).

The establishment of relationships between different subjects in an extent area is linked to the theme of actor engagement, conceptualized and specifically theorized by Brodie et al. (2019). This domain fits into the research that considers many different actors in service ecosystems and is defined as "a dynamic and iterative process that reflects actors' dispositions to invest resources in their interactions with other connected actors in a service system" (Brodie et al., 2019, p. 2).

Following this perspective, recently, many scholars are increasingly, but not sufficiently, considering in their research interactions and relationships established with local actors, in a view of communities' development (Szromek et al., 2019; Zmyślony et al., 2020; Streimikiene et al., 2021).

Despite this growing interest in the social aspects of sustainable tourism and the engagement of multiple actors for a constant responsible and sustainable development, there is a lack of systematization of literature on these aspects. To fill this gap, the study is conceived as a bibliometric literature review, designed to assess the current progress of research and to deliver guideline for further investigation and research opportunities in socially sustainable tourism field.

Specifically, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

(RQ1) *How is structured the field of research? On which themes and topics is organised?*

(RQ2) *Which publications and authors are the most impactful for research about engagement in sustainable tourism?*

(RQ3) *Which are the avenues for future research in this field?*

To answer these questions, the study examines a final sample of 65 articles extracted from the *Clarivate Analytics Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection*, performing co-occurrence, co-citation and bibliographic coupling analyses through the use of *Bibliometrix*, *CiteSpace* and *VOSViewer* software.

The paper is organized as follows: firstly, the methodology employed in the research is described; thereafter, the descriptive data analysis is presented, followed by co-citation and conceptual analysis, including a map of the thematic areas addressed by the documents. The study ends with conclusions, namely theoretical contributions and managerial implications and, finally, an agenda for future research is proposed.

1.3. Research methodology

The present study, as a review of the literature, is built upon secondary data, consisting of a sample of documents collected in January 2023 through the academic database *Clarivate Analytics Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection* and its indexing service of scientific citations *Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI)*.

In order to represent a relatively large and omni-comprehensive research field, initially, we performed several extractions with combinations of the main keywords “tourism” and “sustainable”. We then insert the terms “social sustainability” and “engagement” to refine the

search. Consequently, we narrowed the query by filtering the results for language (only in English), document type (articles only) and the research area (Science Technology Other Topics; Social Sciences Other Topics; Business Economics). We obtained a sample of 84 documents; after reading the abstracts, we removed those articles that were not consistent with the purpose of the study or with the research area and we removed inconsistencies. The final sample consists of 65 articles on which we performed bibliometric analyses (cf. *Table 1.1*).

Table 1.1 – WoS extraction process

KEYWORDS	DOCUMENTS
<i>sustainable* tourism*</i> (Topic)	15,305
<i>sustainable* tourism*</i> (Topic) AND <i>social* sustainability*</i> (All Fields)	2,449
<i>sustainable* tourism*</i> (Topic) AND <i>social* sustainability*</i> (All Fields) AND <i>engagement*</i> (All Fields)	111
<i>sustainable* tourism*</i> (Topic) and <i>social* sustainability*</i> (All Fields) and <i>engagement*</i> (All Fields) <u>Filtered for:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Languages: English - Document types: Article - Research areas: Science Technology Other Topics; Social Sciences Other Topics; Business Economics 	84
Final sample (after reading abstracts):	65

Source: author's elaboration from Bilioshiny for Bibliometrix

This research, in particular, employs a bibliometric analysis to discover focal documents and objectively illustrate the links between and among articles on a given topic or field of research. After selecting the scientific contributions regarding the theme of engagement in the sustainable tourism sector, we performed it with the support of various data analysis software.

Initially, we used *Biblioshiny for Bibliometrix*, a software developed by Aria and Cuccurullo in 2016, to investigate the distribution patterns of publications and their impact within the scientific communities. Specifically, through mathematical and statistical techniques, it allows to deduce trends and research themes over time, identifying the production development, and to highlight the most cited articles and authors, with the aim of systematizing the existing theoretical contents.

The *Bibliometrix* examination was followed and supported by the use of *CiteSpace* to deepen and enrich the analysis. This software, by detecting emerging trends and patterns in scientific literature, allows substantial theoretical and methodological contributions to progressive knowledge domain visualization (Chen, 2006). Specifically, in the present study it is used to perform co-citation analysis to conceptualize and visualize the intellectual bases of the selected stream of literature.

Finally, the employ of *VOSViewer* allowed us to go even deeper into the bibliometric analysis. This is generally used to graphically represent bibliographic data through VoS (Visualization of Similarities) mapping technique, providing distance-based visualizations of bibliometric networks (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010). We used it to perform bibliographic coupling, describing the conceptual structure of the existing literature and showing the main emerging issue concerning this specific theme.

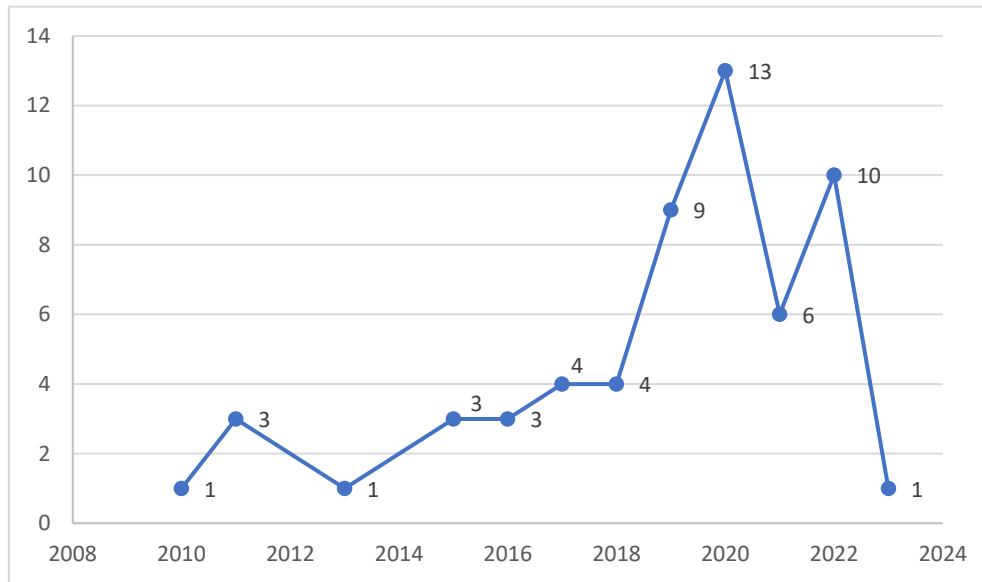
1.4. Descriptive data analysis

The selected research sample includes 65 documents extracted from *Clarivate Analytics Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection*. The articles have been produced in about ten years: the first publication dates back to 2010, and after a fluctuating period of scarce but constant production, in 2020 there is a peak of production, which more or less lasted in the following years. It appears clearly that in the last four years there has been an increasing consideration for the selected topic and, consequently, a greater number of publications, with 38 out of 65 between 2019 and 2022 (cf. *Figure 1.1*).

This growing production since 2019 seems to be connected to the publication of Brodie et al. (2019) on the theme of actors' engagement. This aspect appears interesting because it highlights a substantial up-to-date curiosity and attention towards the issue of engagement, in particular applied to sustainable tourism, but, on the other hand, it can also lead to a difficult identification of

well-defined research areas; it may therefore be useful to systematize the literature to better define the grounds for application.

Figure 1.1 – Annual scientific production



Source: author's elaboration from *Bilioshiny for Bibliometrix*

Proceedings with the analysis of the documents, it is appropriate to focus on the 22 sources on which they appeared. Among these, the two most relevant are *Sustainability*, with 21 articles and *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, containing 17 articles (see Appendix – Table A).

Concerning the most significant journals, the source dynamics graph shows that the number of their publications is constantly increasing, especially since the last five years. Therefore, it is easy to describe this theme as newsworthy and trending (see Appendix – Figure A).

For a more detailed analysis of the international publication landscape, it is not enough to list the sources, but it is also useful to consider the most widely cited authors and their related articles. Authors who carried out research on the theme of engagement in socially sustainable tourism are 191 overall. The publications are mainly multi-authored, except for 8 documents written by a single author.

Concerning the authors, the impact list – structured on the basis of the number of total citations – see at the top three: Sheldon P. J. and Park S. Y., with 121 citations, followed by Baum T., with 70 and Everett S. and Slocum S. L., cited 67 times.

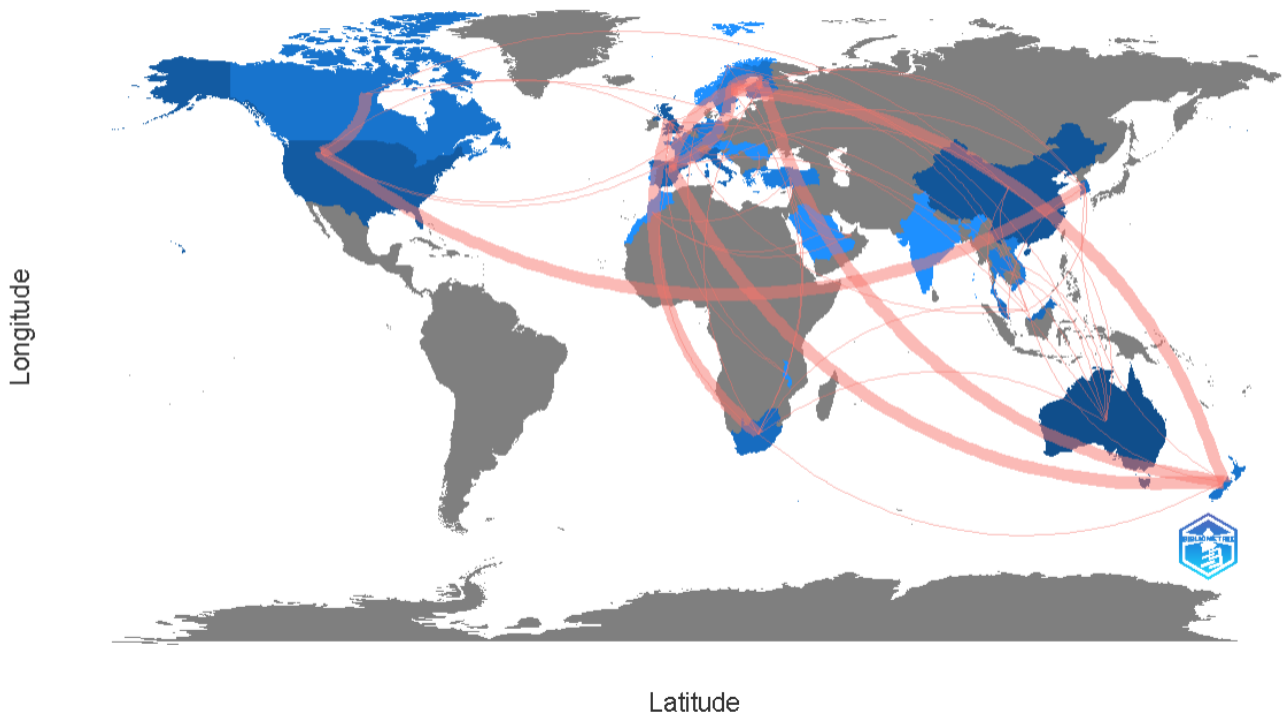
To deepen the analysis, it is useful to consider also the most local cited references, such as Garay L., with 7 citations, Fornell C., with 6, Braun V. and Okazaki E., with 5 each and Anderson J. C., Bagozzi R.P., Font X., Higgins-Desbiolles F., Keeble B. R., Lee S., Moscardo G. and Sampaio A.R., whose references have been cited 4 times each.

Proceeding further in the descriptive analysis of the documents, it is interesting to consider the geographical origin of the publications, both from the point of view of the countries' scientific production and of the collaboration between authors from different countries.

Regarding the countries, the leaders are Australia, China, UK and USA, with 24, 16, 13 and 11 publications each (see Appendix – *Table B*). Among the most cited countries we can include Australia, UK, USA and Italy, with, respectively, 256, 223, 167 and 78 total citations.

Furthermore, the map of global collaboration between authors (cf. *Figure 1.2*) allows to outline the countries with major international collaborations. Therefore, considering the thicker lines highlighted in the figure, it is possible to identify the countries with a greater frequency of collaborations, specifically these are: Finland, France, USA, UK and New Zealand.

Figure 1.2 – Country collaboration map



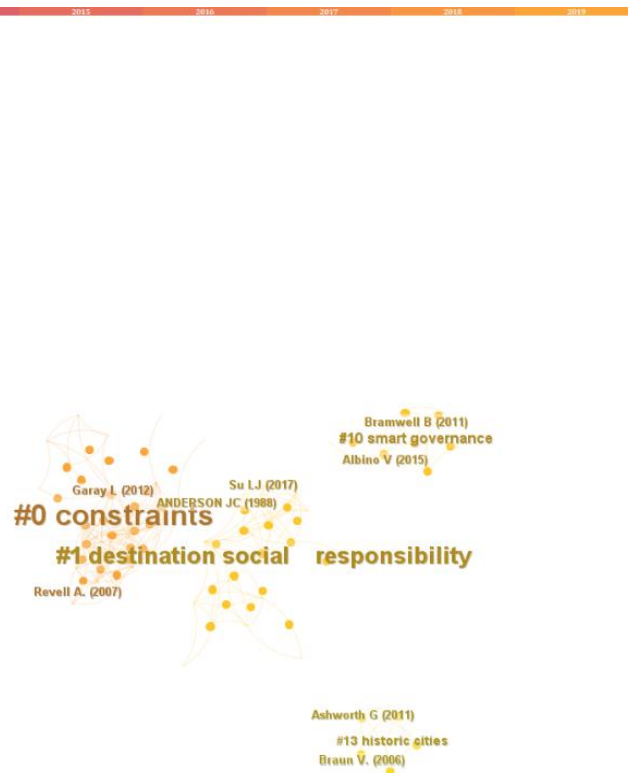
Source: *Bilioshiny for Bibliometrix*

1.5. Co-citation analysis

Co-citation analysis helps to understand how many times an article has been cited together in the source articles. This analysis is useful not only to measure popularity, but also to detect key authors and crucial publications, distinguished by common themes, that shaped the evolution of a certain field of research (Apriliyanti and Alon 2017). Co-citation analysis is therefore essential to fully understand the development of a given research area, to identify crucial research streams and their underpinning theoretical frameworks (Apriliyanti and Alon 2017; Fetscherin and Heinrich 2015).

We performed this analysis using the *CiteSpace* software and five main clusters emerged (cf. *Figure 1.3*; see Appendix – *Table C*).

Figure 1.3 – Co-citation analysis



Source: author's elaboration from CiteSpace

The first cluster in size is represented by the word “constraints”. Publications contained in this group concern also tourism industry and small firms, corporate social responsibility and green aspects, such as trust, word, attitudinal loyalty and marketing. Garay and Font (2012) focused their study on corporate social responsibility (CSR) in small and medium-sized accommodation enterprises, identifying altruism and gaining competitive advantages among the motivations of their acting responsibly. Similarly, Martínez and Del Bosque (2013) analysed the influence of CSR on hotel customer loyalty, recognizing trust, identification and satisfaction as mediators. Furthermore, Revell and Blackburn (2007) studied SMEs and the measures taken by managers to be more eco-efficient and improve environmental performance, highlighting the high costs among the constraints to these actions. The study of Sigala (2008) investigated the role of supply chain management (SCM) within tour operators' business for integrating sustainability into tourism supply chains, proposing a model of SCM. Camilleri (2016) based his research on the topic of responsible tourism and shared value, discovering that this practice can lead to multiple benefits, including improved relationships between social and regulatory stakeholders, better market standing and cost savings.

The second group is labelled “destination social responsibility”. The main emerging issues refers to pro-environmental behaviours, stakeholder engagement, experiences, service ecosystem and transformative value. Su and Swanson (2017) investigated how positive emotions of consumption and the identification of tourist destinations mediate the effect of social responsibility of the destination and responsible behaviours. In addition, Su, Huang and Pearce (2018) then developed an integrated model to demonstrate that the social responsibility of the destination affects the overall satisfaction of the resident community. This groups also includes, among the cited articles, the fundamental studies on the modelling of structural equations to be applied to practical situations and their evaluation, respectively published by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) and Bagozzi and Yi (1988).

We then labelled the third cluster “sustainability”. Publications in this cluster are topical studies about economic, environmental, social and cultural sustainability. Bramwell and Lane (1993; 2014) explored the origins of the concept of sustainable development and applied this concept to the tourism sector. Aas et al. (2005) examined the roles of stakeholder collaboration and involvement in the heritage tourism development and conservation processes. Andereck et al. (2005) investigated residents’ perception of the impact of tourism on communities, highlighting the need for education campaigns to improve the benefits for the local community. Hung et al. (2010) underlined how the extent to which community members participate in the tourism development process depends on motivation, opportunity and ability to participate.

The fourth collection concerns “smart governance” and include documents related to smart tourism, pro-poor tourism, heritage destination and cultural rationality. Bramwell and Lane (2011) focused on the role of effective governance to implement sustainable tourism; the study of Albino, Berardi and Dangelico (2015) defined and conceptualized the term smart city, identifying the main dimensions and elements that characterize a smart city, in comparison to a traditional one.

The fifth and final group is called “historic cities”. Accordingly, many documents in this cluster provide studies and investigations on themes such as governance, policy and spatial (in)justice. Urban tourism and the definition of cities in the world are the subject of the study by Ashworth and Page (2011). The main topic of the special issue containing the publication of Aall and Koens (2019) concerns sustainable cities and urban sustainable development, analyzed, in particular, from the social and environmental perspectives and including challenges related to climate change.

1.6. Conceptual analysis

Conceptual analysis is used to distinguish terms, explore the understandings they refer to and representing them. Concepts include some of the most fundamental entities or phenomena associated with a certain discipline or field of research (Cocchiarella, 1996) and represent theoretical terms which suggest the role played in a theory or in relation to other concepts.

1.6.1. *Co-occurrence network*

Concerning the conceptual structure of the documents, a co-occurrence network analysis has been carried out with the support of *Bibliometrix*, through the examination of the keywords plus. The keyword co-occurrence analysis is a bibliometric metric employed to underline how many times a keyword appears in different studies. Indeed, it represents a co-appearance map of keywords in the examined research. Furthermore, this analysis is useful to categorize the keywords and related themes of investigation through similarity and connection.

The network map that emerged from this exploration shows six different constellations in size: three main and three minor ones (cf. *Figure 1.4*).

Figure 1.4 – Co-occurrence network



Source: Bilioshiny for Bibliometrix

The first cluster in size contains five big knots labelled management, perceptions, performance, CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and sustainable tourism. It refers primarily to themes connected to the management of the sustainable enterprises, in relation to their performance and a competitive advantage.

The second group refers to the sphere of tourism marketing, containing, among other, the words attitudes, behaviour and consumer behaviour, segmentation and satisfaction.

The biggest knot of the third cluster contains the word engagement, connected to the term experience, participation and enterprises.

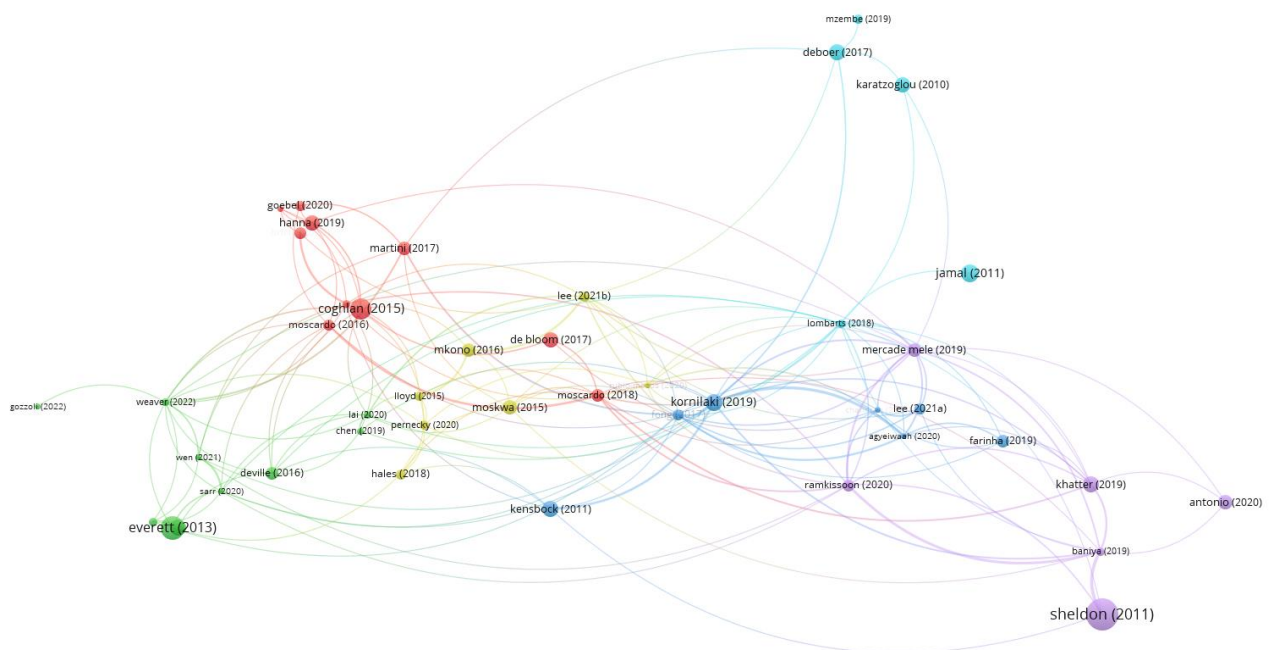
As shown in the graph, the other three minor constellations include, respectively, the keywords: impact, green and communication; destination and stakeholders; city.

1.6.2. Bibliographic coupling

To deepen the conceptual structure, broadening the keywords' examination, it was possible to consider the documents divided by macro-thematic areas covered. Indeed, we made a further examination using the *VOSviewer* software and the bibliographic coupling function to define and classify the intellectual and conceptual structure of the extant literature and to highlight emerging and niche themes.

After measuring the publications coupled by documents – with a minimum of four citations per document, we marked them in six different clusters. From this scan emerged a multi-coloured chart, distributed in interconnected topics that emphasizes the emerging ones (cf. *Figure 1.5*).

Figure 1.5 – Bibliographic coupling



Source: *VOSviewer*

In general, all groups refer to engagement and sustainable tourism, but going deeper into the analysis, clusters are differentiated by keyword (see Appendix – *Table D*).

There are two big groups, with 10 items each, labelled, respectively, “well-being practice” and “community development”. In particular, the first cluster refers principally to terms such as health, psychology, quality of life, behaviour, nature and social sustainability and the articles

included here reveal a strong relationship between tourism in natural and rural areas and tourists' well-being. For example, Coghlan (2015) investigated sustainable tourism as a tool for local, regional and societal improvement, exploring tourism experiences that enhance participants' well-being; Martini et al. (2017) analysed value co-creation and social innovation, focusing on a new approach to the management of natural areas. Moreover, based on the claim that holidays improve well-being, De Bloom et al. (2017) considered how workers behave, think and feel differently during travels than during leisure time spent at home and the research of Hanna et al. (2019) highlighted how outdoor adventure tourism facilitates reconnection with nature and promotes pro-environmental behaviours.

The second one reflects on issues related to local community development, identity, authenticity and social capital. Specifically, Basile and Cavallo (2020) considered the condition of sustainable development in the Italian Inner Areas, identifying the determinants of the relationships between rural identity and perceptive components of authenticity; Weaver et al. (2022) focused their study on how sustainable tourism can be achieved through appropriate behaviour, including rules of participation, autonomy, commitment to social order and solidarity; Everett and Slocum (2013) analysed the role of food tourism in delivering sustainability agendas. Furthermore, Herbold et al. (2020) researched, through a systematic literature review, the promising interface between community development and sport tourism, focusing on the potential of identity-based sports and necessary local engagement.

The following clusters per dimension, with 7 documents each, are classified as "sustainable entrepreneurship" and "education and knowledge". The first one regards tourism entrepreneurs, small tourism firms, self-efficacy and social responsibility and, in particular, considers the capacity of local communities and their self-efficacy to develop and support sustainable tourism development (Fong et al., 2017). In addition, includes studies on actions taken by entrepreneurs of small companies operating in sustainable tourism (Kensbock and Jennings, 2011) and identifies drivers and constraints to the development and implementation of sustainable attitudes, respectively, self-efficacy and external context (Kornilaki et al., 2019).

The other group considers the topic of the awareness and understanding, local embedding and engagement in the hospitality sector, specifically, through social media. Some researchers focused on Indigenous community and explored the (online) engagement of tour operators with tourists highlighting some limits in their communications (Mkono, 2016) and Lloyd et al. (2015)

investigated the role of interpersonal relationships, cultural and social interactions between locals and visitors, in order to improve knowledge and enhance the experiences of tourists. Additionally, the study of Moskwa et al. (2015) focused on the engagement of customers and community in a collaborative conversation about sustainable development, food, hospitality and tourism, through deep local embedding, to transform culture and beliefs.

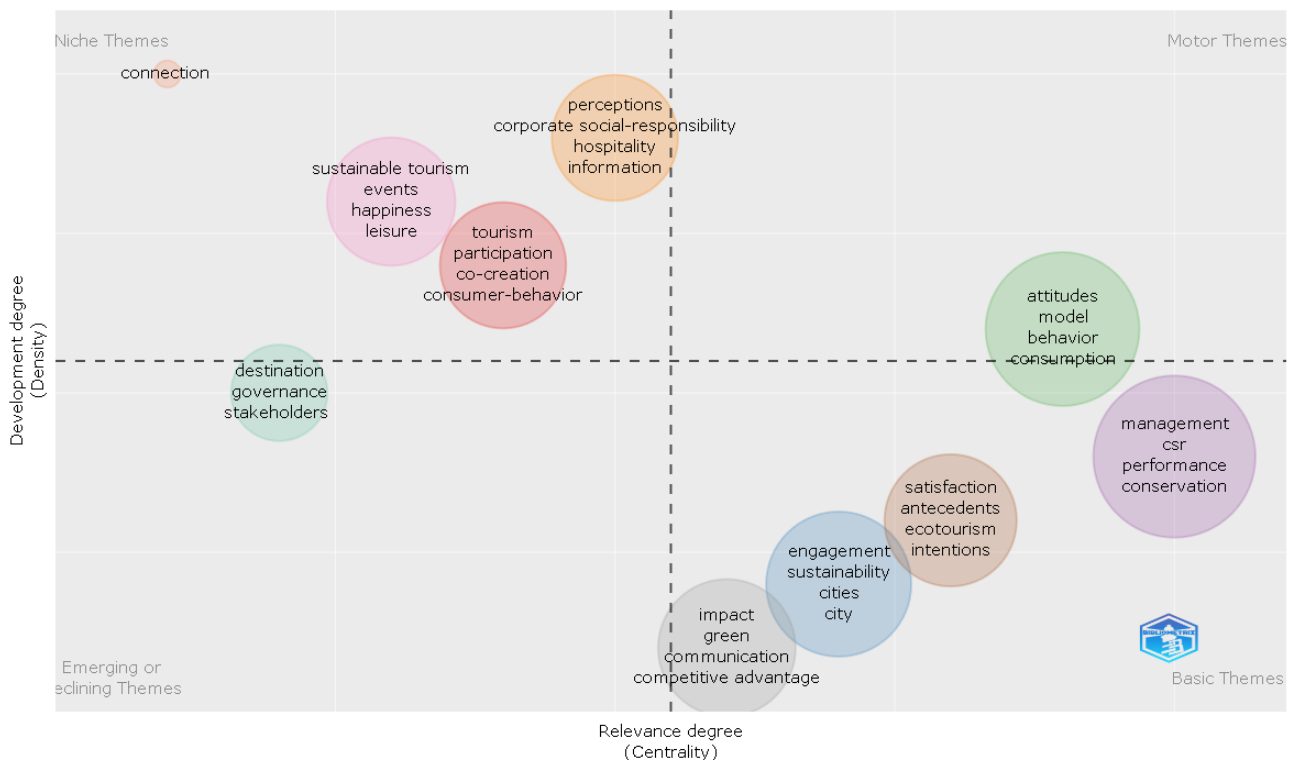
The fifth group, with 6 publications, is marked by the label “engagement” and reflects mainly on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), reputation and environmental sustainability. Publications are concerning the role of stakeholder engagement, from a value co-creation perspective, since it increases tourism companies’ social legitimacy and reputation (Iazzi et al., 2020); Khatter et al. (2019) explored the engagement of hotels with environmentally sustainable policies and practices in order to determine their commitment towards meeting the expectations of environmentally conscious stakeholders; Sheldon and Park (2011) investigated the engagement in CSR activities taken by travel companies, highlighting enhanced reputation and community-based issues among the drivers and lack of resources and understanding as the main inhibitors of these practices.

The smallest cluster, including 5 papers, considers “sustainable development” and its planning and modelling and outlines green tourism, community participation and hospitality sector as main subjects of analyses. Deboer et al. (2017) explored firms’ environmental practices, pointing out that proximity to green areas moderates their level of commitment and engagement; Jamal and Watt (2011), based on issues such as civic engagement, multi-stakeholder learning and collaboration, explored emerging forms of participatory action and climate change pedagogy in mountain resorts, stressing the need for programmes and actions linking governance, tourists and residents; additionally, based on the assumption that tourism can damage the common resources through poor management practices, the study of Karatzoglou and Spilanis (2010) proposed a management tool capable of providing hotel SMEs with a continuous flow of helpful information on the environmental impact of critical corporate activities.

1.6.3. *Thematic map*

In addition to the bibliographic coupling, to improve the aggregation of the research themes and the conceptual descriptions of the publications, it is possible to generate a thematic map structured on the authors’ keywords, with the support of *Bibliometrix* (cf. *Figure 1.6*).

Figure 1.6 – Thematic map



Source: Bilioshiny for Bibliometrix

From this analysis, it is pointed out a graph that examines the degree of relevance (vertical axis) and development (horizontal axis) of the themes covered and, specifically, it has led to the identification of ten clusters.

As we can see from the chart, among the various aggregations, four consider mainly basic themes in relation to our research, with a scarce relevance degree and an evident development level, such as management, CSR, performance, satisfaction, engagement, city, sustainability, green, impact and communication.

In reference to the centrality level of the topics addressed we can highlight two groups: on the right direction, in the motor themes section emerges, with a quite extreme level of development, the spot that addresses the thematic of attitudes, model, behaviour and consumption; on the left, in the emerging themes box, accordingly, with a poor development degree, appears the ball concerning destination, governance and stakeholders.

The remaining four clusters are placed in the niche themes section, with a quite high relevance degree, but at a scarce stage of development. They reflect on perception, information and corporate social-responsibility, sustainable tourism, leisure and events, participation and co-creation. Precisely linked to our review of the literature on engagement in sustainable tourism, within the classification of niche themes, it emerges an interesting cluster, which considers specifically the concept of participation, co-creation and consumer behaviour in the tourist market, which definitely needs further investigation. And, finally, the smallest dot refers to the connection issue.

1.7. Discussion

So, in summary, in this study we carried out a bibliometric literature review about the thematic of engagement, social sustainability and sustainable tourism with the aim of identifying the intellectual structure of the research subjects, understanding the state-of-the-art of the literature related to this topic and outlining the compelling future avenues of research.

With this goal in mind, we performed, through a multi-staged process, a bibliometric analysis on a final sample of 65 articles extracted from *Clarivate Analytics Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection*.

At the beginning, we used the software *Biblioshiny for Bibliometrix* to process the descriptive analysis. It emerged that most of the paper covering our field of investigation were published between 2019 and 2022, revealing a peak of interest in the issue of engagement and socially sustainable tourism in the last four years. Moreover, concerning the sources and the journals in which the documents were published, the most prolific appears to be *Sustainability* and *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, with, in total, 38 out of 65 publications. We also noticed a remarkable level of collaboration between authors from different countries, including Australia, China, UK and USA as leader countries in the number of relationships and publications.

Consequently, we performed a co-citation analysis using *CiteSpace* software to identify the main clusters that represent the intellectual pillars of the research issue of engagement and sustainable tourism. It emerged that the literature concerning this topic is based on studies regarding five main aggregations of themes. The richest in publications concerns tourism industry and small firms, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and marketing issues, such as trust, attitudinal

loyalty. The subsequent concerns destination social responsibility, addressing pro-environmental behaviours, engagement, experiences, service ecosystem and transformative value as the main subjects of analysis. Another group explores the concept of sustainability, from the four different perspectives, namely economic, environmental, social and cultural. The last two cluster regard principally governance and cities, from a smart tourism point of view.

This classification appears absolutely in accordance with the visualization of the thematic map made through *Bibliometrix* (cf. *Figure 1.6*), since the most widely developed and explored themes are those included in the section called basic themes, which includes management, CSR, engagement and behaviours; while other clusters that contain fewer documents concern niche issues, less relevant and with a low level of development, such as governance and destination.

The next step of analysis is represented by the conceptual analysis made on our research sample. We were then able to visualize the conceptual structure of the selected documents, primarily through the co-occurrence network analysis, with the support of *Biblioshiny* for *Bibliometrix*, and we noticed that the research about the topic of engagement in socially sustainable tourism is polarized around three main conceptual clusters: the first deals with managerial practices adopted by sustainable enterprises, in the perspective of CSR, performance and competitive advantage; the second refers mainly to tourism marketing issues, such as behaviours, attitudes and satisfaction; the third is specifically focused on the matters of engagement, participation and experience.

Thereafter, we performed a bibliographic coupling analysis, using *VOSviewer* software, to deepen the exploration of the stream of literature, and going to highlight the recent and emerging research topics, divided into six clusters by keywords. It emerged that wider aggregations relate, respectively, to well-being practices, connected to psychology issues, such as health, quality of life and behaviour and to community development, considering identity, authenticity and social capital. The following groups in size concerns sustainable entrepreneurship in small tourism firms and the topic of education and knowledge, related to awareness, understanding and local embedding. The two final clusters refer, mainly, to stakeholder engagement and CSR practices and to sustainability development, in reference to modelling and planning in hospitality sector.

1.8. Conclusion

The analysis of these documents highlighted how the tied themes of engagement and social sustainability are particularly emerging and outstanding, timely and essential in the field of sustainable tourism, especially from the last five years.

This study has also allowed to the identification of some emerging strategies aimed at the sustainable development of communities, entrepreneurship and sustainable management of small businesses and the participation of local residents. From this analysis, however, it was also possible to detect some obstacles related to communication, poor education and knowledge of the issues closely interconnected with the practices and definition of sustainable tourism, both by the public sphere, and by locals, residents and communities. These are therefore considered by researchers as the main limitations and constraints to the establishment of beneficial relationships between actors and the development of engagement processes by entrepreneurs of small businesses operating in sustainable tourism. However, among the main drivers to these processes are included the external context, awareness and self-efficacy of the firms.

At the theoretical level, therefore, this bibliometric review contributes to a clearer understanding of how the literature on socially sustainable tourism and engagement is structured and can be useful to other researchers who intend to investigate the phenomenon in more detail. Starting from the thematic division and from conceptual analysis and clustering, it has been possible to highlight the topics of niche and emerging research, such as participation, co-creation, behaviours and connection, on which further interesting publications can be structured.

Indeed, many of the research published on these issues in recent years concern aspects related to the psychology of the actors involved, dealing with issues such as quality of life and well-being in ecosystems of sustainable tourism services (Coghlan, 2015; De Bloom et al., 2017). Others, however, consider how the behaviours of the actors who actively participate in the ecosystem and are committed to social order and solidarity can improve the dissemination of the concept of sustainability (Weaver et al., 2022) and support sustainable tourism development (Fong et al., 2017). In general, all scholars consider the participation of multi-actors as an engine to bring mutual benefits and produce co-creation of value among the involved subjects. It is exactly on these groundbreaking aspects that it may be interesting to carry on further research.

Among the limitations of this research, we can definitely consider the restricted number of documents analysed, derived from searching for very specific keywords. Nevertheless, other researchers can enrich the analysis and expand the search scope, for example by extending the starting database by including articles from other sources (e.g., *Elsevier Scopus*) and merging the results obtained, either by modifying or adding "environmental sustainability" or "economic sustainability" to the term already sought by us, namely "social sustainability".

Furthermore, regarding the methodology of the analysed publications, it emerges very clearly that most scholars use qualitative and explorative methods to investigate the selected phenomena. Although the focal theme concerns a dynamic and iterative process, such as engagement, potentially, future research could employ more quantitative techniques to investigate this issue.

In conclusion, it is also possible to assert some managerial implications. This analysis and the results obtained can in fact be considered by different subjects. On the one hand, they can be taken into account by entrepreneurs of small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the field of sustainable tourism, looking at following and promoting educational courses to train their customers and visitors, with the aim of reducing the misalignment on the concept of sustainability. On the other hand, it is useful that they are also taken into account by public bodies of the area in which they are active or of destination countries of sustainable travel, in the overall perspective of implementing sustainable and responsible practices, increasing knowledge and awareness, promoting the engagement of multiple actors and developing collaborative relationships increasingly embedded, robust and, potentially, long-lasting.

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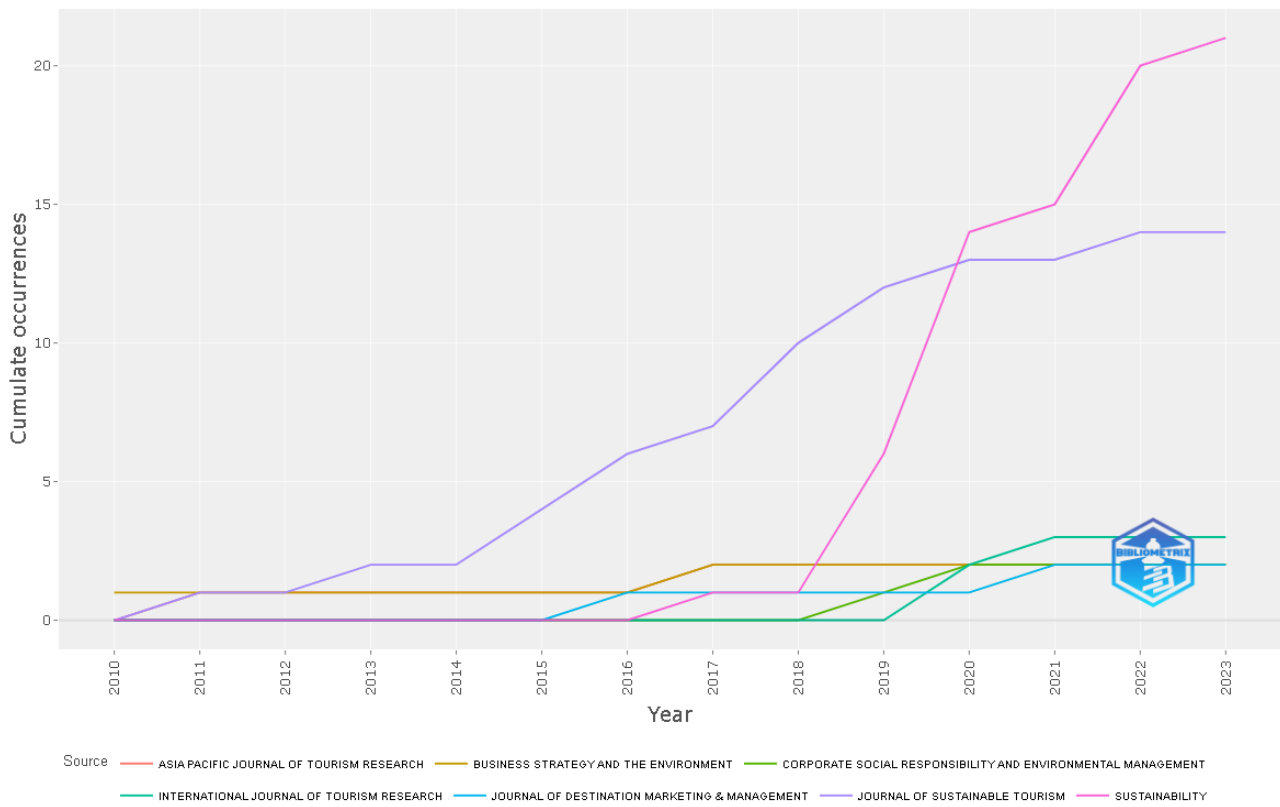
Appendix

Table A – Most relevant sources

SOURCES	ARTICLES
<i>Sustainability</i>	21
<i>Journal of Sustainable Tourism</i>	17
<i>Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management</i>	3
<i>International Journal of Tourism Research</i>	3
<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research</i>	2
<i>Business Strategy and the Environment</i>	2
<i>Journal of Destination Marketing & Management</i>	2
<i>Ecological Economics</i>	1
<i>Hospitality & Society</i>	1
<i>International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management</i>	1

Source: author's elaboration from Bilioshiny for Bibliometrix

Figure A – Source growth



Source: Bilioshiny for Bibliometrix

Table B – Country scientific production (Bibliometrix)

COUNTRY	FREQUENCY
Australia	24
China	16
UK	13
USA	11
Malaysia	9
Spain	8
Italy	7
Netherlands	7
South Korea	7
Finland	4

Source: author's elaboration from Biblioshiny for Bibliometrix

Table C – Co-citation clusters

CLUSTER	TITLE	AUTHOR	YEAR	SOURCE
CONSTRAINTS (tourism industry; small firms; corporate social responsibility; green aspects, trust, attitudinal loyalty and marketing)	Doing good to do well? Corporate social responsibility reasons, practices and impacts in small and medium accommodation enterprises	Garay, L., & Font, X.	2012	International Journal of Hospitality Management
	CSR and customer loyalty: The roles of trust, customer identification with the company and satisfaction	Martínez, P., & Del Bosque, I. R.	2013	International Journal of Hospitality Management
	The business case for sustainability? An examination of small firms in the UK's construction and restaurant sectors	Revell, A., & Blackburn, R.	2007	Business Strategy and the Environment
	A supply chain management approach for investigating the role of tour operators on sustainable tourism: the case of TUI	Sigala, M.	2008	Journal of Cleaner Production
	Responsible tourism that creates shared value among stakeholders	Camilleri, M. A.	2016	Tourism Planning & Development
DESTINATION SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (pro-environmental behaviours, stakeholder	The effect of destination social responsibility on tourist environmentally responsible behavior: Compared analysis of first-time and repeat tourists.	Su, L., & Swanson, S. R.	2017	Tourism Management

engagement, experiences, service ecosystem and transformative value)	How does destination social responsibility contribute to environmentally responsible behaviour? A destination resident perspective	Su, L., Huang, S. S., & Pearce, J.	2018	Journal of Business Research
	Structural equation modeling in practice: A review and recommended two-step approach	Anderson, J. C., & Gerbing, D. W.	1988	Psychological bulletin
	On the evaluation of structural equation models	Bagozzi, R. P., & Yi, Y.	1988	Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science
SUSTAINABILITY (economic, environmental, social and cultural sustainability)	Sustainable tourism: An evolving global approach	Bramwell, B., & Lane, B.	1993	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
	The “critical turn” and its implications for sustainable tourism research	Bramwell, B., & Lane, B.	2014	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
	Stakeholder collaboration and heritage management	Aas, C., Ladkin, A., & Fletcher, J.	2005	Annals of Tourism Research
	Residents’ perceptions of community tourism impacts	Andereck, K. L., Valentine, K. M., Knopf, R. C., & Vogt, C. A.	2005	Annals of Tourism Research
	Testing the efficacy of an integrative model for community participation	Hung, K., Sirakaya-Turk, E., & Ingram, L. J.	2011	Journal of Travel Research
SMART GOVERNANCE (smart tourism, pro-poor tourism heritage destination and cultural rationality)	Critical research on the governance of tourism and sustainability	Bramwell, B., & Lane, B.	2011	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
	Smart cities: Definitions, dimensions, performance, and initiatives	Albino, V., Berardi, U., & Dangelico, R. M.	2015	Journal of Urban Technology

HISTORIC CITIES (governance, policy and spatial (in)justice)	Urban tourism research: Recent progress and current paradoxes	Ashworth, G., & Page, S. J.	2011	Tourism Management
	The discourse on sustainable urban tourism: The need for discussing more than overtourism	Aall, C., & Koens, K.	2019	Sustainability

Source: author's elaboration from CiteSpace

Table D – Authors' labelling by keywords in clusters

CLUSTER	MAIN TOPICS	MAIN AUTHORS' KEYWORDS	AUTHORS
WELL-BEING PRACTICES	health, psychology, quality of life, behaviour, nature, social sustainability	cultural tourism; health; wellbeing; positive psychology; stress; environmental sustainability; eco-psychology; social sustainability; smart tourism; natural resources; protected natural areas; destination community wellbeing; social and sustainable marketing	Briciu, A., Briciu, V. A., & Kavoura, A. (2020) Coglan, A. (2015) De Bloom, J., Nawijn, J., Geurts, S., Kinnunen, U., & Korpela, K. (2017) Goebel, K., Camargo-Borges, C., & Eelderink, M. (2020) Hanna, P., Wijesinghe, S., Paliatsos, I., Walker, C., Adams, M., & Kimbu, A. (2019) Huang, L., & Lau, N. (2020) Mandić, A., & Kennell, J. (2021) Martini, U., Buffa, F., & Notaro, S. (2017) Moscardo, G., & Murphy, L. (2016) Moscardo, G., & Hughes, K. (2018)
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT	identity, authenticity, social capital, local community	rural identity; behavioural and emotional participation; authenticity; sincerity; guest-host relationships; social capital; sustainable community development; local community; community-based tourism; local engagement; local residents; stakeholders	Basile, G., & Cavallo, A. (2020) Chen, Y. (2019) Deville, A., Wearing, S., & McDonald, M. (2016) Everett, S., & Slocum, S. L. (2013) Gozzoli, P. C., Rongrat, T., & Gozzoli, R. B. (2022) Herbold, V., Thees, H., & Philipp, J. (2020) Lai, P. H., Chuang, S. T., Zhang, M. C., & Nepal, S. K. (2020) Sarr, B., González-Hernández, M. M., Boza-Chirino, J., & de León, J. (2020) Weaver, D. B., Moyle, B., & McLennan, C. L. J. (2022) Wen, S., Cai, X., & Li, J. (2021)

<p>SUSTAINABLE ENTREPRENEUR- SHIP</p>	<p>tourism entrepreneurs, small tourism firms, self- efficacy, social responsibility</p>	<p>small accommodation enterprises; self-efficacy; sustainable tourist behaviours; socially responsible learning; sustainable indicators; social sustainability; tourism entrepreneurs; small tourism firms; responsibility; destination social responsibility</p>	<p>Agyeiwaah, E. (2020) Chandran, A., Mandal, S., Shanmugeshwari, M., Nair, G., Das, P., Ramachandran, N., & John, E. (2021) Farinha, F., Oliveira, M. J., Silva, E. M., Lança, R., Pinheiro, M. D., & Miguel, C. (2019) Fong, S. F., Lo, M. C., Songan, P., & Nair, V. (2017) Kensbock, S., & Jennings, G. (2011) Kornilaki, M., Thomas, R., & Font, X. (2019) Lee, S., Park, H. J., Kim, K. H., & Lee, C. K. (2021)</p>
<p>EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE</p>	<p>hospitality, engagement, local embedding, social media, awareness, understanding</p>	<p>tourism impact; public sphere; social media; awareness; understanding; identity; transformative learning; representation; local embedding; hope; SDGs; stakeholder engagement</p>	<p>Hales, R., & Larkin, I. (2018) Lee, J. H., Wood, J., & Kim, J. (2021) Lloyd, K., Suchet-Pearson, S., Wright, S., Tofa, M., Rowland, C., Burarrwanga, L., ... & Maymuru, D. (2015) Mkono, M. (2016) Moskwa, E., Higgins-Desbiolles, F., & Gifford, S. (2015) Pernecky, T. (2020) Rubio-Mozos, E., García-Muiña, F. E., & Fuentes-Moraleda, L. (2020)</p>
<p>ENGAGEMENT</p>	<p>CSR, stakeholder, environmental sustainability, reputation</p>	<p>stakeholder engagement; corporate social responsibility; travel and tour operators; policies and practices; hotels; environment; green marketing; customer satisfaction; loyalty</p>	<p>Baniya, R., Thapa, B., & Kim, M. S. (2019) Iazzi, A., Pizzi, S., Iaia, L., & Turco, M. (2020) Khatter, A., McGrath, M., Pyke, J., White, L., & Lockstone-Binney, L. (2019) Mercade Mele, P., Molina Gomez, J., & Garay, L. (2019) Ramkissoon, H., Mavondo, F., & Sowamber, V. (2020) Sheldon, P. J., & Park, S. Y. (2011)</p>

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT	planning, hospitality model, green tourism, community participation	environmental practices; local destination governance; community participation; environmental resources; hospitality industry; hospitality model; social value creation; sustainable development planning	<p>DeBoer, J., Panwar, R., & Rivera, J. (2017)</p> <p>Jamal, T., & Watt, E. M. (2011)</p> <p>Karatzoglou, B., & Spilanis, I. (2010)</p> <p>Lombarts, A. (2018)</p> <p>Mzembe, A. N., Novakovic, Y., Melissen, F., & Kamanga, G. (2019)</p>
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Source: author's elaboration from VOSviewer

Chapter 2

2. Actors engagement in sustainable tour operators' service ecosystem

2.1. Abstract

Building on the service-dominant logic and the service ecosystem literature, the present study addresses the topic of co-creation of sustainable value in tourism service ecosystems. Current research in tourism field leaves unanswered critical questions such as tourism capability to engage and co-create value with and for all the actors in the service ecosystem. Specifically, this research focuses on actor engagement in sustainable tourism and aims to identify the processes and mechanisms of engagement of heterogeneous actors and to detect triggers and barriers related to engagement practices to promote sustainability in tourism. To pursue the research aims, we adopted a qualitative approach based on interviews with entrepreneurs of Italian sustainable SMEs and actors with whom they have established relationships. Findings reveal that particular attention is given to the sustainable behaviour of individual actors. These seem to be aimed at turning themselves into accepted routines to which all the actors of the network adhere, since the process of institutionalization of sustainable practices is still ongoing, especially in SMEs. One of the main challenges emerging from this study is how to manage conflicting views and values amongst actor groups; for this purpose, a critical role is assumed by the promotion of valuable communication and learning for effective actor engagement and to address the issues of empowerment and governance.

2.2. Introduction

The tourism phenomenon has generally shown continuous growth, a real expansion worldwide, and only exceptionally it has slowed down during negative economic conditions or abrupt suspensions, in the presence of extraordinary events. It is often identified and recognized as a strategic sector in the international economy and now it seems destined to become the main, largest and rapid growing world industry (Neto, 2003; Zhao and Li, 2018).

If the tourism industry on the one hand is meant as a profitable development opportunity, in terms of urban development (Buckley, 2012), job creation (Wanhill, 2000; Berno and Bricker, 2001) and economic well-being, having a good ability to distribute wealth equally (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006), on the other hand it represents a global challenge especially in the field of sustainability. Sustainable tourism, indeed, should seek to minimize the negative impacts that could be brought to the environment (Gössling, 2002; Ahmad et al., 2018), to the resident communities (Caneday and Zeiger, 1991; Faulkner and Tideswell, 1997) and, overall, to future economic development (Niñerola et al., 2019).

Basically, the concept of sustainable tourism refers to the application of sustainable development ideas to the tourism sector that started in the late 1980s (WCED, 1987; Weaver, 2006; Oriade and Evans, 2011). Sustainability, in its evolution, has not only embraced economic and environmental issues, but also socio-cultural ones, incorporating the concept of well-being, cultural integrity, value system, resources and benefits (Lindberg et al., 1997), and seeks to raise the standard of quality of life for tourism stakeholders, citizens and local communities (Jeon et al., 2016). Indeed, tourism is commonly considered sustainable when current and future economic, socio-cultural and environmental effects meet the needs of visitors, the environment and host communities (World Tourism Organization and United Nations Environment Program, 2019).

Taking these aspects into account, it was possible to note that some models theorized in recent decades include the idea of collaboration between tourism operators and stakeholders and consider community support and empowerment to be fundamental, as landmarks of the sustainable development process (Simpson, 2001; Aas et al., 2005; Sutawa, 2012; Park and Kim, 2016; Khalid et al., 2019). This framework that considers various actors and describes their relationships and involvement can easily be traceable to a service ecosystem, conceived by Vargo and Lusch (2008). In this system, the main actors, the integration of resources and the practices of co-creation of value should be identified in four contexts of analysis: micro, meso, macro and meta (Barile et al., 2020).

In this perspective, it is immediate to refer to tourism organizations that act in a sustainable way, therefore essentially capable of creating value in the economic, social, cultural dimension and minimizing the environmental footprint. And, specifically, to tour operators who represent the leaders of the tourism supply chain as intermediaries between tourists and destinations and who, through the planning, design and promotion of sustainable, ethical and responsible travel, are

considered the leverage point to guide the transition towards sustainability (Fredericks et al., 2008; Bricker and Black, 2016).

Despite a growing interest in sustainable tourism in literature over the past decades, academic research on SMEs in tourism is still limited and the study of sustainability values and practices is rare in the field of these enterprises (Kornilaki et al., 2019). The researchers did not analyse in depth the management dynamics of sustainable practices and their integration into the ecosystem of tourism services (Ibarnia et al., 2020). In fact, many have mainly considered the point of view of tourists (Miller et al., 2010) or of local communities and residents (Choi and Murray, 2010; Nunkoo et al., 2013) or other have studied large companies in the hospitality sector (Rather and Sharma, 2017; Thomas-Francois et al., 2020).

Therefore, the need to figure out from a managerial point of view how tourism SMEs operate in a sustainable way emerges, especially in this last period in which there has been a substantial increase in sustainable tourist packages promoted by tour operators; and besides, it is evident the will to understand the ways in which the various actors are integrated and involved in the actions implemented by operators, from the perspective of an ecosystem of tourism services. Indeed, the main objective of the paper is to identify the processes and mechanisms of engagement of heterogeneous actors, highlighting the obstacles and difficulties in promoting sustainable offers by tour operators in the Italian tourism service ecosystem. Specifically, the study aims to answer two research questions:

(RQ1) How tour operators define the concept of tourism sustainability?

*(RQ2) How the process of actor engagement is been developed overtime by tour operators?
What are the obstacles and the benefits of the engagement process?*

In this direction, the research employs an interview-based qualitative approach to understand in depth the process of engaging the actors in a service ecosystem that creates value (Giannopoulos et al., 2020).

After outlining the reference literature review and describing the methodology, the analysis addresses the research questions on how the process of actors engagement is developed. Contributing to existing literature, the paper aims to interpret and describe the efforts of potential actors in a value-creating service ecosystem to develop ever more distinct and solid engagement

bonds. Finally, the study offers a discussion on managerial and theoretical implications and reflects on future research in the field.

2.3. Literature review

2.3.1. Sustainable tourism

The concept of sustainability begins to join the development paradigm in the 1980s, from which the notion of sustainable tourism subsequently derives. Since its emergence following the publication of the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), sustainable development – and its tourism declination – has been crucial in promoting the idea that tourism is not an end in itself; rather it can be used for broader sustainable development goals (Weaver, 2006; Moyle et al., 2020). Specifically, sustainable tourism is seen as a "regulatory orientation that seeks to redirect societal systems and behaviour on a broad and integrated path toward sustainable development" (Bramwell et al., 2017, p. 1).

It is often conceptualized using the three pillars of environmental, economic and social sustainability, including also cultural, political and ethical aspects, and it is adaptable according to the circumstances of different contexts over time. Sustainable tourism is said to occur when all three main features are achieved, however in some cases one aspect can prevail over the others or each can be accomplished independently by reducing negative impacts and improving positive ones. Its purpose, therefore, is to maintain a balance between protecting the environment, providing social and cultural integrity, promoting economic benefits, trying to meet the needs of local communities and improve living standards in long-term periods (Liu et al., 2013; Zolfani et al., 2015).

Emergent topics in tourism regard in particular environmental aspects with the definition of indicators to evaluate sustainability issues; social and ethical questions related to the possibility of improving quality of life (Morgan et al., 2015); technological and innovation matters. Although these issues are primarily related to the promotion of green and social tourism, there are also important competitiveness topics to be addressed as competitiveness is perceived as one of the main economic dimensions of sustainability also relevant for tourism. Concerning corporate competitiveness, sustainable practices are important to outline a winning strategy and a long-term competitive advantage only when sustainability is considered a relevant issue also for customers and stakeholders and is used as a distinctive factor over competitors (Postma et al., 2017).

In this context, there is noticed that the issue that receives less attention is social involvement. This is due to the scarce communication among organizations and between them and potential tourism service consumers sector (Streimikiene et al., 2021). With reference to the social sphere of sustainable development, represented by the ability of the actors of a territory to collaborate synergistically according to a shared territorial vision, it is necessary to consider the relationships that are established between companies, businesses and enterprises operating in the tourism sector and all the actors extant in the area, at local and national, public and private level (Van Der Duim, 2007). In this regard, some additional studies confirm that stakeholders' involvement is essential for the success of the tourism sector in establishing a feasible balance between economic, environmental and social dynamics (Byrd, 2007; Nicholas et al., 2009) and this engagement can also be useful for achieving a sense of collective responsibility for sustainable development (Landorf, 2009).

In relation to management activities applied to tourism, Landorf (2009, p. 55) states that a sustainable development plan must “engage stakeholders in a process guided by a strategic orientation, reflecting local influences and stakeholder needs based on consideration of a circular model of causality”. Accordingly, the interaction of sustainability in the principles and strategy of a company has received more attention in recent years (Cavagnaro and Curiel, 2012). Moreover, some scholars believe that a strategic approach, intended as a means of guiding resource allocation, can positively contribute to the sustainable development decision-making and planning process, and can improve long-term organizational performance (Simpson, 2001). In a wider sense, sustainable development can also refer to the renovation of core business activities – business model, strategy and operations – making an organization more competitive in achieving economic goals in a responsible way, both from the environment and social point of view (Van Passel et al., 2009; De Grosbois, 2012).

Stated the polyhedral nature of sustainable tourism, conventional definitions frequently put it at the intersection of activities (e.g., marketing, infrastructure, programs, policies) that are simultaneously environmentally appropriate, socially acceptable, and economically viable. Therefore, the activities of planning, management and monitoring of tourism development proposals and actions turn out to be extremely relevant, taking into consideration the sustainability criteria and globally recognized sustainable development goals (SDGs). In relation to the SDGs promoted by 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the presence of the “Partnership for the

Goal” topic as single most cited objective confirms the revealed importance of stakeholders’ contribution themes (Moyle et al., 2020).

According to Moscardo’s (2011) review of tourism planning models, stakeholders are often mentioned as important, but poorly detailed support is provided on how to identify, engage and work with them (Budeanu et al., 2016). Stakeholder groups are also mentioned by Blackstock et al. (2008) and by Choi and Murray (2010) as tool to build a better community and to maintain good and successful communication with the municipality and residents, since their collaboration and effective involvement is considered important in the planning, development and management processes.

Moreover, some key issues emerge from the analysis of further papers, including the creation of partnerships and the involvement of all stakeholders, such as local populations and non-governmental sectors, to ensure sustainability strategies (Mihalič et al., 2012), the challenge in managing different visions and values of sustainability among groups of stakeholders (Clausen and Gyimóthy, 2016; Hatipoglu et al., 2016), the complexity of sustainability processes involving stakeholders and the fundamental importance of communication and learning for effective stakeholder engagement (Frisk and Larson, 2011; McLennan et al., 2016). Specifically, some scholars have noted that institutional structures to support stakeholders’ engagement are lacking and that results are often discussed more than engagement processes, with reference to sustainability (Hawkins and Wang, 2012).

For this reason, in fact, our intention is to deeply investigate the sustainable aspects, linked to the social sphere and, primarily, to the engagement processes of the various actors that compose the extremely fragmented tourism system. In a context as complex as that of sustainable tourism, it is not possible to consider resources, activities and communities individually, but it is necessary to consider the whole as an ecosystem of integrated services and constantly connected actors.

2.3.2. *Service ecosystem and actor engagement*

Since tourism provides services, seen as the application of operating resources, it can be defined as a service industry (Battilani and Fauri, 2009), that generates an ecosystem.

To better understand the concept of service ecosystem it may be useful to dwell on the service-dominant (S-D) logic, theorized by Vargo and Lusch (2004). Broadly, this model recognizes a strategic centrality to service, seen as a fundamental unit and object of exchange relationships. Services are considered essential for exchanges, and they represent means to bring benefits to all the actors who not only provide services but also improve resource integration (Taillard et al., 2016; Wieland et al., 2016). And it is precisely through resource integration and combinations of actors that value is co-created. Moreover, the co-creation of value is managed by institutions and institutional arrangements.

Vargo and Lusch (2008), in defining the theory, emphasize the procedural nature of services which, deriving from “operating resources”, generate benefits. Furthermore, through the reciprocal exchange of services between different actors and the interactions between actors and the environment, a flow of resources and services is produced which, in turn, generate and co-create value, understood as maintaining and increasing well-being (Lusch and Vargo, 2014). This provision of reciprocal services within a system constitutes an interrelated and dynamic service ecosystem (Vargo and Lusch, 2016).

Therefore, the role attributed to service ecosystem in this theory appears substantial: it emphasizes on the importance of inclusion of end-users in the value creation process and emerges and evolves through relationships among service-for-service providing and resource-integrating actors. Fundamental, then, is the presence of the actors involved in, who constitute a web of relationships, since they always remain connected. Moreover, the participation of various actors in service ecosystems can bring reciprocal benefits and can have an influence on the co-creation of value. And, from a service ecosystem perspective, all these subjects are resource-integrating, service-providing "enterprises" (Vargo and Lusch, 2017) that relate to each other in various contexts; this integration takes place in the form of a process and the ways of co-creating value emerge within dynamic and iterative relationships.

Furthermore, another important aspect to underline is the ability of ecosystems to produce benefits, in terms of goods and services, and its connection to human well-being. The concept of well-being is directly associated to the population, the community, the actors present in the area and participating in the service ecosystem. Indeed, it seems important to consider their presence and engagement in this complex system.

According to the service-dominant logic, both consumers and the various organizations and entities that gravitate around companies are included and integrated: relationships are built with them, collaborative activities are shared, knowledge is fleshed out and all results in a positive impact on the actors involved, producing benefits.

So far, it has been investigated by scholars how S-D logic can be applied to various research fields, including marketing and tourism management (FitzPatrick et al., 2013). Specifically, it appears that this theory can be used to guide practitioners to achieve and sustain strategic and competitive advantage, emphasizing the realization of corporate values shared with stakeholders and encouraging the firm to invest in amplifying its co-creation proposition (Bettencourt et al., 2014; Evans, 2016).

Among the strategic methods used by experts to create value and to make firms more competitive, we can include the collaboration of the consumers, the firms and other members of the network that exchange operant resources through interaction, dialogue and coordinated communication (Tynan and McKechnie, 2009); hence it is natural to define the involvement and engagement of multiple actors as a strategic resource, intended as means to influence production, outcome and performance among firms and creation of value and, moreover, capable of developing a community through interactive and dynamic engagement processes.

Customer engagement depicts active behavioural involvement and, in the service ecosystem, it occurs within a dynamic and iterative process in which customers co-create value through interactions with various agents, and thus generating multiple engagement relationships (Hao, 2020). According to Chathoth et al. (2016), the close relationship between customer engagement and co-creation is essential; moreover, among the benefits of engaging customers through co-creative modalities we can include higher mutual value, greater satisfaction by customers, the possibility of being recognized as a valuable resource and the creation of social contacts (Etgar, 2008).

According to Lusch et al. (2010), customer engagement may occur in different way, categorized into five dimensions: valence, form or modality, scope, nature of its impact and customer goals. As described by Hao (2020), the engagement-related research in tourism and hospitality studies covers six main streams: customer engagement; employee/work engagement; community/resident engagement; institutional/hotel engagement in stakeholder management, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and sustainability; student/learner engagement;

civic/volunteer engagement. Furthermore, the author has identified four sub-categories of customer engagement: online customer engagement, tourist engagement, customer engagement behaviour, customer brand engagement.

Thus far, many researchers (Chathoth et al., 2014; Storbacka et al., 2016; Romero, 2018; Rather, 2020) merely investigated the role of stakeholders and their engagement behaviour in tourism contexts, while it has not yet been investigated in depth the perspective of the actors, considering their engagement in an ecosystem of tourism services. Indeed, going beyond the mere definition of consumer, some recent studies have focused on dynamic network structures that accentuate the mutual, social and collective nature of engagement beyond a dyadic interaction and multiple types of actors, such as employees, business partners, governmental and non-profit entities, citizens and even non-human actors. Their engagement has a complex and procedural nature that results in the co-creation of value and production of benefits; accordingly, Brodie et al. (2019, p. 180) state that "the institutionalization of actor engagement is essential for creating coordination benefits in a service ecosystem".

Basically, the main objectives of actors engagement practices undertaken by sustainable entrepreneurship are: to evaluate the contribution to learning and innovation of the processes and services offered; to improve the quality and the level of responsibility and sustainability of strategic decisions within the company, which also have an impact on external competitors, allowing companies to align social, environmental and economic performance with the strategy and to collaborate with those interested in, to improve the management of shared social challenges; to better understand how to handle (eco)systemic change, involving in their decisions and activities the actors who can influence the operations of the entrepreneurship themselves; to know better the actors involved, their needs, expectations, and requirements, in order to improve the decision-making process, positively influence the legitimacy to operate in a sustainable and responsible way, to be able to differentiate themselves from competitors who have not yet moved in this direction and gain a competitive advantage.

In the tourism context to which we refer, the actors, nestled in a network of relationships with the numerous entities of the ecosystem to which they belong, are subject to active participation in development processes, not only territorial, but also of value creation, and thus operational synergies, agreements and integrations arise between them and local companies (Martini et al., 2017).

It therefore appears necessary to consider the impact and benefits that actors engagement can bring to enterprises, especially sustainable ones, which are attentive to social, environmental and economic aspects. From the economic point of view, the interaction with the actors can decrease the production and leftover of resources because they are exchanged and integrated. The environmental impact is evident because, as there is sharing and integration, there is less waste and increasing value of local territories. From a socio-cultural perspective, by combining new voices, subjects and ideas, companies that carry out engagement activities can add and create value in the community in which they operate and, through steady link with the reference territory, they are able to anticipate and cope with changes.

These enterprises should evaluate the integration of the perspectives of external actors with respect to their actions and decisions as an opportunity, to be considered more collaborative, inclusive and strategic and often there is also a positive impact on corporate reputation and relational aspects. This engagement, in fact, can allow enterprises to carry out projects and offer innovative services, co-creating shared value and, moreover, to evaluate their work, in terms of output, through the feedback of the actors and measure the level and quality of commitment and integration process.

Given these premises, it emerges that the actors and the integration of resources are crucial in the process of value co-creation and in the mutual contribution of benefits and, in this sense, a fundamental role is certainly associated with tour operators, since they are the main subject who has direct interactions and relationships with all the different types of actors.

The choice to consider tour operators is motivated by many reasons: first of all, the poor consideration and investigation by researchers of the tour operator perspective; secondly, tour operators constitute a focal point in the ecosystem of tourist services at all levels, as they represent the mediators between the various actors and, finally, given their multifaceted functionality, tour operators are able to involve multiple subjects, different by nature and quality. Among these, the main reason is certainly the fact that tour operators cover a strategic position in the tourism service ecosystem. These, being actors themselves, represent the meso level of this system: they are, in fact, placed as intermediaries between the micro and macro levels of the actors, thus, specifically, between tourists and destinations. Tour operators can hence be considered as orchestrators of the tourism service ecosystem and therefore deserve a specific in-depth study.

Accordingly, with the intention to explore these aspects related to the tourism service ecosystem, it is required to examine the crucial and most interconnected actor, that is tour operators. And this investigation can be deepened by analysing the management facets related to the sustainability of the tourist package offers and the organizational aspects linked to their role as intermediaries between the many actors engaged.

2.4. Research objectives and methodology

The present study aims to investigate the Italian sustainable tourism ecosystem, very fragmented and made up mainly of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This context has been chosen since Italy is the one of the leading countries for tourist activity, counting about 15% of the total of European companies operating in the travel market. The purpose of this analysis is to qualitatively explore how Italian tour operators consider sustainable tourism and construct their practices as “sustainable” in order to understand the value orientations that contribute to outline its definition. Moreover, its aim is also to identify the phases of the engagement process of heterogeneous actors and to detect barriers and obstacles related to the practices of involvement to promote sustainability in tourism. The research questions can be summarized as follows:

(RQ1) How tour operators define the concept of tourism sustainability?

*(RQ2) How the process of actor engagement is been developed overtime by tour operators?
What are the obstacles and the benefits of the engagement process?*

The object of the research is mainly represented by sustainable tour operators, which, in a system as complex as the tourism is, are recognized as intermediaries between the actors and as interconnectors between the various levels – micro and macro – that make up a system. Furthermore, they could act both as individual entities and as mediators between various stakeholders, potentially giving input to tourism development, especially in reference to sustainability. The research does not limit itself to analysing the work of sustainable tour operators, but also investigates the other levels, through a snow-ball method, and examines the actions of the same actors who establish relationships with operators and who, all together, constitute the tourism service ecosystem.

This analysis is carried out in compliance with the perspective of service-dominant logic, therefore, examining the procedural aspect of value co-creation and the contribution in terms of benefits that the subjects considered bring each other and, in general, to the ecosystem of tourism services.

2.4.1. *Research setting*

Since most of the companies operating in the Italian tourism sector are small-sized, the focus of the research is on the category of SMEs. They are companies with less than 250 employees and a turnover of less than 50 million €, compared to the definition contained in the *EU Recommendation no. 2003/361/EC*⁷.

In this context, the main subject of the research is represented by tour operators, based in Italy, who adopt sustainable practices and who declare interest in issues such as responsible tourism, respect for the environment and social solidarity. Given their nature, these organizations offer tourist services, respecting suppliers, the environment, traditions of local citizens and communities in whose territories they organize trips; as intermediaries between tourists and destinations (Hamid and Isa, 2020), they are led to cooperate and work alongside other actors in the area, to spread their philosophy and their proposals more widely.

In detail, since the classification of tour operator is not defined by Italian law, the Tourism Satellite Account (UNSD, 2008) definition of tour operator states that they combine two or more travel services and sell them directly or through travel agencies to final consumers as a single product, labelled as a tourist package.

According to Fredericks et al. (2008, p. iv) they are seen as a “pivotal link between the tourist and the destinations, and thereby represent a leverage point for leading the move towards sustainability”, and they also build relationships with local communities and suppliers in the tourism industries (Hamid and Isa, 2020). As intermediaries between the supply and demand for tourism, tour operators are in fact part of a more complex system that interdependently integrates social, economic and environmental aspects. This tourism service ecosystem highlights inherently high levels of cooperation between tour operators and their immediate stakeholders and it includes

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/sme-definition_en

direct involvement in all aspects of the tourism experience, on three levels: the first contains transport, accommodations, attractions, travel agencies; the second includes retail shops, banking, entertainment and leisure activities; the third provides basic infrastructure and support for tourism, such as public sector services, crafts and food production (Lickorish and Jenkins, 1997).

Furthermore, with their extensive distribution networks, these tour operator enterprises have become very important in potentially inducing behavioural changes in the tourism industry. Indeed, some scholars have studied and strengthened their responsibilities and fundamental role as key players in affecting variations in attitudes towards more responsible form of tourism and they have highlighted their potential in promoting sustainable tourism (Budeanu, 2005; Sigala, 2008; Hamid et al., 2021). However, they mainly considered large companies, without dwelling on the analysis of small and medium-sized enterprises which, at least in Europe, dominate the tour operator sector, representing almost $\frac{2}{3}$ of the tourism market (EEA, 2001).

Since tour operators influence various aspects of the tourism system and, in part, the behaviour and perception of visitors, they can maximize the aspect of sustainability, including social and economic advantages, benefits for cultural heritage and for the environment and they can promote partnership, through actor engagement (Bricker and Black, 2016). But, despite their high and remarked relevance in the distribution of tourism products, their role within the tourism supply chain and ecosystem has been scarcely studied, and even less regarding their performance towards more sustainable practices implemented by small and medium-sized enterprises (Ibarnia et al., 2020).

From these considerations derives our interest in investigating the relationship that is established between tour operators and the various actors involved in and the resulting consequences: in fact, the engagement of external subjects can generate value and produce benefits, increasing, for example, the level and the quality of the companies' sustainability.

In this context, the tour operators we considered were selected using a purposive sampling process. The sample has been identified from an initial population of Italian tour operators, from which sustainable ones were picked, selected from ranking and lists of Italian tourist websites⁸. Therefore, we have chosen active subjects with headquarters in Italy, which offer both incoming

⁸ <http://touroperator.qviaggi.it/recensioni/vacanze/tour-operator/generalisti/>
<http://www.airt.org/soci/elenco-soci/>

and outgoing services, who declare to operate in a sustainable way, hence who act with regard to economic interest, respect for the environment and social solidarity and who are members of associations that promote sustainable and responsible tourism or that carry out projects concerning ecology, environmental education, solidarity, social cooperation, cultural enhancement.

Moreover, using a snow-ball approach, we then considered the actors who interact with the tour operators we interviewed. Literature of tourism shows six different types of actors categorized into: tourists, local community, industry, government, educational institutions and special interest groups (Waligo et al., 2013). And, among these, we have decided to exclude visitors and consumers because several researchers have previously analysed their point of view. And thus, we referred mainly to educational and territorial public bodies, tourism businesses and companies (also competitors), associations and NGOs.

2.4.2. *Methodology: interviews and narrative approach*

Interview was chosen as the method of analysis since this tool is the most common in research on small and medium-sized enterprises (Curran et al., 1993; Tinsley and Lynch, 2001). Therefore, we conducted 15 in-depth and semi-structured interviews with key informants of tour operators and, to broaden and triangulate the study, other interviews were carried out with managers of external organizations, connected to tour operators, such as national associations of responsible tourism, social cooperatives and NGOs, travel agencies and suppliers or producers of traditional local goods (craftmanship and gastronomy) (cf. *Table 2.1*).

This choice was dictated by the fact that the main objective of the research is to consider the entire tourism service ecosystem, going especially to reflect on the interplay dynamics at social level that exist between the subjects. In fact, the first interviews were addressed to the entrepreneurs of Italian tour operators, while a second round of interviews was made with some of the actors engaged in their work with whom they have established and undertook long-lasting relationships.

Table 2.1- List of subjects interviewed

Subject	Location	Year of foundation	Size	Main activity	National association	Data sources
TO_01 Founder	Vicenza	1998	50	Active cycling and walking holidays; houseboat stays in Europe	AITR	Online interview; website; journal articles; further documents
TO_02 Founder	Palermo	2017	5	Cycling and ecotourism trips in Sicily	Travelife; ActiveItaly	Online interview; website
TO_03 CEO	Turin	2002	6	Adventure tour in developing countries	Rainforest Alliance T.O.P.S (Tour Operators Promoting Sustainability)	Online interview; website; journal articles
TO_04 Sustainability manager	Trento	2015	12	Trips with a naturalistic-cultural vocation all over the world	Travelife; Treedom	Online interview; website; further documents
TO_05 Director of sustainable tourism department	Palermo/ Cefalù	1983	5	Excursions, holidays and educational trips in Sicily	AITR	Online interview; website; further documents
TO_06 Founder	Rome/ Milan	1993	15	Trekking holidays between nature and culture in Italy and all over the world	AITR	Online interview; website; further documents
TO_07 Guide and travel	Livorno	1985	6	Nature-based travel and educational trips in Tuscany,	AITR	Online interview; website

planning manager				Sardinia and untouched countries		
TO_08 Travel planning manager	Verona	1999	5	Accessible, thematic and nature-based trips all over the world	AITR	Online interview; website; further documents
TO_09 Director	Turin	2004	10	Excursions and cycling trips in Europe, Africa and Latin America	AITR	Online interview; website; further documents
TO_10 Director and vice director	Camogli	1987	4	Walking holidays in developing countries	AITR	Participant observation during a course; interview; website; books; further documents
A_01 Director	Milan	1998	15	Association that promotes dissemination and works for the affirmation of culture, principles and practices of sustainable and responsible tourism	AITR	Participant observation during courses; online interview; website; previous interviews
A_02 Executive secretary	Turin	2020	7	Active and Sustainable Tourism Business Network to promote active tourism	Activetaly	Online interview; website; previous interviews
A_03 Marketing and communication manager	Turin	2003	5	Italian artisans who create handmade fashion accessories		Online interview; website; previous interviews

				reusing bicycle wheels		
A_04 Marketing and communication manager	Palermo	2009	6	Tour operator that offers ethical tourism holidays and involve subject part of the anti-Mafia network	AITR	Online interview; website; previous interviews
A_05 Project manager	Palermo	2016	5	Laboratory of gastronomic products inside the juvenile prison Malaspina (PA) that manage a space for tourist reception		Phone interview; website; previous interviews

Source: author's elaboration

A maximum of two subjects with a key role within the company were contacted: directors, founding partners, managers of the CSR department, travel coordinators and planner were interviewed. Most of the respondents perform several tasks and occupy multiple positions within enterprises, due to their small size and not always adequate economic capacity. The interviews were conducted between February 2021 and February 2022; they lasted between 30 to 120 minutes, for a total of approximately 17 hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim, producing a 120-page document (Calibri, 12). Furthermore, participants were assured of their anonymity using pseudonyms.

In addition to the information derived from the interviews, secondary data were also useful for the analysis. These were generally retrieved from the websites of the enterprises that were contacted, from their pages on social networks, from articles in online newspapers in which they were cited, from specific courses organized by national organizations that deal with responsible and sustainable tourism.

The interviews consisted of a series of open narrative questions to explore and evaluate three main thematic macro-areas: the interpretation of the concept of sustainable tourism and the declination into actions within the enterprises; the importance of external actors in the provision of the tourist offer, the mechanism and the obstacles to their engagement and the benefits produced; the pandemic and post-pandemic situation of Covid-19.

Specifically, the first section intended to analyse the sustainable management practices implemented by businesses. Starting from the definition of sustainable tourism, we investigated how it was declined within the company, both from an economic, environmental and socio-cultural point of view; we then tried to understand if sustainability was the main mission of their activities and, therefore, if it was intrinsic and not a mere strategy to reach a specific target of consumers. Finally, any obstacles and difficulties encountered in developing a sustainable offer were outlined.

The following segment investigated the role of the actors and their engagement in the sustainable activities promoted by the enterprises. Basically, the importance that the interviewed subjects attribute to the involvement of external actors and the methods and mechanisms adopted to engage them, as well as any barriers faced, was sought. Then we explored the category of individual actors (i.e., public and educational bodies, other companies, local producers and communities) and the type of relationship established over time. Subsequently, it was asked whether the company had benefited from this engagement process and mutual value was co-produced.

The last questions focused on the situation and the impact suffered by enterprises during the pandemic period: we investigated whether the idea of engaging more and more actors could be a consequence of such a critical period – especially from a social point of view – as the one experienced in the last two years and whether companies were identifying new objectives and developing specific projects of engagement and cooperation, in view of a more sustainable future.

Since our study is exploratory and aims to bring out new issues relevant to the sustainable management of enterprises and concerning actor engagement, we adopted for the analysis an interpretative thematic approach inspired by a narrative methodology (Galuppo et al., 2020).

Narrative research draws its methodology from philosophy, psychology and sociology (Cortazzi, 1994). There is no single method of narrative analysis, since a story, an experience and a perception are individual and can be reported in different ways, with different words and it is subject

to personal interpretations of the narrators. Generally, it is a matter of separating the words spoken from the respondents, inductively developing thematic elements and categories through the narratives of the participants (Riessman, 2000). The main aim of a narrative approach is to consider the most expanded social, cultural, linguistic and institutional context, but going to sacrifice, partially, the unique and individual experience of the single participant (Hunter, 2010). This means that, in the phase of thematic narrative analysis, the approach consists in examining how the participant imposes an order on the narrative sequence, to give meaning to the events and actions in relation to the theme under consideration (Nasheeda et al., 2019). This procedure, in fact, can be applied to create a narrative, through a process of transformation from transcripts to a story, not necessarily organized in chronological order, but also as a thematic sequence (Riessman and Quinney, 2005).

Hence, the interviews were considered and read as a set of narratives, as a means by which the entrepreneurs justified their behaviour (Cunliffe et al., 2004) and their approach to the different actors involved. The research has focused on the structure and the content of the narratives, therefore, the structural analysis examined how the participants constructed their stories and positioned themselves in them, instead the content analysis looked at how respondents define tourism experiences and practices as “sustainable” and what is their approach in engaging various actors, considering their role in the infrastructure of the tourism service ecosystem. The study has identified different main narratives, which are described in detail in the following paragraph. As stated by Koning and Waistell (2012), the interpretation of the narratives described is only one of the countless possible interpretations of the empirical material and does not want to be incontrovertible but rather open to further analysis and reflection by the readers.

2.5. Findings

Based on these analyses, we could understand how the different respondents defined the concept of sustainability and it was possible to observe their approach in engaging external actors in their work.

2.5.1. *Sustainability concept*

As is universally known, the definition of sustainability considers three main aspects: environmental, economic and socio-cultural and all respondents argue that sustainability should consider them all, albeit to different degrees.

The examination of the interviews allowed, through an interpretative approach, to gather to an omni comprehensive definition of the concept of sustainability. In essence, the purpose of those operators who pursue actions of sustainable and responsible tourism is basically to minimize the environmental and ecological impact of the proposed trips, enhancing the social impact and promoting the territory of destination and their inhabitants, through a local economic return.

Overall, they assume that a sustainable journey should aim to respect nature and territory, reducing as much as possible the emission of carbon dioxide and therefore controlling the environmental and ecological impact produced by a trip – it is impossible to completely eliminate it since the simple act of travelling involves an alteration of the environment. Specifically, the behaviours aimed at preserving the environment most adopted in the companies surveyed concern: the decrease in the use of paper and plastic, accompanied by separate collection; the installation of solar panels or the adoption of renewable energy systems; the consumption of coffee beans, produced by Fair Trade organisation; the habit of providing reusable aluminium bottles to customers; the reduction of polluting transport.

This is compounded, for many, by the idea of stimulating an economic return in the countries visited, preserving, promoting and supporting projects that consider the inclusion of minorities or small communities in the social and economic life of the analogue country. In this sense, some tour operators commit to make donations to NGOs with which they collaborate in developing territories, others propose to use the services offered by local family-run organizations (accommodation facilities and restaurants) and to buy products made by local suppliers (handicrafts and gastronomic). Moreover, they try to avoid the phenomenon of leakage (i.e., loss to the local economy in favour of the one of the country of origin of the tourists) by reinvesting the money in projects in destination countries.

Another important consideration is about the social, ethical and educational aspects, not exclusively related to trips. Some tour operators argue that it is necessary to travel at a reduced speed to fully appreciate the territory and know the residents, their habits and traditions; therefore,

they propose relational tourism experiences through meetings with host communities and official suppliers, to pursue in-depth cultural mediation. To this end, many actions have been implemented by tour operators, including the discouraging of activities that exploit wild animals; the creation of a shared sustainable value charter to educate tourists and organizations; the establishment of cooperation and partnerships with local authorities and guides, to better get in touch with their culture; making travel accessible for people with disabilities and respecting employees, aiming at a fair working environment.

Sustainable management is not a trend but is part of the DNA and mission of the enterprises interviewed: only by truly believing in the ideals described above is it possible to create a careful and prepared community and to transmit knowledge and educate both customers and external subjects. All entrepreneurs believe that it is important to adopt sustainable practices even outside the company, in the everyday life and, in fact, this predisposition arises from intrinsic passions or from the personal education of entrepreneurs, that, in many cases, are trained as tourist guides or hikers. In addition, some believe that having a corporate CSR department, despite the small size of tourism entrepreneurs, is important, as well as being inspired by the world sustainable guidelines: *"each entity should realign its value chart to include the 17 SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) of the 2030 Agenda"* (TO_04). Others support the idea that *"sustainability is a strategy – not in a strictly economic way, but more in general – to preserve the planet and not damage it, to better experience and appreciate it"* and that *"representing an added value for entrepreneurs, sustainability can turn into a competitive advantage for companies that adopt it"* (TO_03).

There were several difficulties that entrepreneurs had to face in developing a sustainable offer, especially with respect to the objective they set, namely, to make their reality recognizable and competitive in the super fragmented national tourist market. In this regard, it is possible to consider communication as the main obstacle for all tour operators. Communication is mainly intended as explanation of the type of travel proposed and often, this lead to a complexity in the reception and perception of the offer by customers poorly informed and prejudiced, characterized by a cognitive bias for which sustainable travel is imagined as understated and thus cheaper: *"our sustainable choices are not aimed at saving money, as some customers believe, but it is a commitment and a will not to consume unnecessary resources"* (TO_09). A further aspect related to the communication concerns the effort not to speak focusing too much on the details to describe the travel proposals because on one side some tourists can be overwhelmed and therefore

frightened, meanwhile others may criticize operators for deceiving them, accusing them of greenwashing. To overcome this problem, many operators organize preliminary information meetings on the nature of the imminent trip.

Another obstacle that has been faced by most of the subjects interviewed is to be branded and recognized as promoters of sustainability, especially in the 90's – decade of birth of some tour operators – when this concept was slowly facing the Italian ground. Together with these critical aspects, it emerges that moving in a sustainable direction involves higher costs, both in economic and time-consuming terms, especially if their aim is to properly train and educate the customers.

From the interviews, it intuitively appeared that the engagement of external actors can be considered as a good solution to solve these challenges: *"we certainly had to face some obstacles, but we have always worked by trying to involve local communities and other organisations, such as schools, as much as possible; therefore, step by step, our work has been recognized and our educational method has been appreciated"* (TO_05). This declaration makes it possible to highlight how essential the presence and engagement of external actors is for many factors: first, for a greater recognition of the tour operators themselves, then for the diffusion of the correct definition of the concept of sustainability and, finally, for the creation and enhancement of an ecosystem of sustainable tourism services.

2.5.2. *Process of actor engagement*

In this section the purpose is to examine the importance of external actors in the provision of the tourist offers and to outline the process of their engagement, both from the tour operators and actors' point of view.

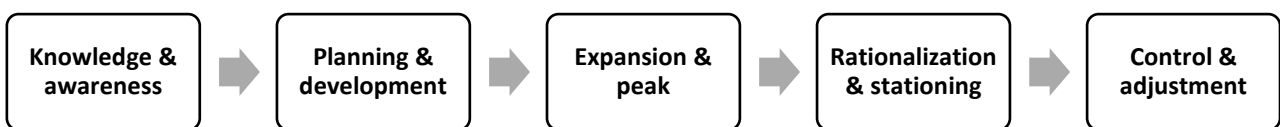
In particular, the dual-minded analysis of the mechanisms and methods of engagement does not lead to a single direction of action. In fact, it is possible to observe multiple approaches to external actors, articulated into coherent narratives, i.e., clusters of attitudes toward engagement of sustainable actors. Since there are various perspectives and approaches, it has been convenient to conceptualize them in a dynamic process that describes the incremental phases of the engagement of the actors (Li et al., 2017; Brodie et al., 2019). According to Li et al. (2017) this iterative process can be conceptualized in a theoretical framework, whereby engagement outcomes from previous phases become new engagement conditions in the next iteration; furthermore, they

highlight the fact that the outcomes of the actors' behaviours create a strong bond within external subjects and the community, enhances their disposition and intensifies their engagement behaviours.

Based on the primary conceptualization of Storbacka et al. (2016) of the actor engagement as an empirical foundation for value co-creation within the context of a service ecosystem and on their proposed framework, our model focuses specifically on the "engagement properties" concept. These are defined as observable engagement activities and consider co-production and value-in-use-activities, relational properties, informational properties and temporal properties. Since the actor engagement is iterative and dynamic, the temporal properties encompass the other and this concept guided our investigation.

As shown in *Figure 2.1*, the narratives are organized in the form of an evolutionary process and describe the five stages of the actors engagement cycle, structured according to the enterprises' years of activity and the ability of tour operators to develop a complete sustainable offer. Consistent with a processual narrative and interpretative approach respondents' descriptions regarding their behaviours adopted in engaging external actors move and evolve between the narratives, representing some possible "positions" that can be considered when dealing with engagement within an ecosystem of sustainable tourism services.

Figure 2.1 - Actors engagement process



Source: author's elaboration

Being within a process, there are some crucial phases, while others vary according to the moment of "life" and the years of activity of the enterprise itself. In fact, every organization firstly realizes that there may be a problem or a lack in its activity and engaging external actors can be necessary and useful to implement better strategies and grow the business and, secondly, after analysing the potential subjects to involve, it prepares a development plan in which the actors and the modalities of engagement are defined. In particular, in these initial phases the common theme

– although addressed with different insensitivity – is the level of sharing of intrinsic ideals and philosophy concerning sustainability, intended as an effective driver to foster nature and environment conservation, respect for the community and the territory and attention to economic issues.

The central phase represents the moment of effective expansion and leads to maximum engagement of the actors. This is the period in which operators actually set in motion and get in contact with the various actors selected and, especially at the beginning, they try to reach as many subjects as possible to be involved, so as to be able to expand, to raise awareness and develop strong relationships.

The fourth stage of the process describes the moment in which the enterprise begins to rationalize on the actors already involved over the years and the preceding phases, considering not to involve ulterior ones. In the last step, the enterprise tries to monitor and manage all the relationships and collaborations in place, trying to rearrange or interrupt any relation no longer in line with its work and activity.

2.5.3. *Narratives of multi-actor engagement*

From the analysis of the interviews, it emerges that no one is in the preliminary stage of realising that involving external actors in their work can be beneficial from various points of view. But all respondents are already aware and are moving into the next stages of effective engagement.

In fact, some tour operators of very recent constitution – less than five years – are in the initial phase of planning and development. They, actually, have chosen to involve actors in their activities or to become themselves part of an association operating in sustainable tourism sector almost exclusively to strengthen their presence on the market and to overcome the problem of the lack of visibility, given by the few years of activity and the impossibility of organizing trips during the Covid-19 pandemic: *“involving the actors to create a network can be a better solution than working independently, but we are considering that the network succeeds if there is cohesion, if we help each other, if we set the same goal. [...] We have joined the Activeltaly network also because the planning and creation of travel itineraries in recent years has been partially limited”* (TO_02). The idea of joining a network or simply involving external actors is the consequence of the idea that alone it is more difficult to achieve goals. In fact, the period of Covid-19 pandemic allowed them to think that

this specific moment could be the right one to join and develop more complete offers thanks to the help of other subjects: *"it would be time to get out of our fence and do networking. Travelife can help us in this sense because it potentially puts you in touch with other organisations sensitive to sustainable issues, to create a network of experts interested in the same topics"* (TO_04). This does not mean that the concept of sustainability and the ideals associated are lost; however, in these more immature cases it is not declined at 360° and focuses mainly on environmental and social aspects. These organisations are aware that being sustainable is a long path that must necessarily start from the individual, to be then developed throughout the whole enterprise, by contributing to raising internal awareness and implementing a strategy spread vertically, engaging actors, suppliers and consumers. In confirmation to the above considerations, the Activeltaly association claims that, among the various activities it deals with, there is certainly the communication and the sharing of the opportunities offered by the tour operators associated. In fact, this mechanism can also help to create new collaborations between companies in the network: *"many operators are small-sized and, for them, be known is more complicated. Often, it happens that someone asks us to sell their activities, but we are not commercial, and we cannot, so we simply tell the opportunity to all members. [...] And this also helps to create collaborations because everyone deals with different activities, but you can be sure that other companies follow the same principles, because part of the same network"* (A_02).

The second group of enterprises has been active for less than 10 years and is in the intermediate stage of maximum expansion. These subjects consider crucial to share some fundamental ideals that concern sustainability to enhance and spread their activity. In fact, they state that *"the ways of involving the actors vary from the subjects themselves, but it is essential to pay attention to sustainable issues, especially from an environmental and social point of view"* (TO_03); *"we prefer to work with small tour operators, already used to managing small groups and with local transport providers and producers, attentive to sustainability and accustomed to ecotourism and experiential tourism"* (TO_09). Despite their youth, the sharing of ideals related to sustainability, the protection of planet Earth and the respect of workers is so strong that it has prompted some entrepreneurs to act by supporting the subjects with whom they collaborate, in the spirit of social solidarity. To confirm this fact, three specific companies that perform very different activities but strongly conditioned by sustainability ideals fall into this category. The first enterprise deals mainly with the production of fashion accessories made with reuse materials and, precisely, with tires of exhausted bicycles recovered from some tour operators interviewed, in a circular

economy view. In addition, it has used billboards abandoned to make the collars of medals to reward participants in the marathon in Turin, collaborating with the municipality; or it supports projects and associations who try to raise sustainability awareness in the community, for example through sports; or, again, it collaborates with Legambiente for the project "Clean Up the Med" and it has created a special edition of fashion accessories whose proceeds were used to buy the beach cleaning kits. Its objective is therefore to raise awareness among the society and in fact it prefers to *"advertise and make itself known by implementing actions with a positive impact on society"* (A_03). The second company plans and programs trips – mainly school and educational trips – directing tourists to consume and buy products and services from activities part of the "Addio Pizzo" network in Palermo and that denounce Mafia activities, with the aim of informing and educating travellers to rely more frequently on attentive realities in the anti-mafia network: *"our business was born to give an opportunity to those who travel in Sicily not to finance mafia, not even with a penny, therefore offering services 100% mafia free. [...] However, compared to tourism tout court, we have tried not to appear totally set on these issues and in fact we also offer other types of services, including excursions and activities related to food and wine, culture, cuisine or sports, always in the perspective that all suppliers are part of the circuit and decline in their own way sustainability"* (A_04). The last organisation is basically a laboratory of bakery products made with high quality and 0 km raw materials by prisoners in the Malaspina juvenile prison in Palermo. They also work in a restaurant with Slow Food presidium, as chefs or waiters, and they offer catering services and sustainable tourism activities and recently they are facing the construction and management of a structure for tourists' reception. Essentially, this social project is committed to training operators in the tourist-hotel sector, flanked by real professionals, and deals with reintegrating into society fragile children, who have not had the blessing or social conditions to be properly educated, trying to restore the social balance and making them autonomous once their period of detention is over. *"We have always wanted to involve young people in all the creation of this enterprise, avoiding that they were only passive users, but giving them the opportunity to intervene both at the material and thought level. We like to define this project as the «creation of collective intelligence», given that all the boys put in the right conditions to be able to express themselves, could have given their contribution also at the creation level, positioning themselves as colleagues and partners"* (A_05). Therefore, these companies – carrying out activities of re-use of materials, spreading awareness of the problems related to mafias and reintroduction into the society of prisoners – deal transversally

with sustainable tourism, declining it in all its possible meanings and demonstrating a deep sharing of ideals and solidarity, despite their still immature, but developing, activity.

The following step includes the companies characterized by at least twenty years of organization and planning of sustainable travel activities that, therefore, continue to carry out their business almost without innovating them. They are stationary and fulfilled: they have found the perfect dimension and do not tend to modify or innovate particularly or to bend to the demands of some external actors, while trying to meet the needs and wishes of tourists and costumers. Common to these enterprises is the fact that they expect other operators of the tourism service ecosystem to seek their cooperation. This is because, being active for so many years in Italy, they are quite well known in terms of quality of services they offer; therefore, the desire to engage new players is not exactly part of their market strategy, but they expect others to look for them. It is not even said that they establish new collaboration since they have developed over years strong and lasting bonds with associations, collaborators and correspondents, more often foreigners, because they argue that creating links with Italian operators is more complicated since they are convinced that everyone thinks exclusively of their interests. To confirm this partially static behaviour, an interviewed operator comments saying: *“some actors ask us for collaborations, especially to sell their packages, but we do not always act in this way, because it is convenient for us to create and organize them directly”* (TO_01). They strongly believe that being part of a network or having collaborations is an advantage, especially if actors have similar size, because small enterprises need to support each other to achieve common goals: *“despite the negative experiences of collaboration, we continue to believe that it is the right way: we believe a lot in the network”* (TO_07). Furthermore, some additional criteria applied to choose the potential actors to be involved in their work are the quality they promote, the sincerity of their offers and the belief in sustainable ideals. Another tour operator argues that confrontation and dialogue are fundamental to establish lasting relationships with external actors *“because the foreign correspondents and collaborators are the ones we deal with to organize trips, and every trip is the result of a four-handed process and represents a food for thought to understand how it can be improved, together”* (TO_08). Given their longstanding activity, all these tour operators are part of the board of directors of AITR – Italian Association for Responsible Tourism for several years and argue that within the association is not always effortless to create a strong synergy and close collaboration. Despite the large number of organisations, the diversification of the services they offer, the fact that everyone is committed to sustainability in all its forms and the desire to be part of a common system that respects, promotes, enhances and

disseminates the concept of sustainable tourism, this cooperation is sometimes complex and limited to only a few actors.

The last phase of control and adjustment encompass operators who have been active for more than thirty years in proposing sustainable tourism offers and who are totally committed to fortifying and spreading the ideals of sustainability and, in fact, they tend to reconsider the actors engaged over the years, trying to maintain collaborations only with those with whom they have trusting relationships lasting over decades. These enterprises began their activities in the mid-80s, namely, as soon as the theme was launched on the international market and then on the Italian one. They were born as associations or cooperatives composed of "lovers of Planet Earth", with the aim of discovering and preserving the pristine areas, their inhabitants, their culture and their traditions: they are convinced that only through the life story of the members of the community it is possible to fully and deeply enjoy and appreciate a foreign country. At the beginning of the 90s they started to organize sustainable travel and in the 2000s they confirmed themselves on the Italian market as tour operators. The relationship established over the years between these tour operators and suppliers is so deep that they consider them as partner. Their bond, in fact, is based on trust and mutual respect and would not exist without reciprocal help; another aspect of their relationship is that they share the same philosophy based on respect for nature, the populations and the education of external subjects to these ideals. Indeed, some tour operators acknowledge that *"actors are essential for our business. Engagement is fundamental for us: inclusion and involvement are needed for local development. [...] We are always very careful to involve and promote other organizations and, above all, similar cooperatives, with our own ideals and we try to involve as much as possible local communities, producers and accommodation in Sicily. We like to define our suppliers as partners: there is mutual respect and our activities would not exist if we did not help each other"* (TO_05); *"usually, we directly contact the actors we are interested in engaging. We design the tours and enrich them with details that can add value to customers and involve actors who normally in generalist tourism remain marginalized. There is a huge multitude, of small production and limited economic value but of great value for all the other aspects we are interested in"* (TO_06); *"our correspondents are not classic, but we try to create a deep and lasting bond and harmony with local authorities able to direct us and create specific projects and itineraries: this kind of involvement is essentially based on solid collaboration. [...] For us, engagement is based on concepts such as mutual knowledge and trust – integration cannot be generated if everyone works in a selfish way – openness to the stranger and belief in the same values"* (TO_10). In the three cases listed above, the concept

of reciprocal help, mutual respect and sharing of values appear common as a basis for the engagement of the actors, which inevitably leads to a solid and lasting collaboration. A further factor common to these tour operators is the presence of tourist guides. In some cases, they are expert and certified environmental guides, in other they are local citizens; in any cases they are very trained and able to lead tourists to discover the peculiarities of the territory, the culture and local traditions. In fact, they affirm that *“among the subjects involved, a fundamental role is occupied by the guides. Both trained cultural mediators and local inhabitants (elderly people, pensioners, village leaders, farmers, social workers, monks, etc.) with the right spirit and attitude of those who are open to meeting. [...] The purpose of our choice is to really get in touch with the local community”* (TO_10); *“the guides we employ are all environmental guides-hikers and have the role of mediator and director, giving directives, between travellers and local stakeholders. [...] For us the guides are our engine, our spearhead, an integral part of our production, and with them we establish a collaborative relationship. We work on two fronts with them: or we define destinations and assign them to guides who want to do scouting and on-site checks or ask the same guides if they have travel ideas to propose and then we develop them together. But in both cases, the guides test the trip before accompanying the tourists and even some customers ask us to follow certain guides rather than reach certain destinations”* (TO_06). Basically, the aspects that unite tour operators that engage actors to strengthen and spread the prospects related to sustainability and sustainable tourism are: the desire to educate and train new users and sensitize them to these issues; the coherence of responsible and sustainable tourist offerings, even if they vary in their form; the desire to raise awareness of less explored territories, to promote culture, traditions and craftsmanship of the countries visited, to meet the inhabitants and the resident communities, because, as suggested by TO_10, *“only through their life stories it is possible to really enjoy a foreign country, with customs, traditions, lifestyles different from ours”*. With the same objectives also operate AITR – Italian Association of Responsible Tourism. It represents a diversified aggregation of organisations that operate with the single purpose of sharing the idea of responsible and sustainable tourism. Everyone then declines it and approaches it differently according to the activities it performs, addressing both travellers and the tourist industry in general: *“if members organize trips or courses, carry out projects or manage hotels, it is not discriminatory, but it is important that they are inspired by the same principles and good practices of responsible and sustainable tourism”* (A_01).

2.6. Discussion

As seen in the latter paragraphs, the tour operators' interviews have revealed different ideas and positions concerning tourism sustainability. Despite the tripartition of the concept – which considers the respect and minimization of the environmental and ecological impact on the territory, the stimulus of an economic return in the countries of destination, by encouraging the inclusion of communities in the socio-economic life, and the promotion of social, ethical and educational projects – it remains common the idea that sustainability must be part of the DNA and mission of the enterprises interviewed. Without prejudice to the fact that spreading this concept among operators and external actors is not particularly immediate, but it is a slow and arduous process, working on the correct communication of the definition of sustainability and its various declinations is absolutely a winning solution and a further path to follow to spread this concept is certainly the engagement of external actors.

In this regard, the involvement of the actors, endorsed by the desire to create strong and lasting bonds and mutual collaborations, appears as fundamental and beneficial for all the enterprises. Essential for this engagement is a common and deep knowledge and the sharing of the same underlying ideals related to sustainability, even if declined in a different way. From the tour operators' point of view, often, suppliers are not only seen as entities that offer services or products, but they are perceived as real collaborators and partners, whose relationship is based on trust, respect and mutual help.

Notwithstanding that, the sustainable tourism industry represents a niche – although, lately developing – and it becomes essential, therefore, to be part of a network of enterprises, especially where the individual fails. The engagement behaviour seems useful also since it allows a greater spreading of the concept of sustainability and it encourages the growth of interest in these particular topics and the demand for sustainable travels. Engaging the actors, then, is useful for the process of territorial enhancement of the destination places. Moreover, it allows to improve the tourist services, expanding the offer, especially when involving foreign actors. It is therefore crucial for the improvement of the proposed offer that the actors engaged are proactive and totally participatory, otherwise their presence would be almost an obstacle.

Furthermore, this analysis shows that each operator involved in the ecosystem of sustainable tourism services must face certain problems related to the type of offer it proposes. These include the communication of travel proposals – because they are not immediately understandable for an audience that is not properly educated – and the difficulty of being known as genuine promoters of sustainable ideals. Moreover, it emerges that these obstacles can also be linked to the age and years of activity of the enterprise itself: in fact, the more recently tour operators have been founded, the more challenging it is to create a base of loyal customers and collaborators who are able to fully understand the proposed offer.

To overcome these problems, some tour operators consider it essential to involve external actors. For all respondents, it is not simply engagement that counts, but also the creation of a strong bond with the actors, the possibility to interact with suppliers on organizational aspects and to meet local communities for more complete and involving trips; it turns out advantageous also to be part of an organized network.

From the narratives, however, emerge some obstacles to the involvement of the actors, including selfishness, misalignment in the concept of sustainability (e.g., greenwashing), lack of sensitivity and experience in the sector, unavailability destination locations and slow responses of local authorities, lack of professionalism and clarity, accompanied by the fading of trust and mutual respect.

Nevertheless, all the tour operators who have been interviewed are fully convinced that involving external actors is indispensable and convenient to strengthen their presence on the market, to be recognized as subjects engaged in spreading the concept of sustainability and therefore attracting new tourists, organizations, and involve further actors and, somehow, to create and enhance the ecosystem of sustainable tourism services.

Moreover, it emerges that the belief in the same ideals and the sharing of a philosophy based on the spread of sustainability is the most important and determining factor compared to the years of activity of the operators. If the ideals in which the enterprises believe are not genuine, clear and well communicated, it becomes more complicated to attract and involve new external actors and, consequently, to spread truthful aspects related to sustainability. Therefore, substantially, from a deep sharing of ideals originate greater mutual benefits for the actors involved and for the operators themselves and, moreover, a system of values is co-created: it gives the chance to provide new

opportunities and to establish relationships and engage more and more actors who believe in these principles, in order to expand the sustainable tourism services ecosystem.

In this regard, as a result of the engagement of actors with ideals aligned to those of tour operators, it is possible to identify some benefits for both parties. This collaborative bond allows to create a deep synergy that leads to the improvement of the services offered, which are therefore designed and developed together, enriching the value of existing proposals and planning new ones, tailor-made, to better meet the needs of all actors and customers. If the relationship that is established with the actors persists over time, customers already know the interlocutors to interact with and therefore they are probably more satisfied and become loyal, because a long-standing relationship is synonymous with stability. As stable and unchanged remain the prices of services offered by accommodation facilities, restaurants, suppliers with which tour operators have collaborated for years. A further benefit is represented by a higher visibility and reputation that can be achieved by both parties. Moreover, the actors engagement and the establishment of solid collaborations can lead to a shared success on both sides, especially if the actors are proactive and participative.

In addition to the multiple benefits that each operator and actor can derive from their relationship, from the active engagement of each party, a system of shared values is co-created. First of all, the promotion of the territory, of the gastronomic, cultural, social traditions, of the communities and their inhabitants, allowing all travels participants to intensify and enhance the experience and enrich their knowledge. An added value is also represented by the possibility of experiencing new activities, engaging more and more actors and leading to the dissemination of the concept of sustainability, in all its forms. The actors involved and included in the planning of the trips also allow the tour operators to improve not only in the proposed offers, but also as enterprises and organizations, trying to always meet the needs of the people they encounter during their journeys. And it is a long path and not free from obstacles to face, but that brings fulfilment when both parties are satisfied and the objectives that have pushed the various subjects to cooperate – i.e., growth and affirmation on the market, the spread of sustainable practices, the increase of awareness on the issue of sustainability – are achieved.

In conclusion, it should be stressed that the benefits and values described above are shared and confirmed by the actors interviewed. They acknowledge that having stable and long-lasting relationships with tour operators is a source of great inspiration for their activities and consider it

important to be involved in the process of developing offers, in order to create a sort of "collective intelligence" which leads to a continuous improvement and enrichment of the tourist proposals, with a view to a constant enhancement and expansion of the ecosystem of sustainable tourism services.

And the willingness and desire by tour operators to involve new actors to expand their sustainable offers and spread ideals of social solidarity, economic equity and environmental protection in their work did not stop even during the pandemic situation of Covid-19. In the last period, almost all the interviewed enterprises have not been able to organize trips, since many were used to plan trips abroad, and have suffered an economic crisis with decreases of approximately 90% of the turnover. Therefore, some have programmed an internal training of employees (e.g., digital marketing, website and social communication courses), the development of the website and related applications and the acquisition of licenses for their guides. Others worked on the design of projects for territorial promotion and the planning of future trips, going to select new actors to involve and collaborate with and new types of customers to reach (e.g., children or people with disabilities, thinking about accessible travel). In fact, in response to the situation, many have understood that being part of a network and involving actors can be a better solution than working independently, only if at the base everyone has similar ideals and the same objectives: the only solution to stasis is union.

2.7. Conclusion

This section summarizes the research questions identified and addresses the contribution of the research, highlighting, as well, the managerial and practical implications. Moreover, it describes the limitations and the consequent future research.

2.7.1. Implications for research

Since the dynamics of engagement in an ecosystem composed of so many different actors as that of sustainable tourism services appear particularly complex and challenging (Moscardo, 2011; Budeanu et al., 2016), it is important to consider the point of view of multiple actors and it is precisely on their perspective that our research has been built.

One important contribution regards the conceptualization of sustainable tourism, since it is a considerably debated issue and tour operators and actors involved in the service tourism ecosystem depict different practices and definition under the same label of sustainable tourism. Following Galuppo et al. (2020), the present study confirms the nuance, partiality and ambiguity of the definition of this concept, since it lacks widespread and consolidated approach and, indeed, each tour operator acts according to its own conviction of what sustainable tourism means.

The principal contribution of this study comes from providing a conceptualization of the different phases of the process of actor engagement by tour operators in the tourism service ecosystem. This formulation is retrieved from the model designed by Storbacka et al. (2016) that describes the value co-creation process within service ecosystem, combined with the framework theorized by Li et al. (2017) on the process of engagement among multiple actors in a network. Specifically, our research answers the need highlighted by Storbacka et al. (2016) to further explore how the disposition and the temporal and relational characteristics of an actor relate to the motives for engagement and its level, intensity and type. In fact, our study focuses on the “engagement properties” concept (i.e., observable engagement activities) and investigates it, formulating a five-staged process of actor engagement. These properties are not exclusively the result of actor-specific characteristics, but they are also determined by the conceptual and physical context, namely why, when and how actors engage. Indeed, in our staged process the phases results from the combined analysis of multiple properties: since actors engagement is dynamic and iterative in nature, the temporal properties on which we focused extend the spatial, contextual, relational and informational ones.

2.7.2. Implications for managerial practice

With regard to the practical implications that may emerge from this study, it appears certainly essential that tour operators focus more on the development of effective communication systems of sustainable offers, designed involving various and multiple external actors (Frisk and Larson, 2011; McLennan et al., 2016). In addition to organizing courses to inform and educate customers, this goal can be achieved through a greater effort by the managers of the tour operators. It is possible, for example, to develop new educational approaches and increase employee participation in courses and specific training modules (e.g., marketing, website and social network

communication) or to use the "voice" of actors or partners themselves to make communication more participatory and understandable, generating a sort of common storytelling.

Communicate through the experience of others, not just customers, but also organizations and associations active in promoting offers and projects related to sustainability and directly involved in the work of tour operators can be beneficial and profitable to improve the understanding and awareness of users. Moreover, this participatory communication can represent the presence of a very strong tour operator within the ecosystem of tourism services and, consequently, potential customers and partners would be more encouraged to rely on and trust it. Thinking of communication as a mere problem can be limiting and misleading for the tour operators' managers, and in fact it should be reconsidered as an opportunity for an ever-greater development and enhancement of sustainable offers proposed. Furthermore, if they are able to share and make communication more structured, the goal of educating the external public and especially potential customers and collaborators is less dispersive and easier to reach, so that they can also spread the most correct and omni-comprehensive definition of the concept of sustainability.

A further managerial implication regards the engagement process carried out by tour operators. Notwithstanding that actors engagement within the activity of the tour operators is fundamental and beneficial to strengthen their presence in the tourism industry, it is useful that they follow the specific staged process above defined to better structure their strategy of engagement. It is in fact essential that managers define some criteria to involve actors (for example, sharing the same ideals of sustainability) and develop a well-structured action plan. In this way they will be able to spend less time and resources in their activities and to involve only valid and effective actors, with the common objective of defining a single conceptualization of the concept of sustainability, educating users and enhancing the sustainable tourism services ecosystem.

2.7.3. *Limitations and future research*

This research certainly presents some limitations. First of all, the subjects interviewed are few in number, especially concerning the actors considered. By choice we did not investigate the perspective of customers and tourists, but the various organizations assessed represent only a minimum part of the entire ecosystem of sustainable tourism services and, above all, the macro level of analysis has not been addressed. Further research studies are therefore needed to fill this

gap, increasing the number and heterogeneity of interviewees. Moreover, researchers could further examine our findings employing other qualitative analysis or a quantitative approach, achieving more reliability and accuracy.

Another limitation is linked to the fact that the subjects interviewed are only Italian and this is not enough to generalize the results obtained from this study. In fact, it might be useful to examine similar subjects in international contexts and develop a multi-country study to verify if the phases of the engagement process of the actors remain unchanged and if there are “engagement conditions” or factors contingent (e.g., connections, disposition and value propositions) from the context or the national territory of reference that may have an impact on the results (Li et al., 2017).

Finally, the issue of the pandemic from Covid-19 was only partially addressed and a comparison between the pre- and post-pandemic situation has not been included, since the interviews ended at a time when the Italian tourist situation had not yet recovered and re-established itself. In the next future, researchers will be able to develop this type of comparison, imagining that the level of tourism before the pandemic has been re-established. In addition, more responsible and sustainable tourism offers have recently been developed on the Italian territory, with an impact on the entire ecosystem (i.e., tourists, tour operators, resident communities, government, associations and NGOs), especially due to a growing awareness of the impacts and risks associated with climate change and global warming linked to over tourism in recent times (Scott and Gössling, 2022). Therefore, it seems necessary and fundamental not to interrupt, but rather to intensify the number of studies on these topics, so as to allow those who work in this sector to develop new, increasingly complete and updated tourist offers, designing them with respect for the environment, the economy and the socio-cultural conditions of the destination countries and communities.

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Chapter 3

3. The role of actor engagement in promoting value co-creation and local enhancement: the case of Cremona's traditional-violin-craftsmanship

3.1. Abstract

The present research is conceptualised as a case-study on the Cremona's traditional-violin-craftsmanship, in Italy, inscribed since 2012 by UNESCO on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This is a unique scenario represented by 183 workshops of violin-makers and many various organizations that operate offering services connected to the violin-making system. Starting from the service-dominant logic and in the perspective of the socially sustainable tourism, the present study aims to investigate which consequences emerge from the engagement of multiple actors and their contribution in terms of fostering value co-creation and local enhancement of the area. To achieve the research objectives, 60 violin-makers and five public figures of the organizations they work with and are involved with were interviewed. Findings reveal that to be able to produce consistent benefits, it is necessary for all subjects to know their proper role within the ecosystem, to be cohesive and to trust each other, to communicate in a clear and open way, and to cooperate and move all with the common goal of research, safeguarding and enhancing the tradition of violin-making and the territory of reference.

3.2. Introduction

Nowadays tourism is often acknowledged as a strategic sector in the international economy and it represents the biggest and fastest industry globally (Danish and Wang, 2018; D'Arco et al. 2021). The tourist business constitutes a complex phenomenon which generates conflicting effects: on the one hand, it stimulates the creation of employment opportunities (Fawaz et al., 2014) and economic growth, contributing to local and regional development (Cárdenas-García et al., 2015); on the other hand, it has a strong negative impact in relation to the waste of energy, the overconsumption of natural resources and besides on local traditions and customs (Jones and Wynn, 2019).

In recent years the tourism industry has undergone – and is still undergoing – many changes, structural modification and radical transformation, both for the massive advent of the Internet, for the new and more immediate means of communication and booking platforms, both because the interests and needs of tourists have changed over the time. Until a few years ago, namely pre-pandemic from Covid-19, it was often associated with phenomena such as ‘overtourism’. This term can be defined as “the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors’ experiences in a negative way” (UNWTO, 2018, p. 4). The Responsible Tourism Partnership refers to ‘overtourism’ as “destinations where hosts or guests, locals or visitors, feel that there are too many visitors and that the quality of life in the area, or the quality of the experience has deteriorated unacceptably. It is the opposite of Responsible Tourism which is about using tourism to make better places to live in and better places to visit. Often both visitors and guests experience the deterioration concurrently” (Goodwin, 2017). In essence, it presumes a lack of good management practices to give way to uncontrolled development. Due to the increasing number of tourists, it has become appropriate to develop offers and manage the tourist phenomenon in a sustainable way for the actors involved, both for visitors and especially for local communities.

To this end, in the tourism sector one of the most updated and recently explored topic is sustainability. This concept is frequently theorised using the three pillars of environmental, economic and socio-cultural sphere, which must be balanced in order to generate positive effects. In this sense, the tourism industry is able to produce many socio-cultural benefits for local community.

The development and the management of sustainable tourism offers implies the knowledge of the interests and needs of local actors, such as communities, residents and local authorities, in order to engage them. The strategies of development, enhancement and sustainability of a tourist region are particularly linked and dependent on the proactive support of locals (Thetsane, 2019; Albu, 2020). In fact, the engagement of the actors in the tourism operation, destination development and decision-making process were identified as crucial (Lee, 2013).

Actors in the tourism sector are indeed particularly attentive and increasingly aware of the importance of tourism sustainable development than they were in the past (Andereck et al., 2005). Moreover, within the tourism literature, residents' attitudes toward tourism development have flourished and now are among the most studied areas, reflecting the fundamental role they can play

in the creation of sustainable pathways for the industry (McGehee and Andereck, 2004; Choi and Sirakaya, 2005; Diedrich and García-Buades, 2009; Nunkoo et al., 2013).

Although sustainability is a trend topic for researchers, as for entrepreneurs and policymakers, the tourism sector is struggling to consistently adopt well-rounded sustainable practices, in particular, from the point of view of socio-cultural sustainability based on local communities' positions (Butler, 2017; Cheer and Lew, 2017; Moyle et al., 2018). Scholars focusing on social sustainability often study the role of actors and residents in tourist regions towards a sustainable development, considering environmental and social aspects (e.g., provision of employment, reduction of poverty and nature protection), but do not refer directly to the cultural ones, aimed at enhancing the territory (Cooper et al., 2005). However, it emerges the need to deeply investigate the behaviours of the host community and its active engagement in order to plan and manage the enhancement of cultural resources.

The engagement process is strictly connected to the service-dominant logic, conceived by Vargo and Lusch (2004). It is represented by a circular and dynamic path, based on services. Through the involvement of actors, the resource integration and the reciprocal exchange of services, managed by institutions and institutional arrangements, a flux is produced, thought like a service ecosystem, and co-creation of value is generated. According to the S-D logic framework, it is possible to discuss the role played by the different actors and the relevance of a multi-actor approach in service provision (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Lusch and Vargo, 2014).

To this extent, many scholars have recently studied and described some new roles played by the actors of the tourism industry, also when contributing to co-create values and experiences (Prior and Marcos-Cuevas, 2016; Sigala, 2016; Viglia et al., 2018). Actors and community engagement is essential in this perspective and its challenges and opportunities appears different in various segments of tourism – especially the cultural one, such as religious, educational, festival, heritage and non-material cultural tourism (Moric et al., 2021).

Moreover, empirical studies focusing on value co-creation processes, analysed through the S-D logic lens, are limited to considering only the micro-level, consisting mainly of the consumers' perspective (Chathoth et al., 2016; Barile et al., 2017).

Therefore, to have a wider perspective, it emerges the need to consider these aspects from multiple points of view and from various levels of analysis (micro, meso and macro) (Barile et al.,

2020). And, to meet the abovementioned demand, this study aims to consider the perspectives of all local actors (public and private) that constitute the "traditional-violin-craftsmanship system" of the city of Cremona, in Italy. Specifically, starting from the definition of the role of each actor that is part of the tourism ecosystem, the research purposes to answer two specific questions:

(RQ1) *What effects and consequences emerge by the actors engagement in a territory?*

(RQ2) *How the actors engagement contributes to produce value co-creation and promote local enhancement?*

The research setting is Cremona's district of traditional-violin-craftsmanship and the local enterprises with which it collaborates. It represents a unique case of excellence of a small city with an incredible concentration of traditional violin-makers: 183 micro-firms that export their products all over the world. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that, in addition to representing an extremely concentrated artistic-cultural community, it is registered since 2012 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO)⁹.

In order to deepen the analysis of the local tourism ecosystem and to better understand the role of the various actors involved in, with the aim of promoting the territorial value enhancement, the analysis employs a qualitative approach, conceived as a case study, based mainly on in-depth interviews with the key informants of the district.

The study addresses initially the reference literature review and describes the research objectives and the methodology; then, it outlines the research objectives and the case-study context. After presenting the main findings, the study offers a discussion and some managerial and theoretical implications and reflects on future research in the field.

3.3. Theoretical overview

3.3.1. Sustainable tourism and social sustainability

In the tourism industry, sustainability represents one of the most updated and lately explored topic. The concept of a sustainable model appears for the first time in 1987 with the publication of "Our Common Future", better known as the "Brundtland Report". In this context, sustainability has been

⁹ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/traditional-violin-craftsmanship-in-cremona-00719>

outlined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987).

According to this definition, literature on sustainable tourism has focused on three tied dimensions, namely economic, environmental and social (or socio-cultural) (Purvis et al., 2019), which must be balanced in order to generate positive effects, such as meet the needs of host communities and improve living standards in the long term (Morgan *et al.*, 2015; Zolfani *et al.*, 2015).

Specifically, economic factors are connected to the idea of not compromising the quality of the environment and the economic benefits from tourism should remain within the local economy – in order to avoid the leakage phenomenon, to be equally distributed throughout the community. Environmental aspects are not only related to actions that aim to protect and preserve biodiversity since natural resources are limited, but also regard the preservation of the place of identity and the conservation of cultural heritage. Social factors are concerned with the respect for social identity and community culture, in view of ensuring local people’s well-being (Ciegis et al., 2009); moreover, social sustainability concerns political, economic and social actors or institutions with the competency to change the territory; cooperation among local enterprises and collaborations between tourism firms, institutions and residents (Asmelash and Kumar, 2019).

In addition, Choi and Sirakaya (2006) added two further dimensions regarding the political and the technological sphere of sustainability. According to them, technological factors are represented by devices and applications (i.e., the internet, e-commerce websites, social networks) environmentally friendly that limit consumption and allow exchanges of information and a more agile communication system among different actors. Moreover, the society’s political system and the power distribution affect the achievement of the sustainable development goals such as to regulate tourism fluxes and to reduce negative impacts of over-tourism (Boluk et al, 2019). All the dimensions of sustainability discussed herein are strictly interconnected and necessary for the development of sustainable tourism (Choi and Sirakaya, 2006; D’Arco et al., 2021).

According to the late definition provided by the UNWTO (The World Tourism Organization), the sustainable tourism is seen as the “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (UNWTO, 2014). In this context, the socio-cultural sphere considers the achievement of a series of specific objectives: the contribution to the increasing of inter-cultural tolerance, the preservation of cultural heritage and traditional values and the respects

of socio-cultural traditions of destinations (Bâc, 2014). Although this dimension has started to receive increasing attention from researchers in recent years, it is more difficult to trace and delineate than the other aspects, since it is linked to changes that may occur in customs, traditions and lifestyles, then to processes and dynamic factors (Lansing and Vries, 2007; Streimikiene et al., 2021). Moreover, scholars' attentions consider the livelihood and the well-being of residents' communities and the creation of awareness among visiting tourists (Caneday and Zeiger, 1991; Morgan et al., 2015; Jeon et al., 2016).

Furthermore, since the social declination of sustainability also takes into account ethical, human and cultural aspects, the analysis of the territory and the conservation and enhancement of cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) is also included in this classification, together with the examination of all the actors operating in the local service ecosystem, including the host community, enterprises, tourism promotion bodies, and tourists.

Specifically, cultural sustainability was first mentioned in 1995 by the World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD) to identify the inter- and intra-generational access to cultural resources (WCCD, 1995). Cultural heritage, instead, was initially defined as "the entire corpus of material signs – either artistic or symbolic – handed on by the past to each culture and, therefore, to the whole of humankind" (UNESCO, 1989). It is divided in tangible and intangible, including monuments of archaeological, architectural, sculptural and painted nature and, lately, "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (UNESCO 2003). Cultural tourism – associated to cultural heritage and creativity – is seen by Jovicic (2016) as an alternative to mass tourism, since cultural tourists, instead of joining passively the experience, take a proactive approach and contribute to the joint creation of high-quality experiences. This type of tourism is strictly connected to the engagement of customers, in fact, a satisfying experience is based on the level willingness to participate in tourism initiatives (Tregua et al., 2020). Since this co-creative approach also takes into account the implementation of effective projects to reconcile the needs of residents, local enterprises and tourists – also through the support of new technologies, cultural tourism appears connected to the engagement not exclusively of visitors, but of all local actors (Marques and Borba, 2017).

Cultural heritage can therefore be seen as a means of allocating cultural value and it is necessary to identify the correct logic of enhancement service-based and on the definition of valuable offers and proposals for potential users (Barile, 2012). Consequently, the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism has led to propose cultural tourism as a strategy of enhancement of the heritage itself (Fusco Girard and Nijkamp, 2009; Throsby, 2009). These socio-cultural aspects, indeed, define the heritage of a nation, a territory and a community and appear fundamental for local development, value co-creation and for the enrichment of all the subjects involved.

Overall, the socio-cultural sphere could be defined as the ability of local actors to collaborate in a synergic way in order to delineate a shared territorial vision; this collaboration and engagement can be beneficial in the process of planning and management the activity of the actors, in the pathway to co-create value among actors and in the construction of a sense of collective responsibility for sustainable development (Landorf, 2009; Choi and Murray, 2010).

Accordingly, it can be inferred that these aspects on the one hand are closely related to the needs and well-being of communities and actors that are part of the tourism ecosystem, and on the other hand require further studies and insights. It becomes therefore necessary and interesting to dwell on investigating and deepening the sustainable aspects, especially related to the socio-cultural sphere of local subjects, and the ways in which the actors are engaged and the relationships they establish with each other and with the companies operating in the tourism sector, which constitute the ecosystem of integrated tourist services.

3.3.2. *Value co-creation and actor engagement*

The idea of co-creating value, in order to produce benefits for all the subjects involved, is perfectly associated to the social sphere of sustainability, applied to tourism.

In this context, the tourist offer can be seen as the service proposed by the industry. Tourism experiences are acknowledged as the result of dynamic co-creation process through knowledge integration (Buhalis and Foreste, 2015) and as the essential tool for value co-creation throughout the entire process of interaction between tourists and firms (Chathoth et al., 2016). When dealing with co-created experiences, namely the customization of a tourist service and its outcomes,

depending on the contribution and engagement of multiple actors, the discussion on tourism experiences appears permeated by the service-dominant logic (S-D logic) (Bryce et al., 2017).

Vargo and Lusch (2004) theorized this logic that is structured on the basis of the involvement of multiple actors, resource integration and service exchange. Specifically, a flow of resources and services is created throughout the reciprocal exchange of services between economic and social actors and the interactions among different subjects and the environment; this flux brings benefits to all the actors involved and, moreover, generates and co-creates value, intended as maintaining and increasing their well-being (Lusch and Vargo, 2014; Wieland et al., 2016). The process of value co-creation is also managed by institutions and institutional arrangements that generate and establish a service ecosystem.

This more complex and detailed vision has allowed scholars to further expand the perspective of service ecosystem, underlining the independent role of the different actors involved in the various co-creation processes, promoting a many-to-many service experience (Vargo and Lusch, 2016).

Specifically, the service-dominant perspective discusses the role of the different actors and the relevance of multi-actor approach in service provision (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). More recently these scholars introduced and described the multi-actor phenomenon to better support the understanding of a web of relationships, instead of merely dyadic ones. These connections shape and define the context in which services are exchanged and value is created for the beneficiary of multiple subjects.

Therefore, in the S-D logic framework, value co-creation occurs in complex and dynamic network or service ecosystems (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) and happens through resource and knowledge integration and combination of multiple actors. It is seen as a process particularly affected by the user's characteristics, since "value is uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary" (Vargo and Lusch, 2008, p. 7).

Recently, studies on engagement and value co-creation are emerging as a central topic to be addressed and investigated in tourism research, although the insight in this area remains scarce and poorly understood (Chatholth et al., 2016). The debate on new ways of understanding value has continued and fertilized many fields of study, with the aim of proposing a framework to be

implemented, research agendas and deeper attention to service experience, in particular applied to the tourism industry (Chandler and Lusch, 2015).

The tourism experience involves many actors, not only tourists and enterprises, but also local communities, possibly affected by the presence of the visitors (Mason and Cheyne, 2000). It appears that actor engagement, indeed, can be fundamental also in the perspective of sustainable tourism, since it cope with the economic, environmental and socio-cultural aspects. From the economic point of view, it can promote resources and services exchanges and Lin et al. (2017) stated that tourism development may facilitate transformation such as incoming investments and business activities in local communities, providing greater employment opportunities, and this development could attract even more tourist. From the environmental perspective, engagement could create connection and sharing of ideals and consequently less waste and increasing value of local territories. The socio-cultural sphere contemplates the idea of creating and adding value in the community in which engaged actors operate and, through the combination of opinions, ideas and subjects, it is possible to promote local traditions, activities, projects and cultures.

Moreover, Chathoth et al. (2016) consider customer participation as the key goal of their involvement; according to their opinion, the customer co-creation level on the one hand could be affected by a firm's support to customers and, on the other, may impact on their satisfaction and increasing in the use of local services. Tourist participation in value co-creation processes leads to a greater awareness of a destination brand (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2017) and this effect is more pronounced when tourist efforts are associated with the contribution of other local actors (Mazurek, 2015). It emerges that tourists are playing an active role, and firms are offering a fertile ground for the co-design of tourism experiences, leading to the creation of an ecosystem of integrated tourist services (Tregua et al., 2020).

Additionally, Storbacka et al. (2016) conceptualize actor engagement's dynamic process as an empirical micro-foundation for value co-creation within the context of a service ecosystem. Accordingly, engagement appears to positively and strongly influences the co-creation processes (Rather et al., 2019). Indeed, it is considered as a key factor to increase the tourists' participation in co-creation and this participation is encouraged by the development of connections and the establishment of relationships, based on the beliefs of the same ideals and a common philosophy and on the support of new technology devices. Multi-actors' contexts are seen as the best

environment to foster participation and satisfaction and lead to a co-created tourism experience, possibly mediated by technologies (Chugh, 2018).

Past research on service ecosystems mostly limited their attention on the role of customers and employees with scarce focus on the other entities that may influence the development of engagement and relationships. Hence it emerges necessary to employ a holistic, multi-actor perspective in order to exploit the dynamic, interactive and systemic aspects of the interactions among different actors, especially in a sector as fragmented as the tourism one, that involve multiple and various subject to provide them greater service experience (Skylar et al., 2019).

According to more recent studies, a service ecosystem consists of multiple participants, including employees, customers, governmental and non-profit entities, host communities and firms, constantly connected and interacting with each other in a collaborative manner in order to co-create their service experience (Patrício et al., 2018; Brodie et al., 2019). In this context, with such interdependent relationships, managers and entrepreneurs have seen the need to take into account the role of multiple actors in defining strategies for service exchanges (Sharma et al., 2020).

The presence of multiple and various actors can be understood, in this perspective, as essential to produce benefits and co-create value. They are seen as proactive contributors, through their connections and reciprocal engagement and their discussion in the process of shaping and innovation of tourist offers and services (Blazquez-Resino et al., 2015). This engagement could allow local entities and authorities to implement new integrated projects and provide innovative services, crafted on the contributions of each individual actor involved in.

Accordingly, in the tourism industry, it emerges that the engagement of the actors and the integration of resources and services are fundamental in the process of value co-creation, in an ecosystem of integrated services view, and it is important to focus on analysing all the actors, at any level and of any nature, to better understand the dynamics that are established and developed in a specific and concentrated context such as that of Cremona's traditional-violin-craftsmanship and, specifically, to study the role of these actors in promoting value co-creation and enhancing local development of the territory, the local enterprises and their activities.

3.4. Aims and methodology

3.4.1. Research objectives

The primary aim of this analysis is to define and thoroughly investigate the tourism service ecosystem built on the traditional-violin-craftsmanship located in the city of Cremona, in Italy. This context has been chosen since it represents a unique case, in the world, of a small town with an incredible concentration of violin-makers: 183 micro-firms – mostly individual enterprises – that produce traditional musical instruments to be recognised, sold and exported worldwide.

The purpose of the study is to qualitatively explore the role of the actors involved in the tourism service ecosystem of Cremona, in order to understand how they are engaged and which are the consequences of their local engagement, with a particular attention to the socio-cultural sphere of sustainable tourism that consider the value co-creation and, precisely, the promotion of local activities, traditions, culture to be renowned nationally and globally. The research intends to address the two following research questions:

(RQ1) What effects and consequences emerge by the actors engagement in a territory?

(RQ2) How the actors engagement contributes to produce value co-creation and promote local enhancement?

The present study follows the rules and the model of the service-dominant logic; thus, it analyses the ecosystem of tourism services related to the traditional-violin-craftsmanship of Cremona through the assessment of the procedural nature of the production of mutual benefits and co-creation of value.

3.4.2. Research setting

The study started in Autumn 2021 from an explorative analysis on the tourism services offered by the city of Cremona related to the tradition-violin-craftsmanship. Initially, it was decided to examine the research context through secondary data, and potential respondents were identified.

The traditional-violin-craftsmanship system of Cremona sees many actors involved. In this context, a first classification that establishes a clear distinction is represented by the consortium (*Consorzio Liutai Antonio Stradivari*). In particular, in Cremona there are 183 violin-makers ateliers, registered at the local Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Crafts and Agriculture: 45 are part of this

association and the remaining 138 are independent workshops or member of the trade association. In addition to the registered violin-makers atelier, there are some external subjects that are part of the ecosystem and with which, over the years, they have established relationships and collaborations. These include museums and theatres, cultural associations, municipality and culture department, scientific laboratories, tour operators and tourists.

Among violin-makers, 60 people were interviewed, without distinction outside or belonging to the associations. The further subjects interviewed are represented by the director of the Violin Museum (*Museo del Violino Antonio Stradivari – Fondazione Stradivari*), the project manager of the Cultural District of the city of Cremona (Culture, Museums and City Branding) and head of the UNESCO Project of “The Know-how of Violin-Making”, the head of the Tourist Promotion, Information and Accommodation Department of the municipality of Cremona, the director of the consortium (*Consorzio Liutai Antonio Stradivari*), the president of the Italian violin-makers association (*Associazione Liutaria Italiana*) (cf. Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 – List of subjects interviewed

Code	Subject	Association – role	Data sources
VMC	25 violin-makers	<i>Consorzio Liutai Antonio Stradivari</i>	Online interviews; website; social network pages
VMA	12 violin-makers	<i>Associazione Liutaria Italiana</i>	interviews; website; social network pages
VMI	23 violin-makers	Independent violin-makers; Cultural District member	Interviews; website; social network pages
VMC_01	Director of the Violin-makers Consortium Antonio Stradivari	<i>Consorzio Liutai Antonio Stradivari</i>	Online interview; website; journal articles; further documents; previous interviews
VMA_02	President of the Italian Violin-makers association	<i>Associazione Liutaria Italiana</i>	Interview; website; journal articles; further documents; previous interviews

A_01	General Director of the Violin Museum Antonio Stradivari – Fondazione Stradivari	Member of the Board of Directors of <i>Associazione Liutaria Italiana</i> ; consultant of the <i>Cremona Musica</i> exhibition; coordinator of the Triennial International Violin-Making Competition	Interview; website; journal articles; further documents
A_02	Head of the Tourist Promotion, Information and Accommodation Department	<i>Infopoint</i> of the Municipality of Cremona; member of the Tourism Observatory	Interview; website; journal articles; further documents
A_03	Project manager of Cultural District of the city of Cremona (Culture, Museums and City Branding)	Head of the UNESCO Project of “The Know-how of Violin-Making”	Interview; website; journal articles; further documents

Source: author’s elaboration

3.4.3. Methodology

To address our research questions, it was agreed to carry out an empirical qualitative investigation based on a case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994, 2003), in order to better understand and deeply investigate the “how” question of the phenomenon.

Following the Eisenhardt’s (1989, p. 537) recommendations, it was decided to choose a case with a unique and consistent situation, in which the process of interest appears “transparently observable”, so that to be able to extend the emerging theory of the specific research context, without searching for generalization and replicability criteria (Piekkari et al., 2009; Welch and Piekkari, 2017). This approach, indeed, fits perfectly with the goal of gathering in-depth information about the engagement practices of various actors active in the tourism service ecosystem of the city of Cremona, and specifically linked to the traditional-violin-craftsmanship.

Specifically, this paper employs a qualitative approach, primarily based on the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants of the Cremonese tourist service ecosystem. The interviews were conducted between October 2021 and November 2022; they lasted between

30 to 100 minutes, and were recorded and transcript verbatim, producing a 200-page document (Calibri, 12). Moreover, participants were assured of their anonymity using pseudonyms.

The interviews conducted with the violin-makers consisted of a series of open question to investigate two thematic macro-areas: the innovative aspects in the production activities, without distorting the traditional violin-making practices, in order to remain competitive on the market, spread the knowledge and increase its reputation; the attitudes to competition and collaboration with other workshops and organizations part of the local tourism services ecosystem, to better understand the procedure and objectives of the engagement of multiple external actors and the type of relationship established with them over time.

The questions addressed to local institutions, instead, have mainly focused on the initiatives promoted for the artistic and cultural local enhancement linked to the violin-craftsmanship of Cremona and on the methods of engagement of multiple external actors and violin-makers, in the perspective of socially sustainable tourism. In addition to investigating the activities carried out in relation to the territorial promotion of the city of Cremona and the heritage of violin-making, were sought the initiatives to establish relationships and involvement of the actors and the effects deriving from their active participation, without neglecting the obstacles and the problems faced in the process of multiple-actor engagement.

In addition to the information obtained from the interviews, secondary data was also used to elaborate a more complete and thorough analysis. Were then explored and examined in depth all the websites and social network pages of the individual subjects interviewed, the articles in online newspaper in which they were cited, the publication “UNESCO and the Intangible Cultural Heritage: patrimonialization and Safeguarding” (2020)¹⁰, the Strad Magazine archives (monthly publication for string world fans)¹¹. Moreover, there were the possibility to attend local events planned by some local organizations, such as conferences on the topics of the Cremonese violin-making tradition, and the fair *Cremona Musica*, the annual event in the form of international exhibition and festival held in late September.

¹⁰ https://www.unesco.beniculturali.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ICH_1210.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.thestrad.com/magazine>

3.5. Case study: Cremona's traditional-violin-craftsmanship

3.5.1. Historical background

The city of Cremona and the production of violins are linked by a centuries-old historical bond that has its roots in the first half of the XVI century, starting from the violin-craftsmanship activity of Andrea Amati (1511-1580). Then, his sons (Antonio and Girolamo) and his heirs Andrea and Giuseppe Guarneri "Del Gesù" (1698-1744) and, in particular, Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737) led the Cremona violin-making industry towards its "golden age", the eighteenth century. For more than two centuries, these great families of violin-makers have handed down for generations an exceptional know-how and have defined the constructive model of violin, viola and cello for centuries to come. At the end of the eighteenth century, however, began a slow decline that lasted for the whole century, although in that period skilled and important violin-makers worked in Cremona. In the XX century, were laid the foundations for the relaunch of Cremona's violin-making industry with the opening of the International School of Violin-Making (1938), to create a highly qualified vocational education centre and regenerate an artistic-craft practice disappeared for many years. From this moment on, Cremona's traditional-violin-craftsmanship regains its reputation, with the establishment of new Masters and the opening of their workshops, the organization of exhibitions, events and competitions of high international interest and this allows to build further relationships and generate high recognition all around the world.

3.5.2. Cremona's traditional-violin-craftsmanship

The intangible heritage of the Cremonese productions is still alive in the work of skilled artisan-artists who build precious bow instruments in Cremona. Currently, the number of violin-craftsmanship workshops amounts to 183 (June 2021)¹². The principal organizational form is the individual atelier; in some cases, the craftsman works in collaboration with assistants, or share the workshop with other masters, but rarely in an associative form.

The definition of artist-craftsman as a worker who draws inspiration from his reference environment, produces unique and exclusive objects, with a higher value than the purely economic, and who strives to combine tradition and market laws (Aguirre and Lopez, 2017) well suited to violin-makers in Cremona. The product of these artisans – be it a violin, a viola or a cello – is always a

¹² Chamber of Commerce of Cremona elaborations on InfoCamere data

unique piece, the result of a know-how of centuries of tradition that since 2012 has been officially registered by UNESCO in the Intangible Heritage of Humanity List. Every single musical instrument is signed inside by the craftsman, and the name and reputation of the designer and creator, combined with the fact of being “Made in Cremona”, are the main guarantee of the value of the product worldwide. The objective quality of these musical instruments, the skill of master violin-makers and the tangible and intangible resources offered by the local system allow, therefore, to explain the competitiveness and attractiveness of the Cremona system, all over the world (Antoldi et al., 2017).

Cremonese violin-craftsmanship is greatly renowned worldwide for its traditional process of shaping and restoring musical instruments. Violin-makers, after attending a specialized school, usually become apprentices in local workshops to master and improve their unique technique. Each Master produce an average of five instruments per year – it takes about 3 months to produce a violin – and assembles manually more than 70 pieces of wood, evaluating their individual acoustic properties: each part is made with specific woods, carefully selected and seasoned in a natural way.

They are locally represented by two associations and strongly believe that sharing their knowledge is fundamental to the growth and reputation of their art of craftsmanship. Violin-makers assume that the dialogue and connections with the musicians – their primary customers – is essential in order to fully understand their needs. Traditional-violin-craftsmanship is considered fundamental for the identity of Cremona and its citizens, and plays a crucial role in practices, events and socio-cultural life.

3.5.3. *Cremona and the local community*

In addition to the rich population of violin-makers, the local community consists of many other actors that, collaborating synergistically, carry out activities to improve the cultural and artistic governance frameworks and are involved in the operations of managing and safeguarding, protection and enhancement of the intangible cultural heritage of the city of Cremona.

Since 1976, the Antonio Stradivari Violin Museum Foundation has protected and promoted the value of Cremona’s classical and contemporary violin-craftsmanship, through competitions, exhibitions, conferences, publications and concerts. In 1984 a collection of musical instruments and wooden models, documents and craft equipment of great local masters was offered to the city of

Cremona and, after several relocation, it was exposed to the Civic Museum where it stayed until 2013, year in which it was transferred to the current building of the Violin Museum. In addition to the exhibition rooms, in the building, there is the Giuseppe Arvedi auditorium and the Musical Acoustics Laboratory of the Milan Polytechnic and the Arvedi Laboratory of non-invasive diagnostics of the University of Pavia that collaborate and develop research activities on topics related to violin-making, such as the analyses of acoustic and qualitative properties of musical instruments. The entire heritage and the exhibition and research spaces are managed by the Antonio Stradivari Violin Museum Foundation, direct owner of the collection of the winning musical instruments of the Triennial International Violin-Making Competition, held for the first time in 1976.

In 1980 was founded the national association "*Associazione Liutaria Italiana*" with the aim of assistance and cultural and technical dissemination. Specifically, it is committed to develop a continuous dialogue and discussion of skills and knowledge between violin-makers and fans, scholars and experts of this art. Moreover, it promotes the spread and transmission of the violin-craftsmanship culture and carries out promotional activities at national and international level.

The consortium "*Consorzio Liutai Antonio Stradivari*" was founded in the late 90s by the aggregation of two associations of violin-makers with the common objective of promoting the contemporary violin-craftsmanship of Cremona in foreign countries and markets, protecting and enhancing the constructive tradition of musical instruments and pursuing a continuous training of members. To achieve its objectives, the consortium carries out many activities that can be classified into four main macro-categories: a) direct sales activities of the instruments of the consortium members, at the local showroom or in foreign locations; b) general promotion of Cremona's violin-craftsmanship production (with particular attention to members' instruments), through international exhibitions or publications of catalogues and books; c) offering services for business partners to expand their market and improve production or to support the violin-makers less experienced who intend to open their workshop; d) managing the brand and certification "*Cremona Liuteria*", to protect the musical instruments from the threat of counterfeiting.

All these subjects interested in safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of the traditional-violin-craftsmanship are represented by the Cultural District of the city of Cremona (*Distretto Culturale della Liuteria*). It was born after being inscribed in the Representative List of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, from the desire to give body and voice to this cultural system and unique practice. The cultural district, by definition, has a governance model

characterized by the strengthening of territorial enhancement processes and, specifically, this system is committed to long-term planning practices of integration and coordination between local actors working in the sector; moreover, it is committed to fostering dialogue between the administrative, cultural and productive systems and actors dealing with local planning and management, in a sustainable perspective. The district brings together individual Master violin-makers – about 80 are enrolled – and other organizations including the Violin Museum Foundation, the International School of Violin-Making, the Scientific Laboratories of the University of Pavia (Department of Musicology and Cultural Heritage) and of the Polytechnic of Milan (regional campus of Cremona). The objectives of the district include: a) safeguarding “The Know-how of Violin-Making” of Cremona; b) the enhancement of the historical collections through the conservation, promotion and research actions planned by the Museum; c) the creation of a system that ensures a solid training for passionate of the art of violin-making, supporting post-graduate training courses in the disciplines of restoration and sound engineering; d) support scientific research and offer in-depth knowledge and additional services, by bringing together academic studies and practical knowledge, in order to encourage a virtuous circuit to improve practices, create relationships and understand the needs of both musicians and violin-makers. These objectives can only be achieved through close and continuous cooperation between all local actors. Indeed, the District employs inclusive and participatory governance, multilevel, coordinated by the Municipality of Cremona and the UNESCO office of Italian Ministry of Culture, to stimulate an exchange between public and private organizations, encouraging innovation and applied research and supporting local community proposals and initiatives.

Another organization that belongs to the local ecosystem and works with the aim of promoting tourism services is represented by the Tourist Department of the municipality of Cremona. It manages the flow of tourists, Italian and foreign, informing them about the activities or event it organizes; it schedules guided tours in the historically attractive sites of the city; it collaborates with local tourism agencies or tour operators and hotels; it promotes cultural and artistic initiatives. Among the many activities it manages, those particularly related to the violin-making system include the direct collaboration with both travel bloggers or influencers who visit the city and tourist places artistically and culturally relevant and with local tour operators with whom it organizes guided tours in the workshop of violin-makers. Some of these, in fact, according to the will and availability of violin-makers, are included in the tourist circuit and allow visitors to enjoy

immersive and engaging experiences directly in touch with the masters, their equipment, their musical instruments, in their ateliers.

3.6. Findings

After describing and analysing the community and the various organizations directly operating in the city of Cremona linked to the violin-making activity, it is necessary to understand how the various respondents to the interviews consider their involvement in the processes of value co-creation and local enhancement.

3.6.1. *Consequences of actor engagement process*

To answer the first research question that intends to investigate the effects and direct consequences – both positive and negative – that may emerge from the engagement of various actors active in the territory, it is useful to focus on aspects both related to the violin-makers activities related to local organizations offers.

In a city with such a strong concentration of violin-makers, collaboration is seen as a great tool to learn about the work of colleagues (or competitors) and confront each other and, wanting to avoid producing similar pieces, they can reduce the level of competition. This is because, although the same musical instruments are produced, each workshop and each Master has its own rules and production processes and therefore creates unique pieces, which can be variously appreciated by different customers in the world, both musicians or composers and dealers. Thus, the collaboration between violin-makers becomes advantageous to grow and develop professionally: *"if you do not accept the collaboration you cannot innovate and grow, to know what others do and always remain a "bookworm"*" (VMC_03); *"if you find it hard to trust other people and prefer to work isolated because you fear unfair competition, you may feel left out, because alone you cannot have the same strength as a group"* (VMI_06); *"if you are openminded, this can help you to open many doors, to sales, promotion and especially to the internationalization of your production"* (VMC_05).

In addition to professional growth, collaboration allows greater knowledge sharing and access to more opportunities, given the exploitation of shared resources, information and ideas. This inevitably leads to an increasing confidence in the own production, because it is based on an

objective quality of the musical instruments designed and to a growing visibility and possibility of fame and success in overseas markets: *"by sharing study and knowledge, everyone has a better chance of learning and training from the lessons of the Masters who have been before us, so as to improve and do always better"* (VMA_11); *"living in a territory so rich in services and activities related to violin-making as Cremona, it is easy to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the community of local subjects, especially if you are at the beginning of the path of success of your own workshop"* (VMI_15); *"to be able to assert yourself, you must know how to exploit what the city's own system offers"* (VMI_07).

The growth and sharing of the knowledge of violin-making is also the basis of the objectives set by the Cultural District and the Violin Museum: *"many initiatives and workshops have been organized more and more frequently over the years in order to allow the direct study of ancient instruments preserved in the museum, with accompanying monographic lessons related to different historical periods and various constructive practices, to better investigate the origin of the transformations over time and what has been handed down of the ancient Cremonese method. We found a strong interest and assiduous presence of violin-makers. On our side we are very satisfied with the numerous and constant participation, and we feel we have done something important to make them feel part of something, part of a cohesive community"* (A_01).

It is therefore clear that the engagement of multiple actors of the ecosystem is useful especially if it is supported by a strong and heartfelt sharing and cohesion and if it has, among other requirements, a mutual trust: *"teamwork succeeds and gives clear results if the group appears cohesive and there is an ideal of participation and everyone feels responsible for the added value they can bring"* (VMI_09); *"the stimulus to change and growth is very present, especially if there is sharing and mutual respect"* (VMA_13).

An additional benefit from the actors engagement is linked to the economic sphere. The economic sustainability of a workshop is not always immediate to reach and maintain, as it is difficult to have the economic means to promote themselves on the international market. There are in fact some violin-makers who decide to collaborate with other workshops to enhance their productions of musical instruments, for example in sharing stands during international fairs: *"the cost of participation in the fair "Cremona Musica" has increased in recent years to the point that I cannot afford to pay for the stand alone, so I decided to share it with another colleague and friend violin-maker, because he is in the same situation as me"* (VMI_18).

Since the expenses to attend the events organized for the promotion of instruments have increased, other violin-makers have decided to join associations, such as the consortium. This association encompasses those Masters willing to pay a share of participation, as long as it cares about all the commercial aspects related to the sales and promotion of musical instruments on a national and international scale. In this perspective some artisans claim that: *"it makes more sense for me to pay an annual fee and be sure that my instruments will find their buyer through the Consortium"* (VMC_09); *"my job is to be a craftsman, to produce quality musical instruments that have an unmistakable sound that can be appreciated overseas, not to be an entrepreneur that occupy time finding the right customer who pays a reasonably high price for my product: my work is manual, not commercial. I prefer someone else to take care of the sales side"* (VMC_06).

As a result, direct collaboration has led some violin-makers to join the associations. Among these, the Consortium acts as a facilitator, especially for commercial aspects and internationalization of sales, while the National Association is useful to deepen the constructive knowledge, based on research and studies on musical instruments, and allow the growth of the fame of traditional and contemporary violin-making in Cremona: *"those who are part of the Consortium have more visibility on international markets, because they have a greater bargaining power than an individual and can take advantage of the "Cremona Liuteria" brand as a certification"* (VMC_01); *"we members of the association have been involved in the study and collaborative construction of a violin, on the models of ancient instruments exhibited at the Violin Museum"* (VMA_04). In this perspective of division of tasks and responsibilities, there are some members of the Consortium who also belongs to the Association and who collaborate, since they are unified by the same ideals and the common desire to keep alive the tradition of Cremona violin-making system and to promote it nationally and internationally: *"when I started to collaborate with the UNESCO project managers, I experienced this situation as a moment of unity and cohesion; and also with the president of the Consortium we said to stick together, because only jointly we can be worth more and give more voice to the community of practice of which we are spokesmen and representatives. It has not always been easy because there are some uncertain and confused traits, many ideas and many different interests, but at least we all worked together for a common goal of great importance for our work and for the city of Cremona"* (VMA_01).

Consequently, it emerges one of the first limits of the engagement of the various actors of the ecosystem: despite the collaboration on paper, everyone wants to make their own interests and

it is difficult to communicate when two different languages are spoken. The community of practice of artists-artisans has more needs related to manual skills and know-how and to be recognized as a spokesperson for a unique knowledge in the art of violin production, while the representatives of the public organizations have interests more connected to the economic sphere and to the image resulting for the city that they represent. And this basic divergence is not always helpful in the common process of strengthening the cultural identity of the city of Cremona and of regeneration and maintenance of the fame of traditional-violin-craftsmanship. And public bodies are aware of this communication difficulty, as stated by the project manager of the Cultural District: "*the more complex the concept is, the more difficult it is to structure communication, and we are enormously lacking in this. Not only because we have not been able, but because in order to have content to spend with communication tools, we must do a preliminary work to make them emerge*" (A_03).

Similarly, from the point of view of the community of the practice, one of the main problems is to be found in the mutual understanding and communication with the public bodies: "*it is as if we artisans spoke a language different than that of public representatives: we speak through the hands, they speak through politics, and it is not always easy to make these languages converge*" (VMI_01); "*I have been working with violin-makers for many years and my experience tells me that they should grow to be able to effectively express their voice, because they are a divided community, made up of individual subjects and individual minds: the individual component always wins, and it is difficult to put at the service of others, despite the common objective linked to the enhancement of their profession*" (A_03). Specifically, communication appears problematic for several factors, including the different geographical origin of the Masters: of the 183 workshops registered at the Chamber of Commerce of Cremona, more than 40% are managed by non-Italian artisans, therefore with their own culture, of their beliefs and approaches to the different entities of the local ecosystem. This aspect is certainly a plus for evaluating the heterogeneity of the community, but also a limit to understanding each other, since it becomes more challenging.

Communication becomes even more complex in cases where the trust, that is the basis of a collaboration, is lacking and this can lead violin-makers to feel exploited: "*when we were asked to participate in the research initiatives promoted by the Cultural District on ancient instruments exhibited at the Violin Museum, we gladly accepted this educational and training opportunity. Once this project was finished, however, we did not receive any feedback from them. Since they promised us, we expected them to give us the results of the acoustic research on the analysed instruments,*

but this was not the case, perhaps because this type of analysis requires more time than we expected to return the results. We were disappointed by these promises which were made and which they were unable to keep" (VMI_11; VMI_12). Accordingly, it emerges also the problem of lack of transparency, resulting in feedbacks not always shared or otherwise communicated with very long time to the subject involved in the initiatives.

This single episode is an example of the loss of confidence in a pseudo-collaborative organization, but it is not to be considered as the only possible outcome; indeed, some violin-makers assert that: *"although some promises have not been fully fulfilled by local authorities, I do not deny the possibility of participating again in a similar initiative, because I firmly believe that only through union and collaboration can something worthwhile be produced and I am sure that the results will come"* (VMI_20); *"it has been a very formative and interesting research experience, although we have not yet had a feedback of the analyses made. Alone we could never carry out an analysis of this type, so I think I will continue to participate in the initiatives promoted by the Cultural District, that is very committed in this regard towards our community"* (VMA_07).

Linked to the more general problem of communication, it emerges an additional obstacle to collaboration related to organizational limitations. According to some violin-makers, public bodies that organize events, promote projects and initiatives appear substantially open to the inclusion and involvement of actors, but often, it turns out to be a façade: *"the municipal authorities pretend to be open to listening to our requests and our needs, or rather, try to listen to us, but not fully understanding our requests and struggle to meet us. We have different interests and on paper they have the power, so our needs end up in the background"* (VMA_08); *"local public organizations that focus part of their activities on the violin-making system should keep us on a pedestal because without us violin-makers, they would not work, while, in fact, they pretend to take our demands into consideration and to evaluate our needs, but only look at the aspects related to their political and economic interests"* (VMI_03). Moreover, the Head of the UNESCO Project feels, in part, in line with some of these considerations: *"there is a statement that many violin-makers make and to which I must unfortunately agree, that is that in reality for so many years we have worked with them without really listening to their needs and taking advantage of their image to realize the policies of enhancement of the territory, not really involving them as protagonists; while now they claim, justifiably, to be decision makers of their fate, and they would like to have more opportunities to say their own opinions. [...] We have chosen, therefore, to focus on initiatives to reconstruct the identity*

and the cultural and territorial fabric, through constant dialogues and constructive conversations, so as not to create overlaps of roles and competences, because it would be counterproductive and harmful to all parties involved" (A_03).

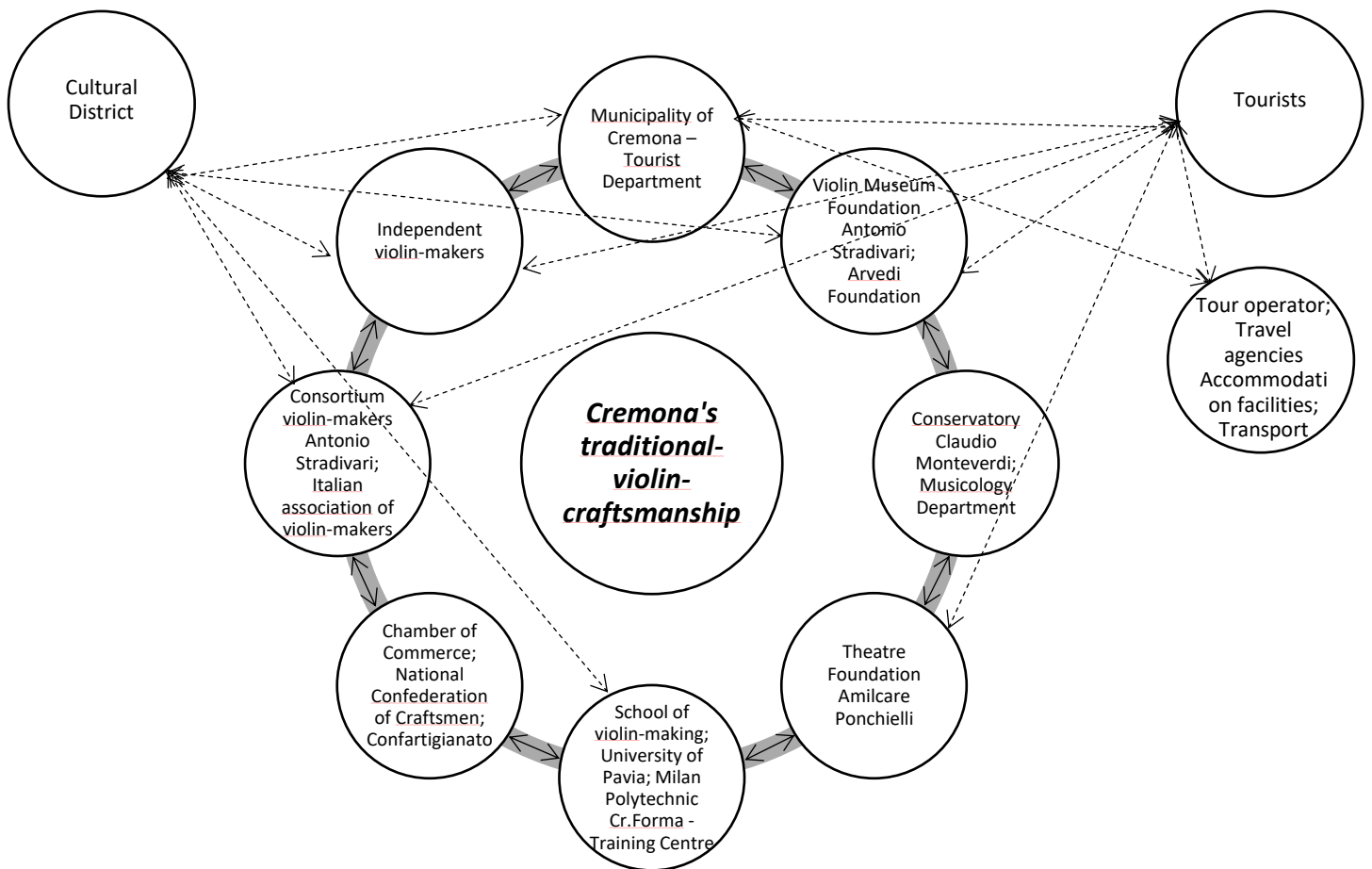
From the point of view of all the actors involved, a fault linked to the organizational structure of the system is evident, because some violin-makers believe that not all the organizations know exactly the role they play and vice versa, since it is not well defined and everyone wants to make their own interests; it is exactly in this perspective of redefining the roles of all the actors engaged in the ecosystem of tourism services related to the violin-making in Cremona that the investigation continues.

3.6.2. Contributions to the local enhancement

To better understand the ways in which all the actors engaged in the ecosystem of tourism services in Cremona produce co-creation of value and promote local enhancement and to answer the second research question, it was necessary to redefine the role of each of them individually and with respect for the other actors involved.

The attention of any tourist activity promoted in Cremona appears essentially focused on the violin-making ecosystem. *"The foreign tourist, if he thinks of Cremona he thinks of the "City of violins and violin-making": here was born Stradivari, was opened an international school of violin-making with a very high percentage of foreign students and future violin-makers, there are more than 180 workshops, here were established laboratories of acoustics, diagnostics and restoration, that collaborate with the Violin Museum, and this integrated system adds value to the already rooted tradition and gives a strong boost to the enhancement of the local cultural heritage" (A_02).* It emerges, indeed, the presence of a service ecosystem and a network of subjects very cohesive and united by the common objective of deep knowledge, preservation and enhancement of the local heritage, that can be outlined in *Figure 3.1*.

Figure 3.1 – Cremona’s violin-making service ecosystem



Source: author’s elaboration

Basically, in this framework, every actor has at least a collaborative relationship with another involved subject. They cooperate deeply or partially with each other in order to define and shape the ecosystem of tourism services and to provide an increasingly wide offer both to direct stakeholders, in the perspective of mutual growth and co-creation of value, and to external tourists, final consumers of the proposed offers.

The central network considers all the subjects mainly involved in the safeguarding and protection, study and research, promotion and enhancement activities of the traditional-violin-craftsmanship of Cremona. In particular, the Municipality of Cremona and its Tourist, Information and Accommodation Office represent the central hub to which every subject is linked. The Foundations (Violin Museum and Arvedi) are the main interlocutor for the research and conservation plan of the intangible cultural heritage, owned by the Municipality. The Conservatory,

working on the creation of a constant debate between expert researchers and technicians and students related to ancient instruments, realizes initiatives designed specifically for violin-makers, in collaboration with the Violin Museum and the Department of Musicology. Ponchielli Theatre works with musicians, who in turn are customers of violin-makers. The apparatus dedicated to the training of violin-makers, which includes the International School of Violin-Making, the Scientific Laboratories of the University of Pavia (Department of Musicology and Cultural Heritage), the Milan Polytechnic (Cremona regional campus) and the Professional Training Centre of Cremona (Cr.Forma), has formalized relationships with all other institutions; moreover, most of the violin-makers interviewed are also teacher in the International School. The system made up of Chamber of Commerce, National Confederation of Craftsmen and Confartigianato supports associated enterprises in obtaining contributions and financing to grow the workshops from an entrepreneurial and economic point of view and collaborates with other public bodies. The consortium and the Italian association involve their members and cooperate with each other, being part of the Cultural District of the city of Cremona. Also, the independent violin-makers, which are not represented by intermediate bodies but are registered in the Chamber of Commerce, are involved in the system.

The external subjects are directly connected, but, actually, they engage only with some actors of the ecosystem and represent entities in themselves: the Cultural District (cf. *Par. 4.3*), on one hand, include some organizations and coordinated violin-makers, encouraging constant dialogue and discussion between the actors involved, in the socially sustainable perspective of integration of the administrative, productive and cultural system; tourists, on the other hand, are the subjects to which the system is addressed, by offering initiatives such as exhibitions, fairs, festivals, shows, guided tours, namely, experiences of personal and cultural enrichment.

To the latter and to the Tourism Department of the municipality of Cremona are directly connected: companies that develop tourist packages, such as tour operators or who sell them, such as travel agencies; accommodation facilities where tourists stop during multi-day trips; the local transport system that connects the neighbouring towns, which allows visitors to reach the tourist destination. These entities generally manage other activities, but in the city of Cremona are mainly focused on offering services related to the violin-making system.

The ecosystem described above has been systematized since 2012, a crucial year for the city of Cremona and for the activity that most identifies it nationally and internationally: the traditional-violin-craftsmanship. From the moment it was registered in the Representative List of Intangible

Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a constantly growing evolutionary process has begun for the city of Cremona and its recognition as a prominent tourist destination.

On this occasion, was also established the Cultural District, which, involving multiple actors of the ecosystem, has allowed a growing development in the number and quality of the relationships undertaken and a solid definition of what the "violin-making system" represents for the city of Cremona. This process of continuous growth would not have had the same outcome if various actors of the local ecosystem had not been involved and certain relationships and collaborations had not been undertaken with subjects such as, for example, the Chamber of Commerce or craft associations. The presence of these organizations has accelerated the establishment of deep and lasting relationships, since they have a role as intermediaries, being in direct contact with violin-makers and knowing the most sensitive issues in the sector. Moreover, the integration of resources and knowledge has given a strong push in the direction of training entrepreneurs and the increase and dissemination of technical, artistic and commercial know-hows. Indeed, it is mainly tacit knowledge that is transferred through the relationships between the actors and, since its transfer requires direct and personal interactions, it is more likely to occur if the relationships between the entrepreneurs are highly cooperative. In this sense, on the one hand, a general increase in the set of material and intangible resources and distinctive skills has been developed, while on the other hand the relational network, built on this knowledge, has been extended. This system, based on mutual exchange and constant and deep sharing, is a key factor to support the development of multiple benefits and to enhance the services offered to individual actors.

In addition to the sharing of knowledge and resources between the actors of the ecosystem, it is also interesting to consider the set of events and initiatives organized by municipal authorities, to involve local businesses and attract more and more tourists.

All the interviewed subjects have confirmed that the organized activities and the proposed initiatives have generated an evolutionary process of continuous development of the heritage of material and immaterial resources, in particular, starting from 2012. To confirm this, the head of the Tourist Promotion, Information and Accommodation Department of the city claims: *"for ten years now, the tourist destination Cremona has been occupying a relevant and advantageous position and this high reputation has been pushed by the recognition by UNESCO and the inscription of the traditional-violin-craftsmanship in the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity"* (A_02).

The tourist lever is therefore represented by the intangible element of “The Know-how of Violin-Making”, which is a unique and inimitable heritage. Hence, it is necessary that its tradition is told and handed down to attract a growing number of tourists. In the same way, are always increasing the initiatives promoted to raise awareness and promote this art, so particular and rare: an excellent example is represented by the planning of guided tours inside the workshops of violin-makers, in order to get the visitors directly in touch with the Masters and their musical instruments, so renowned all over the world. In addition to the possibility of visiting the workshops, the Violin Museum also lends itself to a real openness to a more heterogeneous audience: the visit is particularly interactive, with many detailed descriptive panels, and it is structured in well-defined and chronologically ordered sections; the exhibition offers paths for children and immersive installations (realized in collaboration with the Musical Acoustics Laboratory of the Milan Polytechnic and the Arvedi Laboratory of non-invasive diagnostics of the University of Pavia), to allow an extremely enjoyable visit experience. The director of the Museum tells: *"to enhance the sense of integration in the world, in the Museum hall are exposed violins made with materials from a landfill in Paraguay or produced by prisoners of the prison of Opera or, even, using the woods of boats of migrants"* (A_01). The intention behind these initiatives is to better meet the needs of any type of visitor, from the most experienced violin-maker to the not yet trained pupil, so as to involve everyone and allow a visit experience as satisfactory as possible: *"all these initiatives are fundamental to attract a more heterogeneous and popular audience, making the heritage more accessible to all the visitors, so that it can be told and handed down to a wider audience with the common objective of safeguarding and enhancing it"* (A_02).

In conclusion, so that traditional-violin-craftsmanship can claim a recognition in the world, it is necessary that it is strongly cohesive and, simultaneously, open to the world.

3.7. Discussion and conclusion

3.7.1. Discussion

From these analyses it emerges that the engagement of multiple actors in a circumscribed territory such as Cremona, so strongly focused on the activity related to traditional-violin-craftsmanship, produces multiple consequences and effects on all actors who actively participating in the system. Among the positive ones, it is possible to include the professional growth of violin-makers and the development of new opportunities, in terms of sales and promotion; a constant deepening of

knowledge and lifelong training; a deep-rooted sharing of ideas, information and resources, including economic ones. Furthermore, these aspects can expand the visibility and quality of musical instruments, violin-makers and the system itself, producing an increasingly high reputation at national and international level.

On the other hand, however, the production of positive consequences and the contribution of benefits appears evident and substantial especially for those who know the role they play in the system, for those who trust and believe in collaboration and involvement and, above all, for those who know how to take full advantage of all the emerging opportunities. Moreover, violin-makers should not have the prejudice of being exploited or undervalued, but should act with the constant thought that only by collaborating in a cohesive and deeply integrated system, they can reap mutual benefits, in order to achieve a win-win situation for all parties involved, including, first of all, the international enhancement of the intangible heritage constituted by the traditional-violin-craftsmanship of Cremona.

The negative effects, instead, include a partial difficulty in maintaining cohesion between the actors engaged. This comes essentially from a diversity in understanding the language and the needs of all actors, because they have various backgrounds, mentalities and habits. Communication, therefore, appears as the main limit to the harmony and balance of the ecosystem of tourist services in the city of Cremona. Each subject, although involved in a working group, association or project, tends to do mainly their own interests and, to solve this problem, public bodies are also moving in the direction of giving more space and further opportunities for speech to individual violin-makers, in order to make them feel part of something and protagonists a cohesive community and addressed to the same objective of territorial enhancement.

A further problem is related to the difficulty that some actors have in recognizing their role within the ecosystem, since its organizational structure is not always easily definable. This definition has been more clearly delineated since 2012, the year in which traditional-violin-craftsmanship was included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. On this occasion, it was possible to redefine the role of the actors involved, in view of the common objectives that represent the basis of the project: the safeguarding of the art of violin-making, the support for scientific research, the creation of a system that guarantees a solid educational path to the involved subjects, the creation of a stable and constant dialogue between the actors engaged in the ecosystem of tourism services related to this activity and the enhancement of the heritage itself.

Accordingly, after 10 years, Cremona represents a reference point for an ancient excellence that is renewed in the encounter with other disciplines: material scientists, art historians, engineers, restorers, artisans, musicologists and politicians collaborate in a lively urban laboratory. The community of violin-makers is therefore bearer of a practice that is vital for the city and its image, and constantly evolving according to the parameters of the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage elements. UNESCO itself, in the recognition procedure, has emphasized community sharing and the commitment of the residents in the protection and enhancement of the local cultural-artistic heritage. In conclusion, Cremona, with its tourism service ecosystem, seeks to propose itself as a tourist city par excellence, enhancing the entire production and value chains of the oldest creative industry in its territory: the music of the violin.

3.7.2. Research and managerial implications

Starting from the assumption of Brodie et al. (2019) that actor engagement has a dynamic nature that results in the co-creation of value and production of benefits in a service ecosystem, the present research contributes to support the idea that multiple different participants connected and coordinated can develop a more all-encompassing tourism service experience. This study also shows that, according to Sharma et al. (2020), this outcome can be achieved only if every actor engaged in the ecosystem knows its proper role in the definition of strategies for service exchanges.

Moreover, this study affirms that only through the integration of resources and the sharing of ideas and knowledge, inclusive projects and innovative services can be produced, in the perspective of sustainable development – both in terms of socio-cultural value and benefits – for all the actors engaged. Indeed, actor engagement in the ecosystem of tourism services of Cremona creates new opportunities for professional growth and network expansion and produce greater international visibility, based on a robust cohesion of the multiple actors involved and on their union in view of the common objective of research, safeguard and promotion the traditional-violin-craftsmanship and the territory of Cremona.

From the managerial point of view, the research is useful to subjects operating in the territory of Cremona offering services related to violin-making system, since it allows to delineate in a defined way what are the effects and consequences – both positive and negative – of the engagement of the actors in their daily activities. Among the limits to this engagement, it emerges

in a very clear way a problem of communication especially by public bodies, which can be solved undoubtedly by trying to give more possibility of speech to violin-makers, listening to them and trying to meet their primary needs.

The principal practical contribution of this study derives from the conceptualization of the framework of the Cremona's traditional-violin-craftsmanship. It allows to outline which are the actors involved, to redefine their roles and to identify the bonds that are the basis of the relationships of the ecosystem: all subjects are variously involved and linked by stable connections lasting over time, collaborate on research and training initiatives and cooperate in projects on a local (e.g., *Cremona Musica Fair*) and international scale (e.g., UNESCO project). This conceptualization can be useful both for entrepreneurs, namely, violin-makers and for representatives of public bodies or other organizations operating in the system offering tourist services, in order to increase the awareness of the role of each subject, in view of a development of mutual value and territorial enhancement.

3.7.3. *Limitations and future research*

Certainly, one of the main limitations of this investigations concerns its non-generalizability, since the case-study by definition is not replicable. Being a restricted case located in the city of Cremona and concerning the system of violin making, with a unique structure and situation, is quite impossible to find and reproduce in other cases. Future research, however, could try to reproduce a similar investigation, based on the model described and analysed herein, in reference to the other Italian elements inscribed in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity provided by UNESCO (e.g., Sicilian Puppet Theatre, Sardinian Pastoral Songs).

An additional limitation to this research concerns the actors involved. The interviews were made with the violin-makers who were available to participate in the investigation, representatives of the violin-makers associations and the director of the Violin Museum, the representative of the Tourist Office of the municipality of Cremona, the person in charge of the UNESCO project and the Cultural District; however, not all actors active in the ecosystem were interviewed. The future intention is to continue the research by expanding the number of respondents, including researchers from the University of Pavia and Milan Polytechnic, the directors of the Ponchielli Theatre and the Conservatory, so that it can give an even deeper and better-defined picture of the

Cremona violin-making system, in the perspective of its enhancement and development of its reputation and image at international level.

A further stream of research that, here has not been deliberately addressed, concerns the investigation of the perception of visitors, consumers of tourist services offered by the city of Cremona. Future research may consider how the violin-making system is perceived by tourists and whether they are satisfied with the proposed initiatives, projects and offers.

Therefore, it definitely seems necessary to pursue the research in this sense, in order to investigate, in even more depth, how the multiple actor engagement produces benefits, in terms of value co-creation and enhancement of the territory, on the actors themselves that are part of the ecosystem of tourist services offered by the city of Cremona, since its main attraction and heritage, namely, the traditional-violin-craftsmanship is already considered a unique and representative good for humanity and must not be forgotten in time.

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Final remarks

The flourishing and increasing interest of both researchers and policy-makers in sustainable development and tourism issues has led to the production of a considerable body of literature, especially in recent decades (D'Arco et al., 2021; Streimikiene et al., 2021; Weaver et al., 2022).

Although the concept of sustainability is widely addressed and considered, there are several definitions of the same, which take into account the various economic, environmental, socio-cultural, institutional and technological pillars. However, there are poor directions and instructions of how to put into practice this omni-comprehensive definition, especially in a sector as complex as sustainable tourism (Budeanu et al., 2016).

The obstacle of ambiguity in the definition of this concept and the consequent difficulty in aligning practices (Galuppo et al., 2020) was, substantially, the engine of this thesis. Indeed, only by starting from the definition of relevant theoretical contributions, which can be potentially put in practice, it is possible to define a unique and consolidated approach to action, implement aligned sustainable tourism practices and promote sustainable development at 360 degrees.

Starting from the theoretical analysis of the definition of sustainable development (WCED, 1987), sustainable tourism (UNWTO, 2014) and actor engagement (Brodie et al., 2019) it was possible to configure this research. As addressed in the first paper, these three aspects represent the basis of the systematization of existing literature, the re-structuring of the field of investigation and the predictions for future research. The main contribution of the bibliometric review is to detect possible future research topics, based on emerging themes, including “participation”, “perception”, “co-creation” and “connection”. From this study, it also emerged that one of the major obstacles to multi-actor engagement and to the establishment of stable and long-lasting relationship is communication mismatch, linked to poor education and scarce knowledge of the issues closely interrelated with the practices and definition of sustainable tourism, both by the public sphere and by local communities. It therefore seems necessary to develop future research, capable of outlining an educational solution, which creates a shared basic knowledge, allowing to produce a common language to improve the promotion of sustainable development.

It, therefore, seems useful and compelling to dwell on the detail of what emerges from the conclusions of the first study on the review of the literature about engagement in sustainable tourism and, precisely, on the considerations made by researchers about limitations and drivers to

the establishment of beneficial relationships between actors and the development of engagement processes by entrepreneurs of micro and small firms operating in the sustainable tourism market.

Among the constraints, scholars identify communication problems, little education and poor in-depth knowledge of aspects related to sustainable tourism practices and activities. And, moreover, they complain about a not all-encompassing definition of the concept of sustainability, which is applied from time to time differently by the actors of the tourism ecosystem.

This ambiguity and difficult identification are valid both for the public sphere and for the residents, as well as for the organizations and enterprises operating in this direction. This inevitably leads to a problem in communicating and spreading a correct and omni-comprehensive concept of sustainability, because everyone acts for their own purposes and thinking about their own individual interests, and it creates a misalignment that is not easy to overcome.

It is in fact from what this first analysis of the literature revealed that we wanted to observe more deeply the misalignment in the definition and sustainable practice through empirical analysis at different levels, both national, considering more firms and organizations active in the sustainable tourism sector, and local, contextualized to the city of Cremona.

From literature review, scholars have also tried to suggest some solutions to this complex problem, in the view of fostering the process of engagement of the actors. In fact, among the main drivers that can encourage this process, they have identified a proactivity by the actors involved, which stems from a greater, albeit necessary, awareness of their role and of the contribution they could make to the sustainable tourism ecosystem. These remedies can also be visible, not only theoretically, but also as practical application in the two following papers.

Differentiation in the positions and ideas concerning sustainable tourism and a difficulty in communicating it correctly to external actors arise also in the second paper. However, in order to make the engagement process of multi-actors effective and efficient, a deep knowledge and a sharing of some underlying ideals related to sustainability are needed. Indeed, it emerges that these shared and aligned knowledge and beliefs can foster the creation of strong collaborations and partnerships, based on respect, trust and mutual help. At the base of these relationships, moreover, there must inevitably be, on the part of the enterprises and the organizations, a developed capacity to involve actors of the ecosystem, in an active and participatory way, aimed at producing mutual benefits and co-creating shared value. In this sense, the main theoretical contribution of this paper

is the five-staged process of actor engagement, based on the model designed by Storbacka et al. (2016), combined with the framework theorized by Li et al. (2017). It is an evolutionary process based on the enterprises' years of activity and the ability of tour operators to develop a complete sustainable offer. The article argues that following this model and involving different subjects – aligned to the same objective – can produce a variety of benefits. Among these, are listed a wider spreading of the concept, a growing demand for sustainable travels and a process of territorial and socio-cultural enhancement, with the aim to develop the ecosystem of sustainable tourism services. From the managerial point of view, this study suggests entrepreneurs of tour operators to develop a more effective communication system of sustainable offers, designed with the aim of involving different and multiple external actors. On the one hand, it proposes to educate customers and employees, to align on the same interests and issues, to make communication more participatory and to promote more complete offers; on the other hand it offers the possibility to know and follow the evolution of the process of engagement of multi-actors as a strategy of development and action, to involve only valid actors and effectively aligned to the interests of the entrepreneurs of the tour operators of sustainable tourism.

Starting from the assumption of Brodie et al. (2019) that the process of multi-actor engagement has a dynamic and iterative nature, that can be translated into value co-creation and production of benefits in an ecosystem of services, the third article theoretically contributes to the idea that multiple different participants connected and coordinated can develop a more all-encompassing and successful tourism service experience. Additionally, according to Sharma et al. (2020), this outcome can only be achieved if every actor engaged in the ecosystem knows his role in the definition of strategies for service exchanges and collaborates with other parties, as a way to achieve a common goal, such as the enhancement of the territory and the traditional violin-making system of the city of Cremona. Also in this specific case, it was possible to highlight how communication appears as the main constraint to the harmony and balance of the actors engaged in the ecosystem of tourist services. As a result, both public bodies and violin-makers are mobilizing to give additional mutual space, to listen to each other more and to develop greater initiatives and projects in collaboration, so as to feel all protagonists of a cohesive community. As stated in the previous articles, to overcome the problems related to the communication, from the managerial viewpoint, it is essential that every actor engaged in a system or in a community knows his proper role and has his space of thoughts and words; moreover they should be aligned with the same beliefs and ideas – avoiding focusing on their personal interests – and need to be encouraged to

participate actively to the social life of the community, in order to develop a more integrated tourism service ecosystem. Furthermore, the conceptualization of the framework of the Cremona's traditional-violin-craftsmanship can be seen as the most significant contribution, from both the theoretical and the managerial perspective. By identifying all the actors involved, their roles and their links and interconnections, it allows you to visualize the relationships of engagement and how they have been developed and last over time, with the common objective to safeguard the intrinsic value of violin-making and to enhance and promote the territory that hosts this unique art.

In conclusion, in all three papers, although of diverse nature and referring to different research contexts, it emerges a substantial communication misalignment. This discrepancy is partly due to the nuance and ambiguity of the definition of the sustainable tourism concept, corroborated by Galuppo et al. (2020), and to the consequent lack of a language shared by all the actors. At the same times, it also due to the inability of some actors to feel part of an integrated ecosystem or community, often making personal and individual interests prevail. Finally, in order to enhance sustainable development and practices, it emerges the general need from each individual subject to neglect the selfish willingness and to replace it with the ability to embrace and welcome the collective and common needs of the different actors that are an integral part of the sustainable tourist services ecosystem.

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