

# **Tourism Collaboration Among Rural Entrepreneurs in Rural Areas: Case Studies of Matakana in New Zealand and Pustertal in Italy**

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# ABSTRACT

Tourism in rural areas is a complex phenomenon with multifaced outcomes and has gained ground in terms of demand and attention from scholars in social science as well as in agricultural, environmental and food science. Tourism has a direct influence on the local economy, contributing to the entrepreneurial activity, which is essential for the sustainability of rural areas as it plays a vital role in its development, by leveraging resources and creating tourism offerings. Literature emphasises the importance of collaboration for both tourism providers and the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem in rural areas. Although the impact of tourism collaboration on rural development has been studied, further research is needed to understand how rural entrepreneurs perceive such collaboration.

This thesis aims to investigate rural entrepreneurs' point of view on tourism collaboration and to provide a deep comprehension of the intangible assets that can be mobilised in rural areas through collaboration. This research is underpinned by an interpretative research paradigm and adopts a qualitative case study approach in two distinct rural settings: Matakana (New Zealand) and Pustertal (Italy). The research design employs semi-structured in-depth interviews and the integration of a scenario cards game as a tool of elicitation. Twenty-seven respondents have participated to this research, 12 in Matakana and 15 in Pustertal. Findings of this thesis define the significant roles and multifaceted values of collaboration in rural settings, showcasing the roles of support, sharing, synergies, promotion and connections perceived by participants. The findings reveal also a number of challenges in achieving and maintaining tourism collaboration. The investigation of rural entrepreneurs' experiences provides valuable insights on the development of a representative model for *assets mobilisation through tourism collaboration in rural areas*. Tourism collaboration does not only directly benefits rural entrepreneurs who participate in it, but also contributes to rural development by mobilising a variety of assets. The thesis concludes by emphasising the importance of re-thinking the role of collaboration in developing rural tourism destinations.

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# ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

*Karin Malacanan*

# DEDICATION

To my family and friends, thank you for always supporting and encouraging me throughout this endless journey. It has been one of the hardest yet happiest experiences of all.

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Ethical approval was granted by Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022 (approval number 21/440).

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASTAT	Istituto Provinciale di Statistica - Provincial Statistics Institute
AUT	Auckland University of Technology
AUTEC	Auckland University of Technology Ethical Commission
CAQDAS	Computer-assisted qualitative analysis software
CCF	Community Capitals Framework
DOC	Department of Conservation
DMO	Destination Management Organisation
EPRS	European Parliament Research Service
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDM	Innovation, Development and Marketing organisation
IRE	Istituto di Ricerca Economica – Economic Research Institute
MBIE	Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment
MCDM	Matakana Coast Destination Management
NZTRI	New Zealand Tourism Research Institute
RBV	Resource Based View
RE	Rural Entrepreneurs
RT	Rural Tourism
RTNZ	Regional Tourism New Zealand
RTO	Regional Tourism Organisation
SSIDI	Semi-structured in-depth interviews
ST	Stakeholder Theory
TC	Tourism Collaboration
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organisation
USP	Unique Selling Point



# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Tourism is driving development in many rural areas worldwide, and it is a complex phenomenon that has multifaceted outcomes. While it can revitalise abandoned sites and stimulate economic growth, it may also lead to the commodification of local culture and pressure on residents (Lane et al., 2022; Mackay et al., 2019; Weaver & Lawton, 2014). Tourism is considered to be a resilient sector that overcame global crises. The last one is the COVID-19 pandemic (WTO, 2024 b) that brought a renewed attention on investigating tourism in rural areas. On the one hand, tourism may provide various opportunities for local people, retaining locals and/or influencing newcomers to migrate to these areas (WTO, 2024 b). On the other hand, some rural areas are experiencing an exponential increase in tourists and visitors, pressuring local communities that may not have resources such as knowledge or tools to manage tourism.

Tourism governance in rural areas can be manifold, ranging from strong institutional involvement to community-led initiatives. Given the demographic age imbalance and ecological sensitivities of some rural regions, as well as the potential for both benefits and drawbacks from tourism, its management requires careful consideration that aims to improve or sustain local community well-being. Thus, rural entrepreneurs are key stakeholders in the tourism industry. In this rural context, tourism collaboration among rural entrepreneurs contributes to the development of rural tourism. However, collaboration within the tourism sector has had limited research, particularly from the rural entrepreneurs' point of view.

This research investigates tourism collaboration and its influence on the development of tourism in rural areas from a subjective perspective. It aims to provide light on the rural entrepreneur's point of view in particular, and including tourism actors such as Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), which help manage the tourism sector. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the thesis topic, and it begins by explaining the rationale and significance of the research, followed by the research aims, objectives and questions, research contextualisation, and definitions of concepts. The chapter concludes with an overview of the thesis's structure.

## **1.1 Rationale and Significance of the Study**

Worldwide, increasing numbers of people are leaving rural areas and moving to cities (Johnson & Lichter, 2019), affecting the population decline in these areas, with dramatic consequences related to ageing populations, high levels of unemployment, reduced services and infrastructure, loss of cultural heritage, and abandonment of villages (Bender & Kerstetter, 2020; Etienne et al., 2019; Nel et al., 2019). Depopulation of rural areas becomes a threat to cultural heritage conservation, particularly to traditions and ways of living in agricultural places (WTO, 2023).

On the other hand, there is the contrasting trend of amenity migration, which reflects people moving to rural places and seeking to improve their quality of life through the richness found in natural and cultural amenities (Bender & Kanitscheider, 2012). To some extent, amenity migration has addressed the problem of demographic imbalances and erosion of local and cultural heritage (Borsdorf et al., 2012). Indeed, newcomers can forge initiatives and activities to revitalise the areas, facilitating their integration into the community (Membretti & Viazzo, 2017). Newcomers tend to open rural tourism enterprises in order to combine business with the rural lifestyle (Brooker & Jopper, 2013). However, migration into rural areas can cause problems such as increasing the price of houses, making it hard for young residents to afford them, causing changes in community dynamics, and disrupting the protection of the culture and character of the place (Brooker & Jopper, 2013; Kachniewska, 2015). Thus, local communities are vulnerable to social, economic and environmental change (Bender & Kerstetter, 2020).

Tourism is a key player in the development of some rural areas, and it can help address economic issues resulting from global disruptors such as the COVID-19 pandemic. That event hit many rural communities significantly, with jobs being lost and small businesses placed at risk due to travel restrictions (Silva, 2021; UNWTO (b), 2020). In this scenario, tourism has performed an important role in the recovery of some rural areas (Vaishar & Šťastná, 2022). Despite the general damage to the tourism sector, this global disruption has also influenced the growth of rural tourism. Rural areas possess unique advantages that align with tourists' preferences—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Features such as small scale and natural surroundings have organically positioned these areas as main tourist destinations (Vaishar & Šťastná, 2022; Li et al., 2023). This increasing growth of tourism in some rural areas has led to accelerating tourism development and ignoring residents' well-being at the expense of vulnerable rural groups, such as locals (Li et al., 2023). Tourism plays a vital role in rural communities, serving as a key driver of local development. Collaboration among rural tourism entrepreneurs can significantly influence this process by fostering a shared vision and

guiding efforts toward both individual and collective goals (Badurina et al., 2023; Ramayah et al., 2011; Utami et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the literature emphasises the importance of networking and collaboration among stakeholders in rural areas to establish and promote a tourism offering (Melović et al., 2023; Cehan et al., 2021; Peira et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2023). This need for collaboration extends beyond tourism offerings; it is crucial for the entrepreneurial ecosystem, highlighting the need for bottom-up movement towards a shared future (Latham, 2023). Notably, connections among rural entrepreneurs are vital for enhancing collaboration and fostering networking opportunities (Falter, 2024). However, research on tourism collaboration remains limited, notably from the subjective perspectives of rural entrepreneurs (Qiu et al., 2024; Perkins & Khoo-Lattimore, 2020). Additionally, there is a lack of awareness among local stakeholders on collaboration and cooperation benefits (Badurina et al., 2023). Rural tourism studies have seen discussions on tourist perspectives (Ayazlar & Ayazlar, 2015; Yousaf et al., 2018; López-Sanz et al., 2021; Sapkota et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023). It has also examined the impacts of tourism on local communities and their involvement in tourism development (Chang et al., 2018; Fong & Lo, 2015; Deng et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2023). In addition, some scholars have focused on tourism collaboration among entrepreneurs for rural development as a tool towards the planning of rural areas, highlighting the creation of positive outcomes such as innovation and improved access to resources (Beckmann et al., 2023; Mackay et al., 2019) as well as a deeper understanding of the collaboration process and its key components (Piboonrungraj & Disney, 2015).

While understanding the concept of collaboration as a tool, there remains a dearth of understanding about how collaboration is perceived and understood by those proposing the tourism offering, such as rural entrepreneurs (Chimirri, 2021; Salvado et al., 2023). Investigating individual experiences provides an opportunity for a less representative group to speak up and share their voices and perspectives. It also offers a deeper understanding of tourism collaboration, a topic often taken for granted as a managerial tool. However, there remains a lack of knowledge regarding how to build and implement stakeholder collaboration in rural tourism destinations (McComb et al., 2017; Stoddart et al., 2020; Bitsani & Kavoura, 2014). This gap is particularly evident among tourism suppliers (Eschker et al., 2017; Sá et al., 2018), highlighting limited understanding of the effectiveness of collaborative approaches and their potential to strengthen community resilience (Salvado et al., 2023). Consequently, it is suggested further research is needed on the subjective perceptions and lived experiences of tourism collaboration experiences by these primary actors (Shahraki & Heydari, 2019; Salvado et al., 2023; Joshi et al., 2024; Li et al., 2021). This thesis may thus contribute to a deeper

understanding of personal experiences in tourism collaboration. Moreover, as Chimirri (2021) states “theorizing collaboration requires investigations of how collaboration is understood and done in practice” (p.348), which could reveal different aspects of tourism collaboration that were not previously discovered.

Stakeholders need to be aware of the inhibitors and challenges of collaboration. Sharing its benefits will allow greater understanding of collaboration, and it might present opportunities for those interested in rural tourism to implement their knowledge around it (Jamal & Getz, 1995). Chimirri (2021) highlights the emergence of understanding tourism collaboration in order to help practitioners work together towards socio-cultural, environmental and economic goals. Existing theories on collaboration are useful for understanding how and why actors engage in collaborative efforts (Chimirri, p.363). However, they are not enough to tackle the complex realities experienced by individuals who continuously live and work within collaboration environments (Chimirri, 2021). By exploring the perceptions and individual experiences of tourism collaboration among rural entrepreneurs within the context of rural tourism development, this research aimed to shed light and provide original knowledge on collaboration.

Moreover, literature suggests the need for networking and collaboration by stakeholders in rural areas in order to create and propose a tourism offering (Melović et al., 2023; Cehan et al., 2021; Peira et al., 2021). Literature also presents the challenge of rebuilding social capital in order to foster rural areas’ socio-economic development (Quaranta et al., 2016). Thus, this thesis focuses on the rural entrepreneurs’ perceptions of tourism collaboration, as the role of entrepreneurs in developing tourism is largely underestimated in the field of research. There is a need for a more in-depth understanding of rural entrepreneurs’ perceptions as they are key players, not only for the local economy, but also for wider rural development and influence over next generations (Komppula, 2014). It has been found that rural entrepreneurs are essential to rural development, yet there is a lack of research on rural entrepreneurs’ perspectives (Eschker et al., 2017; Sá et al., 2018; Shahraki & Heydari, 2019). Scholars have stressed the lack of information regarding rural entrepreneur’s perspectives of collaboration and networking (Rosalina et al., 2021; Bitsani & Kavoura, 2014). Additionally, there is limited understanding among tourism providers about what collaboration entails and how it can be effectively implemented (Qiu et al., 2024). Therefore, this thesis aims to fill the research gap in the literature by exploring and investigating the rural entrepreneurs’ subjective experiences on collaboration in rural tourism settings.

## 1.2 Thesis Aim and Research Objectives

This thesis aims to investigate rural entrepreneurs' point of view on tourism collaboration within the rural tourism context, as they are essential players in rural development. It aims to provide a deep comprehension of the perceived meaning of tourism collaboration within the rural tourism context and identify barriers and tourism collaboration influence on the development of rural tourism. Using two case studies located in Matakana (New Zealand) and Pustertal (Italy), the research explores these unique cases of tourism in rural areas. The thesis mainly focuses on rural entrepreneurs (RE), who have tourism-related enterprises, where they are key pillars of the local economy. It also incorporates other actors such as destination management organisation and locals or entities that have a direct influence on rural tourism development. These latter actors include former entrepreneurs who have influenced tourism in the case study area, or other entities such as territorial brand organisations who have influenced the dynamics of tourism in the case study destinations.

The answers to the following research objectives and questions aimed to provide insights into the nature and significance of tourism collaboration in the rural tourism destinations of Matakana and Pustertal.

**Research Objective 1:** To develop an understanding of the key elements that characterise tourism collaboration among rural entrepreneurs:

RQ1: How do rural entrepreneurs perceive tourism collaboration?

RQ2: In what way/s does tourism collaboration affect rural entrepreneurs?

**Research Objective 2:** To explore the challenges and facilitators for tourism collaboration:

RQ3: What are the barriers that hinder tourism collaboration among rural entrepreneurs?

RQ4: In what way can tourism collaboration be facilitated?

**Research Objective 3:** To understand the contribution of tourism collaboration in rural areas:

RQ5: How does tourism collaboration contribute to rural development?

RQ6: What assets are mobilised through tourism collaboration within rural areas?

Hence, this thesis intends to offer an understanding of individuals' perspectives, navigating and constructing their vision on the complexity of collaboration within the rural tourism context in two case study destinations.

## 1.3 Contextualising the Thesis

Rural areas are being subjected to continuous change that varies their functionality and social meanings, becoming more often a place of or for consumption (Figueiredo et al., 2014). Apart from the agricultural sector, rural areas may not provide sufficient employment opportunities for the local community (Trukhachev, 2015). In this regard, *rural tourism* (RT) plays an important part in shaping the economy of rural areas. As tourism numbers continue to grow annually, rural destinations face increasing pressure on their socio-economic and environmental systems, often threatening their fragile ecosystem (Aimar, 2023; Drápela, 2023). This following section presents the complexity of rural areas where tourism collaboration is taking place and allows the reader to be introduced to the aim and contribution of the study.

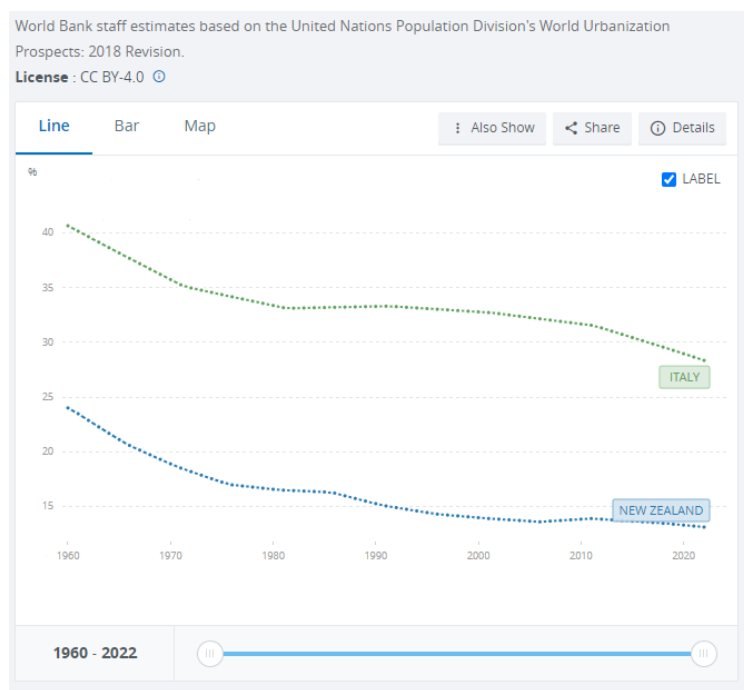
### 1.3.1 Thesis Context

#### 1.3.1.1 Rural Population Decline and Abandonment

Over the past century, there has been a steady increase in the number of people leaving rural areas to settle in cities (Johnson & Lichter, 2019; Müller, 2006). Thus, the shrinking of population in these areas has left behind dramatic consequences related to the ageing population, high levels of unemployment, diminishing of services and infrastructures, loss of cultural heritage and abandonment of villages (Etienne et al., 2019; Nel et al., 2019; Bender & Kerstetter, 2020). Rizzo's study (2016), on the analysis of rural population trends in Southern Italy, noted that "there are concrete chances that rural towns will be left behind and forgotten if depopulation trends and shrinking agricultural entrepreneurships are not addressed with suitable economic and urban strategies." (p.250). For example, Johnson and Lichter (2019) have studied the growth and decline processes over the past century in the United States of America. The findings are alarming: depopulation has accelerated over time in rural United States. Johnson and Lichter (2019) identified the most significant factor in population loss in the first stage as the out-migration of young adults. The population loss eventually affects fertility and mortality, which are manifested in a natural decrease. The rural populations in New Zealand and Italy are also declining. **Figure 1.1** shows the decreasing population trend in rural areas in New Zealand (coloured with a blue line), and Italy (coloured with a green line) (World Bank, 2024). The figure presents the percentages of population living in rural areas and shows a constant decline from the latest data available 1960 until 2022. Moreover, World Bank (2024) data describe the increase in population ages (65 and above).

**Figure 1.1**

*Rural Populations Trends 1960 – 2022 (% of total population) – New Zealand and Italy*



Credit: World Bank Indicator <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?end=2022&locations=NZ-IT&start=1960&view=chart>

Furthermore, the abandonment of land is an ongoing process that is widespread around the world. Rural abandonment is defined as the place where there is no longer an active cultivation of the land and so no direct human influence (Crawford et al., 2022). An example of that can be seen in the South Italian inner areas, where historic rural buildings have been abandoned by their owners, and are in danger of disappearing (Sardaro et al., 2021). On the other hand, in the North-East of the Italian Alps, there are also examples of policies created to retain the population in rural areas. Notably, the South Tyrol province provides financial support towards house purchases, salaries and subsidies for farmers in mountain areas. It also provides tax exemptions and financial subsidies for micro or small tourism entrepreneurs, such as agritourism activities (D'Angelo, 2021; Civis, 2024). Similarly, New Zealand has experienced a decline in agricultural land use and a rise in land abandonment (Vannier et al., 2022). To incentivise and stimulate the regeneration of the ecosystem and native vegetation regrowth, there is a need for certain political conditions (Vannier et al., 2022). At the same time, some rural areas face a surge in tourism, sometimes resulting in an over tourism phenomenon. This situation causes pressure on the local communities and highlights the need for sustainable development through

effective management of tourism flows (Insch, 2020). Thus, there is an increased urgency to find ways to attract or retain local rural and semi-rural populations allowing the continuity and sustainable development of rural areas.

### **1.3.1.2 Amenity Migration**

The movement towards non-urban areas can be explained by varying motivations (Bender & Kanitcheider, 2012). One of these is growing attention over time, which is the movement of people to rural places seeking to improve their quality of life through the richness in natural and cultural amenities. This phenomenon is called amenity migration (Moss & Glorioso, 2016). According to Alam and Nel (2022), many rural areas in New Zealand have seen an influx of newcomers over the past decade, drawn by the availability of local amenities. Consequently, while the population in some rural and small towns is ageing and decreasing, leading to economic challenges, new migrants from diverse backgrounds are helping to address these problems, yet encountering integration barriers. The demographic changes have the potential to correct population imbalances and counteract the erosion of local and cultural heritage (Borsdorf et al., 2012). On the other hand, immigrants can forge new initiatives and activities to revitalise the areas and encourage residents to include newcomers (Membretti & Viazzo, 2017). Regeneration of abandoned buildings and villages, stimulation of tourism and local services and suppliers, improvements in the municipality's infrastructures and creation of jobs are some of the benefits that these flows are bringing (Müller, 2006). However, rural areas are dynamic systems in continuous evolution that are sometimes undergoing significant demographic shifts, characterised by out-migration and in-migration. This dual trend necessitates the management of depopulation and the integration of newcomers while also presenting opportunities for local economic revitalisation. Thus, a position of this thesis is that tourism collaboration among entrepreneurs can provide solutions and support to potential challenges that these phenomena can bring.

### **1.3.1.3 COVID-19 and Rural Places**

This thesis was conducted just after the global pandemic caused by the spread of COVID-19, when rural destinations were re-opening to tourism, and the domestic tourism market somewhat mitigated the negative economic impacts of this global outbreak. Tourism, as well as rural areas, is not new to external shocks, as they are regular occurrences (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; McIntyre & Roy, 2023; Lamhour et al., 2023). However, COVID-19 was unprecedented and impacted both economic and health systems (Brandano et al., 2024; Santucci et al., 2023). A change from international to domestic

tourists, as well as a change in the preferences for the destination, was detected by Brandano et al. (2024). For example, choosing a rural destination in the proximity was not only a consequence of the restrictions in place which did not allow people to travel far, but also a preference for tourism destinations immersed in the natural context. Particularly, rural areas were favoured compared to urban destinations; urban areas saw a decrease in tourism demand as there was the need to avoid crowded places (Falk et al., 2022). The impacts of COVID-19 have ranged within a variety of aspects for all countries, and Italy was one of the earliest to witness adverse effects (Provenzano & Volo, 2022). Impacts for New Zealand were also important, as the country's economy is heavily reliant on tourism for both urban and rural economic growth (Perkins & Mackay, 2022).

#### **1.3.1.4 Rural Resilience**

Rural areas have been found to go through different changes and overcome different situations; in this regard, diverse scholars have studied rural resilience (McIntyre & Roy, 2023; Lamhour et al., 2023). 'Resilience' can be described as the ability of a material or a system to return to, or even improve, its previous status without breaking after being disturbed by multiple hazards (Fantechi et al., 2020; Nguyen & Akerkar, 2020). Thus, it is the "ability to bend, rebound, and survive" (Lamhour et al., 2023, p.15). Rural areas can be both fragile and resilient during external shocks. It has been observed that having a rich and diverse business base is crucial for supporting community resilience in times of crises (McIntyre & Roy, 2023). The resilience of rural areas is claimed to be associated with its community cohesion, including cultural identity, economic diversification, social network and collaborative approaches (Gabriel-Campos et al., 2021; Riddle & Thompson-Fawcett, 2019; Fountain et al., 2021; Latham, 2023). In particular, Riddle and Thompson-Fawcett (2019) discuss rural change and tourism in remote regions and demonstrate that, in general, resilient communities have a diversified economy which can often survive the cycle of boom and bust. Diversification has proven to be a resilient and proactive strategy for adapting to unpredictable situations. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated consumer shifts towards healthier and more sustainable food choices, creating opportunities for entrepreneurial initiatives to specialise or consolidate their strategic diversification (Zanetti et al., 2022).

Another element that helps overcoming crisis is collaboration (Fountain et al., 2021). Indeed, communities are characterised by strong ties, which leverage connections, strengthening relationships, forming collaborative groups, and enhancing social capital, thereby increasing access to potential and actual resources (Lee & Hallak, 2020; Gabriel-Campos et al., 2021). Thus, networks and collaboration facilitate the process of economic diversification and feed resilience in rural areas as

they pave the way for community renewal and rebuilding (Spector et al., 2019). Resilience and collaboration are intertwined, playing a key role in building community identity, fostering interconnectedness between organisations, and drawing on a sense of place (Rizzo, 2016). Latham's (2023) study on small food tourism businesses in New Zealand offers valuable insights within this context, identifying collaboration and social relationships, both internal and external, as crucial factors fostering resilience and innovation within these businesses. Additionally, the importance of external networks in building strong and reliable support systems is emphasised, especially when there is a collective commitment towards a shared vision (Latham, 2023). A diversified economy and collaboration are elements that together strengthen a rural setting, making it more resilient to external and internal shocks.

## **1.4 Organisation of the Thesis**

Chapter 1 introduced the research, its rationale and significance. It then explained the thesis aims, research objectives and questions, research context, and definitions of concepts.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review covering rural tourism evolution, exploring the positive and negative impacts of tourism on rural areas and the key factors in rural tourism development. This is followed by a presentation of the current knowledge on rural entrepreneurship, covering the evolution of rural tourism entrepreneurship. It continues by explaining stakeholder theory and its adoption, and presents a review of the tourism collaboration literature, focusing on its current definition, benefits and challenges.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology adopted in the research, describing the interpretivist paradigm that guided it and the two case studies selected: Matakana in New Zealand and Pustertal in Italy. Finally, the overall research design is described, including justification of the methods for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 provides detailed insights into the research findings. It presents a vision on collaboration and benefits transferred to the territory, as well as the contribution to tourism development and the challenges in building collaboration

Chapter 5 discusses the significance of the findings as they relate to the wider literature. The discussion includes the vision of tourism collaboration, rural entrepreneur contribution to tourism development, and the overall influence of tourism collaboration on rural areas.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis with an overview of the key findings in relation to the research questions and objectives, limitations of the research, and ideas for future research.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this chapter is to critically review the relevant literature on rural tourism and tourism collaboration in rural areas, positioning the present research and identifying the originality and contribution of this thesis. The literature presented here contextualises the thesis topic and relates to the extant knowledge on rural tourism development and collaboration among rural tourism entrepreneurs.

This chapter introduces several concepts within rural tourism, entrepreneurship, and collaboration. It commences with a detailed exploration of rural tourism (Section 2.1), delving into its definition and its benefits, challenges and implications. Section 2.2 focuses on rural tourism development and the role of rural entrepreneurs in developing rural tourism. It presents the community capital framework as a holistic way to comprehend the complexity of the multifaceted reality of rural areas, emphasising the importance of a resource-based view. Section 2.3 discusses a multi-stakeholder approach, with a particular focus on rural entrepreneurs, who are the central subjects of this thesis. The discussion is further narrowed to local tourism actors, and the diverse managerial systems present in the two selected case studies Matakana (New Zealand) and Pustertal (Italy). This section also critically examines stakeholder theory. Finally, Section 2.4 covers tourism collaboration in rural destinations and the challenges associated with it.

### 2.1 Rural Tourism

Rural tourism (RT) began its worldwide growth activity in the late 1970s and early 1980s, subsequently spreading across numerous rural areas (Lane, 1994; Lane et al., 2022). RT is recognised by communities and governments as a valuable activity with both rural regeneration benefits and manageable challenges (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). However, despite the increasing influence of tourism in rural areas, there is little consensus on the definition of rural tourism (Priatmoko et al., 2023). Rural tourism can be defined in various ways. It may refer simply to “tourism that takes place in the countryside” (Lane, 1994, p.9), or more broadly as “a wide concept that covers tourism activity in general in a rural setting” (Ohe, 2020, p.8). A more detailed definition describes it as a “type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing” (EPRS, 2023, p.3).

Although there is no unanimous conceptualisation of rural tourism, several common characteristics are frequently mentioned. These includes natural and environmental features, direct interaction between tourists and local communities, and the perception of rural tourism as a key tool for sustainable development (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2017; An & Alarcon, 2020; Sadeghi et al., 2023; Eusébio et al., 2014). Rural tourism should aim to deliver long-term economic benefits while respecting environmental carrying capacity. RT should safeguard nature and preserve cultural heritage for both present and future generations (Eusébio et al., 2014). Additionally, it should ensure a high-quality experience for visitors and contribute to the socio-cultural well-being of local communities (Eusébio et al., 2014). Thus, this thesis posits that rural tourism can be developed with economic, socio-cultural and environmental vision, which are the three pillars of sustainability.

RT is an umbrella concept that encompasses various types of tourism characterised by the rural environment and engagement with the socio-cultural and natural elements of the area (Fontefrancesco et al., 2023; Rosalina et al., 2021). For instance, Sasu and Epuran (2016) suggest that RT covers many different types of tourism including agritourism, ethnic tourism, ecotourism, culinary tourism and creative tourism. Other definitions are moving the focus from the tourist experience to the local community. According to Nagaraju and Chandrashekara (2014), rural tourism comprises:

any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially, as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience. (p. 43)

Rural tourism (RT) can be understood as a tool for development, attracting investment and fostering interest in rural life, traditions, and local identities (Giannakis, 2014; Sadeghi et al., 2023). This, in turn, provides diversification of income opportunities and contributes to sustainable development (Trukhachev, 2015; Eusébio et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2023; Sadeghi et al., 2023). More recent definitions of rural tourism incorporate elements of sustainability and responsible travel, wherein travellers engage with local lives in the rural setting (Priatmoko et al., 2023). Some scholars consider RT as a strategy for sustainable development that considers economic, socio-cultural, and environmental aspects (Ćurčić et al., 2021; Chan, 2023). Rural tourism serves as a mechanism for rural destinations to achieve economic, socio-cultural and environmental sustainability goals, while fostering rural area development. In this context, focusing on sustainability, Chen (2023) highlighted the importance of collaboration and partnerships for tourism development in rural areas.

### **2.1.1 Rural Areas from Agricultural Places to Tourism Destinations**

Rural areas around the world are experiencing a growing trend in tourism as a viable alternative for diversifying local economies. This shift allows communities to reduce their reliance on agriculture and explore and integrate new sources of income and development (Riddle & Thompson-Fawcett, 2019; Goulding et al., 2014; Dai et al., 2023; Mattsson & Cassel, 2020). In particular, many rural areas in developed countries have been undergoing a transformation from being predominantly a production space to a multifunctional place of leisure and living (Halfacree, 2006). RT has emerged as a strategic tool for planning and implementing development initiatives aimed at enhancing social and economic growth in these regions (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2023; Sadeghi et al., 2023). The influence of rural tourism has been demonstrated through its contribution to the revival of the local economies (Goulding et al., 2014; Badurina et al., 2023; Utami et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Polo & Frias, 2010; Peira et al., 2021; Tang & Xu, 2023; Sanagustín Fons et al., 2011). It also serves as a stimulus for the economic diversification, enabling a shift from a predominantly primary sector towards a more service-oriented, tertiary sector (Fontefrancesco et al., 2023; Ibănescu et al., 2018; Lane et al., 2022; Sadeghi et al., 2023).

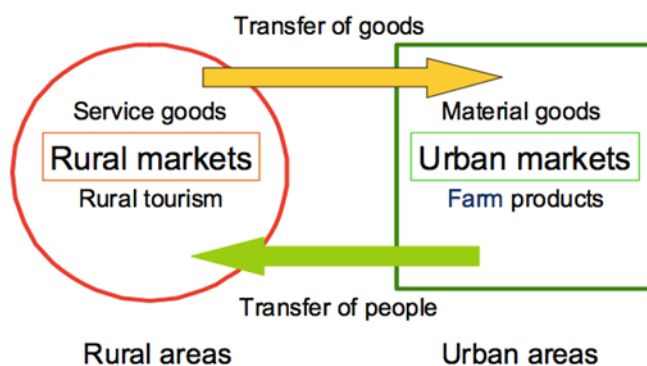
Rural tourism stands as a valid development tool, addressing not only economic aspects but also the preservation of cultural traditions and the ecological environment (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2023; Sadeghi et al., 2023). The integration of tourism into agricultural sectors may support a greener transformation. This approach has gained traction in recent years as a pathway to achieving sustainable goals, such as those outlined by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation through its 17 Sustainable Goals (Ingrassia et al., 2023). Rural areas have seen farmers diversifying their activity by integrating additional income sources through tourism ventures and agritourism (Aguglia et al., 2009; Mackay et al., 2019). Two main phenomena characterise this rural development: multifunctionality and diversification. Multifunctionality refers to the use of resources for both agricultural and non-market products, such as maintaining rural heritage and conserving biodiversity on-site. Diversification pertains to using a business's resources for both agricultural and non-agricultural production, for example, rural tourism or biomass energy (Aguglia et al., 2009). Thus, where diversification occurs, it is closely linked to the presence of multifunctionality, as these concepts are intertwined (Ohe, 2007). For instance, farmers are diversifying their operations and contributing to tourism development by offering additional services such as accommodation, rural cuisine, and farm experiences for visitors and tourists (Ohe, 2007; Mazzocchi et al., 2020). Diversification is necessary in rural areas as it is a way of survival, allowing the obtaining of sufficient income and living standards (Ćurčić et al., 2021). Rural entrepreneurs play a significant role in shaping

the dynamics of tourism development through their products and businesses. Additionally, a trend has seen people moving towards rural areas and starting their own businesses, often related to tourism activity. These new entrepreneurs introduce diverse perspectives on local natural and cultural assets, bringing different knowledge, resources, and experiences that enhance the diversification of the local economy (Mattsson & Cassel, 2020).

The transition from a primary to a more integrated tertiary sector is supported by the proximity of rural areas to urban centres. In this context, tourism plays a significant role, as it markets local products to urban and rural consumers while attracting tourists to rural destinations. Ohe (2020) illustrated the movement of goods from rural to urban areas and the reversal of trends (see Figure 2.1). Urban markets provide urban residents the opportunity to purchase and appreciate farm products, fostering a connection to rural life. Additionally, the green arrow in **Figure 2.1** represents the trend of an increasing number of urban dwellers travelling to rural areas to buy local products directly and enjoy services such as rural tourism activities and natural and cultural attractions.

**Figure 2.1**

*The Rural–Urban Relationship Model*



Source: Ohe (2020)

This evolution, along with the proximity of some rural areas to urban cities, not only facilitates positive exchanges, connections, and tourism flows but also creates business and entrepreneurship opportunities for locals. This is achieved by attracting repeat visitors and fostering connections and networks beyond rural areas (Soontiens et al., 2018). In this context, tourism significantly influences

the development of rural areas by enhancing business opportunities that can retain residents or attract newcomers, while also presenting challenges.

### **2.1.2 The Impacts of Rural Tourism**

Rural areas present a complex system for managing tourism development, and understanding tourism impacts provides a broader comprehension of what is involved. Tourism is increasingly becoming a significant phenomenon in many rural areas across the globe (Iannucci et al., 2022). In many rural destinations, the number of tourists increases yearly, putting pressure on socio-economic conditions and the fragile environmental aspects of these destinations (Aimar, 2023; Drápela, 2023). Literature has shown the positive aspects of developing tourism in rural settings, viewing it as a beneficial trend that contributes to the economic and financial growth of these areas (Liasidou et al., 2021; Kachniewska, 2015). Particularly, tourism generates benefits for various stakeholders including local communities and it contributes to socio-economic regeneration (Tang & Xu, 2023). Moreover, tourism plays a significant role in empowering women's entrepreneurship in rural areas (Vukovic et al., 2021) and is fertile ground for youth development, enhancing job and business opportunities (Martynova & Iaromenko, 2021; Stroe, 2019). The increase in job opportunities is particularly beneficial for micro-enterprises, which view tourism as a chance to boost household income (Kimbu et al., 2022; Sanagustín Fons et al., 2011). Rural tourism also leads to improvements in infrastructure and transportation, resulting in the development of public amenities (Goulding et al., 2014; Ibănescu et al., 2018). For instance, abandoned buildings may be repurposed for community use or as a tourist attraction (Lane et al., 2022; Mackay et al., 2019).

The benefits of rural tourism extend beyond the financial gain. From a socio-cultural perspective, rural tourism fosters community cohesion and participation (Goulding et al., 2014; Priatmoko et al., 2023; Utami et al., 2023). It also supports cultural activities and traditional arts through preservation, enabling future generations to connect with their roots (Figueiredo et al., 2014; Sadeghi et al., 2023). Rural tourism can also enhance resident well-being by improving services and infrastructures, while contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage (Mackay et al., 2019; Kachniewska, 2015). Furthermore, rural tourism is worthy of study as it plays a significant role in addressing the global phenomenon of rural depopulation (Melovic et al., 2023; Badurina et al., 2023). It helps retain local residents and can attract skilled individuals to the countryside (Lane et al., 2022). From an environmental perspective, RT incentivises the natural and environmental preservation of landscapes and natural places (Goulding et al., 2014; Utami et al., 2023) and in some cases may reduce

deforestation (Liu et al., 2023). Scholars have seen that rural tourism experiences can positively influence the motivation for green consumption among tourists, encouraging the adoption of sustainability practices (Chen et al., 2023; An & Alarcon, 2020). Rural tourism also strengthens tourists' connection with agriculture (An & Alarcon, 2020) and enhances the appeal of the rural areas in terms of both business opportunities and quality of life.

RT is not exempt from having challenges that pressure rural areas. While rural tourism contributes to economic and population growth in rural areas, it also causes many types of challenges. These include traffic congestion, loss of culture, environmental threats and damage, and pressure on residents (Goulding et al., 2014; Priatmoko et al., 2023). Many of these issues are often associated to mass tourism and overtourism (Drapela, 2023). Rural tourism may also lead to the commodification of rural areas, particularly cultural practices. This can result in the loss of cultural identity and authenticity, the dilution of indigenous and local cultures, and a diminished sense of belonging for locals (Weaver & Lawton, 2014; Drapela, 2023; Kumar & Shekhar, 2020; Arbogast et al., 2017; Kimbu et al., 2022). According to Iannucci et al. (2022), it is important to monitor changes driven by tourism, as over-exploitation of rural areas can threaten both the sustainability of tourism and the integrity of the territory itself. Regulations and policies must be established that take into account both the agricultural and tourism sectors to mitigate the risk of depleting environmental and cultural resources (Iannucci et al., 2022). Goulding et al. (2014), for example, state that tourism in rural areas provides disturbance for the local community, leading to issues like increased litter, which can overwhelm small communities. RT also impacts the environment through air, noise and water pollution, deforestation and damage to the natural habitats (Figueiredo et al., 2014; Priatmoko et al., 2023).

The increasing opportunities and the alternative income sources beyond agriculture in rural areas increase the risk of social conflicts within the local community and tourists (Figueiredo et al., 2014). Structural issues may arise from employee shortages and the seasonal nature of tourism, leading to an over-concentration of tourist activity during specific periods of the year (Arbogast et al., 2017; Mikulić et al., 2021). As tourism grows, it tends to enhance the value of the area and transform local landscapes (Kachniewska, 2015). Rural tourism also impacts the cost of living, contributing to rising housing prices (Goulding et al., 2014; Priatmoko et al., 2023; Drapela, 2023; Kachniewska, 2015). When newcomers move from cities to rural areas, often with higher wages than these provided by agriculture, existing residents may face housing inequalities. This issue is further exacerbated when tourism investors influence the rural housing market, making it difficult for locals to afford housing (Mikulić et al., 2021). While rural tourism clearly brings both benefits and challenges to rural areas,

exploring the perspectives of rural entrepreneurs—particularly regarding tourism collaboration and its influence on development—could provide valuable insights for attempting to mitigate these challenges and enhancing the benefits of rural tourism.

### **2.1.3 Key Factors for Rural Development**

As a key factor for rural tourism development, this thesis examines the concept of sustainability, emphasising the importance of achieving the intertwined economic, social, and environmental pillars associated with tourism (Ćurčić et al., 2021). The literature shows that rural entrepreneurs, who are key players in the development of rural areas, not only prioritise the profitability of their businesses but also take actions that positively impact the entire destination (Mottiar, 2016). According to Li et al. (2019) rural development relies on three key conditions that influence the growth or decline of an area:

1. *New business ventures* capable of responding to potential urban demand;
2. *Local entrepreneurship* that can establish and expand these businesses;
3. *Social capital* that supports these new businesses through access to credit, workforce development, human capital, and external sources for learning and innovation.

These conditions show that the entrepreneurial ecosystem plays a fundamental role in sustaining rural areas and nurturing future opportunities for youth and upcoming generations. Furthermore, deeper insights into the entrepreneurial ecosystem suggest that recognition and prestige gained through successful businesses can serve as a powerful motivator for rural entrepreneurs. These achievements not only encourage innovation and improvement but also inspire others to invest in the area. This dynamic is particularly vital for rural regions seeking alternatives to a declining agricultural sector (Cunha et al., 2020). The entrepreneurial ecosystem can create a virtuous cycle of development, and Ohe (2020) highlights the necessity for a collaborative system among entrepreneurs in order to initiate and achieve rural development. Specifically, collaboration and cooperation among rural entrepreneurs are considered factors that can enrich and provide enhancement of a destination (Tirado Ballesteros & Hernández, 2021; Bornhorst et al., 2010). Therefore, collaboration among rural entrepreneurs from their point of view is a worthwhile and important topic of enquiry as they do not aim just for the economic return but also consider the good of the destination (Mottiar, 2016).

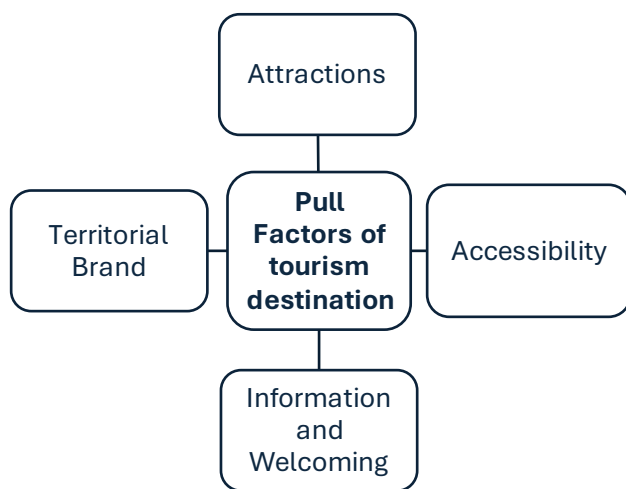
Tourism and entrepreneurship combined, not only forge creativity and innovation within the tourism context (Sadeghi et al., 2023) but strengthen the sense of belonging and the local identity (Goulding et al., 2014). Scholars demonstrate that this embeddedness within entrepreneurship and the rural

setting is a base for forging collaboration and networks and maintaining them (Beckmann et al., 2023). Additionally, Kimbu et al. (2022) stress the importance of having a collaborative and multi-stakeholder approach in order to sustain local livelihood and developing tourism (Kimbu et al., 2022). For this reason, understanding the nature and discussing the importance of rural tourism collaboration can be significant.

However, entrepreneurial activity alone is not enough to attract tourists to visit rural destinations and sustain the development of rural tourism. Indeed, the natural landscape, local cultures, outdoor and farming activities and tranquillity are essential motivators in order to appeal to visitors and tourists view of the rural destination (Pesonen et al., 2011). All these elements are part of a wider picture of the external factors that affect travellers' choices aiming to fulfil their needs and desires (Antara & Prameswari, 2018; Martini, 2017; Kastenholz et al., 2018). Martini (2017) presented the four pull factors of a tourism destination such as attractions, accessibility, territorial brands and information and welcoming. These are noted as key elements in the development of tourism destinations. Indeed, 'pull factors' play a key role in enticing tourists to a rural destination. At the same time, these elements are or can be influenced by the collaboration of different stakeholders. For instance, territorial branding can be done by grouping people in rural areas, while information and welcoming are part of the whole destination. **Figure 2.2** depicts the pull factors attracting tourists to tourism destinations.

**Figure 2.2**

*Pull Factors of Tourism Destinations*



Note: Researcher elaboration from Martini, U. (2017). *Management e marketing delle destinazioni turistiche territoriali. Metodi, approcci e strumenti*. McGraw Hill.

Attractions are the important elements of a tourism destination, and these can be enhanced through collaborative efforts of diverse stakeholders who work together to create unique experiences. Accessibility, on the other hand, focuses on how to reach the destination, taking into account infrastructure, travel time, and effort. Collaboration can improve accessibility by, for example, promoting joint transportation initiatives. As the provision of clear visitor information and creating a welcoming environment for tourists are crucial aspects of enhancing the visitor experience (Martini, 2017), collaboration can contribute to a consistent visitor experience by ensuring these important aspects. Finally, the territorial brand, which represents the destination's image, can be strengthened through collaborative marketing efforts. Thus, collaboration, which is not something easy for rural tourism destinations as stakeholders have their own agendas, is significant in rural tourism development (Fotiadis et al., 2016). Thus, understanding collaboration is worth studying, enabling new knowledge from the rural entrepreneurs' point of view as it may highlight specific elements of collaboration and effects that are still unknown in the pursuit of sustainable rural tourism development.

## **2.2 Rural tourism development**

Tourism has a great impact on rural areas, requiring substantial attention to the tourism development and planning process (Gkartzios et al., 2022). Rural areas are a dynamic system that comprises people, resources and interrelationships in a continuous state of change, where tourism is seen as a tool to develop these areas (Aquino et al., 2018; Ćurčić et al., 2021). However, there is the need to understand how tourism collaboration may potentially influence the development of rural areas, and the nature of rural tourism.

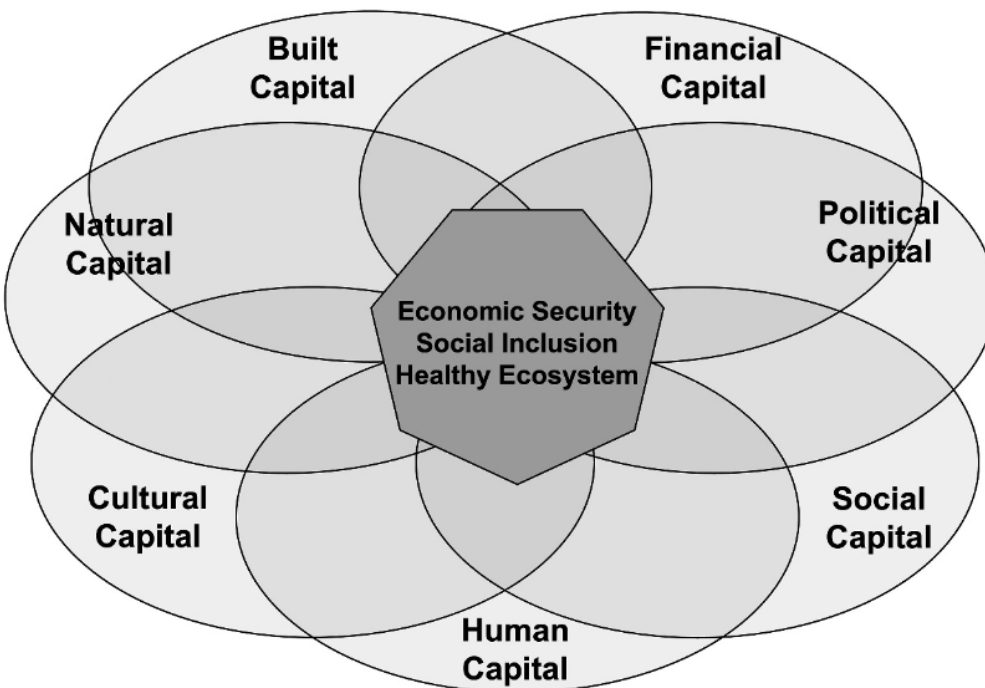
### **2.2.1 Community Capitals in Rural Areas**

Rural areas are places where people act through communities, as groups that usually hold a shared sense of place, involving relationships with others, the environment, and the culture associated with a particular area (Flora, 2015). Thus, rural areas are a complex system, and it is important to take into consideration diverse aspects, such as the capital involved. The Community Capital Framework offers a broader socio-ecological perspective, identifying seven types of capitals that underpin community development (Emery & Flora, 2006; Flora, 2015). Capital is defined as an asset that will enable providing a stream of current or future benefits and create new resources (Shoeb-Ur-Rahman et al., 2020; Flora, 2015). For instance, natural capital refers to the environmental aspects of the rural area,

such as landscape, mountains, green spaces, lakes, vegetation, and weather (Fey et al., 2006; Emery & Flora, 2006). Natural capital is often considered the uniqueness, thus the attractions, of rural tourism destinations. Figure 2.3 presents the Community Capitals Framework (CCF) from Emery and Flora (2006). The CCF (**Figure 2.3**) identifies seven types of capital: natural, cultural, human, social, political, built, and financial capital (Jacobs, 2007). These types of capital are intertwined with each other, as each of them can influence others. For example, having financial capital can provide changes to natural capital, by funding sustainable tourism strategies. These capitals are sustainability centred, thus focusing on the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects (Taylor et al., 2023; Flora, 2015). The community capital framework (CCF) helps to guide towards a holistic view of the community development process, as tourism has a great influence over all these elements (Flora, 2015; Taylor et al., 2023).

**Figure 2.3**

*Community Capitals Framework (CCF)*



Note. Presentation of the capital community framework from “Spiraling-Up: Mapping Community Transformation with Community Capitals Framework.” from Emery, M., & Flora, C. (2006) *Community Development*, 37(1), 19–35.

In particular, scholars discussed the social capital as the network of relationships and connections that enables the mobilisation and allocation of resources benefiting both the individual and the collective (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020). Therefore, social capital is considered as the connections among organisations and individuals that help forge and develop tourism. As Flora (2015) describes it “involves mutual trust, reciprocity, groups, collective identity, working together and a sense of future shared” (p.16).

The tourism offering is a complex orchestra of a various asset (Lane et al., 2022). These assets become capital when they are invested (Emery et al., 2006), playing an essential role in the community and its development (Aquino et al., 2018). According to Lane et al. (2022) these assets can be both intangible and tangible. Intangible assets are non-physical resources, and it is difficult to determine an economic value. They are often related to cultural, natural or social and human capitals, often considered as immaterial resources that can be used to create value and opportunities for the development of local communities (Morales-Zamorano et al., 2020; Miroschnichenko et al., 2024). Pitzer and Streeter (2015) argue that the improvement of intangible capital will lead towards a continuous development of outcomes for the rural area, which allows the spread of skills and assets to the whole community, empowering locals. For example, social capital can be manifested through networks or other social structures that generate benefits towards the strengthening of community, such as cooperation, mutual assistance, and leadership (Tomay & Tuboly, 2022; Runyan et al., 2007; Kline & Milburn, 2010). Thus, interrelationships among rural entrepreneurs become one of the significant factors that enable rural development (Kline & Milburn, 2010). Intangible assets can also be related to the place, where there is a strict connection to the area, such as the territorial brand, authenticity, identity, culture, and natural environmental assets (Castaldi & Mendonça, 2024; Morales-Zamorano et al., 2020). Indeed, rural areas do not focus only on the natural and cultural assets. They also represent a set of intangible assets such as the quality of life, human capital, and knowledge of the territory (Ivona et al., 2021). Capital Community Framework is integrated with Stakeholder Theory and Research-based view to analyse tourism collaboration and mobilisation of these capitals. Indeed, stakeholder engagement is seen as the mechanism through which resources are mobilised and capitals are enhanced. **Table 2.1** describes the features of each capital.

**Table 2.1**

*Description of Community Capitals Framework*

CAPITALS	DESCRIPTION
<i>Natural Capital</i>	Refers to the environmental aspects of the rural area, such as landscape, mountains, green spaces, lakes, vegetation, and weather (Fey et al., 2006; Emery & Flora, 2006), which are often considered to comprise the uniqueness, thus the attractions, of rural tourism destinations. The natural capital is considered the base for all the other capitals, and it is intertwined with human activity (Flora, 2015).
<i>Cultural Capital</i>	Cultural capital refers to “people’s understanding and interactions with the world around them” (Sanders et al., 2024, p.227) and the lens through which individuals view the world which will influence the delivery of tourism experiences.
<i>Human Capital</i>	Indicates the “people” and it refers to knowledge, information, skills, self-esteem, and attitude that collectively enable the improvement of assets.
<i>Social Capital</i>	The sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p.243). Social capital is considered as the connections among organisations and people in order to forge and develop tourism. “It involves mutual trust, reciprocity, groups, collective identity, working together and a sense of future shared” (Flora, 2015, p.16). It is the network of relationships and connections that enables the mobilisation and allocation of resources benefiting the individual and the collective (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020).
<i>Political Capital</i>	Access to personal and structured power to act within the community, including policies to promote entrepreneurship and tourism collaboration.
<i>Financial Capital</i>	Monetary support directed toward community development through micro-financing programmes, financial literacy programmes and accessibility to funds for TC.
<i>Built Capital</i>	Physical infrastructure, tools and equipment, which require a human intervention to be produced and processed, that may support the mobilisation of TC.

Credit: Adapted and elaborated from Sanders et al. (2024); Fey et al. (2006); Shoeb-Ur-Rahman et al. (2020); Flora (2015); Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998); Emery and Flora (2006); Kline (2017); Musavengane and Kloppers, 2020.

### **2.2.2 Resource Based View**

The resource-based view (RBV) derives from the conceptualisation of the organisation as a pool of resources which are needed to create its services and products (Chisholm & Nielsen, 2009). RBV was initially developed in the field of strategic management, mainly focusing on large and established organisations. It was later extended to the entrepreneurship field, where researchers focus on younger and smaller ventures (Kellermanns et al., 2016). Barney (1991) defined firm resources as the “assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge” (p.101), and they can be classified into three categories: physical, human and organisational capital. For instance, physical capital resources are the raw materials, human capital resources are the interrelations and firm personnel, and organisational capital resources can vary across the planning, controlling and coordinating systems. RBV focuses on the three features of *rarity*, *imperfect to substitute* and *valuable resources*. These characteristics enable businesses to develop strategies that competitors find hard to replicate (Chisholm & Nielsen, 2009; Wang et al., 2024; Castaldi & Mendonça, 2024; Runyan et al., 2007). In rural tourism, RBV has been applied to understand how entrepreneurs leverage local knowledge, networks and innovation to gain competitive advantage (Runyan et al., 2007; Yachin & Ioannides, 2020). Entrepreneurship stands on the multidimensional conditions based on the different types of resources, capitals or assets, while RBV redirects the attention to the unique resources accessible or controlled by individual firms in the rural setting (Romero-Castro et al., 2023). The RBV is particularly present when the entrepreneurs have a strong relationship to the territory, which has also generated benefits for the local economy and influenced the rural identity (Castaldi & Mendonça, 2024). An enterprise consists of a combination of tangible and intangible assets (Guo et al., 2023), which provide a competitive advantage for the entrepreneur, strengthening the unique selling point of the business (Chisholm & Nielsen, 2009). While tangible assets are physical, the intangible ones that are the immaterial resources provide value for companies and are a “set of multifunctional components of an intangible nature” (Miroshnichenko et al., 2024, p.2). RBV sustains that the most desirable resources are intangible assets such as knowledge, which can reside in individual human beings from experience (Chisholm & Nielsen, 2009). In particular, collaboration can be considered as a powerful asset that can impact the development of rural destinations and sustain their local economy. Collaboration is considered to be an intangible asset that can be nurtured and leveraged to achieve a variety of goals (Miroshnichenko et al., 2024). RBV is an important point for the present thesis that aims to investigate collaboration mainly from a rural entrepreneurs’ point of view, those who have access to the resources and capitalise them within the rural tourism context. This thesis

extends RBV by examining how collaborative practices among rural entrepreneurs mobilise both firm-level and community-level resources, contributing to the destination resilience and sustainability.

### **2.2.3 Sustainable Development in Rural Areas**

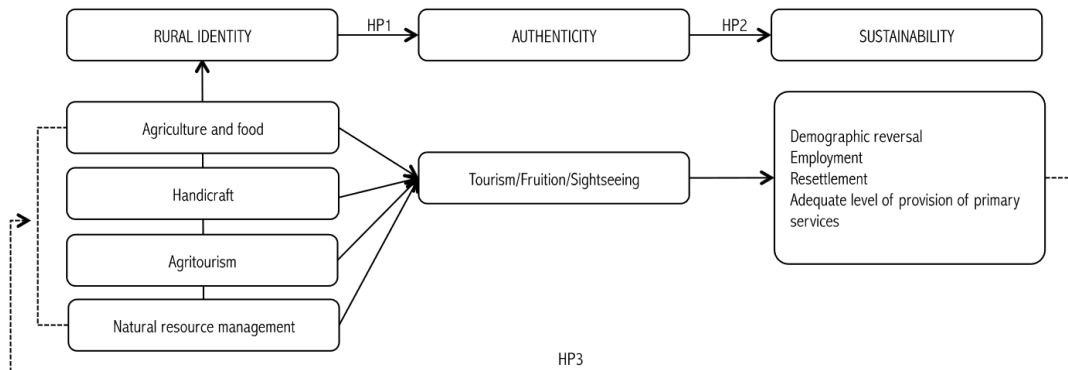
Literature suggests rural areas development should be strictly related to the sustainability concept and the contribution of rural tourism in achieving sustainable development (López-Sanz et al., 2021; Ivona, 2021, Ruiz-Real et al., 2022). Sustainable development is based on the connection among the economic, environment, social and cultural aspects (Ruiz-Real et al., 2022). In particular, the United Nations (2025) defines sustainable development as:

“Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development calls for concerted efforts towards building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and planet. [...] For sustainable development to be achieved, it is crucial to harmonize three core elements: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. These elements are interconnected, and all are crucial for the well-being of individuals and societies.” (UN, 2025)

Additionally, Suárez Roldan et al. (2023) state that rural development is based on the improvement of living and working conditions of rural areas. By analysing the number of indicators for each of the subdimensions of sustainable development - economic, social and ecological - Suárez Roldan et al. (2023) highlight the greater number of indicators in the research field cover the social dimension, stating the importance of studying the human behaviours as it has a direct influence on the environmental and economic aspects. Additionally, while defining the sustainable development of rural areas, Basile and Cavallo (2020) state the strict relationship between rural identity and authenticity, which influences sustainable development. The following **Figure 2.4** represents the rural areas sustainable development framework elaborated by Basile and Cavallo (2020) based on the Italian inner areas.

**Figure 2.4**

*Rural Areas Sustainable Development Framework*



Note: Reprinted from “Basile, G., & Cavallo, A. (2020). Rural Identity, Authenticity, and Sustainability in Italian Inner Areas.” *Sustainability*, 12(3).

The illustration focuses on the study of determinants of the relationship between authenticity and rural identity and gives a stronger idea of the connection between these elements. Rural identities are expressed through elements such as agriculture, food, handicrafts, agritourism, and natural resources. These elements contribute to a sense of authenticity, often described as “genuine” and “real,” which is experienced through tourism activities like sightseeing and cultural engagement. Moreover, Zhang et al. (2022) also state that relationships, connections, and identity are an intertwined complex framework in which authenticity and high-quality values play a key role. Thus, rural sustainable development is strongly related to the authenticity and identity of rural places.

### **2.3 Involvement of Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs**

The tourism industry is a wide and complex field which encompasses a multitude of stakeholders. These include tourists, local communities, governments, employees, local businesses, activist groups, competitors, academia, market intermediaries, other organisations such as NGOs, and tourism industry players (Roxas et al., 2020; Martini & Buffa, 2015; Wardana et al., 2020). Rural entrepreneurs (RE) in the tourism sector are closely involved in tourism development (Roxas et al., 2020). Their dual role – as business operators and often as residents - allows them to accumulate spatial and temporal

knowledge. Entrepreneurs play a vital role in the development of the rural areas as they leverage resources and create tourism offerings. While profit maximisation is a common incentive, other motivations, such as social impact or personal fulfilment, drive entrepreneurs' endeavours (Mottiars, 2016). Therefore, they are not only driven by the economic return but by multifaceted aspects that concern the social structure, making each entrepreneur's perspective unique. Understanding their subjective perceptions of tourism collaboration provides varying insights into the social aspect that is driving entrepreneurs. While this thesis mainly focuses on rural entrepreneurs, it has taken into consideration other relevant stakeholders' points of view. These include destination management organisations, local leaders related to tourism, and key players in the tourism sector, all of whom play significant roles in tourism promotion and management (Martini & Buffa, 2015). However, the primary focus of the research rested with understanding the perceptions of local rural entrepreneurs. As such, the next section will define rural entrepreneurs and their role within the tourism sector. The section then describes the tourism management organisations in the two case study countries selected – New Zealand and Italy. These destination management organisation players can provide extra resources, and knowledge and shape the tourism offering. Thus, considering their point of view would provide information on the rural tourism collaboration perceptions and effects over the rural areas.

### ***2.3.1 Rural Entrepreneurs within the Tourism Sector***

The increasing trend in tourism in rural areas is impacting the rural economy which shapes the socio-cultural as well as environmental structures. Rural tourism has evolved beyond traditional farm-stays and agritourism entrepreneurs. It now encompasses a broader range of activities including accommodation, food and beverage services, sports, arts. This expansion has contributed to the transformation of primary sector areas into tertiary ones that often centred around tourism (Riddle & Thompson-Fawcett, 2019; Goulding et al., 2014; Dai et al., 2023). Indeed, economic activity is fundamental for the sustainability of rural development. Entrepreneurs play a key role in being an active part of the system, revitalising rural areas (Ateljevic, 2009; Bichler et al., 2020; Rosa et al., 2019; Eschker et al., 2017).

Rural entrepreneurship can have the characteristics of being embedded in the area, in the local community and in the local social networks. Entrepreneurs may be personally committed to the community, not seeing the business solely from an economic perspective but as a tool to pursue the well-being of their communities, viewing their business not solely through an economic lens but as tools for enhancing the overall quality of life (Tomay & Tuboly, 2022; Mottiars, 2016). Thus, as

mentioned in Chapter 1, this thesis adopts the conceptualisation of rural entrepreneur (RE) as someone whose business is closely tied to the rural surroundings and often utilise rural resources to create value, becoming vital contributors to the sustainability of rural areas (Korsgaard et al., 2015; Sadeghi et al., 2023). Other definitions often associate rural entrepreneurs with their geographical location (Candelario-Moreno & Sanchez-Hernandez, 2024). Rural entrepreneurship is considered the core of economic development and is often found in the dominant agriculture sector (Cloesen, 2007, p. 89), and it has the potential to shape the social, cultural and economic traits of the system. Mainly, they are agents of innovation, employment and work structure (Cearra et al., 2021) and therefore businesses who innovatively use the local resources and facilities aiming to the creation of commercial opportunities (Sadeghi et al., 2023). Moreover, rural entrepreneurs are directly involved in tourism development, as they are part of the tourism offering by shaping the tourist experience as well as being affected by it (Eusébio et al., 2014). However, entrepreneurs who are based in rural areas are often hindered by a variety of factors. As mentioned previously, they may be subject to lower levels of development, depopulation, and lack of infrastructure and services compared to urban areas (Cearra et al., 2021). The role of entrepreneurs in developing tourism is largely underestimated in the tourism literature. This highlights the need for a deeper understanding of their perceptions, as they are key players not only to the local economy but also to rural development and the shaping of future generations (Eschker et al., 2017; Komppula, 2014).

Tourism collaboration involves more than just rural entrepreneurs. Organisations such as Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) also play a critical role in the strategic tourism planning. They help attract tourists and influence how tourism products and services are delivered (Wagenseil et al., 2022). Tourism collaboration also concerns other local tourism actors, such as ex-farmers or brand agencies who are strongly engaged with the tourism development of the area. Tourism actors, such as the ones just proposed, can guide tourism towards sustainability management by promoting initiatives through local businesses and external stakeholders on sustainable practices (Haid & Albrecht, 2021), and are in direct contact with rural entrepreneurs. This relationship can influence collaboration among them by proposing projects, sharing knowledge and experiences, and providing resources. Other local tourism actors include people who have influenced the growth of tourism in past years, for instance other tourism organisations or locals who have initiated a farmers' market.

### **2.3.2 Destination Management Organisations**

#### ***Destination governance – a decentralised approach (New Zealand)***

In the land of the ‘long white cloud’ (Aotearoa), which is how New Zealand was first called Aotearoa (New Zealand) by Māori during the great migration (NZ Government, 2009), tourism became an essential part of the everyday life of the country. According to Tourism New Zealand (2024), one in nine New Zealanders are directly or indirectly employed in the tourism sector. Tourism has been one of New Zealand’s largest export industry, with expenditure reaching \$38.79billion. In the year ending March 2023, it contributed 4.1% directly to GDP and an additional 2.8% indirectly through tourist-related activities. (Tourism New Zealand, 2024). From a tourism point of view, the structure of the tourism destination management system in New Zealand is decentralised. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) sets the national tourism strategy, together with the Department of Conservation, and directs it to the Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) that develop the management in each area. The MBIE tourism strategy is founded on the tikanga (customs or values) aspects of Māori culture that underpin the sustainable tourism growth of New Zealand. As stated in the New Zealand-Aotearoa Government Tourism Strategy (MBIE & DOC, 2019), these pillars relate to:

- Ōhanga/ whairawa (economic prosperity and wellbeing)
- Manaakitanga (shared respect, hospitality, generosity and care for others)
- Kaitiakitanga (guardianship/sustainability)
- Whanaungatanga (a sense of family and belonging, relationships built on shared experiences and working together).

The 31 Regional Tourism Organisations play a crucial role in fostering and promoting tourism development. While each is different in scale and structure, all follow the same vision of providing sustainable economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits through tourism, to the local community (RTNZ, 2024). Moreover, the Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality is responsible for the support and marketing of tourism and, together with Tourism New Zealand and other regional organisations, works on promoting the country around the world (RTNZ, 2024). The specific case of Matakana, which is one of the case studies of this research, is under the legislation of Auckland’s regional tourism organisation. In particular, the self-funded local tourism management organisation called Matakana Coast Tourism is responsible for marketing of the area and product development, as well as enhancing tourism development and manages the destination management plan (Matakana

Coast Tourism, 2024). Moreover, the Matakana Coast Tourism aims to support sustainable growth for regional economy, encourages community engagement and provides partnership.

### ***Destination governance – a multi-layered system (Italy)***

In Italy, tourism is increasing and contributing to 9.5% of the national GDP (Migliorati, 2024). The tourism management system, while having a similar structure to the New Zealand one, is more complex and multifaceted. The Ministry of Tourism is the national body for the tourism policies, and it provides the national tourism strategies and frameworks. The regional governments which Italy is composed of 20 regions, are allowed to work within this framework and create their own regulations. Finally, municipalities hold significant responsibility in the ordinary tourism management as they regulate local attractions, events, information centres and also have the power to decide on the tourist tax (Legislative Decree n.79/2011). Indeed, while the central government is providing a national framework within each region that can apply for its own roles, there is a particular case, such as in South Tyrol, that has a different power recognised by the country. Due to historical reasons related to both World War I and II, the province of Bozen, the capital of South Tyrol, has been given an extraordinary asset in terms of laws and financial management. Moreover, there are established DMOs in each territory that work together with the public sector in order to develop tourism in each area. In particular, in South Tyrol subsidies and tax incentives for agritourism operators are provided by the government (Grillini et al., 2024). Agritourism has a significant impact on the rural economy. It represents a diversification of farm activities, integrating additional sources of income and increasing farmers' awareness of their role within the natural environment and rural communities (Giaccio et al., 2018). Agritourism in Italy can only be performed by farmers or their family members, and the agricultural activity needs to be predominant in relation to the provider's working hours (Giaccio et al., 2018). The same authors claim that the Italian legislation guides farmers to deal more with agricultural activity rather than solely tourism activity, enticing sustainable choices from an environmental point of view.

### ***2.3.3 Stakeholder Theory (ST) in Rural Settings***

The network of collaborations among and within different stakeholders in a rural area could be considered as a system with economic and social objectives. The original idea of ST was to consider the interests of different stakeholders, who are referred to as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisations' objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p.46). Therefore,

stakeholder theory highlights the importance of collaboration among actors in the achievement of shared goals (Bricker et al., 2015; Wondirad et al., 2020). Stakeholder theory considers the attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency, which define the three levels of salience for the identification of stakeholders (Agle et al., 1999). However, it remains a challenge to define criteria for identifying “legitimate” stakeholders (Sundaram & Inkpen, 2004).

Critics of ST suggest that the theory is too focused on the organisational approach and the actors who affect the organisation, thus misrepresenting stakeholders who are affected by the network (Roloff, 2008). More recent stakeholder research argues that there is a need for flexibility in stakeholder identification strategies. This is especially important for recognising stakeholders who can be less notable or less powerful within the tourism contexts (Khazaei et al., 2015). ST evolves and goes beyond the first engagement to building collaboration and contributing to local strategies (Stokes, 2008). It reflects changes in society, and it is becoming more important to identify stakeholders as their salience assumes new meanings (Wood et al., 2021). The evolution of ST encounters the problem of considering shareholders as a homogeneous group and, in the same instance, individuals have multiple interests as well as holding multiple roles in society (Winn, 2001). Thus, ST opens to the concept of collaborative thinking, implying that each stakeholder group should be given importance, without one having priority over others (Byrd, 2007). While there is no unanimous consensus around stakeholder theory (Fubah & Moos, 2021), it remains a valuable framework for guiding organisation. ST encourages the generation of value for all stakeholders, moving beyond the traditional view that focused primarily on economic benefits for shareholders only (Fubah & Moos, 2021). Indeed, according to Fubah and Moos (2021) “the ecosystem can only function optimally if all, not just some, of the ecosystem’s components remain interconnected” (p.10). Moreover, Beritelli’s (2011) suggestion is to pay attention to relationships and interactions among stakeholders by exploring the participants’ points of view. In particular, it has been suggested to explore entrepreneurs’ perceptions in rural development (Nguyen et al., 2019). Other studies in the context of rurality and tourism and sustainable tourism development have used case study approaches underpinned by stakeholder theory, providing insightful information from different perspectives (Morea et al., 2022; Amoako et al., 2021). Section 2.4 will focus on the conceptualisation of collaboration in rural tourism destinations and its related features.

## **2.4 Collaboration in Rural Tourism Destination**

Rural areas are home to a variety of stakeholders, including entrepreneurs. In particular, these rural entrepreneurs, who are tourism-related, play a significant role in the development of rural areas. While entrepreneurs are often viewed as individual entities, there is less discussion about their collaboration. Scholars who have investigated aspects of rural tourism development argue that more significant consideration is needed for collaboration among stakeholders within the rural areas (Badurina et al., 2023; Chimirri, 2021). Indeed, tourism is influencing the economy of rural areas, directly contributing to entrepreneurial activity, which is essential for the sustainability of rural areas. Thus, collaboration becomes of worth to study as it is of key importance for the success of rural entrepreneurs (Eschker et al., 2017). Rural tourism, entrepreneurship, and collaboration are then related to one another, potentially influencing the results of the development of rural areas.

### ***2.4.1 Defining Tourism Collaboration***

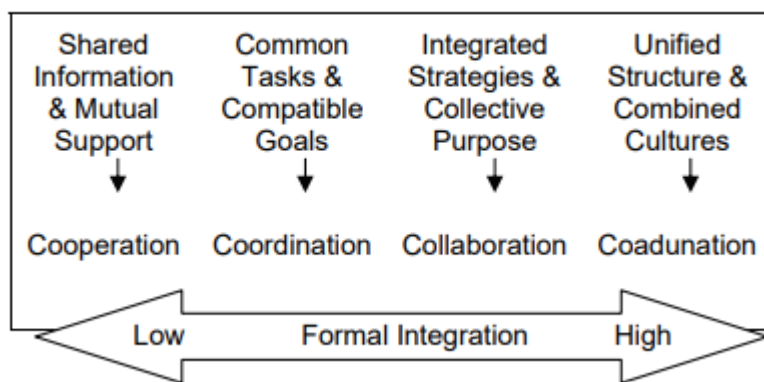
This thesis is centred around the concept of collaboration, which scholars have considered essential in the tourism industry (Qiu et al., 2024; Chimirri, 2021; Kumar & Shekhar, 2020). However, it has been noted that every tourism practitioner has a different vision and perception of tourism, and this results in multiple and entangled aspects which increase the complexity of tourism collaboration (Chimirri, 2021). Consequently, this constitutes a challenge to its applicability, as collaboration, even recognised as a tool, does not have the nature to be controlled and planned (Waayers et al., 2012). Even though no consensus on the universal meaning of collaboration has been reached, this thesis applies the concept as a multi-faceted process between people working towards common goals (Le Pennec & Rauffet, 2018).

Scholars in the 1980s tried to define collaboration, resulting in a range of definitions varying from joint decision making to an interactive process that is based on building relationships with ongoing communication (Wood et al., 1991). From this perspective, collaboration in tourism development has been defined as an “educational and enabling process whereby stakeholders assume responsibilities for the development of tourism within their community” (Byrd, 2007, p.9). In particular, the word collaboration can be understood as working together to achieve common goals (Le Pennec & Rauffet, 2018). Some scholars intertwine the terms collaboration, cooperation and partnership, referring to the process of joint decision making (Qiu et al., 2024). However, others distinguish between these concepts, arguing that cooperation mainly focuses on building mutually beneficial relationships, while collaboration involves equal contributions toward shared objectives. This distinction highlights the ambiguity and blurriness in the definitions of these terms (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020). Bedwell et al.

(2012) define collaboration as “an evolving process whereby two or more social entities actively and reciprocally engage in joint activities aimed at achieving at least one shared goal” (p.131). Colbry et al. (2014) highlight two main features of collaboration: the absence of a significant power imbalance between stakeholders and the willingness to achieve common goals. Yet, the achievement of common goals and the action of working together become specific characteristics when defining collaboration. Other scholars state that collaboration is a strategic alliance, suggesting that it is not a destination but a whole journey during which collaboration becomes part of a continuum (Gajda, 2004). **Figure 2.5** shows that collaboration is on the spectrum of a formal integration between agencies who seek to work together. In the presence of a low integration level, there is cooperation, while high integration is defined as coadunation going through different stages of cooperating, partnering, merging, and unifying.

**Figure 2.5**

*Defining Strategic Alliances Across a Continuum of Integration.*



Credit: figure was created as an explanation of the continuum of strategic alliances. From “Utilizing Collaboration Theory to Evaluate Strategic Alliances.” Of Gajda, R. (2004). *American Journal Of Evaluation*, 25 (1), 65-77.

This representation of collaboration highlights the complexity of defining collaboration and relationship that can exist between different stakeholders, and between rural tourism entrepreneurs and tourism local actors. Indeed, these relationships keep evolving and changing, being dynamic on this continuum. While provisions of multiple definitions and presentation on collaboration have been

given, this thesis takes into consideration the concept of collaboration that consists in the work of two or more people that focus on to one or more common goals.

#### ***2.4.2 Tourism Collaboration as vital spark for Rural Areas***

Tourism collaboration among multiple stakeholders plays a vital role in the enhancement and progress of rural places and can support and promote sustainable development in such areas (Cradock-Henry et al., 2018; ENRD, 2014; Riddle & Thompson-Fawcett, 2019; Spector et al., 2019). Over the past few decades, many researchers have studied collaboration in different topics, showing the potential of collaboration in providing benefits within the sustainable development field (Le Pennec & Rauffet, 2018; Li et al., 2021). Scholars have found that collaboration offers a solution to the various challenges faced by small tourism firms in rural areas in terms of developing tourism (Perkins & Khoo-Lattimore, 2020). For example, tourism collaboration positively influences the performance of tourism operators, increasing their revenue and helping to overcome issues related to limited resources (Ramayah et al., 2011; Sigala, 2004). Collaboration enables contributions to successful destination branding, increasing participants among local community members, and creating a more guided approach towards a shared vision (Perkins et al., 2020). Galvão et al. (2020) provide empirical evidence of the positive outcomes created by the interaction of local actors, which are considered both public and private entities. Findings show that, through collaboration, new start-ups are fostered, contributing to regional development, and entrepreneurship is supported, giving new opportunities to create value in the community. It has also been stated that “the creation of economic and livelihood opportunities is facilitated by the partnership among local governments, businesses, and local community members” (Roxas et al., 2020, p.394), underlining the benefits of collaboration among these stakeholders. However, there appears to remain a lack of awareness among local stakeholders on collaboration and cooperation benefits (Badurina et al., 2023) and investigating this could potentially bring improvements to rural areas, by acknowledging the benefits and challenges of tourism collaboration.

Entrepreneurs who connect with others can mobilise resources more easily, ask for support and information, and finally, develop business relations. For instance, farmers see through rural development and collaboration a possibility to increase their earnings and quality of life. Meanwhile, there can be a corresponding slowdown in the rate of abandonment of rural areas (Paul et al., 2014). Entrepreneurs can feel much stronger in a group, and this can lead to a competitive advantage in the market (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999, p.2219). In their comparative case studies, Jesus and Franco (2016) identified the potential of networks and collaboration to be competitive in the market, due to the

sharing of knowledge, resources and expertise. These combined factors can increase business activity and community development.

Finally, while studying the collaborations among non-profits and businesses, Austin and Seitanidi's (2012) propose in their collaborative value creation framework specific elements that denote the benefits of collaboration, such as:

- Associational value (AV) considered as the benefit that someone gets by having a collaborative relationship with other companies or actors.
- Interaction value (IV) refers to intangibles elements that are created when organisations collaborate with each other.
- Transferred resource value (TRV) occurs when an organisation receives a resource from another organisation.
- Synergistic value (SV) is built on the sum of previous values and allows to for the expansion of perspectives and paradigms for change and innovation.

As suggested by Mongelli and Rullani (2017), this framework is open to the subjective perception of the actors in a way to investigate what they “see and make sense of” (p.152). In short, further investigation into the perceived values of collaboration is needed within the context of rural tourism, as there is limited understanding among tourism providers of what collaboration is and how it can be enacted (Qiu et al., 2024).

### **2.4.3 Barriers to Tourism Collaboration**

Collaboration comes from the need to work with others in order to achieve some goals; as such, it often encounters multiple challenges that can hinder the relationships and the efforts of collaborative approaches (Wondirad et al., 2020; Keyim, 2015). Indeed, collaboration can be affected by a variety of factors, such as a lack of trust, social and cultural backgrounds, competition, opportunism, behavioural changes, misunderstandings, interests and vision that are not aligned (Wondirad et al., 2020; Ali & Haapasalo; 2023). Often challenges are strictly connected to the mindset of the entrepreneurs, who have inherited habits of previous generations, such as self-interest over the mutual benefit and collaborative approach (Ali & Haapasalo; 2023). Pilving et al. (2019) present other challenges faced by tourism collaboration, such as the lack of a supportive team. For example, local leaders may stimulate other stakeholders towards specific projects, but then difficulties arise over time if there is a lack of continuity and support.

Several other challenges hinder effective tourism collaboration in rural areas. These include lack of communication and time, dependence of external funding, institutional changes, lack of connection with urban centres. Such issues often result in the absence of proper evaluation of the benefits and impacts generated through collaboration (Pilving et al., 2019; Komppula, 2014). In particular, Pilving et al. (2019) studied the perspectives of public and non-profit organisations and suggested further research through other case studies in different contexts. This would help create a foundation for discussing conflicts and reducing barriers to collaboration. For example, ensuring the inclusion of those who may feel marginalised in the tourism planning process is essential (Wondirad et al., 2020). By deeply understanding rural entrepreneurs' perceptions and experiences, this thesis might shed light on other collaboration challenges and benefits among rural entrepreneurs.

## **2.5 Summary**

The literature review chapter has explored the complex and multifaceted features of rural tourism, rural entrepreneurs that is tourism-related, and tourism collaboration. The chapter has shed light on rural areas development from the agricultural to a more diversified and multifunctional economy. Noting the impacts of tourism development in rural areas, literature has shown benefits and challenges that space between the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects. Pull factors of tourism growth in rural destinations are presented, as well as the community capitals framework that considers a variety of capitals that can be influenced by tourism in rural areas. Despite the increasing research in tourism in rural areas, it remains a dearth of understanding from the rural entrepreneur's point of view, particularly referring to tourism collaboration. To address this complexity, the thesis draws on three interrelated theoretical frameworks: Stakeholder Theory (ST), the Resource-Based View (RBV), and the Community Capitals Framework (CCF). While each offers distinct insights, their integration provides a more holistic lens for understanding rural tourism collaboration and development. This has resulted in investigating entrepreneurs' impact on tourism development but failed to address and explain entrepreneurs' tourism collaboration as at all and the overall influence on rural areas. The chapter has also presented the involvement of other stakeholders such as destination management organisations in term of tourism development by approaching tourism collaboration from a subjective point of view. This draws on the resource-based view and stakeholders' theory into the study of tourism collaboration in rural areas. This research can potentially provide a deeper understanding of the subjective perspective of rural entrepreneur's role into the development of tourism in rural destinations.



## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the paradigm and methodology that guided the research and informed the research design and methods applied for data collection and analysis. The chapter justifies the philosophical approach of interpretivism, illustrating how this, along with the epistemological concept of intersubjectivity and the ontological assumption of relativism, shaped the aim of the research. Together, this foundation guided the exploration of tourism collaboration from the perspectives of rural entrepreneurs and, its influence on tourism development in two selected rural case study areas. Furthermore, the chapter details and justifies the methods employed, including semi-structured in-depth interviews and field notes, concluding with an overview of the analysis process for the findings.

### 3.1 Research Design

An overview of the philosophical perspective is provided in the following section that describes the researcher's beliefs and worldview. It was Kuhn (1970) who introduced the concept of different paradigms. A research paradigm reflects the researcher's beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology), what counts as knowledge (epistemology), and what processes are involved to learn and gain this knowledge (methodology) (Giddings & Grant, 2006). **Table 3.1** outlines the philosophical pillars that underpin the present research and overviews the methodological steps taken during the construction of the research design.

**Table 3.1: Philosophical Pillars of the Research**

<b>Paradigm</b>	Interpretivism	The interpretivism paradigm proposes an interactive and cooperative relation between the interviewer and the participant as per this specific case (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004). The interviewer is able to connect and explore the participant's worldview, understanding the real value of networking and how this value is transferred to the territory in terms of tourism development.
<b>Ontology</b>	Relativist	Applying a relativist ontology welcomes the subjective meaning of individual experiences. These meanings are complex and multiple, and the researcher has the purpose of investigating them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It aims to explore the complex world of participants from the rural context and understand the multi-faceted realities of people living in different countries.
<b>Epistemology</b>	Inter-subjectivity	As there are multiple realities, an appropriate way to absorb knowledge is to interact with others and try to understand and reveal their meanings about the topic studied (Mason, 2022). The attempt to reveal participants' realities goes through the interchange of information and worldview for which the researcher is conscious to be biased by having their own ideas as a function of its understanding of the world (Toren, 2009).
<b>Approach</b>	Inductive	Understanding the value of something that is intangible, such as networking and collaboration, can lead to a diversity of findings which a deductive approach could limit by defining the results. An inductive approach starts from the unknown as there is a lack of literature on that specific field (Mason, 2022). The researcher's aim is to gain detailed and in-depth comments from participants (Mason, 2018).
	Qualitative dual case study	It allows focusing on one or more cases and to have a holistic perspective of the situation studied (Yin, 2014) as well as building a rich, contextual and in-depth investigation (Riddle & Thompson-Fawcett, 2019).

### **3.1.1 Research Paradigm**

This research is underpinned by interpretivism, which emphasises the understanding of meanings from people's perspectives through their experiences and everyday life (Saunders et al., 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Veal, 2011). It explores "how people engage in processes of constructing and reconstructing meaning through daily interactions" (Leavy, 2022, p. 142), suggesting that the social world is continuously re-made based on interaction and interpretation. This paradigm embraces the idea of multiple constructed realities, facilitating the explanation of phenomena from a more subjective position rather than an objective one (Mason, 2022; Jennings, 2010). This lens aligns with the thesis aim of understanding the views of different actors who are part of rural realities located in two different rural destinations with a diversity in culture and languages. In other words, collaboration among rural entrepreneurs has different configurations in different locations, as reality is socially constructed and varies by context (Saunders et al., 2012). Consequently, investigating multiple cases allows the incorporation of multiple perspectives, experiences and realities unique to each rural tourism destination. Interpreting the meanings shared by participants is crucial for grasping their worldview and addressing the research aim. Indeed, it suggests that the social world is governed by universal laws and truths (Jennings, 2010), thereby neglecting "how the complexity in the real world affects human behaviors" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.32).

Interpretivism encourages an interactive and cooperative relationship between the researcher and the subject of the research (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004) through the attempt to understand people's interpretations and meanings while interacting with participants (Leavy, 2022). To achieve this, interpretivists often seek to minimise the distance between themselves and participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), allowing for the collection of deeper and more comprehensive information. In particular, this is valid in contexts characterised by a variety and complexity of realities, such as the multifaced world of entrepreneurship (Leitch et al., 2009). As noted by Rehman and Alharthi (2016), the aim of interpretivist research is not to discover a universal truth, but to interpret the social phenomena with which subjects interact. Interpretivism treats the research context and its scenario as unique considering the given condition and individuals involved (Alharahshes & Pius, 2020). Of relevance to this thesis research, scholars have previously applied the interpretivist paradigm to explore stakeholders' perspectives on the role of trust in building network engagement and collaborative relationships in developing smart tourism initiatives (Johnson et al., 2023; Kelliher et al., 2018). This approach also emphasises the subjective meaning of the world, while also recognising that the nature of reality is in constant evolution (Kirby et al., 2023).

### **3.1.2 Epistemology**

The epistemological position addresses the questions of what constitutes knowledge (Giddings & Grant, 2006) and considers how the researcher aims to uncover knowledge to reveal reality (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The interpretivist paradigm posits a subjective position, rejecting the objective notion, and assumes that human beings cannot be separated from their knowledge (Veal, 2018; Hiller, 2016; Saunders et al., 2012). The epistemological standpoint applied in this research is inter-subjective, suggesting that reality emerges from the interchange of information and interactions between the researcher and participants (Hiller, 2016). When participants and the researcher interact, the researcher challenges his or her own personal beliefs and preconceived assumptions, while engaging with an open-minded orientation toward understanding the participants' meanings. It is important for the researcher to be aware of their role in the meaning-making process. Stake (1995) argues that subjectivity is an "essential element of the understanding" (p. 45) and the actions of individuals do not stem solely from the object or the subject, but from the interaction itself, which is foundational to the creation of knowledge (Piaget, 1983). Thus, each individual is shaped by a specific context that influences their vision, values and experiences. Throughout their development, individuals are defined by various situations, places, and everything that interacts with them. By aiming to understand the participants' subjective perceptions on tourism collaboration in the context of rural tourism development, the focus shifts to the relation space among the individuals, which fosters deeper understanding of the social world (Grundmann, 2018; Hiller, 2016).

### **3.1.3 Ontology**

Ontological questions relate to how the world is viewed and the underlying assumptions regarding the researcher's beliefs about reality (Giddings & Grant, 2006; Saunders et al., 2012). The present research stands on the relativist ontological assumption, which posits the existence of a multiplicity of realities (Mathison, 2004; Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019; Willis, 2007; Jennings, 2010). These realities are understood intersubjectively, taking into account differences in culture, circumstances, and time (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Saunders et al., 2012). According to this relativist assumption, "[individuals] develops subjective meaning of their experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow meanings into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). This ontological assumption considers multiple realities, all of which hold potential significance (Schwandt, 1994). The research context acknowledges a diversity of worldviews and

perspectives, as participants have different backgrounds, cultures, and languages, and fosters an understanding of individual meanings and contributions.

### **3.1.4 Qualitative study**

The qualitative approach allows for the investigation and exploration of participants' perspectives and personal experiences, by achieving an understanding of the significance people attach to their behaviour (Jennings, 2010). A qualitative research approach guides towards the in-depth look into the meaning, values and attitudes held by individuals (Carmichael & Morrison, 2011). The depth of understanding that qualitative research can offer regarding social phenomena enables the exploration of subjective experiences and the meanings individuals attribute to them, in accordance with the interpretivist paradigm. The qualitative study of tourism began to make a significant contribution in the 1970s, despite the prevailing influence of quantitative approaches before and after this period (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). Generally, qualitative studies aim to collect detailed and rich data about relatively few cases or subjects, as opposed to the typical quantitative approach, and wherein explanations and theory emerge from the examination of data (Veal, 2018).

Qualitative studies have significantly influenced the stakeholder collaboration literature; however there has been limited literature focused on the perspectives of entrepreneurs, particularly in a rural context (Huy, 2019). Qualitative research is based on the beliefs that individuals personally involved in specific leisure and tourism situations are best equipped to describe and articulate their experiences, feelings and worldviews in their own words (Veal, 2018, p. 279). Therefore, gathering perspectives from various individuals, including rural entrepreneurs and also tourism actors, enhances the understanding of the information collected, leading to a more in-depth grasp of the thesis topic. This research employs a multi-stakeholder approach, encouraging input from various stakeholders such as rural entrepreneurs as well as local tourism-related actors. Rural areas typically have fewer resources and inhabitants compared to urban centres, which means that rural entrepreneurs and local institutions play a crucial role in the development of rural tourism (Fontefrancesco et al., 2023; Petrescu, 2015).

### **3.1.5 Inductive and exploratory approach**

Swedberg (2020) states that the qualitative case study is often correlated with the exploratory approach, particularly in fields where knowledge is limited (Jennings, 2010). Recent examples of this approach can be observed in various tourism research topics, such as the impact of Airbnb on host communities, emerging food destinations, and education for sustainable tourism development

(Cheng et al., 2022; Park & Widyanta, 2022; Rezapouraghdam et al., 2022). The aim of the research was to explore rural entrepreneurs' points of view on tourism collaboration and how they are perceived to influence rural tourism development. An explorative study was well-suited for uncovering new insights in this area. In the context of this explorative study, an inductive approach provides the space to gather data on the subject under investigation (Veal, 2018). Researchers employing an inductive approach typically aim to gather detailed and in-depth information from participants (Mason, 2018), by hearing from different voices, opinions and views of life. The inductive approach enables the deconstruction of the researcher's beliefs, allowing for the comprehension of others' worldviews and incorporation of diverse knowledge, ultimately guiding the research towards the discovery of new findings.

Following an inductive research approach, Veal (2018) asserts that "data comes first and the explanation later" (p. 49). This perspective is applied in exploring tourism collaboration in a rural context considering the individual point of view of rural entrepreneurs. Unlike the deductive approach, which starts from a hypothesis and moves towards a confirmation or refutation, an inductive approach starts with a question and aims to answer it, or identify why it cannot be answered (Bernard, 2013). Finally, an exploratory study is applied to gather different participant perspectives and investigate their understandings of the themes discussed. The exploratory approach aims "to discover something new and interesting, by working your way through a research topic" (Swedberg, 2020, p.17). Therefore, by collecting in-depth data, a more nuanced and subjective understanding of the research topic can be developed.

### **3.2 Positioning the Researcher**

Positioning the researcher allows readers to understand how pre-existing concepts may have influenced various aspects of the research, including the formulation of research questions, the framework, and the methods of data collection and analysis (Wilson et al., 2022; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). In foregrounding myself as a researcher, and for just this part of the present research so as not to detract from the voices of my research participants, I will use the first-person singular. Growing up in Italy, my viewpoints have been shaped predominantly by Italian history and culture. Additionally, in recent years, I have spent time as an international student in both Canada and New Zealand, experiences that have further impacted my worldview. My work experience has also contributed to this perspective. I have worked as a commercial agent selling local products, as an assistant on a fruit farm, as a tourism researcher in Italy, New Zealand, and the Cook Islands, and as a

volunteer in a rural tourism network in my Italian hometown. These roles have fuelled my passion for rural tourism and my desire to amplify the voices of rural communities, particularly rural entrepreneurs. My background facilitated my interactions with rural entrepreneurs, who, upon learning about my experience, were more than willing to engage, communicate, and share their challenges. They appreciated that I could understand the struggles faced by the farmers and entrepreneurs. By gaining skills in topics such as administration, economic issues, and government support, I was able to discuss these subjects fluently.

Despite an affinity with the positions of my participants, Beeton (2005) has cautioned that researcher bias may arise when the researcher personally collects and analyses data. To minimise this risk, I deliberately chose research locations where I did not know anyone, ensuring they were entirely new to me. This approach helped prevent potential biases and issues associated with being a full "insider" (Tracy, 2019). Thus, I positioned myself as an "insider-outsider," which allowed me to acquire new knowledge while reducing the likelihood of imposing my own ideas, beliefs, and perceptions on the data (Berger, 2015). The insider-outsider position can be viewed as a continuum. In this context, being an insider means having lived the culture of the areas studied, while being an outsider refers to not personally knowing any of the participants. The insider role facilitated acceptance by participants, who, according to Dwyer and Buckle (2009), are often more inclined to share information at a deeper level. Conversely, the outsider role enabled me to detach from my preconceived notions, allowing for a more nuanced understanding and interpretation of the participants' realities.

### **3.3 Case Study**

This thesis adopted the case study approach discussed by Yin (2018). A case study is defined as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in depth and within its real-world context" (Yin, 2018, p.8). The case study approach is recognised as robust and effective, offering dual advantages. First, it facilitates a comprehensive understanding and critical analysis of the phenomenon under investigation: second it allows for theorisation and the creation of new knowledge (Sigala et al., 2022). The case study approach allows a focus on one or more cases and provides a holistic perspective of the situation being studied (Yin, 2014). Additionally, it enables a rich, contextual, and in-depth investigation (Riddle & Thompson-Fawcett, 2019). Case study research can fulfil both practical and theoretical aims and possesses a high degree of flexibility, allowing the researcher to adapt their strategies as the research progresses (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018; Veal, 2011). There are various adaptations of the basic case study approach, including intrinsic,

instrumental, and collective (Crowe et al., 2011) and explorative, explanatory, and descriptive modes (Chopard & Przybylski, 2021). For instance, the collective (or multiple) case study entails examining multiple cases, either simultaneously or sequentially, with the goal of replicating findings across different studies. In the context of this research, the objective was to study two rural destinations and derive new insights from each.

Gustafsson (2017) notes that multiple case studies can be costly and time-consuming, which may constrain researchers with limited time and budget to only include two cases. However, although a single case study yields a rich description, studying two cases enhances the benefits associated with both single and multiple case study methodologies. This enriches the research findings while keeping the costs manageable. It also increases the potential to identify similarities and differences between the two cases (Gustafsson, 2017; Yin, 2018) through qualitative content analysis, which interprets the perspectives of each participant based on the data collected. Although the primary aim of this research was not to directly compare the two case studies, but rather to glean insights from each individual case, meaningful discoveries may still emerge. Specifically, while Eisenhardt (1989; 2021) argues that the case study method is rooted in grounded theory and emphasises the benefits of conducting multiple case studies. In contrast, Yin contends that the lack of generalisability does not preclude the possibility of making significant contributions with case studies and advancing theoretical understanding (Piekkari & Welch, 2018; Ponelis, 2015). Although Eisenhardt's work on case study methods is influenced by Yin's studies on replication logic and Glaser and Strauss's iterative process of constant comparison between data and theory, Eisenhardt approaches reality in a more objective manner (Eisenhardt, 2021). According to Piekkari and Welch (2018), Eisenhardt tends to view case studies contextually without deeply probing the data, whereas Yin underscores the importance of depth and richness of data. Deep insights and richness of data align with the aim of this thesis to provide an in-depth investigation of participants' perspectives on tourism collaboration and its influence on rural tourism development.

The decision to select two international case studies was based on the goal of exploring two unique rural tourism destinations in developed countries – Matakana in New Zealand, and Pustertal in Italy. Both areas are located near urban cities, and tourism plays a critical role in the local development. Earlier scholars have examined two international case studies, highlighting their differences to analyse and investigate their unique features, rather than generalising results (Peirce & Ritchie, 2007; Reindrawati & Rhama, 2022; Panzer-Krause, 2022; Grandi et al., 2022; Aguglia et al., 2021). By utilising international case studies, the research aims to expand knowledge beyond a specific area,

incorporating another case study that provides additional data and increases the validity of the results. However, it is important to acknowledge that comparison of findings can be complicated due to the different contextual settings (Aguglia et al., 2021). Therefore, while recognising the distinct contexts of the two case studies chosen, the researcher aims to investigate knowledge in both rural areas. The findings will be presented for each case study, with the aim of generating insights from the unique characteristics of these regions. As mentioned previously, the present study did not primarily focus on a strict comparison; instead, it sought to explore the distinctiveness of each case studied.

An additional reason for employing a dual case study approach is that findings derived from multiple cases are generally considered more robust and reliable than those obtained from a single case (Yin, 2014). This approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding, as the inclusion of multiple perspectives allows for a richer and more holistic interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation. Each case study may uncover unique themes and nuances that could be overlooked in a single case study. The dual case study approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of individual cases, investigating their unique aspects through separate analyses and integrating the findings to build a broader understanding of the thesis. Moreover, the researcher's experience in both countries contributes to a deeper understanding of the social context, integrating an interpretivist paradigm and inter-subjective ontology. The case study approach can encompass the investigation of single or multiple cases, aiming to capture the complexity of the object of study (Stake, 1995) and serving as a basis for examining specific instances (Beeton, 2005). Case study research encourages diverse points of view from participants (Tellis, 1997) and generates a comprehensive description and analysis of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Although the case study approach has faced criticism in the past for being unreliable or too specific to allow for generalisation (Beeton, 2005), the researcher acknowledges this limitation. However, the advantage of delving deeper into a "study of the particular", as stated by Stake (2000, p. 438), is recognised. Since the research focuses on rural areas in proximity to large cities, the case study approach is well suited for studying specific cases and gaining a deeper understanding of the dynamics and perspectives of participants. It allows the opportunity to delve and explore participants' perspectives, which is aimed in order to understand tourism collaboration from their point of view. Moreover, each rural area has its own unique history, traditions, and culture.

By exploring two different locations, this thesis allows for the identification and investigation of common strengths and challenges of tourism collaborations among rural entrepreneurs. It also enables the researcher to explore the diverse experiences, backgrounds, and viewpoints of

participants, allowing a deeper understanding and interpretation of the information shared during interviews. As this research investigates in-depth the different rural entrepreneurs' point of view, it allows each participant to share their own worldview and experience on the specific topic proposed aligning with the interpretivist's position on the existence of multiple realities (Jennings, 2010). The two case studies are set in different locations and cultures, yet both rural areas are experiencing tourism development. This diversity enhances the understanding of the topic allowing to find common themes that emerge or differences from each case.

Finally, the selection of New Matakana (New Zealand) and Pustertal (Italy) as case study destinations was guided by a combination of experiential knowledge and strategic research considerations. The researcher's long-term residence in both countries provided deep cultural immersion and contextual understanding, enriching the analytical framework of the study. Matakana was chosen for its characteristics as a relatively young tourism destination, marked by a strong rural orientation and emerging influence in national tourism narratives. In contrast, Pustertal represents a mature tourism area with a deeply rooted historical and cultural tradition toward hospitality, making it ideal to grasp useful insights from each case study. Importantly, the researcher deliberately excluded her hometown in Italy from the study to mitigate potential biases. Familiarity with local stakeholders and pre-existing relationship could have influenced participant responses and compromised the data interpretation. This decision aligns with other qualitative research studies, where minimisation of researcher bias is essential to ensure credibility and validity (Lim, 2025).

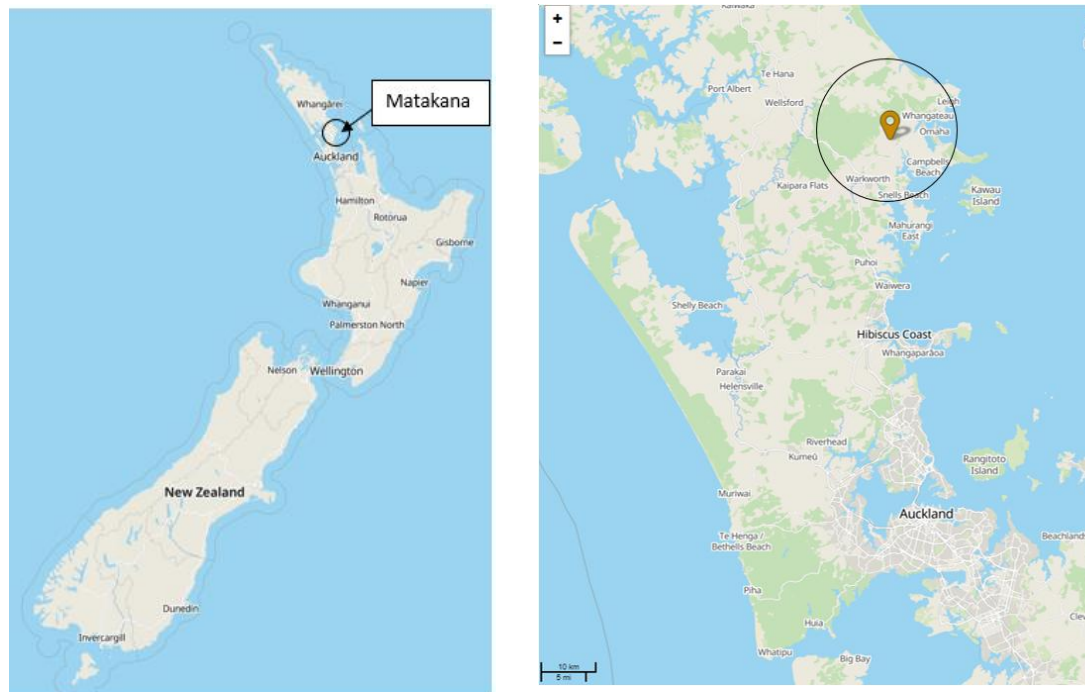
The chosen research paradigm supports an in-depth and multi-faceted investigation common in case studies, accommodating a relativist perspective that acknowledges multiple realities and meanings (Yin, 2014). This approach emphasises the importance of the interaction between the researcher and the subjects (Munhall, 2007) and highlights the interpretation of meanings that arise from this engagement. By adopting an epistemological position of inter-subjectivism, the research emphasises the interrelationships between participants and the researcher.

### 3.3.1 Case Study 1 – Matakana

Situated in the north of the Auckland region (New Zealand), Matakana is a rural area located in the Rodney ward of Auckland Council (see **Figure 3.1**). Its economy is primarily based on agriculture, tourism and forestry, with wineries, horticulture and dairy farms being the main businesses in the agriculture sector (Auckland Council, 2020).

**Figure 3.1**

*The Location of Case Study 1 – Matakana*



Note: Map created by the researcher using Land Information New Zealand data service. (website: <https://www.linz.govt.nz/> )

While there is not much public information on Matakana tourism, Auckland Unlimited’s report (2023b) provided some information on the Matakana Coast Destination Management plan (MCDM). Matakana Coast saw 1 million visitors in 2022, up slightly from the approximately 889,000 visitors it saw in 2020 when, like all tourism destinations, the area was strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the visitors to Matakana are domestic tourists, rather than international, with many typically weekend visitors coming from the Auckland urban area. This visitor profile means that the closure of international borders did not affect Matakana as much as other tourist destinations in New Zealand. The MCDM focuses mainly on community and industry perspectives rather than those of tourists and visitors. The MCDM outlines a plan and actions to develop tourism in the local area, including: (1) ensuring tourism growth is productive, sustainable and inclusive; (2) improving cohesion

and collaboration within the tourism industry; and (3) valuing and celebrating local cultures and identity. According to Stats NZ |Tatauranga Aotearoa, New Zealand's official data agency, 1530 people lived in Matakana and the surrounding area (Dome Valley) in 2018 (Stats NZ, n.d.). The population is expected to grow exponentially causing the community to overcome the problem of amenity migration. The 2018 Census also found that English is the most widely spoken language in Matakana and the Dome Valley, with only about 1% of the residents identifying as te reo Māori speakers (Stats NZ, n.d.). Research by the New Zealand Tourism Research Institute (NZTRI, 2011) in 2011 found the main characteristics that attract visitors to Matakana were the area's beaches and scenery. However, the local organic market also seemed to be a significant pull factor as tourism activity has increased significantly since the establishment of the Matakana Farmers' Market in 2006 (Semmens & Freeman, 2012).

The proximity to Auckland, New Zealand's largest city with a population of 1.6 million, makes Matakana easily reached by Aucklanders. With more than 50 stallholders (Matakana Village, n.d.), all of them being locals or producing very specific products, Matakana Farmers' Market is a unique 'foodie' destination and prides itself on its sustainable and zero-waste practices. The market has four philosophical pillars that guide its activity: to have direct access to growers and producers; to improve community well-being by social gathering and interaction; to encourage the growth of natural products; and to increase sustainability and environmental awareness.

### Figure 3.2

*Left: The Matakana Village Farmers' Market sign*

*Right: Matakana Village Farmers' Market promotes itself as a zero-waste market*



Photo credit: Researcher's own

The area is home to several markets, including the Sunday Market and the Night Market. The charming town of Matakana offers visitors a variety of attractions, such as vineyards, breweries, beaches, a regional park, craft shops, boutique stores, and country cafés. Outdoor activities like hiking, walking, swimming, and surfing are readily available, alongside indoor options like shopping and fine dining. Rural tourism plays a crucial role in the local economy, enhancing the quality of life for the community, local entrepreneurs, and visitors alike. Additionally, the presence of numerous potential rural entrepreneurs provides an interesting foundation for studying collaborative activities between them.

Matakana received Cittaslow certification in 2007, making it the first town in New Zealand to achieve this recognition. Cittaslow is a network of towns worldwide that aim to implement sustainable development practices (Semmens & Freeman, 2012; Abbate et al., 2015). As stated on Cittaslow's website (n.d.), the underlying philosophy is:

*“At present living and managing a Slowcity is just a particular way of carrying on an ordinary lifestyle rather than today's trends. Of course, this way is meant to be, less frantic, yielding and fast; but there is no doubt that it will be more human, environmentally correct and sensible for the present and future generations; the project will respect small realities in a more and more global connected world.”*

Matakana showcases a vibrant and exciting destination where many passionate local entrepreneurs are fostering a fertile environment for growth and opportunity. Matakana seems to be an incubator for the local economy while also embodying the principles of kaitiakitanga—guardianship of the environment and sustainable practices.

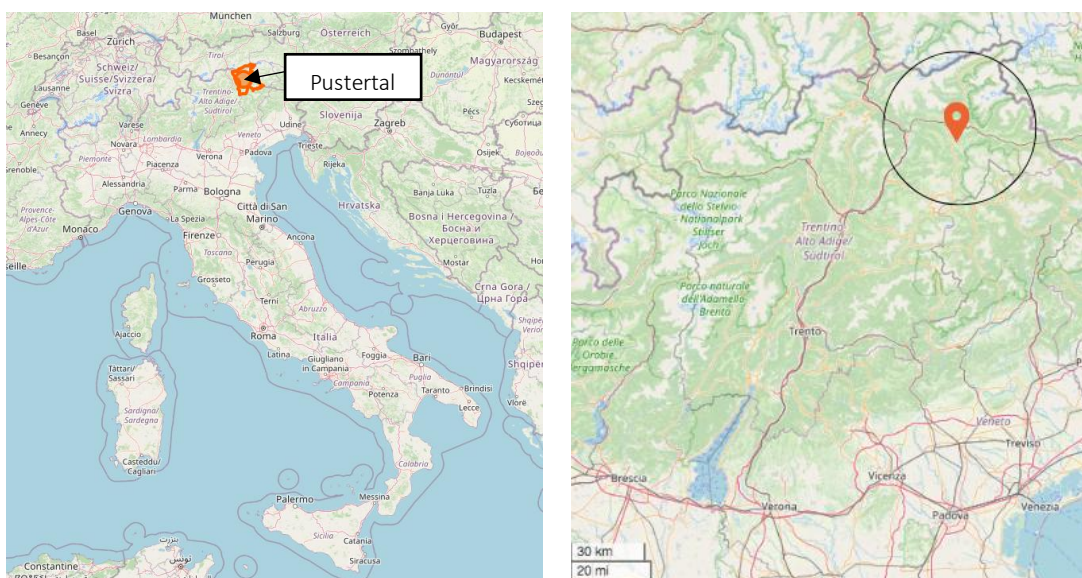
### **3.3.2 Case Study 2 – Pustertal (Val Pusteria)**

Pustertal is a location in the Alto Adige (South Tyrol) province in North-Eastern Italy, close to the Austrian border (see **Figure 3.3**). Pustertal is one of the most popular mountain tourism destinations in Europe (Brandano et al., 2018). In 2020, this territory, composed of four districts, was home to 83,747 inhabitants (ASTAT, 2021). The researcher mainly interviewed participants living in rural areas within the proximity of Brunico, the territory's main urban city. This area has significant agricultural and tourism sectors (Fischer, 2019). In 2022, South Tyrol registered 7.9 million arrivals and during the summer of 2022, Pustertal welcomed nearly 1.3 million visitors (from May to October) and recorded 6 million overnight stays (ASTAT, 2022). With an average visitor stay of 4.7 days, Pustertal ranked third out of eight administrative districts of South Tyrol in terms of length of stay. Furthermore, the area

saw the biggest increase in visitor numbers, compared with the same period in 2021 (ASTAT, 2022). Pustertal, like the whole of South Tyrol, is a trilingual area, with German, Italian and Ladin speakers, and has concrete measures to protect and preserve all three official languages (Eurac Research, 2023). In Pustertal, tourism is a key driver for the local economy, generating numerous jobs and substantial income, especially in peripheral areas (IRE, 2016).

**Figure 3.3**

*The Location of Case Study 1 – Pustertal*



Note: Map of Pustertal area case study created by the researcher using OpenStreetMap (website: <https://www.openstreetmap.org/relation/6537725#map=6/42.83/16.77>)

Pustertal is well-known for its mountains, the Dolomites, and most tourists are interested in the mountains, landscape, nature, food and wine activities, and agritourism; all these amenities play a key role in the tourism sector (Brandano et al., 2018).

**Figure 3.4**

*Farmers Market in Bruneck*



Photo credit: <https://www.bruneck.com/en/events/farmers-market-in-bruneck> 1965

Agriculture plays a crucial role in the economy of Pustertal and South Tyrol. Interestingly, nearly half of the farmers in this region supplement their farming activities with additional services, often related to tourism (IRE, 2016). A notable feature of tourism in this area is the use of brands, alongside strong networks associated with both territorial and product brands. These brands contribute to the development, promotion, and sustainability of rural areas. Examples of some brands in South Tyrol are given in **Figure 3.5**. Indeed, tourism in South Tyrol has been governed by the IDM (Innovation, Development and Marketing), which encompassed the role of the DMO agency, supporting the elaboration process and constitution of brand numbers 3 and 4 (Bachinger et al. 2022). The other two brands (numbers 1 and 2) shown in **Figure 3.5** are related to local products and to the type of accommodation in the so-called maso, a mountain farmhouse where tourists can experience an authentic way of local living.

**Figure 3.5**

*Examples of Brands in South Tyrol*

<p>1. Pur Südtirol</p>  <p>Credit: <a href="https://www.pursuedtirol.com/">https://www.pursuedtirol.com/</a></p>	<p>2. Gallo Rosso (Red Rooster)</p>  <p>Credit: <a href="https://www.gallorosso.it/">https://www.gallorosso.it/</a></p>	<p>3. Alto Adige Quality</p>  <p>Credit: <a href="https://www.qualita-altoadige.com/">https://www.qualita-altoadige.com/</a></p>	<p>4. Alto Adige – Südtirol</p>  <p>Credit: <a href="https://www.marchioombrello-altoadige.it/">https://www.marchioombrello-altoadige.it/</a></p>
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In a study conducted by Bachinger et al. (2022), tourism stakeholders in South Tyrol expressed a view that the regional brand (shown as number 4 in **Figure 3.5**) is vital for tourism development. Kofler and Marcher (2018) suggested that

“spatial, social and cultural proximity could reduce the risk of opportunistic behaviour and bring location advantages for SMEs thanks to the embeddedness in a denser network on the regional level determined by a common legislation and identification, and moreover, through the common umbrella brand ‘South Tyrol’” (p. 16)

This highlights the strong influence of the system which is guiding the development of tourism in the whole region. The use of brands has strengthened the South Tyrol destination and added value to peripheral areas throughout the territory. Brands not only serve as promotional tools but also facilitate intersectional governance, enhancing both bottom-up and top-down initiatives (Windegger et al., 2022).

### **3.3.3 Similarities and Differences Between the Two Case Studies**

When selecting the locations for the two case studies, the researcher considered several inclusion criteria to establish a common ground for the research:

- Rural location
- Presence of rural entrepreneurs

- Tourism destination
- Proximity to an urban city
- Familiarity with the context

The first three criteria relate to the aim of the research, which was to explore tourism collaboration perspectives from participants' points of view and its influence on rural development. The fourth criterion was included because proximity to an urban city enables positive exchanges, connections and tourism flows, in addition to creating business and entrepreneurship opportunities for locals (Ohe, 2020). As the research aimed at interviewing mainly rural entrepreneurs, locations where these were available and there was fertile ground for them was essential. The fifth criterion of familiarity with the context was considered important because the researcher aimed to have a certain level of location knowledge, allowing for deep interpretation and understanding of participants' experiences and meanings.

The two case studies represent locations with very different histories and cultures, and the languages spoken differ as well. While the research inclusion criteria ensured some similarities between the two case studies, the historical and cultural diversity of the locations provided a richer investigation of the research questions. Tourism is a relatively new sector in Matakana, having been catalysed by the establishment of its organic farmers' market in 2006 (Semmens & Freeman, 2012). In contrast, Pustertal has over a century of tourism history. The presence of multiple languages is also noteworthy. In Matakana, residents mainly speak English, while in Pustertal, the languages spoken are mainly German and Italian. Additionally, there is an autochthone and official language that a minority of people is speaking: Ladin. This language is spoken by residents who are living at the border of Pustertal, while te reo Māori is spoken by only 1% of the population in the Dome Valley-Matakana area (Stats NZ (n.d.)). The researcher's fluency in both Italian and English provides a potential advantage in this context. These multilingual settings not only enhanced the study by incorporating two populations with potentially different socially constructed realities, but they also challenge a straightforward understanding of points of view. However, challenges remain in terms of semantics and word usage; meanings are not always clear-cut. To avoid misinterpretations, further clarification was sought whenever the researcher felt it necessary.

Transportation to the tourism destination is another key difference between the two case studies. There is no public transport from Auckland to Matakana, so most visitors to the area arrive by private car. In contrast, visitors to Pustertal not only arrive by car but also by train and public or private buses. Additionally, the role of government and funding for the tourism sector varies between the two

locations. At the time of writing this thesis, Matakana was undergoing a reconstruction of the Auckland Tourism Plan, which involves reassessing funding for tourism (Auckland Unlimited 2023a). In contrast, Pustertal has received substantial financial support from the local government and private tourism associations have been established for many years to manage tourism development and marketing. It is worth noting the high influence of the agritourism sector in this area. A key driver of its growth is the fiscal support provided by the government, which can include a flat tax rate, subsidies and various fiscal benefits (Grillini et al., 2022; Brandano et al., 2018). Finally, the type of tourists to the two destinations is different. Matakana primarily attracts day visitors, while the average stay in Pustertal is almost five days, although this length of stay has decreasing compared to past decades (ASTAT, 2022).

The similarities and the differences between Matakana and Pustertal which have been discussed here are summarised in **Table 3.2**.

**Table 3.2**

*Similarities and Differences Between Matakana and Pustertal as Case Study Rural Tourism Destinations*

<b>Similarities</b>	
<b>Local economy</b>	Tourism plays a vital role in both local economies
<b>Proximity to an urban city</b>	Matakana – approximately 70 km from Auckland Pustertal – approximately 80km from Bozen
<b>Differences</b>	
<b>Natural amenities</b>	Matakana – beaches Pustertal – mountains
<b>Tourism history</b>	Matakana – only recently developed its tourism industry (Semmens & Freeman, 2012) Pustertal – has over a century of tourism history.
<b>Minority language</b>	Matakana – te reo Māori (although it is not widely spoken) Pustertal – Ladin
<b>Main language spoken</b>	Matakana – English Pustertal – German and Italian
<b>Transportation</b>	Matakana – car or tourist buses Pustertal – car, public buses, tourist buses, train

<b>Territorial brand</b>	Matakana – a single brand: Matakana Coast Tourism; no funds to develop a territorial brand  Pustertal – it is covered by numerous brands which came by building strong relationships and a networks between different stakeholders (for example, Ski area brand of Kronplatz, Alta Badia, Hochpustertal).
<b>Financial support</b>	Matakana – reconstruction of the Auckland Region Tourism Plan; very limited resources (both private and public)  Pustertal – private and public resources invested in the tourism sector. The autonomous regulations in place in the Province of Bolzano allows to retain and manage revenues from taxpayers and provides subsidies and tax breaks to farmers engaging in tourism activities
<b>Type of tourist</b>	Matakana – most visitors come just for the day  Pustertal – the average tourist stay is five days

This section has explained the rationale for selecting the two case studies. The next section will discuss the methods used for data collection to answer the research questions, as well as the process of data analysis.

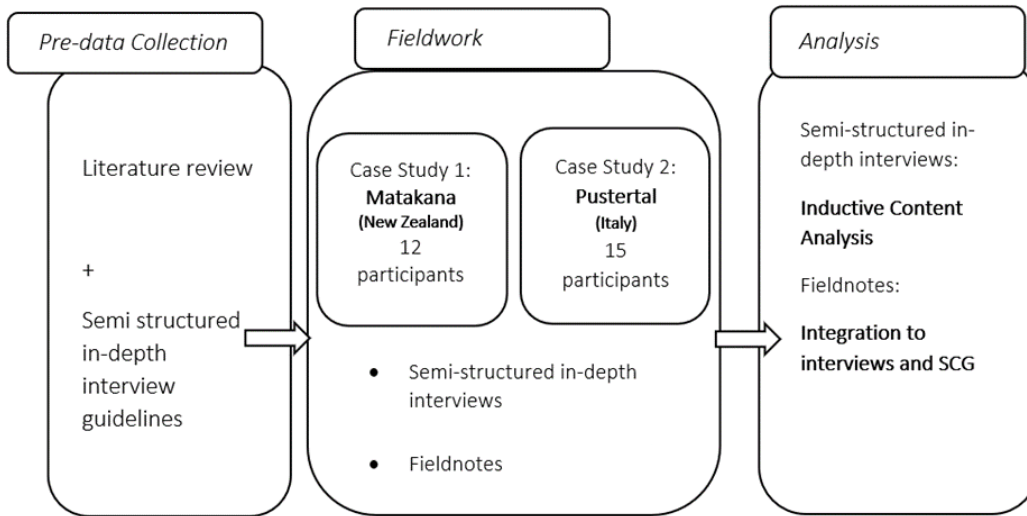
### 3.4 Data Collection

This thesis examines participants' perspectives on tourism collaboration and its impact on tourism development in the two rural areas. To explore participants' experiences and perceptions, the researcher employed semi-structured in-depth interviews (SSIDI) integrated with field notes. Data collection was done between May and June 2022 in Matakana and between September and October 2022 in Pustertal.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews are a well-established method for collecting qualitative data, often used by researchers to gain in-depth insights from a small number of participants (Liamputtong, 2020; Veal, 2018). Field notes were taken to provide a broader understanding of the context and setting of the study, serving as a valuable complement to the interview transcripts (Hunter & Suh, 2007; Savin-Baden & Howell, 2013). **Figure 3.6** illustrates the research methods and planning process involved in data collection.

Figure 3.6

Research Methods and Processes



Note: Researcher elaboration

### 3.4.1 Semi-structured in-depth Interviews

Among qualitative research methods, in-depth interviews are frequently used to gather information, particularly when exploring perceptions and meanings subjectively derived (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Liasidou et al., 2021; Yin, 2016; Bryman, 2016). As Liamputtong (2020) explains, conversation provides individuals with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of others, as well as their perspectives, experiences, and feelings. Semi-structured in-depth interviews position the researcher within an (inter-) subjective framework, allowing the exploration of participants' perspectives through discussions and open-ended questions (Veal, 2011). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen as the preferred method for primary data collection for two main reasons: first, they generate rich and detailed data; and second, they foster an understanding of participants' perceptions. Previous studies, such as Priyadarshini (2020), utilised this method with 22 food firms in Ireland to explore innovation. Similarly, Morretta et al. (2020) conducted interviews with 27 firms across two case studies to investigate how territorial capital can serve as a competitive advantage, while Liasidou et al. (2021) focused on understanding the perceptions of 20 residents regarding the impacts of tourism activities on the rural environment.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews facilitate an active role for the researcher, allowing them to listen to and engage in the conversation while maintaining focus on the research project, guided by an interview framework. Simultaneously, this format gives interviewees the freedom to express their thoughts and opinions (Brinkmann, 2022). Additionally, semi-structured in-depth interviews yield more detailed and extensive information compared to more rigid structured approaches (Pegg et al., 2012). This method aligns well with stakeholder theory in several ways. It explores the diversity of participants, allows them to express themselves and be listened to, and follows the natural flow of the interviewee's narrative, as seen in previous stakeholder studies (Burga & Rezana, 2016; Song et al., 2021). Consequently, the detailed information gathered enables a better interpretation of participants' comments, leading to a deeper understanding of their viewpoints and a more accurate identification of relevant data (Yin, 2014). Furthermore, face-to-face interviews were preferred because they enhance the opportunity to build rapport with participants (Wheeler, 2021). This method also offers flexibility, allowing for follow-up questions and the rearrangement of the chronological order of questions (Morris, 2015; Wheeler, 2021; Brinkmann, 2022; Bryman, 2016).

These justifications support the selection of semi-structured interviews as the primary research method. This is particularly relevant in the rural context, where some participants may have limited prior experience with interviews and might feel hesitant about engaging with academic researchers or reluctant to share their thoughts (Welch et al., 2002; Maryudi & Fisher, 2020). Once this preferred data collection method was determined, the semi-structured interview format was carefully crafted to address the research aim.

Twenty-seven semi-structured in-depth interviews – out of 52 invited - were conducted face-to-face with participants. Potential participants were contacted using addresses and contacts that were available for public audience, and no personal contacts have been used without consent. An email or hard copy of the invitation was given which briefly explains the project undertaken, why the candidate has been chosen, and what they should expect from the researcher (see **Appendix A**). An additional research information sheet was given to participants to read and sign the included consent form at the beginning of the interview (see **Appendix B** and **Appendix C**). This allowed participants to prepare themselves on the topic discussed and the area of investigation. The researcher organised the place and time for the interview in accordance with each participant's needs, being flexible as much as possible. The interviews were conducted in person, and usually at the participant's business. In some cases, the interviews were done in public spaces such as cafés. Specifically, there were 12 interviews for the Matakana case study and 15 for the Pustertal case study. The interviews lasted approximately

45 to 90 minutes and were held at times and locations arranged to suit each participant (Morris, 2015). The research reaches saturation point when data needed were collected and no new relevant information is obtained (Fusch et al., 2018; Rahimi & Kathooni, 2024). Moreover, Hennik and Kaiser (2022) state the sample size for saturation is between 9 and 17 interviews.

The interviews were conducted in the language preferred by the participants: either English (in the case of Case Study 1, with one exception of an Italian mother tongue) or Italian (for Case Study 2). Interviewing in the participant's preferred language allows for a richer vocabulary, enhancing the quality of meaning and interpretation of the data. Additionally, it provides participants with more comfort, leading to “higher quality results (and) increased value for the international scientific community with new insights” (Abfalter et al., 2021, p.474). Since English is the principal language for this research and to maintain consistency across translations, themes and quotes were translated from Italian into English after the analysis for Case Study 2 was completed. This translation process was then re-checked by the researcher to reduce errors and increase the accuracy of meaning interpretation from the original source (Yunus et al., 2022).

All interviews, except one, were audio-recorded with participant consent, and these recordings were later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Following transcription, the researcher listened to each interview again to ensure that no parts of the audio recordings were missed. Notes were also taken during the interviews, as nonverbal aspects—such as participants' feelings, atmosphere, and visual features—are valuable (Veal, 2011) and play an important role in interpreting some meanings. Such notes enhance data quality, provide context for rich analysis, and allow for early-stage tentative interpretations (Philippi & Lauderdale, 2018; Tracy, 2019). Combined with inductive research, which focuses on the unanticipated or unique aspects of phenomena (Corley et al., 2021), field notes are effective in interpreting meanings (Philippi & Lauderdale, 2018) and identifying unexpected themes or results. Moreover, to maintain participant confidentiality, each participant was assigned a unique data code. Data collection occurred at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, and all interviews and communications were conducted following the relevant health and safety rules and guidelines of both New Zealand and Italy at that time. The COVID-19 pandemic did, however, compromise some aspects of data collection. For instance, some participants who had initially expressed willingness to participate in the research had to cancel their appointments due to contracting COVID-19. Considering this, some contextual questions about COVID-19 were included in the interview guidelines to align with the thesis's aim, while avoiding prolonged discussion about the pandemic.

### *Interview guide*

Before collecting the data, the researcher created an interview guide (**Appendix D**) to efficiently organise the timing and content of the interviews, which is essential when conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews (Liamputtong P., 2020). The interview guide was a product of consultations with supervisors about selecting and choosing questions. The interview guideline acts like a checklist of topics to be discussed and ensures flexibility for the interviewer to cover all the topics – in whatever order or way – by the end of the interview (Veal, 2011; Bryman, 2016). It provides a structure for the interview, facilitating consistency and enhancing the reliability of collected data (Bernard, 2013).

Accordingly to Tracy (2019), SSIDI guidelines can be distinguished in opening questions which are the ice-breaker (Part 1), generative questions that allow for investigating and generating the framework (Parts 2, 4, 5), directive questions which are focused on specific areas of information (Part 3), and then closing questions that allow for tying together unfinished loose ends (Part 6). Each interview opened with ice-breaker questions (Part 1). These questions were used to understand the participant's background and connection to the rural place, to establish a relationship between the interviewee and interviewer (Tracy, 2019) and to investigate the tourism product and services under the research-based view lens. Part 2 of the interview concerned the local tourism industry and the uniqueness of the place from a business's point of view. The questions also sought to establish the connections between the participant's business and the local tourism industry (Tomay & Tuboly, 2022; Mottiar, 2016). Part 3 comprised a series of questions about tourism collaboration in the participant's local area. The questions were designed to gather information about the collaboration, which is the main part of the interview aimed at investigating participants' subjective points of view on tourism collaboration. Part 4 focused on policies and the role of local government and other entities on tourism development and economic support given to businesses. The purpose of adding these questions is to investigate the potential existence of collaboration financially supported by external entities, enabling a comprehensive context of the participant setting.

As data collection was taking place during and at the end of the COVID-19 global pandemic (May to October 2022), the researcher dedicated a specific section (Part 5) to discussing this very topical issue. Indeed, many of the participants wanted to talk about the effects that COVID19 restrictions had had on local tourism businesses, and to discuss and explain in detail the challenges and opportunities that had emerged with the pandemic – so much so that there was the risk that this single issue would take over the whole interview. It is also informed the role of networks in disruptive times of COVID-19. The

interviewer, therefore, needed to put a conscious time limit on the discussion of this topic. Furthermore, by placing this topic at the end of the directive questions part of the interview, the interview structure minimised the risk that the whole interview would be focused on and dominated by the impacts of COVID-19. Part 6 concluded the interview with questions that explored the future envisioned by the participants for their business. These closing questions sought to understand challenges and problems related to tourism in the future and to try to investigate if the planned actions were considering collaboration activity.

Interview guidelines help the interviewer direct questions to participants, and utilising open-ended questions allows for the unveiling of their subjective perspectives. This process enables the exploration of multiple realities and emphasises intersubjective viewpoints, fostering rapport between the researcher and participant (Jennings, 2010). The interview guideline serves as a checklist of topics to be discussed, ensuring flexibility for the interviewer to address all topics in whatever order or manner by the end of the interview (Veal, 2011; Bryman, 2016). It provides a structured format that enhances the consistency and reliability of the collected data (Bernard, 2013). A pilot test with a local individual was conducted, allowing for the refinement of some questions (Majid et al., 2017). Since a semi-structured interview format was chosen, the researcher had the flexibility to adapt the order of questions and ask follow-up queries as needed while keeping the overall topics consistent throughout the data collection period. These two features—having a structured interview guideline and utilising a semi-structured interview format—facilitated smoother data collection and yielded profound, informative data.

### **3.4.2 Field Notes**

Notes were taken during the interviews and were used as part of the data analysis. Field notes allow for a broader understanding of the context and setting of the study (Hunter & Suh, 2007). During data collection, these notes were recorded in diaries, with each interview separated accordingly. Different coloured highlighters and shapes were employed to distinguish important information and types of notes, providing a richer and more thorough description of the study context. This approach also included non-textual and auditory information to interpret participant meanings (Philippi & Lauderdale, 2018). An example of this is emotional attachment when discussing some specific topic. Incorporating notes is legitimate, as they facilitate a specific and in-depth investigation that can lead to the emergence of themes and theories (Eisenhardt, 1989). For instance, participants speaking the local language or some elements such as pictures representative of their attachment to the rural area

were noted. Additional notes included observations about brochures at participants' premises that promoted other businesses and comments from rural entrepreneurs suggesting visits to those businesses. Moreover, during the interviews, the researcher noted the passion and emotions displayed by participants when discussing particular subjects. Interpreting the data can benefit from these notes, as they help understand the entrepreneurs' histories—not only as motivation for ongoing company activities but also as elements reflecting their values, lifestyle, and commitment to sustainability. During the analysis, field notes were integrated into two databases: interviews and SCG. This integration helped familiarise the researcher with the data and increased awareness of potential themes, patterns, or outliers (Ponelis, 2015).

### ***3.4.3 Scenario Cards Game***

The Scenario Cards Game (SCG) serves as an elicitation tool to deepening the understanding on specific topics during in-depth interviews with participants. SCG is based on the concept of card sorting, where participants are asked to rank cards on topics derived from scholarly literature. The aim is to gather personal viewpoints, foster a deeper understanding, and support authentic storytelling (Dube, 2023; Brent et al., 2021). As a hybrid card-sorting method, the SCG facilitates collaborative knowledge-building between researchers and participants (Alshehri et al., 2020). Using SCG during an in-depth interview elicits deep reflection, enhances rapport between the researcher and participant, and facilitates an ease and enjoyable experience (Conrad & Tucker, 2019). The rationale for developing and using the scenario card game lies on its focus on interviewees, as sorting cards encourages and prompts reflections and the sharing of personal stories related to specific topics, thereby fostering a relaxed and engaging atmosphere for participants (Brent et al., 2021). Previous studies have employed card sorting during interviews in various fields, including decision-making processes (Brent et al., 2021), community-engaged research (Meagher et al., 2024), management (Töppig & Moital, 2020) and information technology (Schmettow & Sommer, 2016). Grounded in interpretivist paradigms, card sorting tool has been used to generate and analyse data in the educational field as well (Dube, 2023). Furthermore, Conrad and Tucker (2019) emphasise the advantages of integrating card-sorting tool with semi-structured interviews such as additional follow-up questions and achieving better understanding and interpretation of participants experiences. Moreover, Mammen et al. (2016) also note that this SCG contributes to the development of a shared terminology between researchers and participants, enhancing comprehension of the research topic.

In this current thesis, a defined set of cards was employed and, to each participant was provided 12 cards, including three blank ones and nine cards containing different keywords. To ensure relevance, the keywords on the cards were selected from literature focused on collaborative creation value (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012), with the aim of gathering information on collaborative approaches and tourism destination pull factors (Martini, 2017), aiming to gather related information on tourism topics. Employing card sorting tools with images can increase the level of complexity in understanding and interpreting and, misunderstandings are less likely to occur with black-and-white text with known meanings (Page et al., 2022). Consequently, the cards used in the interviews for this research were crafted from white cardstock with black lettering. Participants were given blank cards, allowing them to introduce additional topics, and were invited to share the reasoning behind their choices, as suggested by previous researchers (Brent et al., 2021). Examples of the cards used to collect data in Matakana, along with detailed descriptions, are illustrated in **Appendix E** and **Appendix F**. These cards were introduced to participants when the conversation was covering inquiries related to possible tourism development goals and challenges for their rural tourism. The cards were probing which elements would they consider to be the most and least important and classify them. The cards were presented without any prior explanation or contextual information, allowing participants to interpret them freely based on their own perspectives. The same set of keywords was used across both case studies – Matakana and Pustertal – to maintain consistency. In the Pustertal case study, the cards were translated into Italian. However, the researcher observed that certain keywords carried different connotation depending on the cultural and linguistic context of the participants. In instances where the interpretation deviated significantly from the intended meaning, the researcher provided additional clarification to ensure conceptual alignment.

While participants were arranging the cards, they were commenting and explaining their choices by expressing their thoughts and proactively engage on themes and elements that were being discussed (Brent et al., 2021). To avoid possible misunderstandings related to keywords, the researcher carefully listened to participants' interpretations and provided clarification as needed, employing probing strategies for further explanation with what and why questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

## **Cards design**

The keywords selected from the literature considers various themes that address different dimensions in the tourism development framework. On one side there are the pull factors of a tourism destination from Martini (2017):

- Attractions
- Information and Welcoming
- Accessibility
- Territorial Brand

From the other side there are the values from the Seitanidi and Austin's (2012) collaborative value creation framework:

- Innovation
- Sharing resources and collaborating
- Reputation and visibility
- Financial support
- Improving competencies

The use of keywords from Seitanidi and Austin's collaborative value creation framework allows to focus on the relevance of tourism collaboration, and these themes captures the dimensions of collaborative processes which can be essential for rural tourism development. While the pull factors are specifically for the demand-side and this can make the researcher understand the connection between collaborative processes with the market outcomes, aiming to understand how collaboration emphasises the tourism development.

### ***3.4.4 Participants***

Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling methods. The purposive sampling strategy aimed to select individuals who could provide rich and relevant information (Kelly, 2010; Patton, 2002). This approach allowed for the identification of key stakeholders while utilising limited research resources effectively. The focus was not on generalising results but rather on gaining in-depth insights (Palinkas et al., 2015; Etikan, 2016). Interviewees included accommodation, restaurant, and tourism activity providers, a variety of local producers, and Destination Management Organisations (DMOs). This selection process was guided by stakeholder theory, which emphasises the importance of including diverse representations of the tourism

offerings in rural areas (Song et al., 2021). Information about potential participants was collected by scouting in the area, talking to tourism information offices and public entities and by web auditing. The researcher primarily contacted potential participants via email and by personally engaging with them at local markets and shops.

The objective was to reach individuals closely connected, inspired by the resource-based view, to the rural area and who provide local products and services to visitors and tourists. The following inclusion criteria were applied in the sampling process:

- Must be employed in a tourism-related business
- For-profit organisation

The following **Table 3.3** presents the participants position in Matakana and Pustertal.

**Table 3.3** *Research Participants*

<b>Participants in Matakana</b>	<b>role/category</b>
<i>Rural Entrepreneurs tourism related</i>	Picnic services
	Outdoors tour provider
	Honey producer
	Self-service flower pick-up provider
	Retired rural tourism developer
	Chocolate and local products shop
	Olive oil producer
	Farm to table restaurant
	Local gelato shop
	Vineyard and art expositor
<i>Management and Marketing tourism organisations</i>	Manager at the Destination Management Organisation
	Employer at the Destination Management Organisation

<b>Participants in Pustertal</b>	<b>Position</b>
<i>Rural Entrepreneurs Tourism related</i>	Mountain farm hosting tourists - agritourism
	Climbing service provider
	Restaurant owner
	Bike hire service
	Accommodation provider
	Maso - agritourism
	Restaurant owner
	Agritourism
	Local butcher
	Herbal local shop
	Albergo diffuso 'Scattered Hotel'
Herbal and course provider	
<i>Management and Marketing tourism organisations</i>	Manager - Destination Management Organisation
	Destination Management employer
	Marketing operator

Participants who took part of the research were for the majority all business owner, beside for the exception of the management and marketing tourism organisations interviewees and the bike hire service in Pustertal. Of particular attention, the farming sector appears to be more present in Pustertal, where three participants provide agritourism products. It is worth to note, that at the time of the data collection, Matakana did not appear to have agritourism activity in place.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

#### **3.5.1 Semi-structured In-depth Interviews**

Content analysis has been increasingly used in tourism studies which apply a qualitative approach (Camprubí & Coromina, 2016). The data was analysed applying qualitative content analysis, which is “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or pattern” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Specifically, qualitative content analysis (QCA) investigates meanings, themes, and patterns that may be overt or hidden in a given text. It goes beyond simple word counts and objective content extraction, allowing researchers to gain a subjective yet scientific understanding of social

reality (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). As such, it has alignment with the interpretivist paradigm that seeks to interpret the subjective multiple realities of participants. The analysis process was inspired by the contextual framework described by Bengtsson (2016) for analysing the data from the semi-structured in-depth interviews and field notes. The process of analysis and interpretation follows four stages: decontextualisation, recontextualisation, categorisation and compilation.

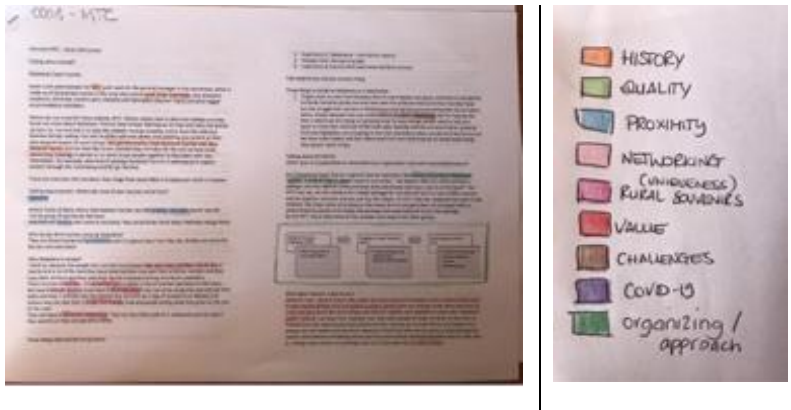
### **3.5.1.1 Decontextualisation – Open Coding**

The first stage involves the researcher familiarising themselves with the data. This process includes *decontextualisation*, during which the researcher transcribes the audio recordings and checks the quality of the data multiple times against the original recordings. The goal is to achieve detailed and complete interviews with a high level of accuracy and to identify initial key aspects or meaning units. Williams and Moser (2019) refer to this process as "*open coding*". By listening the interviews multiple times, the researcher can avoid errors and ensure accurate representation.

Content analysis requires interpretation by the researcher (Graneheim et al., 2017) and this phase focuses on decomposing, examining, comparing and conceptualising data in order to identify phenomena, categories or concepts (Song et al., 2021). To facilitate this, the researcher prints out the interviews and uses different colours to highlight emerging themes, which involves an "interpretative act" (p.5, Saldaña, 2016). This approach helps the researcher develop a clearer understanding of the main topics and insights provided by the participants. While reviewing the entire transcripts, the researcher begins to highlight specific sections, taking notes and integrating insights gathered during data collection, thus starting the preliminary coding phase. **Figure 3.7** provides an example of a printed interview and the resulting 'meaning units' created.

### **Figure 3.7**

*Example of a Preliminary Draft Coding*



Credit: Researcher photos

After applying this strategy and creating a coding scheme on a sample of text, the following step was to validate the coding consistency. In doing so, the researcher rechecked and revised the codes and text until achieving sufficient consistency (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). Then, data were transferred to computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), including interview transcripts and SCG. The specific software used to support the data analysis is NVivo, which is one of the widely used CAQDAS packages and enables the analysis of primary data from the interview transcripts integrated with field notes taken during the interviews (Veal, 2018). From a general idea of unit meanings that covered a sample of interviews, the process continued for all the transcripts. **Table 3.4** presents the phase of open coding for specific and defined codes.

**Table 3.4**

*Example of Open Coding Made by the Researcher*

Open Coding
Perspective of large businesses
Information from Auckland Tourism and NZ Tourism
Networking meetings
Tourists from Auckland (during COVID-19)
International tourists
Close and easy drive from Auckland (proximity)
Coming for a day (visitors)
Family oriented business
Business owner owns and lives there
Beaches, coastal land and nature

Jackson and Bazeley (2019) state that “the goal is to capture the finer nuances of meaning lying within the texts, coding a long enough passage in each instance to provide sufficient context without clouding the integrity of the coded passage by inclusion of text with a different meaning” (p.72).

**3.5.1.2 Recontextualisation – Axial Coding**

The second stage, known as the recontextualization of content, acts as a filter for selecting relevant data. Once relevant content is identified, themes are refined and aligned through an axial coding process. The axial coding “further refines, aligns and categorises the themes” (Williams & Moser, 2019, p.50). Its purpose is to identify and consolidate themes and categories by examining regular and recurring patterns, as well as clarifying the connections and structures of subcategories (Mobily & Morris, 2018; Mende, 2022). During this phase, the researcher distanced themselves from deep involvement with the data, allowing less significant information to be set aside (Bengtsson, 2016). While working on each typed transcript, codes were generated, ranging from frequent occurrences to less common or outlier instances. The axial coding process resulted in 197 codes for Case Study 1 (**Appendix G**) and 182 codes for Case Study 2 (**Appendix H**). **Table 3.5** illustrates an example of the transition from open coding to axial coding, showing how specific codes merge into broader themes. The patterns of codes and meaning units guide the creation of axial codes, which construct the overarching themes.

**Table 3.5**

*Example of Processing Open Coding Towards Axial Coding Done by the Researcher*

Open Coding	Axial Coding
Perspective of large businesses	Vision
Information from Auckland Tourism and NZ Tourism	Top-down approach
Networking meetings (info about new packages from Auckland Tourism to support vendors)	Networking
Tourists from Auckland (during COVID-19)	Proximity
International tourists But mainly from Auckland (Pre-COVID-19)	Proximity
Close and easy drive from Auckland	Accessibility

Coming for a day (visitors)	Time spent in the destination
Family-oriented business	Uniqueness
Business owner owns and lives there	Uniqueness + Long term vision (for family)
Beaches, coastal land and nature	Uniqueness + Environment
Island climate	Uniqueness + Environment
Fruit stalls along the road	Uniqueness

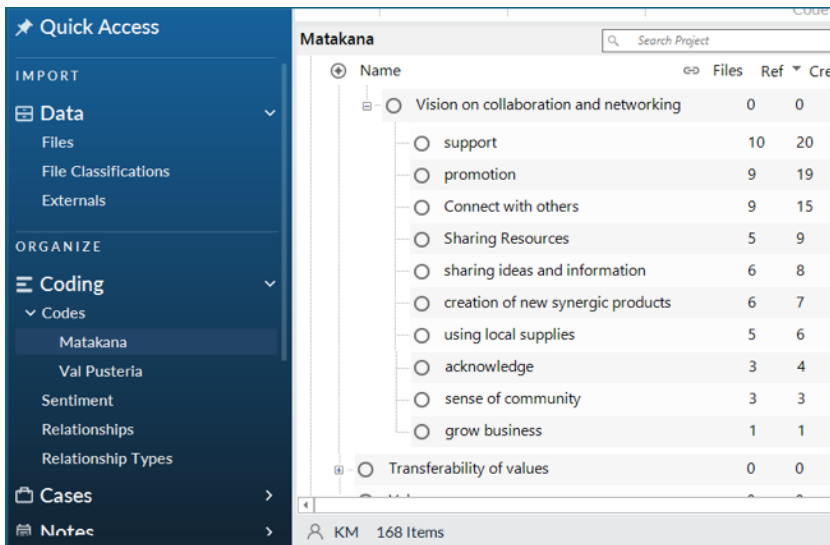
### 3.5.1.3 Categorisation – Selective Coding

The third stage is *categorising* the data into homogenous groups, through *selective coding*. During this coding process, the researcher plays a crucial role in transforming raw data into meaningful outputs. By refining the data and focusing on the main themes, theories and interpretations can be developed (Williams & Moser, 2019). After detaching from the data, allowing some time off, while focusing on other parts of the research, a selective procedure was established to choose and refine the themes. In the final stages, tools such as word frequency clouds and cluster analysis in NVivo were utilized to refine the procedure. For instance, the word frequency cloud helped to identify the most used words, which can be useful for discovering any overlooked themes or specific topics and offering alternative perspectives. However, aside from confirming the visual information on themes already identified, no new specific themes emerged.

Running queries enable having a different perspective of the data. *Cluster analysis* can benefit the research by drafting ideas on the most used words and how they are connected. Indeed, cluster analysis represents the grouping of data into clusters or subsets. This phase has facilitated the interpretation of the data. For example, after reviewing the interviews and corresponding codes, it became apparent that the term ‘sustainably’ was associated with ‘money’, indicating an economic direction. This observation supported the decision to create a code called ‘business sustainability’. Through reviewing and refining the codes, selective codes were developed, allowing for the organisation of a mind map and progression to the next phase.

### Figure 3.8

*Example of Selecting Coding*



Credit: Screenshot from NVivo on researcher's project

### 3.5.1.4 Compilation

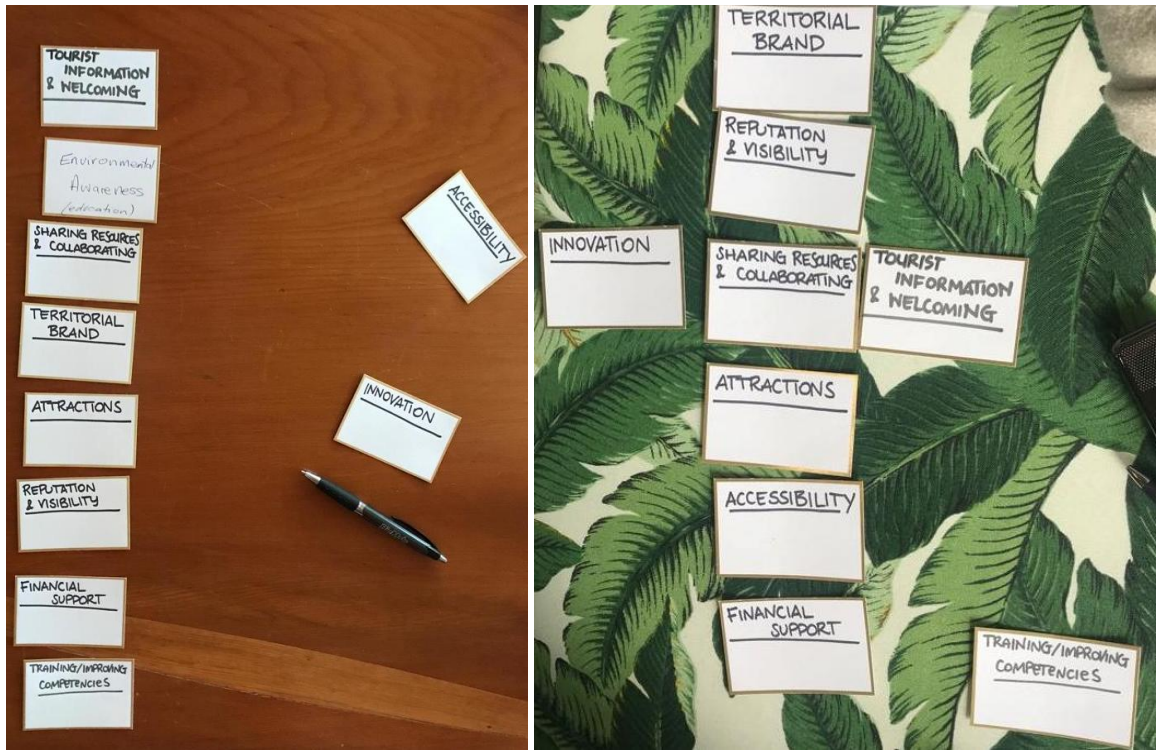
In the final stage, *compilation*, the researcher interprets the data and emergent themes and draws conclusions (Bengtsson, 2016). To begin the final step of the analysis, the researcher created mind maps for both case studies enabling the visualisation and communication of the ideas that have emerged and the inter-relationships among the data. The first one (**Appendix I**) sees Case Study 1 of Matakana, while the second one (**Appendix L**) is Case Study 2 of Pustertal. From these maps, the researcher began to compare the overarching themes and key insights from both cases, identifying commonalities and unique aspects, while interpreting and contextualising the findings. The final step involved stepping back from the specific details to visualise the overall picture from a broader perspective. The researcher accomplished this by writing the themes and their connections on a whiteboard and considering all the data as a cohesive whole.

### 3.5.2 Scenario Cards Game (SCG) analysis

Following each interviews, picture of the sorted cards were taken and filed into a spreadsheet. The participants mostly placed cards in numerical order, from 9 to 1, where 9 is considered the most important and 1 least important. While the majority of participants order the cards from most important to least important, some have placed multiple cards in the same layer (**Figure 3.9**).

**Figure 3.9**

Example of two participants from Matakana case study in the process of sorting cards.



Credit: Researcher's pictures

Although cards were (potentially) ordered from 9 to 1, it could not be assumed that the ordering was linear. In order to respect the participant's decision and without interfering with the placement of their cards, the analysis of the SCG was inspired by Simos' procedure (Figueira & Roy, 2002). This approach helps addressing certain challenges in analysing the dataset, such as calculating the importance of cards ranked within the same layer (Aşiloğlu & Memlük, 2017). This method allowed for a classification and counting of the cards (Figueira & Roy, 2002). Simos' procedure suggests giving each card a position, in this case from most important to least important a value from 9 to 1 (**Appendix M**). Consequently, it was then calculated the non-normalised weights and determined the normalised weights. The non-normalised weight of each rank is calculated by dividing the sum of positions within that rank, by the total number of participants. Next, in order to normalise the non-normalised weights, they are divided by the total sum of values in each rank, excluding the white cards. The resulting numbers are then rounded off to the lower or higher nearest integer value (Siskos and Tsotsolas, 2015, p.544).

### **3.6 Research Ethics**

The definition of ethics used by Collis and Hussey (2014) is “the moral values or principles that form the basis of a code of conduct” (p.30). As this research required the involvement of human participants, it was necessary to address ethical considerations and guidelines have been used in order to avoid ethical issues (Drolet et al., 2023). Prior to the start of data collection, the researcher sought the guidance of the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) through various meetings to achieve the approval from Auckland University of Technology.

Ethical approval in New Zealand is based on the Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi), which complies with the key principles of partnership, participation, and protection. In order to achieve the ethics approval, an application needs to be presented. The submission of a detailed application to AUTEC resulted in the approval being granted on 9 February 2022 (**Appendix N**). Important to note, that all participants were informed of the possibility to withdraw at any time and participation would have been voluntary. All participants received a participant information sheet and signed it or verbally agreed to taking part in the research.

### **3.7 Summary**

This chapter has provided an overview of the paradigm that underpins this current research, and the methods applied to it. It began by explaining the epistemological, ontological and methodological framework. The research applied the interpretivism paradigm, with the ontological relativist assumption and intersubjective epistemology. The approach inductive and exploratory approach, qualitative dual case study.

The chapter explains the researcher position, and then it describes both cases Matakana and Pustertal. It follows the explanations of the data collection methods used, such as semi-structured in-depth interviews, fieldnotes and Scenario Cards Game. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were planned with an interview guide in order to follow a similar script in each interview, which specific section dedicated to the research aims and context of the research. In total, 27 participants took part to these face-to-face interviews, comprising 12 participants in Matakana and 15 participants in Pustertal. A section about data analysis is then described, with each process followed, starting from the decontextualization, recontextualization, categorisation and compilation. It continues with the explanation of SCG data analysis. The chapter concludes with the acknowledgment of the research ethics being granted.

# CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the research findings and provides an overview of the themes that emerged during the data analysis. The first section describes the tourism collaboration participants' perspectives. Five main themes emerged and these are support, sharing, synergies, promotion and connection. The chapter describes the challenges encountered in creating or developing tourism collaboration, as well as suggestions for facilitating the process and identifying opportunities in order to increase collaborative approaches. Then, the chapter focuses on rural entrepreneurs' contribution to rural areas under a collaborative lens, highlighting elements such as environmental stewardship, safeguard of authenticity, traditional knowledge transmission, human relations and reputation enhancement. Each theme generally presents the two case study findings beginning with case study 1 first (Matakana) followed by case study 2 (Pustertal). Finally, a specific session is dedicated to the analysis of cards ranked by the participants during the data collection. This additional set of information provides further insights on participants' perceptions regarding rural tourism development.

## 4.1 Tourism Collaboration Participants Perspectives

### 4.1.1 Sharing

#### *Matakana Case Study*

The theme of **sharing** was found to be at the top ranking on the Scenario Card Game. It was highlighted as the meaning and value of networking and collaboration activity in terms of *“putting some form of resources into a pot that everyone can benefit from”* or *“sharing resources [...], sharing knowledge”*. From this specific perspective of sharing with others, one could suggest that this altruistic or mutual benefit description of networking also reflects the notion of giving. Specifically, as described by a participant, *“there is a give and take of resources when necessary”* (NZ01).

Participants during the semi-structured in-depth interviews (11 out of 15) described sharing not only in terms of practical resources like tools, machinery, and logistics solutions but also at a deeper level involving human support and knowledge. This level of emotional connection includes helping each other with business struggles and sharing information on sustainable improvement. The following quotes illustrate how collaborating with others also means sharing challenges faced by businesses:

*“Even just someone to vent to (release your frustrations about running a business). The politically correct way of saying it would be to discuss your problems, the pros and cons of business. That's really important and I do that now with local operators but you've gotta have that rapport. Confronting and sharing the struggle or even open up understanding that other are struggling as well sometimes.” (NZ03)*

This participant expressed vulnerability, acknowledging the importance of support gained from sharing experiences. The following participant also shared:

*“It feels good to know that you are not the only one that struggles. She (referring to other entrepreneur) is the one that sometimes I call to ask her advice, sometimes I call her and ask, “are you finding this really hard?” and she is like yes. Ah okay good. It feels good to know that you are not the only one that struggle.” (NZ09)*

### ***Pustertal Case Study***

Many participants (10 out of 15) identified the sharing function when discussing collaboration and networking. They expressed their understanding of collaboration through comments like, *“it pools together resources”, “at some point they (other entrepreneurs) realised that they had no other solution than to get together”, “with these collaborations we were able to set up the stands and buy what we need”, “We exchange information” and “In general, we exchange ideas and information”.*

When discussing the collaboration with each other, a participant stated:

*“A network with other entrepreneurs is important to understand which packaging is the most sustainable, price/quality comparison, understand which is the best feed, for questions about diseases or if there is something” (ITA10)*

It highlights the functional role of collaboration in sharing information and exchanging ideas on various topics, ranging from production methods to identifying the best sustainable practices for selling and promoting products.

In this case study, the emphasis is on sharing information and resources, which is particularly beneficial for entrepreneurs living in rural areas. As it is generally understood, rural areas often have fewer resources and less access to services and assets compared to urban areas. Participants mentioned, *“we should do things together, and it's also easier to share costs and help each other”.*

### 4.1.2 Support

In the Matakana Case Study, the **support** notion out of the established connection is often associated to “collective support”, “helping each other”, “reciprocal support”, “they will help you out, no matter what”, “priorities [...] industry collaboration”. Through such wording, the common theme expressed by participants (10 out of 12) was the role of support, which enables the sustaining of the business economy. This helps businesses to overcome difficulties, strengthen one another, support the local economy, and retain people in the local workforce. The following quote summarises the idea of support and collaboration:

*“Possibility of having like-minded businesses /people around you that you can tap into when you need it or when you reach out for help or push something forward and do something in common.” (NZ07)*

In Pustertal, participants (9 out of 15) considered collaboration as a key element of support and value creation. The following quotes summarise this theme:

*“Supporting each other between entrepreneurs helps and creates value! If I have all the rooms booked, I ask other entrepreneurs who rent if they have rooms available. This way a cycle is triggered. When they have lot of demand they call me, and I'm happy!” (ITA07)*

A sense of mutual benefit emerged among the entrepreneurs, highlighting a notion of giving and receiving. More than half of the participants (9 out of 15) mentioned that collaboration is centred on support and value creation, where mutual benefits provide advantages. This can create a snowball effect, encouraging collaboration and shared benefits. From a destination management perspective, the notion of collaborating is about getting people to work together:

*“If we can work together, we can do much better.” (ITA15)*

In challenging times, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for collaboration became evident as participants found support within their network. One participant stated:

*“Having a network is important, especially in difficult times, we support each other, and the network grows more and more. During COVID-19 we helped each other, but in general, we exchange ideas and information.” (ITA14)*

However, it is important to recognise that not everyone is willing to collaborate or help one another. Some expressed this through comments like *“not always with everyone”* and *“locals have a certain level of selfishness”*. Particularly, this participant emphasises the fact that:

*“Outside the tourism sector, we help each other, but in the tourism sector everyone does their own” (ITA03)*

Additionally, participant (ITA07) noted that there are more bottom-up collaborations than top-down ones, given the significant influence that Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) have in Pustertal. They mentioned:

*“They are more bottom-up collaborations between them (referring to entrepreneurs), rather than the tourism office saying, “you have to collaborate”. (ITA07)*

### **4.1.3 Synergies**

An emerging aspect of collaboration involves the creation of **synergistic products**. By developing products in conjunction with other entrepreneurs—not only promoting each other but also strengthening local identities—participants (6 out of 12) highlighted the importance of being part of an active network. The following quote reflects a participant's perspective on creating a sense of belonging to the community through synergistic products:

*“(Creating a product together) It was a way to celebrate the region where we are and then to bring something that is going to have an identity that's unique in Matakana.” (NZ07)*

An example of that is illustrated in Figure 4.1 that depicts a box of chocolate made using local ingredients from other local businesses. This was born from the idea of creating a product that would represent the destination. Participant NZ07 provided an explanation of the benefits of collaboration and synergic effort made by entrepreneurs when producing this type of product together:

*“You reach out to their clientele who probably might not know you directly but by collaborating with them then you expand right away your market by just reaching out to all these people. If you bring two brands together, you bring two creatives together and might come up with something really great that you might not thought of by yourself. For example, taste of Matakana was really driven by us, we made a good product also because they (referring to other entrepreneurs) provide a really good product so the quality of the final product depends also on them doing an excellent work.” (NZ07)*

Figure 4.1

An example of local product made by using local supplies.

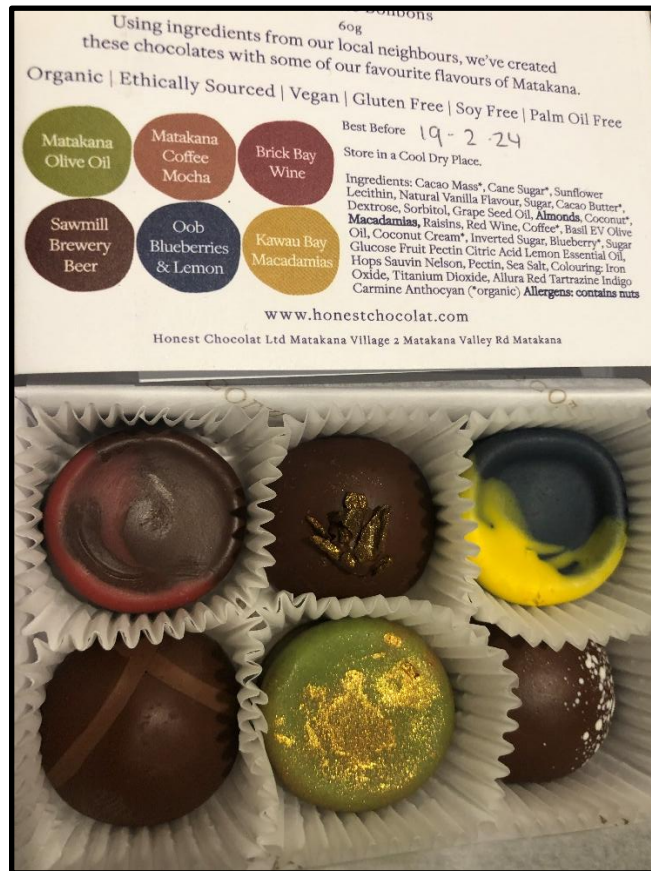


Photo Credit: Researcher

## Pustertal

### Synergic Products and Local Supplies

Through interviews with participants, it became evident that entrepreneurs have a strong attachment to their territory and a focus on value creation within their entrepreneurial activities. These participants (13 out of 15) expressed their sentiments with comments such as: "(Grocery store) asked us to set up a counter with our products", "We are small but we have two restaurants that buy our products, they also advertise our business a lot", "the tourist association [...] that makes the Roda dles saus (the tour of flavours) where each hut offers a special dish only for a week, going from one hut to another, you will find a special dish and that brings advertising" and "Built everything with our own hands. There is nothing imported, bought everything on site". Moreover, representatives from the

destination management sector indicated that the rural experience consists of a diverse range of products and services. The participants emphasised the need for collaboration in order to create a compelling tourism offer, as illustrated by the following quote:

*“The experience is composite, and it is made up of many pieces, therefore the tourist’s expectation is to go to a space to live that place, especially in a rural place, in order to have a certain type of experience. [...] the rural place offers a certain kind of experience, experience in contact with rurality, with local identity, with local history, with local people, with local faces, etcetera.” (ITA02)*

Participants also expressed their vision on the “use of local supplies” which enables positive advantages for different stakeholders. As stated by this participant:

*“There are also hotels that require our jams for breakfasts and this means that they give us importance and entice tourists to come by and take home something local.” (ITA08)*

By using local suppliers, tourists can enjoy higher quality products that have a lower environmental impact. This approach not only benefits entrepreneurs who can source products nearby but also enhances the exposure of local producers. Comments like “we always try to take ingredients from our own farm or other local farms” emphasises this idea of supporting the local economy and enhancing the quality of products and tourism offers “being in a network, it pushes you to move forward and improve the quality”. Also, the tourism operators, including destination management organisations (DMOs) and other agencies can promote genuine local products, providing significant exposure to local producers and service providers. Ultimately, it may lead to an increase in rural entrepreneurs’ revenue as tourists and producers connect directly.

Rural entrepreneurs may sell local products for higher prices than the ones at the supermarket. For example, a jam or eggs can cost two times or even more than the ones at the supermarket. An important note from data pointed out that while supplying hotels and other businesses is beneficial, there are challenges. Specifically, the quantity of products available may not always meet the demand. This discrepancy calls for a shift in how tourism presents and how tourists perceive these local products. As one participant remarked,

*“Because the price is very high compared to the conventional ones, but there are those who have this belief, who pay the price and in fact we had to say no to one or the other, because we do not have enough product, especially in high season.” (ITA10)*

#### **4.1.4 Promotion**

In the context of tourism, effective marketing of a destination is particularly important when the destination is aiming at growing, especially in the early stages of development. Participants (9 out of 12) and the chosen card ranked on the second place for the Scenario Card Game, described the promotional function of tourism collaboration as being an internal benefit of tourism collaboration. Expressions like “referring customers to each other”, “giving insights of where recommend to go next”, “promote each other”, “[other entrepreneur] suggests us” highlight the function of cross-referring, but also the support that is given between entrepreneurs and other local tourism-related actors. One quote emphasises not only the functionality of cross-referring but also the trust and connections among these individuals:

*Cross-referring like networking to me is also important. [...] It is quite big because if you refer a business to someone else, you're backing their business up, saying that I am 100% sure they are doing really well and you should see them. It just means a lot.” (NZ03)*

Indeed, trust is recognised as a key value in building a network that fosters sustainable and strong collaborations over time.

Additionally, **Figure 4.2a** illustrates a store that sells gift boxes of Matakana products, promoting a diverse range of local businesses. These gift boxes contain various local products made in Matakana, allowing small businesses that may not have the capacity for a physical store to sell to tourists and gain greater exposure for their offerings.

#### **Figure 4.2**

*Example of “Taste of Matakana Gift Box”*

**Figure 4.2a**

**Figure 4.2b**



Photo Credit: Researcher

The following example, illustrated in **Picture 4.2b**, showcases another promotional strategy. This product is a combination of local offerings, incorporating goods from various rural areas, not just Matakana. This collaboration enables each entrepreneur to appeal to a broader range of tourists and effectively promote their products.

**Figure 4.3**

*Example of products from a picnic experience in Matakana*



Photo credit: Picnic Village Instagram page

## Pustertal Case Study

### Promotion

*“Networking is a key thing for promotion” (ITA04)*

Nearly all participants (14 out of 15) described collaboration as an effective means to support one another and promote the rural area. A participant emphasised the importance of collaboration in a competitive environment with the following quote:

*“You need to team up to be more able to get your message across. It is difficult to speak today in terms of a single reality, but you have to talk more and more about territorial aggregates.”*  
(ITA02)

This vision is conveyed through comments like *“we promote each other, giving business cards of our colleagues and we tell tourists where they are and what they do”, “many entrepreneurs bring us their brochures and we promote them”, “we promote each other, and this sort of collaboration creates value”*. In addition, it is highlighted a positive exchange with the following words:

*“we help each other, we benefit each other, but so do others, reciprocal benefits. They (tourists) go to them and then they come to us, we promote each other”* (ITA07).

This highlights a sense of reciprocity and mutual benefit in their promotional efforts. Entrepreneurs gain from cross-referrals, which adds value to the entire territory. The focus shifts from an individual approach to a collective one, moving away from competition towards uplifting and promoting fellow entrepreneurs to enhance both individual businesses and the rural area. Additionally, specific products can be found under the umbrella brand “Gallo Rosso” in certain supermarkets, promoting local producers and offering them a market presence that would be difficult for a small entrepreneur to achieve alone. An example of this is illustrated in **Figure 4.4**, which showcases a variety of local products displayed in a dedicated section of the supermarket.

#### **Figure 4.4**

*Example of promotion of a diverse range of local producers under the umbrella brand of Gallo Rosso*



Photo credit: Researcher

#### 4.1.5 Connection

##### Connection: Matakana

Findings indicate that one of the primary internal benefits associated with collaboration is **connection** (9 out of 12 participants). Interview participants using words such as “any form of collaboration is always positive”, “networking means connecting with other people”, “just talking to people and getting together”, and “like a spider web with many connections” highlight the definition of networking as the connection between individuals. The findings show that collaboration involves supporting and relating to one another, sharing a vision, and being surrounded by like-minded individuals united in their goals.

*“It is a group collaboration of liked-minded businesspeople who are here to offer a service or product and it is about tapping into how product and service can assist you and other business, feeding off each other in knowledge and whatever or you can do business together.”*  
(NZ02)

One participant highlighted the collaborative aspect of the network around him and how the connection fosters a sense of community where individuals support and help one another in creating tourism offerings. A key point is the importance of sharing a like-minded vision for future goals and actions. The expression of *feeding off* highlights the pro-active mindset in creating something together

rather than *chipping away* – terminology used by another participant – from one another. The following quote further illustrates the necessity of building and maintaining connections:

*“It's only through the connections that we have, within the industry and the industry bodies, associations and organisations that I am a member of and, I get constant communications from that I can even remotely hoped to guess what's coming.” (NZ11)*

The theme of connection was frequently highlighted by participants, emphasising the importance of engaging with others. This includes interaction with tourists as well as collaboration with other businesses and local operators. As noted by NZ11, particularly in the post-COVID-19 period, the need for connection has become even more pronounced. The challenges of managing and predicting tourism flows were alleviated through communication and collaboration among tourism-related businesses and other operators. This underscores the importance of cooperation, even during extraordinary events, which proved vital for overcoming the crisis.

While some businesses view collaboration as essential and positive – partnering with local suppliers and services to enhance their tourism offerings – others perceive it differently. The following quote was stated by a participant who based the business on local products, thus it has been said:

*“For my business, I have to collaborate to survive” (NZ02).*

Moreover, the following participant perceived it as important to have a relationship with another business in terms of having *“an outsider perspective on your business and decisions you are making” (NZ09).*

A participant from the entrepreneur category highlighted the significance of cross-referring one another in rural areas:

*“For me, it's one of the most important things running a small business in a community town like a small town. Networking is everything. And again, it goes over the things we just said, it's about talking, sharing experiences with other business owners, referring customers to each other.” (NZ03)*

Using words such as *“networking is everything”* moves the collaboration notion beyond the mere business point of view where there are physical reciprocal benefits. It highlights the more personal benefits of talking and sharing previous experiences. Having others to talk to and the ability to build something together appears to be a crucial element for tourism development in rural areas.

### **Connection and cooperation: Pustertal**

The following participant describes the collaboration among entrepreneurs at the farmer's market.

*"The Brunico market is like a small family, we help each other, if we have questions to ask we exchange information. Not always with everyone. For example, when a family member is sick, everyone has made themselves available to help. Or when we have to deliver products we help each other. We help each other with labour and also with the material." (ITA11)*

Interview participants (8 out of 15) described collaboration as connection and cooperation, reflected in the quote above. Participants conveyed with comments like *"we work together"* referring to other entrepreneurs, *"we collaborate with 4/5 local producers"*, *"we collaborate with each other"* and *"we cannot do everything by ourselves"*. These comments illustrate the necessity and reality of collaboration among entrepreneurs, with some describing it as a method for exchanging goods and services or providing reciprocal help.

Some comments expressed the idea of having more bottom-up collaborations, some participants were more inclined toward top-down initiatives, such as activities organised by DMOs, rather than grassroots collaboration. One participant noted a preference for collaborating with DMOs, stating:

*"Not so much with the other entrepreneurs, but more with the tourist association that organises events. For example, we used to do the Roda dles saus (the tour of flavours) towards the end of the season. Organised by the tourist association, each refuge (bach) [...] proposes a typical dish, only for a week, and on Sunday music. Then they (tourists) went to the refuge, in each refuge there was a special dish just for that week and that brings publicity." (ITA05)*

## **4.2 Tourism Collaboration Challenges and Facilitators**

This section presents the challenges explained by participants faced when collaborating. The challenges were different for each case study. Indeed, in Matakana, the lack of leadership and communication were the main problem, with the addition of lack of destination branding. While in Pustertal, collaborating was found to be time-consuming and highlighted the difficulties with having different visions and beliefs. This section is then followed by some participants' suggestions about increasing the collaboration engagement by providing more opportunities to promote the network and therefore collaboration.

## **4.2.1 Challenges**

### **4.2.1.1 Lack of Leadership and Communication**

Five out of twelve participants in Matakana considered two main difficulties when thinking about collaboration in their rural areas. These two are related to the lack of leadership and guidance and the lack of communication, also considering the limited social interactions. Many times, they refer to the absence of social interactions to gather together, meet people and discuss future strategies and problematics.

Starting from the **lack of leadership**, participants expressed the willingness to get together and collaborate; however, as stated by the following participants, managing a business is already time and energy consuming. Moreover, the organisation of meeting and catch up with other can be challenging.

*“Lack of leadership in terms of someone getting to get us together for networking. Everybody is trying so hard at their little businesses that they run here that there's no major leadership to go “right now we get together and you talk, and we are really missing that”. (NZ03)*

This lack of leadership was mentioned by many, and this might be related to the fact that Matakana is a recent tourism destination, which it does not have a strong tourism management organisation in place yet. The notion of guidance and commitment to some sort of aggregation and collaboration to develop tourism is felt by both entrepreneurs that feel the lack of a strong leadership.

*“I think that without with that someone at the helm and willing to actively promote or drive the network, it just is that everyone could be a bit too busy but their all lives and their all business to be very efficient with it. There are always things happening outside the bigger network [...] but I think you do need someone that's got the time and effort to drive the whole thing, fun ways to bring the business together.” (NZ07)*

These specific quotes display the difficulty in collaborating, which comprehend an amount of time, energy and commitment as well as having a strong and clear leadership that bring people together. As stated by this latter participant, interconnectivity between entrepreneurs would benefit the area in terms of planning and driving the tourism sector towards something that is more participatory and shared.

*“If there was a bit more collaboration between those of us who are offering such different experiences and somehow connecting the dots. [...] It would be good to be able to have a bit more (collaboration), but I don't think any of us really sat down and thought about that. It's*

*not a group that says, "OK let's do this, let's plan..." and think about interconnectivity between all of us on this road, for example who have offerings or from Warkworth to Matakana."(NZ04)*

Another challenge is also the **lack of communication** within the diversity of actors in the rural area. Words such as *"there is no communication", "not very talking to each other", "I will start going to the most important asset as the people and getting us to communicate together and work together", "nobody (referred to a specific category of tourism related business) shares information"*. These words expressed the need for having a more cohesive and shared structure and strategic tourism plan as it seems that communication, a key element for guiding tourism, is missing in the area. The following participants expressed the fact that there is no communication among entrepreneurs, and simple action such as Facebook group may benefit the communication channel.

*"There is no communication, there's a minimal Facebook groups in terms of business networks here. There is not enough!" (NZ03)*

Across the participants responses was a prevailing sentiment that at the base of lack of communication and lack of leadership there are no or just a few social interactions. It felt the urge to have more catchups, meetings, networking events, in order to plan tourism development and also strength the local business category.

Moreover, in Matakana the **lack of destination branding** was considered a factor that was missing to provide an increase of the destination visibility.

*We show them (Tourism New Zealand agency) some things, it was all planned and I think from here, we are trying to grab their attention so that they put some more fundings into mentioning Matakana and putting us on the tourism map. We definitely have been left out, but I think it is starting. It was just the pandemic that got in the way, but [...] in the next two years we're going to get some attention." (NZ03)*

#### **4.2.1.2 Different Beliefs and Time-consuming**

The collaboration initiatives in Pustertal seem to be led by the DMO through the organisation of a workshops, by managing the tourism offering and creating services that connect rural entrepreneurs. It is worth to mention that the well-established association of local farmers has also an important role to play to stimulate collaborations.

Perhaps building bottom-up collaboration in such a place where collaborations are strong and have a long-term duration is not a priority. For instance, the comments were related to the facts of collaborating taking lots of energy and time and or cost.

*“In the summer we don't collaborate with anyone, because they have just started and then we would have to collaborate with everyone, and this takes up a lot of time and energy.” (ITA06)*

Also, the following participant expressed the struggle of collaborating in the local farmer's market that is not going well anymore.

*“We collaborate at the Farmer's market organised by us. It must also be said that the markets no longer go the way they did 10 years ago. Maybe people are fed up, the products are always the same and there isn't much development. Everyone sells their products; we discussed having a small shop in the village, but we saw that it costs us too much.” (ITA08)*

Also, a couple of participants expressed the challenge of collaborating with people who have different beliefs and visions. Specifically, the participant was discussing the branding strategy and said:

*“Creating a brand for the territory is much more difficult because it has to bring ideas together, and everyone believes in the same thing and carries forward this philosophy and brings it to life in contact with guests.” (ITA01)*

Having a different vision can be hard when managing tourism, and it can become a challenge when the participant is a newcomer to the rural area:

*“The businesses are small, they're run by passionate people, but by their very nature fall out with each other and have different views. And it's very difficult (to collaborate). You know, I'm coming in as an outsider.” (NZ12)*

#### **4.2.2 Facilitators for Tourism Collaboration**

Facilitators to improve tourism collaboration were suggested by participants in Matakana. Indeed, this part focuses on the ideas and the need shared by participants to provide more opportunities for the development of possible collaboration.

#### 4.2.2.1 Networking Opportunities

Networking opportunities like community groups were present in Matakana, such as a “swap group” where the unsold products are exchanged. These groups facilitate meetings among entrepreneurs and enhance their understanding of local products, land, and agricultural processes. From the perspective of some participants, these groups serve not only to meet others in the community but also as an opportunity for learning, idea exchange, and making new connections.

*“People could come together, spend time with each other, learn about growing our own food, and as we know with this COVID pandemic, having some food close to where you live, in your own garden or nearby is important. So, we had this idea to create the community garden. They agree to help us with some compost bins and some garden edges and it was fantastic. They all (local businesses) helped get the garden started and so it's been successful every Monday morning we meet. [...] Some people come as they are new in this community, and they want to get to know people and want to learn a little bit.” (NZ06)*

Another idea is the market, which acts as a gathering place where various rural entrepreneurs meet, a starting point to leverage the local economy. Indeed, the Farmer’s Market has promoted the tourism destination of Matakana. Particularly, it has given the opportunity to entrepreneurs to get in direct contact with tourists or visitors, proposing them local products sustaining local businesses, as well as revitalising old infrastructures. Finally, being part of a group does not bring only the physical advantages but also it makes the person feel like part of a family, but still with the freedom of being on your own.

*“When I was at the farmers market, it was fantastic amongst all those people who had stalls there. At the end of the market, if we had some produce we hadn't sold, we would all trade with each other and was fantastic.” (NZ06)*

Another participant suggested getting together and having more communication and opportunities to meet and get to know other entrepreneurs:

*“This is one big area of little areas put it together and work together, but yes before COVID there was some little networking events where we would go local business person to talk and tell their story and then we'd all name tags and meet and greet and it was brilliant. It just needs to start happening again. It was cool and that we were referring businesses helped, you know like when you meet someone and they say “oh you've gotta do this with them or you two should meet because you could work together.” I love that. [...] We just need some*

*leadership. Yes, I would like more of that, but I just think they need to get the basics right get us all talking, building rapport first and respecting each other and getting to know each other. However, in this area everybody is so on their own little pockets going "I'm going to try really hard at my business and that's what we do." (NZ03)*

### **4.3 Contribution to Rural Areas Development**

This section explores the rural entrepreneurs' contribution to tourism development under a collaborative lens. The findings present five themes that range from environmental consciousness/stewardship, high quality and authenticity, connection, knowledge transmission and reputation enhancement.

#### **4.3.1 Environmental Consciousness/stewardship**

##### **Environmental stewardship: Matakana**

In Matakana responses such as *"caring for the environment", "sustainability", "green vision", "We choose food sources that rest feet to the natural order", "minimising waste", "monitoring water outflows", "do compost"*, it emphasises the environmental care at the base of participants' actions. Indeed, over the years, there has been seen an increasing trend in sustainable practices. For example, local community groups have supported the recycling system, including the litter collected during local markets. Another example is given by entrepreneurs who are increasingly focusing on eco-friendly products and packaging. The following quote reflects the participants' decision to use locally sourced products to create a product which is local and traditional (using Kete – a traditional basket made and used by Māori) and also considering the carbon footprint that the business could generate (see **Figure 4.5**).

##### **Figure 4.5**

*Example of Kete with Local Products*



Photo Credit: <https://villagepicnic.co.nz>

*"I am conscious of the amount of waste that I produce. So, all my containers that I used are compostable and recyclable. The Ketes are sustainably sourced, and they can be re-used. Then, where I can, I use local organic produces, sustainably farmed like the XXX they order their salmon from a sustainable farm. [...] Then also, about the carbon footprint, making sure that anything I put in my hampers are all from NZ and that is a big thing for me." (NZ02)*

By offering tourists the opportunity to purchase local products all in one, participants help to promote other businesses and also decrease the carbon footprint of shipping these products around the country, which can have a great impact on the environment.

The same value is supported by this participant, who shares the viewpoint of the whole area, showcasing other businesses and how everybody tries to safeguard this rural area. Entrepreneurs do not have the only consumerist perspective of offering towards tourists without any limitation; instead, the willingness of many to safeguard and protect their environment is seen in many different aspects, from using recyclable containers during markets and other activities to specifically selecting sustainable products to safeguard local biodiversity.

*"I think this area especially shares similar values and vision and a lot of business owners in all different scopes are all about the environment. They really are like keeping it as clean as we can, doing something to minimise carbon footprints and just keeping that area clean, not just*

*New Zealand, but our area. I definitely think everyone runs things on the same wavelength, not just completely destroying the place just so we can sell it.” (NZ03)*

Another layer of the environmental consciousness expressed by participants was about the regenerative process that should take place.

*“Sustainability is not really enough anymore, we have to contribute something good. [...] I am adding things to the soil and to the local biodiversity. So instead of just taking, it's also a value of permaculture that you carefully care for the people, and you only take your fair share, so you don't take too much. So, you if you just took over an area and sucked a lot of goodness out of the ground and left it that crap, that would be horrible, but you could take an area and not make it any better and not make it any worse and then you have sustainability but if you are regenerative that is your next step on the scale. So, you are adding to the area so I'm adding to the biodiversity.” (NZ05)*

This quote emphasises the willingness to care for the environment, and taking only what you need, while giving what you can. Indeed, the participant goes on to advocate for a regenerative approach, which actively improves the environment.

### ***Environmental consciousness/stewardship: Pustertal***

Participants (4 out of 15) mentioned the environment while discussing their way of operating and as a way of sharing their vision with other entrepreneurs.

*“Respect for nature. Man has always taken from nature. We are not important to nature, while we depend on nature.” (ITA12)*

Through this quote, the participant reflected the willingness to safeguard nature and bring respect to it. Other participants conveyed with this vision through comments like *“environmental sustainability”* and *“safeguarding the environment is very important”*.

Another participant expressed environmental consciousness related to the concept of limits. Indeed, the participant was discussing the production system and the choices made when avoid producing quantity over quality, as nature allows a certain amount of quantity to be produced. The following quotes explains:

*“We try to transfer tradition, history and relationship with nature which is very important for us and for others. Nature is seasonal, if there is no product, it is because it is not the right season or it is finished.” (ITA14)*

### **4.3.2 High Quality and Authenticity**

The findings show gastronomy as one of the top elements in defining the uniqueness of Matakana.

*“Just bringing something different that hopefully attracts people, I guess in some ways that benefits area. Being part of that region, we are just a small piece of the puzzle. So, we help developing tourism through being slightly different from other entrepreneurs on what we produce.” (NZ07)*

However, authenticity does not stop at local food but goes beyond that. As stated by this participant, authenticity is considered a value, and it relates to integrity and honesty. Providing a real experience that allows tourists to live the rurality.

*“Authenticity, making money doing something that is good for the community, and for people; integrity, honesty.” (NZ10)*

High quality and authenticity are intertwined through such words as *“provide quality through purity”*.

The following participant expressed the values as:

*“It is about authentic, being real, honest to your customers and giving them (tourists) an experience which is value for money. For me, it is important that people go away with memories, so if people have a positive memory of occasion, products or restaurant they have gone to, they will tell their friends and that is the best form of marketing (word of mouth).” (NZ02)*

Participants further elaborated on the concern and desire to safeguard and protect the quality and authenticity of products, services and experiences. It was revealed through sentences such as *“don’t get too big too soon”*, *“we are going to lose that specialness when we sell all of the farms”*, *“identity of Matakana [...] needs to be preserved”* and also introducing the concept of being content and having a production limit *“we are very happy like that, quantity of work I want to do, we sell everything we produce, we have a good reputation here and in Auckland”*.

These comments about limit underline the detachment from a business mentality focused only on economic growth. The fact that participants have authenticity as per value is a sign of considering other aspects of sustainability rather than the solely economic side. An example of this mindset has been seen when talking about the idea of expansion. One participant expressed a preference for keeping the business small, focusing on delivering higher quality and maintaining direct contact with tourists, rather than expanding too quickly without proper control.

*“Just one step at a time in terms of tourism just you know I don't want to see big, huge buses coming to showcase something that is still such a rural area. Just keeping it small and not too big too soon.” (NZ03)*

### **High Quality and Authenticity: Pustertal**

More than half of the participants (9 out of 15) perceived “high quality and authenticity” to be valuable products and services that are created through a local and sustainable supply chain, adding value to the territory. Indeed, as pointed out by Haid and Albrecht (2021), high-quality products also have the highest possible added value locally. The following participant described the philosophy of the business through this quote:

*“The hand that collects the raw material is the hand that transforms the product for you, it is also the hand that sells the product to you.” (ITA01)*

In these terms, the quality is given by the knowledge of the whole production chain, from the ground to the customer’s hands and other participants conveyed through comments such as *“It is followed from the field to the finished product”, “people are looking for genuine and real products”, “the tourist appreciates the whole cycle”* and *“It's not an industry, it's an artisanal thing, we explain the work behind it. Show the process”*. In other words, the value shared is the fact that *“there aren’t many steps where the product then becomes anonymous.”*

The following **Figure 4.6** is showing an example of explaining through this type of sign, placed at the entrance of the business, the production process followed by the entrepreneur. The sign is presented in German and Italian.

### **Figure 4.6**

*Example of Production Process Available to Every Customer at the Entrance of the Business and in a Specific Garden Area.*



Photo credit: researcher

Particularly, it was noted by a participant the concept of not having always what the market requires and so offering what you can produce and explaining to tourists why having those limited quantities is a factor of quality.

*“Offering what you have and if you have little, is a quality factor. It means that we do not add preservatives or anything else to increase the quantity but we maintain what we have and the high quality. If nature has given us less of some things this year, then tourists should understand and appreciate the work. For example, the four years preceding this were very poor years for honey production, and it happened that we ran out of honey already in July, before the large influx of tourists arrived in August. When the August ones (tourists) arrived we had to tell them that it was already finished. Someone then called in advance the year later to order honey in time and put it aside. In this way, a role of customer education is also carried out.” (ITA08)*

These shared values within the collaboration reinforce the willingness of entrepreneurs to offer tourists high-quality products and services, seeing each other (rural entrepreneurs) going in the same direction and focusing on the value added to their products and territory.

The following quote is presented by a participant who previously has defined the value and has high quality of products and services and later on, added the aspect of authenticity in order to maintain the local identity.

*“Typicality and authenticity. This is the most important thing. Maintain your identity and don't sell yourself short [...] It's not just the mountains, but it's the stories of the people, the culture, the tradition, the food, the recipes and all this is very typical in the peasant world. [...] you can experience canederli (traditional food) not from a chef, but from a farmer who has her mother's recipe handed down from her grandmother. And then you can see the stable, you can see the typical breeds of our territory, and all this gives the territory a unique profile and value.” (ITA01)*

### **4.3.3 Connecting to tourists**

#### ***Pustertal***

Participants expressed the importance of connection through words such as *“feeling like a family”, “direct contact with who produces is important”, “we establish a rapport with tourists, it is like being a big family”, “it is very important to get in contact with customers to explain our specialness”* and *“direct contact help to explain the quality of products”*.

Participants perceived the value in approaching and talking directly to tourists, presenting their own products and services and explaining the process. Beyond that, there is the fact that some of them feel like being in a family can create long-term and strong relationships, making tourists come back for many years, as described by the following participant:

*“We have customers who have been coming every year for 10/15 years and also new ones. They return because here they find calm, the products are explained and time is dedicated to them.” (ITA14)*

Also, direct contact with tourists was considered important as it helps to sell local products at a higher price since there is the opportunity to explain the quality of products. Comments like *“it is very important to have a direct contact with customers”, “it is better to sell directly”* and *“I think is very important to develop a direct contact with customers and share our knowledge”*, express the idea of moving forward in a direction where the relationship between producers and customers is getting stronger and based on authenticity and trust.

In Matakana as well it will feel important, particularly the connection with tourists:

*“Bringing the people in contact and the grower gets a little bit better price and the consumer gets a little bit better price because it's not going through a third party, like in a supermarket. So, it's beneficial to keep the growers productive and profitable in the rule areas”. (NZ06)*

#### **4.3.4 Knowledge Transmission**

##### **Matakana**

*“It changed root (referred to the business). So, to speak and integrate teaching beekeeping into all business and I now provide beekeeping courses for adults on site, and I teach in seven schools here in the region.” (NZ04)*

This quote provides a specific example of how the business is moving towards a more educational construct and knowledge transmission of native plants and beekeeping, which integrate to the sale of products. The entrepreneur expressed the desire to achieve more than the economic sustainability. This is related to the willingness to safeguard the environment by teaching others and learning from others.

Another entrepreneur discussed the problem that New Zealand is facing, as well as other countries in the world, when importing products that cannot be found in season here.

*“Everything that we buy that is not in season comes from another country and I have seen videos from these green-houses, and they get sprayed very heavily. There's a lot of unhealthy chemicals, they get fed just artificial fertilizers. It is just a huge public footprint, and we talked about us flying less but like not buying flowers that have been flown in. [...] I would like to educate people about that and to appreciate locally grown flowers and that flowers can change through the season.” (NZ05)*

Other responses reflected the same idea such as *“educate them (tourists) in what we have”, “teaching them (tourists) that around the world there are thousands of varieties of XXX. [...] Attended a course to learn better the quality of this product”*. These sentences suggest that it is not solely about educating others but also keep learning themselves and bring the best to the table.

Finally, it was also noted that the Farmer’s Market was a place of informing tourists and having direct contact with customers, enabling to share information and creating benefits for both sides.

*“That is huge benefit for small growers because it brings the consumer in contact with the grower, they can communicate, they can learn from it what the consumer wants, the grower can explain, people find out where their food comes from and it’s a really huge benefit.” (NZ06)*

**Figure 4.7**

*Example of Local Producers Explaining and Informing Tourists at the Market.*



*Photo Credit: Researcher*

### ***Pustertal***

Tourism seems to be envisioned not only under an economic driver perspective, but as a driver for the socio-cultural and environmental sustainability of the rural areas. It plays a role in carrying knowledge forward, allowing the transferability of traditions and knowledge from generation to generation, from locals to tourists and among locals. Some participants expressed their opinion as follow:

*“It is also important to pass on knowledge and above all the possibility of using plants, for example my aunt who lived here in 1905 and who lived through both wars, and in the period during the two wars there was a lot of poverty, and they knew the plants because they fed on them. That generation grew up with lots of herbs to eat, knowing which ones are healthy,*

*which ones help you and which ones are poisonous. Nowadays this is unthinkable. [...] It is interesting to be able to pass on this knowledge. Lots of little knowledge and traditions that are lost over time. Perhaps through tourism these are relived. The paradox, if on the one hand there are all the problems of tourism on the other there is the possibility of carrying this knowledge forward.” (ITA08)*

By informing tourists about traditional knowledge and sharing these anecdotes, the participant sees the solution to keep this knowledge alive and pass it through generations. It is something that it does not concern only the tourists, as the same participant suggested there is the need to have the right tourists who is listening and is willing to learn. Thus, it extends to a wider range of people in the community as well. Another participant has allocated specific spots within the *Albergo Diffuso* (widespread hotel) to play with the guests, old traditional games once a week, aiming to share awareness of these lost activities and inform tourists on how it used to be.

*“We play traditional games (especially bowling) once a week with old-fashioned tools, the children and all the guests play once a week. [...] We bake artisan bread in the stone oven that works with wood. It is a process that lasts 5 days. Years ago, you couldn't buy bread, it wasn't possible. Then we decided to bake it ourselves. It is the traditional *Trockenes Brot* (dry bread/crushed bread) to use in the soup. The guests participate, watch and then get to eat the bread.” (ITA13)*

Another participant said their intention in the willingness to transfer traditions, history, the environmental awareness with tourists and local community.

*“We try to transfer tradition, history and the relationship with nature which is very important for us and for others. Nature is seasonal, if there is no product it is because it is not the right season or it is finished. More and more people are also asking for these values, asking for information, wanting to know more and more. [...] Schools and kindergartens come here.” (ITA14)*

Sharing knowledge can have an educational function. In particular, the feeling and need to share knowledge and make the tourists understand what is behind the products and services entrepreneurs propose, is considered as contributing to the tourism development. This was described by a local producer, who has been working in the industry for many decades and is shaping the business towards a more educational and informing function and not “only commercial” one.

*“We started making more products, then ointments, herbal teas. Then we also started making visits and this was very important for us. Since we are in a very touristic area here, people would pass by, see the distillery and ask what we did. Then we also sold our products directly to tourists. [...] We were the first ones who started showing people how it is distilled and how it is produced. Now you can see farmers and dairies all over Alto Adige, all of whom have started to show how it is produced.” (ITA12)*

The following **Figure 4.8 (a-b)** shows examples of guiding tourists to be more connected and understanding of the place they are visiting with the correct information. Specifically, this is focused on presenting the biodiversity of the rural area and it is available for every tourist who is visiting the local shop to participate in the activity of this business.

**Figure 4.8 (a-b):**

*Left: Presentation of Biodiversity of Flowers in a Local Shop*

*Right: Tourists Room for Explaining the Biodiversity of the Area.*



Photo credit: Researcher

“Education” was mentioned by other participants who discussed the increase of awareness and knowledge that tourists are looking for and the need for sharing and informing about the place history, production process and environmental topics. The following entrepreneur shared the struggle of explaining to tourists that in rural areas, it is not always possible to find an unlimited quantity of products, which are limited to the weather condition and other factors about the year.

*“Someone (tourists) sees the work behind it, someone confuses our business with any other shop and if you don't find what you're looking for you walk away. Some even do this. For*

*example, if they look for dandelion honey and if they don't find it, they leave, but this year we weren't able to produce it and they go away disappointed, without understanding all the work that goes into it and the possibility of producing it in this area. Someone asks for acacia or orange honey. Products that are impossible to make here, if someone has an idea of how they are produced, they can understand it.” (ITA08)*

The necessity to explain and share knowledge with tourists is real. In particular in rural areas, whereas in the nowadays society everything is available at any time and any place, the value of local products and services may need to be taken care of. As expressed by a DMOs director:

*“Tourism needs fewer products but more tourism education (by example)!” (ITA15)*

In particular, the transmission of knowledge was often in relation to the function of keeping traditions alive. Indeed, over half of participants (11 out of 15) perceived their contribution in terms of keeping **traditions alive** as stated from the following participant:

*“ Tourists come to see the process of creaming butter, and it has a "wow" effect. Tourists take lots of photos. This is interesting because no one knows how butter is made anymore. It's those traditional things to keep the tradition alive.” (ITA03)*

Other participants conveyed the same idea, and it is denoted through comments such as *“we started to propose sandwiches and tultres (typical stuffed pancakes) which my mom used to cook. This is a typical Ladin dish”, “this Maso (mountain farm) has been passed down from generation to generation”, “People are very attached to traditions”*. The importance of continuing tradition is radically felt even in the local cuisine.

*“In my opinion I can transfer culinary tradition, because as long as you cook certain dishes and people continue to order them then they are passed on. Then when you let it go, they are forgotten.” (ITA09)*

However, it was clear the attachment to traditions and history, especially when participants were describing their business and family history. Their roots were clear not only by the decision to keep working in the mountain but also by the long family history that was behind that, and the opportunity given to the next generation to continue it.

*“Since 1892 our family has bought this building. We are the fifth generation. Until 1892 this was the only road in Val Badia, then many people passed by with horses and on foot. Here we*

*have the church and it was a pilgrimage. Plus there was the tavern and people stopped to eat. If people had needed they could have stayed here to sleep.” (ITA13)*

**Figure 4.9** (a-b-c) is showing the ancient traditions, machines and tools used in the past from three different participants. Each one has dedicated a specific place, allowing the tourists to know and see them.

**Figure 4.9**

*Representation of Traditional Arts and Tools in Pustertal*



Picture 4.7a: Woman Weaving Wool with Traditional Tool



Picture 4.7b: Traditional Tools Used in the Past



Picture 4.7c: Traditional Machine Used in the Past

Credit: Researcher's pictures

All these comments confirmed the attachment towards the participants' territory and traditions, highlighting the willingness to keep them alive and share them with tourists. However, it is also noted by a participant that this is not the main reason tourists are going there for their holiday, but it is important to take into consideration and value it again. Indeed, as described by the DMO director:

*"Culture and Ladin is not the primary reason for the holiday. Since it is not important, tourist destinations have put it aside. Now we are trying to reinsert it into communication, into photographs. It had been lost and culture is not a reason for attraction." (ITA15)*

However, there were some who did not agree with that, and contributing to perceiving something that was felt like a tradition, turning it into an event of disturbance and commodity that do not belong anymore to the territory.

*"Yesterday there was a celebration for the return of the animals from the mountain pastures. In the past, it was held because it was a celebration felt by all the villagers and everyone came out of their houses to see the animals go by and the animals were decorated, it was a village festival. Now they try to do it again, but the locals are no longer interested. On the contrary, it creates a disturbance because it creates noise and the streets get dirty with animals. But especially in the nearby village, it is really rural and they want to show this activity by taking up this celebration but those who go to see them are mainly tourists" (ITA08)*

#### **4.3.5 Reputation Enhancement**

Previously, promotion has been seen as one of the roles of collaboration envisioned by participants. In Matakana, this is also connected to their contribution to the tourism development. The data revealed that participants (7 out of 12) mentioned promoting each other and the rural area. An example is given by the words of this entrepreneurs:

*"I was in NZ Herald for Mother's Day. They asked me about my best tips for Matakana so then I recommended everyone (lists of businesses promoted on the article)." (NZ05)*

**Figure 4.10** represents an example of promotion in a national magazine. Specifically, this entrepreneur has been interviewed and has promoted other businesses in the area, increasing their reputation and visibility and the whole rural area.

Figure 4.10

Example of Cross-Referring and Promotion Between Rural Entrepreneurs

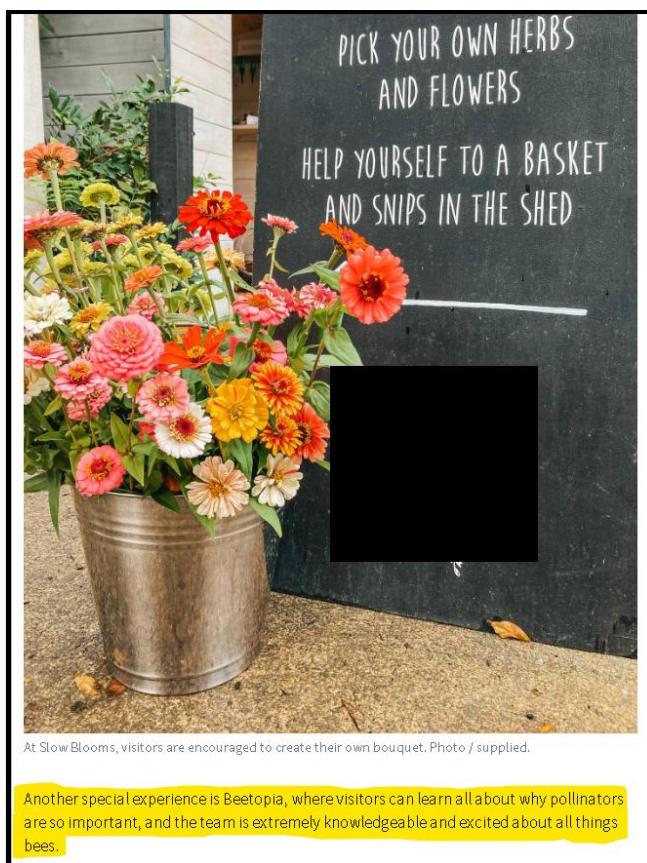


Photo Credit: NZ Herald (website <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/travel/nz-travel-how-to-boost-body-and-soul-in-matakana/JMNTZGEKFWJMVE6UH7UQNBXFLU/>)

Also, by collaborating with each other and proposing synergic products, promotion was organically created. Examples were given by products created together as shown before in section 4.1.3, and also by proposing other products to sell in their business.

*“We sell products of other local producers and from far away as well. I contact the producers. It is a good way to have some local products [...] it is a great exposure for them.” (NZ10)*

Promoting each other is not only beneficial for the local entrepreneur itself, but it helps the destination to be known and more visible to tourists. Participants have started seeing an increasing number of people visiting during low season which is the wintertime in Matakana and more overnights staying.

The finding on promotion as contributing to the tourism development strengthen the importance that is given to the role of collaboration. The promotion of others allows to have a higher exposure of the business, of other local producers and of the destination as well.

#### **4.3.6 Tourism Offering**

##### **Pustertal**

The following category emerged from participants' vision of contribution to tourism development.

Some participants expressed their contributions as **differentiating the tourism offer**. It is common to have an integrated activity to the primary one in the rural area, has for example the Maso (mountain farm) is also a place to host tourists and propose a variety of services. The solely agricultural activity could struggle in a place like Pustertal, as the tough winter conditions do not allow any income. During the years and past century winter activities have become exponentially important and a diversity of offering in the territory has grown.

This was expressed by a participant in the following quote.

*"I think that activities like ours are interesting for tourists who come to spend a week or 5 days and who want to experience something original and authentic." (ITA08)*

Also, there are some related comments in terms of services and farm innovation:

*"It is an innovative method (such as introducing a mobile chicken coop) and, at the moment only we and another farmer have it." (ITA10)*

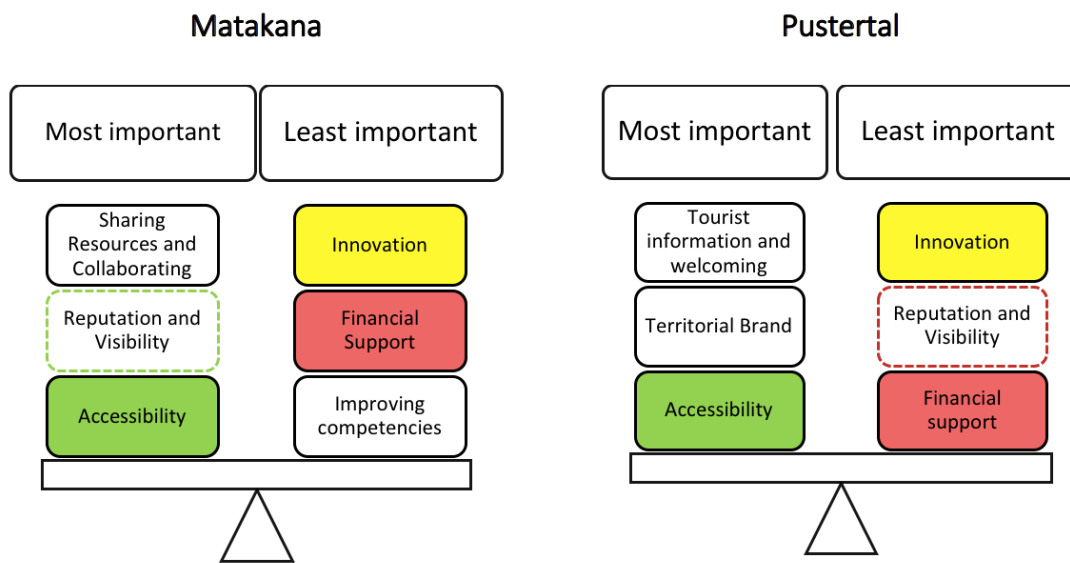
#### **4.4 Additional findings from Scenario cards game**

Scenario Cards Game has proven to be a valuable instrument to use for eliciting comments during the interviews and for supporting the interpretation process of their transcriptions. Beside the insights recorded with the interview, there is also valuable information related to the order given to the cards and from comparing similarities and differences of cards ranked by participants in the two cases. The following **Figure 4.11** is a representation of the cards-ranking in the SCG. What follows is a summary of comments regarding specifically the most relevant "cards" such as "sharing resources and

collaborating” and “reputation and visibility” for Matakana Case Study and “Tourist information and welcoming” and “Territorial Brand” for Pustertal.

**Figure 4.11**

Representation of most and least important cards



Credit: researcher’s elaboration

#### 4.4.1 Sharing resources and collaborating

For the specific case of Matakana, the card “sharing resources and collaborating” was chosen as the most preferred one when considering the elements necessary to develop the next tourism plan. Many participants have expressed their intention and willingness to have more collaboration and networking activity, however they also have disclosed some difficulties in reaching this phase. The following quote is expressing the willingness of having more collaboration and point of contact within entrepreneurs in Matakana.

*“Recommending each other, helping each other, introducing to new people, expanding the network. More support would be good.” (NZ05)*

Some participants feel the need to collaborate more and create a more cohesive tourism offer, getting together and communicating with each other in order to improve the tourism offer. Beside a few

realities of big companies in the rural area, the majority of tourism offer stands on small and medium-sized enterprises. When asked to comment the chosen card a participant reply with the following quote:

*"I don't think anybody is big enough and strong enough to survive or to lift without working together." (NZ12)*

This finding not only supports the interview data but also elevates it at the very top-level insight. Being a novel tourism destination with increasing tourism flows, it may feel more the need of collectively organise the tourism offer as well as finding a way to get together and move on the same path. This is something that Pustertal is already doing, as a local tourism actor, working in the tourism management sector described the tourism offer as *"composite experience"* (ITA02) being not a single service offered but a variety of elements that needs to work together.

#### **4.4.2 Reputation and visibility**

The second most important one for Matakana case study is **"Reputation and Visibility"** and it is considered by many participants as a main element that the area is *"severely lacking"*, as stated by a participant. A variety of comments are expressing the need to work more for improving the reputation and visibility of Matakana. While the sustainable and "green" reputation is out there, the marketing of it is not extensive as quoted by this participant:

*"Our sustainable practices are happening. There are already things in place that would significantly benefit the tourism element of sustainable tourism. But it's communicating those types of things and being able to reach a wider audience. As a single operator I will never have as big of reach as a region and regional branding and concept. Why people go to Waiheke, because it is what it is. It is the whole region. Matakana is there. It just needs the story to be told and it needs to be told in a cohesive way, which is what we're severely lacking." (NZ11)*

As similar, others commented with *"is important because the market need to be current and as producers you need to attract and appeal new market"*, *"you need a good reputation and visibility to be on the market. I saw it with my experience"*. Also, specifying the role of public relations and media this participant expressed the opinion on: *"PR is very valuable and relevant. Getting into articles and magazines, as per my business, managing that more carefully is essential, especially now that we are opening up to more tourists again"* and *"getting into media! [said with determination]"*.

In Matakana participants expressed a certain lack of connections and collaboration as well as lack of leadership leading to an unclear vision of the tourism strategy for the destination development. Visibility is strongly related to the marketing strategies applied by a tourism destination and these results are similar to the ones found by Kürüm Varolgünes et al. (2022) who studied sustainable rural tourism strategy and denote the lack of promotion and marketing activities as a weakness in the specific case study of a rural area of Turkey. Moreover, in Matakana was unveiled the need for a more marketing strategy as it was presented the idea of having a good reputation in terms of being green, which aligns with the majority of the entrepreneurs. At the same time, some entrepreneurs did not want to share with tourists the effort put into the eco-friendly actions as it is considered a double-edged weapon. Having a green reputation in Matakana goes beyond the fact of promoting it, but it is related to a more ethical and moral way of treating and considering the environment. Example of that, is a participant in Matakana who did not want to promote the zero waste actions taken in place. However, it was rather preferred to give example and propose a new or different way of thinking to the visitors or tourists. In contrast, the results presented by Gryshchenko et al. (2022) show that the implementation of green marketing evolves in the green tourism development which is considered the recreation in “ecologically clean natural areas or regions, combined with visits to scientific, educational, cultural, cognitive places and activities” (p.129).

In contrast, the Pustertal case study has chosen the “Reputation and Visibility” within the least important cards to take into account when thinking about the future tourism development of the area. As such, there is already in action a strong tourism marketing and management department in South Tyrol which is an important driving factor for the tourism industry (Streifeneder et al., 2023).

#### **4.4.3 Tourism information and welcoming**

Particularly referred to the case of Pustertal, the “*tourist information and welcoming*” card was chosen by many as the most important asset when identifying the next tourism development plan. The first most important card selected by the participants is “**Tourist information and Welcoming**”, through a variety of comments like “*welcoming is at the first place*”, “*it is important how tourists are welcomed and how they feel*”, “*it needs to be of high quality*”, “*it is very important proposing a good welcoming when tourists arrive*” and “*welcoming is the most important. Here we have the culture of hospitality*”.

A participant also emphasises the importance of taking time to share information with tourists and how this adds value to their experience. Specifically:

*“Tourist information and welcoming are very important. If you spend time and give information about where to go and what to do, tourists appreciate very much”. (ITA03)*

Considering the history on hospitality culture typical of Pustertal and its wider provincial area of South Tyrol, tourism information and welcoming plays a very important role for destination. As suggest by participants there is a strong “culture of hospitality” that features the whole South Tyrol area which became an intangible asset for the tourism industry that still works on it. It is worth to say that participants have suggested that many tourists are returners (8 out of 15 participants mentioned tourists returning), emphasising the great fidelity feature within tourism offer and tourism demand. Some participants indeed have shared that some tourists have been coming in the same place for the past 20-40 years, and they are not only customers, but are now friends. Also, they are often promoting their business and destination through word of mouth. In the same line, scholars are showing that hosts are also active builders for the destinations, which can shape the tourists experience and also improve the competitiveness of the destination (Wu et al., 2022).

#### **4.4.4 Territorial brand**

The importance given to the territorial brand in Pustertal is related to the necessity to be recognised and make the destination known. It is in line with the literature that present the brand as having a semiotic function of non-linguistic communication (Basile & Cavallo, 2020). Its function relies on the attractiveness of tourists as it becomes the essence of the area when talking about tourism. It serves not only as a promotional tool but becomes an instrument for strengthening the sense of community. Indeed, the second most important card selected was “**Territorial Brand**”, when talking about territorial brand comments related to the necessity of having a brand in order to make the destination known and “*recognised*”. It has also a function of attraction of tourists to the destination as explained by this participant:

*“the brand is the essence of everything. It puts all together. It is the image of a territory, and you have to create this.” (ITA01)*

Still considering the territorial brand as the most important card, this following quote expressed the need to find the right balance when having and promoting a brand:

*“It's very important, but I don't think you need to have too much of it. Because afterwards you have tourists of little value. [...] For example, I have to explain how to do separate waste collection to tourists from Qwait. They will ask me for a lot of information, and it becomes*

*very demanding. [...] This is to say that if the brand should be promoted not all over the world but in neighbouring areas.” (ITA10)*

Furthermore, another point of view is explaining the importance of having a territorial brand. Rather than to function as an element of promotion for the rural destination, a territorial brand can play a key role in terms of sense of community, as described by this participant:

*“I don't believe much in territorial branding in terms of promotion/marketing for small areas, however, if the brand is something that has to do with a sense of belonging then it is very important.” (ITA02)*

In Matakana comments were mainly focusing on “we just need some leadership” (NZ03), “I am not a fan of branding an area to be honest” (NZ04), “you need to do it together this, I can't do it on my own” (NZ10), expressing a sort of willingness to have a guidance for the path to follow but at the same time not selling it as a commercial product, keeping the real rurality intact. Expression such as “the brand is the essence of everything, it puts everything together. It is the image of a territory, and you have to create this.” (ITA01)

A participant pointed out the fact that is not only about having and creating a territorial brand, but there is the need to keep revisioning it together. This involves understanding the direction being taken and aligning it towards common goals.

*The brand is almost the most important thing, why don't people go to the nearby valleys where it costs less? They have the nature like us, but the brand is missing. At the same time there is a need for balance, now we have guests from all over the world. But is this really what we want? (ITA10)*

## **4.5 Summary**

This chapter has outlined participants' perceptions of tourism collaboration, presenting the findings for each Matakana and Pustertal case study. The overall responses present five main factors that are categorised as sharing, synergies, support, promotion and connection. These factors are crucial for understanding how collaboration is perceived by participants and how it impacts rural entrepreneurs. This chapter then continues with the tourism collaboration challenges and facilitators, presenting the lack of communication, leadership and destination branding as challenges for the Matakana case

study. In contrast, the Pustertal case study identifies the main challenges as a lack of time and the different beliefs and ideas. To improve collaboration, the Matakana case study suggested providing more networking opportunities to connect with other rural entrepreneurs. The findings also highlight the contributions to tourism and rural development, with environmental consciousness being reported as one of the most significant perceived contributions among entrepreneurs. Other important factors include high quality and authenticity, knowledge transmission, reputation enhancement, and the overall tourism offering. These elements are considered essential for the development of rural areas and tourism. Additional findings are presented at the end of this chapter, such as comments on the cards ranked among the first and second ones in each case study. The next section will discuss the current findings and interpretation of these in relation to the research questions and literature review.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study provides a subjective perspective of rural entrepreneurs who are directly involved in shaping the rural destination's tourism offering. The two case studies of Matakana (New Zealand) and Pustertal (Italy) allow us to gain deep insights into the multi-faceted realities of tourism in rural areas that are placed in different countries, but with some similarities. This chapter presents the discussion of the findings.

The first section (5.1) provides a discussion on understanding of the key elements that characterise tourism collaboration among rural entrepreneurs. Section 5.2 covers the contribution of rural entrepreneurs to tourism development, aiming to discuss the value collaboration has in rural areas and the mobilised assets towards the development of rural areas. Section 5.3 delves into the overall influence on rural areas, followed by Section 5.4 which discusses barriers to tourism collaboration.

### 5.1 Tourism Collaboration Internal Key Elements

This section discusses the concept of collaboration within rural tourism, drawing upon insights from participants in this research. Their perspectives reveal five key themes that define their perceptions on collaboration in this context and that have been categorised as:

- Sharing resources - collaboration facilitates the exchange of resources, knowledge, and experiences among participants. This includes sharing information about best practices, overcoming challenges, and supporting one another through difficulties.
- Support - collaboration fosters a spirit of mutual support, where participants engage in actions that benefit each other's businesses.
- Synergies - collaboration was seen as a way to create products together and work together, this includes also fostering the local supply chain.
- Promotion - participants emphasise the importance of promoting each other's businesses through cross-referring. This collaborative approach helps to amplify the collective tourism offerings of the rural area and attract more visitors.
- Connection – participants felt the need to get together, particularly in a rural context.

These initial themes align with some existing literature on rural tourism collaboration. When studying collaboration, it is highlighted the benefit of sharing resources, knowledge and expertise (Jesus & Franco, 2016; Badurina et al., 2023). In contrast, Pilving et al. (2019) present the challenges faced when collaborating, such as the lack of a supportive team and its continuity after the initial excitement

for a new project. However, this current research has shown that tourism collaboration is perceived with a supportive lens and highlights this as a key element of tourism collaboration.

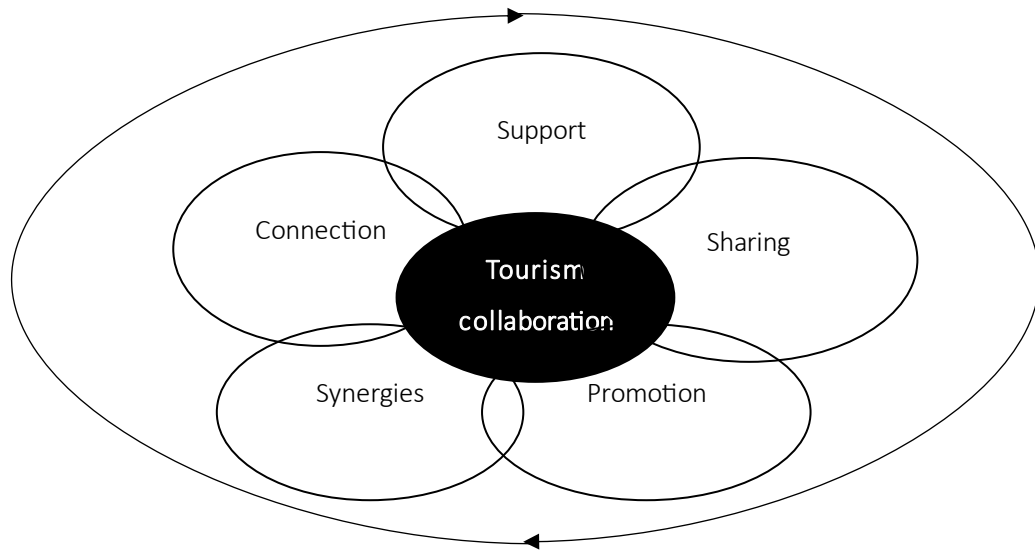
In general, tourism collaboration seems to either increase or strengthen relationships among locals but also provides opportunities for entrepreneurs in the tourism sector. Research conducted by Utami et al. (2023), Ramayah et al. (2011), and Badurina et al. (2023) emphasises the importance of collaboration in rural tourism entrepreneurship. These studies reveal that successful long-term cooperation stems from sharing a common vision to achieve both individual and collective goals. Furthermore, the present findings go beyond the typical economic benefits associated with collaboration. Participants emphasised that collaboration extends to encompass the social and cultural well-being of the entire rural community. This includes fostering a sense of community building through collaboration and a commitment to the land and environment. The following section will provide a discussion into each of these five themes. The next sections will discuss these main key elements of tourism collaboration perceived by rural entrepreneurs and how it affects rural entrepreneurs.

### ***5.1.1 Tourism Collaboration Among Rural Entrepreneurs***

Collaboration can be seen as a set of connected and intertwined elements that have been found to be key elements of tourism collaboration among entrepreneurs (**Figure 5.1**). In particular, the representation of findings aims to show how these factors can stimulate, change or influence one another and be the basis for building on collaborative approaches.

**Figure 5.1**

*Tourism Collaboration Key Elements Perceived by Rural Entrepreneurship – Internal View*



Credit: researcher's elaboration

The figure proposes intertwined elements that can all be related. For example, the action of sharing information or business strategies can strengthen the connection among entrepreneurs. Outside, an arrow has been placed in a circular movement, aiming to represent the constant dynamic of these actions and the constant change of the situations. For instance, one action such as sharing material or information, can forge or influence into other actions such as connection and support. Each element is overlapping as they are all connected and centred to tourism collaboration. Indeed, the networking of two or more elements activate collaborative approaches.

Collaboration can improve the local economy by supporting and promoting others, and at the same time, it strengthens the social structure of the rural area, which can eventually impact the community. In turn, tourism collaboration can guide toward a strengthening of rural cohesion and increasing of community pride. Jesus and Franco (2016) discussed that through collaboration, relationships between people are strengthened. The researcher has seen that collaborative actions are in place within entrepreneurs and DMOs and with local entities such as schools. Younger generation and community are involved into projects or other activities created by entrepreneurs. It does not only guide efforts towards rural cohesion, but it may entice locals to stay in rural areas or attract

newcomers. This can also create positive effects as entrepreneurs share their knowledge with locals, as well as gaining more knowledge from one another. At the same time, this affects tourism, as rural entrepreneurs are in direct contact with tourists and increasing their awareness of the destination tourists are visiting including traditions, natural and cultural features that make rural areas.

#### **5.1.1.1 Sharing: Information, Resources and...Vulnerabilities**

Participants across both case studies perceived collaboration as having positive effects on the entrepreneurial and tourism fabric, as evidenced in the findings (Section 4.1). A key theme emerged – sharing – that encompasses knowledge exchange, sharing resources, and even mutual support through shared struggles. This is related to material things such as machinery, utensils, and products as it can be difficult and expensive to provide for specific things in rural areas, such as machinery that farmers use. Collaboration was mentioned as necessary and also beneficial for rural entrepreneurs, in particular when sharing resources, which allows the creation of valuable projects. For example, as small entrepreneurs were trying to reach more visibility and sell more products, they purchased materials together and set up what was needed for a farmer's market. Moreover, together, a group of entrepreneurs managed to get a shelf in the local supermarket, wholly dedicated to local products, expanding their opportunity to increase their sales as well as having more visibility of their business. This way, their products were seen in a specific place altogether, suggesting to consumers the idea of being local rather than another product on the shelf.

Collaborating in rural areas allows for sharing of resources, knowledge, and skills, resulting in the creation of synergic products and projects. However, it is worth noting that some participants have mentioned that there *"was no other solution"*, almost expressing a sense of pressure given by the rural circumstances. It was previously seen that rural areas have some limitations, and literature has particularly mentioned the limitations of infrastructures and technology for the tourism sector (Kumar & Shekhar, 2020). Thus, collaboration being envisioned as sharing means that not only one receives but also gives, often having a mutual exchange, and this can range from tangible to intangible elements.

The importance of knowledge exchange aligns with Cehan et al. (2021), who identify it as a crucial element when analysing tourism collaboration within two destination's networks. Thus, sharing refers to information, which is an important element when managing a business. Indeed, it ranges from informing people about agricultural processes and tourism flow expectations to advice on best practices or how to improve products, as well as the bureaucratic advice. Depending on the rural

context, this information exchange can result in knowing and access to specific financial and fiscal benefits. This becomes especially important, as access to such information often represents a challenge for entrepreneurs in rural areas (Beckmann et al., 2023). This exchange of information and resources seems to strengthen and increase relationships between people, where collaboration stimulates learning and knowledge exchange and increases the sense of community (Ramayah et al., 2011).

Strobl and Peters (2013) emphasise the necessity of sharing knowledge within the destination to deliver a consistent tourism product and avoid those asymmetries that can cause flaws in the tourism system. Sharing knowledge contributes to the increase of collective expertise and distribution of information, and it also provides a broader number of resources that entrepreneurs can utilise. This is in line with the classic view of firm relationships that aim to be a resource-based pool (Pavlovich, 2003). Moreover, sharing resources improves the relationships among stakeholders (Peira et al., 2021), as there is trust within one another and reciprocity at the base.

Deepening into the conversation, participants disclosed that sharing goes beyond knowledge and resources, but it concerns the struggles and difficulties encountered during their entrepreneurship journey. Particularly important for some participants in the younger tourism destination of Matakana was to share difficulties and get support from other entrepreneurs. This may be related to participants being mainly novel entrepreneurs and newcomers to the area. Seeking advice from others on the way of doing business, as well as understanding the flaws that one might have, can be of great psychological help and can provide emotional support. Some participants felt the pressure of the lack of sales, lack of tourists on their site, and difficulties in deciding future business strategies. However, once they shared their struggles with others and understood that they were not the only ones struggling, it provided extra help in order to continue their business and overcome that difficult situation. Indeed, it offered relief and increased support to one another, strengthening trust even when showing vulnerabilities.

Having a different opinion from a peer could provide benefits and strengthen the relationship by increasing the trust in one another. Scholars have seen the beneficial implications of external social relationships, particularly for women, as studied by Ayatakshi-Endow and Steele (2021). Indeed, they are stating the importance of social relationships as sources of emotional support, increasing their willingness to seek resources for business survival and growth. Mainly, for the case study of Matakana, some participants were newcomer entrepreneurs, the so-called “lifestyle entrepreneurs” who represent the specific category who move to rural areas because of the quality of life and open a small

enterprise (Tomay & Tuboly, 2023). For these individuals, it was important to have support from other peers, making them feel more integrated and supported within the community. In the case of Pustertal, which is a destination with a long history of tourism traditions, businesses are often family-owned and passed down from generation to generation. For the Pustertal case study, the sharing theme was related to resources and information exchange, and emotional support was not disclosed.

#### **5.1.1.2 Promoting: A Way of Cross-Referring**

Both Matakana and Pustertal participants identified promoting each other's businesses or cross-referring as a significant role of collaboration. This vision of collaboration was very popular within both case studies, and it was often suggested as the main benefit of collaboration as well, underlining the reciprocal aspect of it. Promotion/cross-referring seems to be related to trust as participants were giving their "word" to tourists and visitors when suggesting other businesses. The advantages are reciprocal and different. Firstly, enticing tourists to visit other local businesses while simultaneously promoting the entire destination. Then, it often created a reciprocal exchange by promoting each other. An example of this is an entrepreneur promoting another business activity on social media, and this latter was promoting the other during an interview with an important magazine.

Results of the present research confirm the existence of promotional practices, connections and support among entrepreneurs aligning with Cehan et al. (2021). When studying the multi-layered network approach in a tourism collaboration context related to two destinations in Romania, Cehan et al. (2021) found that despite the low level of collaboration, it revealed collaboration existed when promoting.

However, it has been encountered critiques on promoting other entrepreneurs who were competing in the same market with similar products. Indeed, the perceived threat of competitiveness was felt when producing and offering similar products by copying the practices, rather than increasing opportunities that benefit both parties. Other authors disclosed in their study on rural destinations, a lack of horizontal cooperation among private stakeholders derived from the lack of trust and sufficient benefits (Badurina et al., 2023). Thus, the findings suggest that promotion is done mainly when reciprocal benefits accrued. On an important note, is the promotion through the DMOs, who are key players in the promotion of the destination, providing an essential asset for the rural area and entrepreneurs, particularly in Pustertal. While Qu et al. (2022) detect limited interaction between public and private sectors, their study found that businesses make frequent recommendations, promoting each other to tourists.

As seen in the Matakana case study, promotion was one of the main themes that emerged. Participants reported promoting other businesses and the destination to contribute to the development of tourism, either by word of mouth, by press, magazines or social media. This was not only done by advising tourists about other business activities but also by providing brochures, promoting on social media each other's business, and selling other local products on the site. It increases a sense of recognition through being referred by other peers, developing mutual benefit, not only in the upselling of products and visibility but also by increasing motivation in what the entrepreneur is doing. This is in line with Cunha et al.'s (2020) findings that show that the recognition and prestige achieved develop improvement and expansion of the businesses and attract others to invest in a business.

A very specific niche is gastronomy, as it plays a key role in terms of cross-referring and promotion. Indeed, some entrepreneurs used local supplies to create their products, developing promotions among tourists and other local businesses. Besides the promotion of the sole business, the products made with other local products created a positive effect of reciprocal promotion. This is in line with other authors who suggest that partnerships with other local businesses also strengthen the destination image and each entrepreneur's attractiveness, influencing the tourist's choice by making their stay longer (Sanagustín Fons et al., 2011). In summary, promotion was seen as a key element of collaboration and often exists when reciprocal or when a third party is helping, while it comes less when there is a lack of trust among entrepreneurs.

### **5.1.1.3 Supporting Others: Give and Receive**

The theme of support was a great presence in the participants' answers. Often referred to as *"helping each other"* or *"collective/reciprocal support"*, enabling the entrepreneurs to overcome some difficulties thanks to the support received, while sustaining other businesses. Indeed, when discussing the support received, it was also connected to the support given, highlighting the reciprocal benefit. Relatively, Utami et al. (2023), when discussing mutual cooperation as one key factor in developing rural tourism entrepreneurship, specified it as supporting each other or *"sitting together with local stakeholders to discuss"* (p.15).

The research findings go beyond that and present entrepreneurs' actions and experiences that have supported others. It is seen as a way to interpret collaboration within a spectrum of reciprocal benefits and with an altruistic mindset. This is also supported by Salvado et al. (2023), who have studied the stakeholder-entrepreneur value co-creation pyramid and detected that four levels of benefits that

drive a win-win yielding collaboration, one where support is in place. Even though it was not necessarily actioned, the idea given by the words *“they will help you out, no matter what”*, almost expresses a sense of community/ family where someone feels part of something and also knows to be supported. Another one expressed the idea through the following words *“you can tap in when you need it or when you reach out for help or push something forward and do something in common”*, making clear that when in need, someone is there, but also when they want to propose new ideas or projects.

This provides a fertile and open ground for the business development as well as for community development, as it gives the reassurance of being supported by someone. It becomes clear that one business in a rural area, with the structural limitations that rural areas have, is in need of others not only in terms of support for the business but also in relation to creating something valuable together. An example, it is the project about creating a farmer’s market, which has not only economically improved the rural areas but has allowed many young and small businesses to start and develop in these areas. Other valuable projects related to the organisation of events, such as the honey festival organised by two entrepreneurs in Matakana, where after supporting each other as newcomers into the areas and sharing ideas, they have decided to plan this event. Support was also given in terms of material things, such as machineries or workforce when in need. It provides an important leverage for the entrepreneurship development, as the knowledge of having support from other may allow to strengthen the business, relationships and also the overcome possible difficulties.

#### **5.1.1.4 Synergies: Creation and Valorisation of Local Products**

Another important theme discussed by participants is the creation of synergic products and local supplies. This goes beyond the simplistic idea of listing all the tourism offers proposed by the destination; but it evolves into a new spectrum of tourism offering creation by the entanglement of stakeholders, through bottom-up or top-down approaches. Results mainly refer to the creation of products such as the chocolate box in Matakana, which is made with other local suppliers (local olive oil, peanut butter, wine). Similarly, the use of local sourced ingredients in restaurants that has been observed in both Pustertal and Matakana, reinforcing the value of local partnership in tourism-related offerings. Synergies come together also when organising events, farmer’s markets or projects such as *“tour of flavours”*. Results have shown that in Matakana, the synergic products were created from a bottom-up process (for example, the creation of a gift box and chocolate box with local ingredients). As Matakana is a recent tourism destination, it may still in the process of creating synergic products,

particularly from a top-down approach, which were not mentioned. Synergies efforts bring positive impact of synergy among peer enterprises on long-term and sustainable cooperative relationships, such as increasing financial indicators, customer loyalty and reputation (Holubčík et al., 2023).

On the other hand, in Pustertal, where tourism has been developed for many years and is also influenced by the work of DMOs, the synergic experience is created from a top-down process (for example, the experience with the huts, the “tour of flavours”). Both approaches can be efficient and create a ground for collaboration and proactive actions in place, increasing the participation of entrepreneurs by giving them the opportunity to be involved. However, flaws are not missing. While they strengthen the relationships, they also create challenges when entrepreneurs are trying to engage with another one, but there is not sufficient communication or a common vision. For example, one entrepreneur shared a personal experience of interacting with another, who was both giving and requesting different products and services. However, as the local producer held a sort of monopoly over a specific product, it was not possible to further discuss. Moreover, a diverse mindset can put obstacles up for other businesses, by not sharing the same vision or project. This comes back to the importance of collaboration in helping to guide towards a shared vision, as it is difficult to manage different ideas. Melović et al. (2023) sustain the importance of togetherness and synergy in aiming to develop an additional or complementary tourism offer, which in their study was explicitly directed toward the agri-tourism offer.

Findings from this current research have shown the involvement in using local supplies among participants and thus seem to create a virtuous cycle. This was underlined by a participant in Pustertal, as being a supplier for a hotel with local jams used for breakfast. The participant highlighted the hotel’s role in promoting small entrepreneurs. As a result, some tourists were later coming to the shop in order to purchase jams and discover other locally made products. Other similar examples were given in both Matakana and Pustertal. Besides having economic benefits for rural areas, it helps the preservation of rural area activity (Peira et al., 2021; Kimbu et al., 2022).

In particular, Korsgaard et al. (2015) show the willingness of entrepreneurs to use local resources and supplies, highlighting the importance of increasing awareness on the limited quantity and extensive approach that entrepreneurs can produce, as expressed by a participant, preferring the intensive agricultural approach. As such, an entrepreneur in Pustertal was astonished about the high request for eggs (the main product) from other local businesses and explained the experiences of rejecting some offers as the demand was higher than the product availability. It was essential for the

entrepreneur to make the restaurants understand the reasons for the limitation on the quantity in order to preserve the high quality.

In general, the use of local supplies and the creation of synergic products, has seen not only a way to promote each other's products but to increase the connection with other businesses, and propose high-quality experiences and products to tourists. Indeed, it seems to have strengthened the connection with others, not only from a business point of view but also from a personal level. It helped some newcomers feel more integrated into the new place, particularly in the case of Matakana. This is also supported by Florentin et al. (2023), when discussing about the revitalisation of rural areas in Japan; they suggest the spaces created by rural entrepreneurs have strengthened the social networks and also integrate newcomers into the local networks. Additionally, synergic effort on creating products and services together, seems to strengthen the relationships among entrepreneurs, increasing their trust and adding value to the rural destination.

#### **5.1.1.5 Connection as a Need: Towards Coopetition**

Connecting is part of the belonging need and accounts for the social nature of the human being presented through Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Pichere, 2015), thus the insightful view of a simple but essential function of collaboration. It is an essential need for human beings, as it describes the idea of getting together and talking to people. A participant said when discussing collaboration and networking, "*it is just like a spider web, lots of connections*" (NZ06). This metaphor reflects the complex and expanding nature of relationships within the tourism sector. Through tourism practices, these connections can grow, leading to new interactions that extend beyond economic benefits. As seen in the literature, such networks can also expand cultural and social boundaries within communities (Zhang et al., 2022).

Previous studies have found that many small/micro-businesses in rural areas are not interconnected, causing "loneliness and sadness, and a very strong feeling of being ignored, excluded, or not being taken into account" (p.556, Sanagustín Fons et al., 2011). One participant in Matakana expressed the difficulties in finding new connections, making it harder to engage with others. At the same time, others have shown that through collaboration there is the *family feeling*, this sense of belonging, of feeling part of a group. Particularly, Cunha et al. (2020) have found that small tourism businesses with a clear motivation related to the lifestyle of rural areas tend to form strong connections with one another. These relationships help nurture a more dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystem, which sees a flourishing ground for other businesses but also enhances the tourism offerings and contributes to

the well-being of local communities. However, entrepreneurs, identified as less lifestyle-oriented, have revealed a higher level of mistrust towards cooperation. Thus, the results challenge this statement, as even entrepreneurs who moved there for the lifestyle, while having strong motivation to engage with others, can still find it hard to connect and integrate in the rural areas. As suggested, organising local catchups and small meetings can help the process of connection. This might help to strengthen relationships and entrepreneurs' sense of community.

Other studies have shown the need to collaborate in rural areas. Particularly, Fontefrancesco et al. (2023, p297) identified an urgent need to "improve the frequency and intensity of collaboration among all the economic actors of the sector and with private and public institutions". Through connection, there are benefits such as forging synergies, exchanging resources, information and knowledge and promotion, as seen in the previous section. From entrepreneurs' perspective, other benefits are to strengthen their attractiveness and propose a high-quality offer and experience to tourists (Cunha et al., 2020). However, a critical point of discussion, which particularly referred to the Matakana case study, is the lack of connections and leadership. Indeed, some participants expressed this lack of willingness to connect with other entrepreneurs or the difficulties in connecting with others as some felt like "outsiders". For example, an entrepreneur who has moved from overseas to that specific rural area was finding it difficult to connect with other entrepreneurs as being new to the area. In contrast, another participant who had lived there for longer shared that it took a significant amount of time before gaining locals' trust and nurturing connections.

Connecting with others also helps understanding each other, and it can provide a path toward cooptation, which is the base for a different way of competition among entrepreneurs. Cooptation refers to a dual hybrid relationship between competition and cooperation that simultaneously creates value and competes for that value (Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). As tourism grows, competition among entrepreneurs is fermenting. This mixture of collaboration and competition is not always present and acknowledging the potential of cooptation, rather than feeling that they are losing markets might be a key contribution to tourism development. Indeed, when discussing competitors, one participant said: "*Why did he go to my florist, who I am already selling my flowers to?*" (NZ05). This was referred to another entrepreneur who has just started a similar business and is trying to enter the same market. It was noted a negative expression towards that particular competitor. Indeed, the competition is seen as a threat as demonstrated by this comment: "*if you start selling that to the florist it would be less market for me*" (NZ05). Again, this might be influenced by the fact that Matakana is a recent rural destination, there competition is increasing over

time. Others pointed out that competition, even in the same field, is healthy as it backs each other up and helps the whole destination development through new ideas and the promotion of the whole territory. Participants in Matakana who had previously worked in another area expressed the idea that having competition increases benefits for the destinations, and, thus, this can generate positive outcomes. Below are the specific words:

*There was lots of competition per se but there everybody helped each other, and it was just so brilliant. So, I've kind of taken those values and tried and done it here and it worked. For example, there is another lady that runs XXX and does what I do with XXX tours and we're friends we have wines together and she gives me work and I give her work. (NZ03)*

Through competition, the entrepreneurs gain a variety of advantages, such as sharing of resources and efficient and effective marketing strategies for the destination (Wu & He, 2022). Competition is a natural process in the free market. It encourages entrepreneurs toward the diversification of products and services, valorising the uniqueness of the rural area. This focus on differentiation has led to the revival of traditions that were getting lost, such as the example of the herbs that were no longer commercialised, or the emergence of a young storyteller sharing local legends in Pustertal.

In conclusion, collaboration is seen not only under a tangible lens of sharing material resources, but it contributes to the intangibility of aspects such as emotional support, sharing knowledge, promotion. As a result, collaboration enhances the visibility of the entrepreneur, sparks creativity in developing synergic products and projects and strengthens connecting to among individuals. Tourism collaboration provides opportunities for entrepreneurs to get engaged in projects and events. This increases the synergy among them and includes both communities and tourists. This has been observed through the various initiatives of synergic products. For example, the chocolate box in Matakana, featuring products from multiple local suppliers. Agricultural workshops organised by a local, open to the community and other entrepreneurs. Moreover, events and other small projects that allow and foster connections among entrepreneurs. All these elements are positive advantages for a nurturing environment which seems to attract entrepreneurs in Matakana. Opportunities to engage are also available in Pustertal through tourism collaboration, where projects such as farmer's markets or food events allow entrepreneurs to be part of a network. For the case study in Pustertal, these projects are often promoted by DMOs or other tourism entities. The following section proceeds to discuss the perceived tourism collaboration's contribution to rural development.

## **5.2 Tourism's Collaboration Contribution to Rural Development**

The following section provides a discussion of the contribution of tourism collaboration to rural tourism development, aiming to discuss collaboration's value in the mobilisation of assets towards the development of rural areas. When tourism collaboration takes place benefits are multiple, not only internally among the people who take part in it, but it expands to rural areas. Indeed, tourism collaboration can bring many effects to rural areas, in particular on tangible and intangible assets. Specifically, this research finding highlights the importance of intangible assets that were in some way considered or affected by collaboration. The following section presents tourism's collaboration contribution from rural entrepreneurs' perspectives, and it discusses the assets that tourism collaboration is mobilising toward rural development.

### ***5.2.1 Environmental Stewardship – Kaitiakitanga***

While existing literature explores rural spaces as multi-functional areas with consumption, protection and production value (Holmes, 2006; Schroeder et al., 2016), it often overlooks the internal perspective of rural actors (Boluk & Mottiar, 2014). The literature suggests the idea of rural spaces as multi-functional areas driven by different types of value. First, there is consumption value that considers the tourism and recreational activities. Second, the protection value which integrates the resource protection and environmental safeguarding. Third, the production value intended as the agricultural facet of rural areas (Holmes, 2006; Schroeder et al., 2016). This study redeems from looking at the space as a functional object, instead considers the inside point of view of actors who find value in collaborating with each other. Of particular importance is the finding on environmental consciousness as one of the main values shared by the participants. Participants used terms like *"caring for the environment"*, *"green vision"*, *"respect for nature"*, and *"safeguarding"* to express this commitment. Being in direct contact with nature made it possible to perceive and feel a strong connection with the environment. Participants sometimes were also emotional when talking about the environment and traditions. Nature is viewed not only a resource or an attraction for the tourism system, but as an integral part of participants' lives, something to protect and take care of. Participants discussed the ways they take care of the environment. These actions range from basic recycling towards more regenerative actions in place. Their decision-making processes were often guided by an environmental sustainability mindset, rather than being driven by solely economic considerations. They also shared concerns about tourists not being so respectful of nature, and in some cases genuinely not knowing the rules of the place they are visiting. As previously seen, one participant

expressed the idea of sharing values within other businesses that relate to the safety of the environment. Particularly, participant says:

*I think this area especially shares similar values and vision, and many business owners in all different scopes are all about the environment. They (referring to other entrepreneurs) really are like keeping it as clean as we can, doing something to minimise carbon footprints and just keep that area clean (NZ03).*

This aligns with Liu et al. (2023), who found that tourism development can increase environmental awareness within rural communities and encourage responsible resource use. Several participants described practices they implement to achieve greater sustainability, such as reducing waste, and using eco-friendly products. Further investigation brought up the idea that sustainability is not good enough anymore. There is the realisation and actions in place that a regenerative process has started, as reducing the production impacts on the environment is just a first step, and it is now aimed at going further by supporting it. For example, by bringing back what used to be there as the original biodiversity and also understanding and respecting the limits, challenging the capitalistic vision of tourism, which aims to ongoing growth. This commitment to sustainability resonates with Peira et al. (2021) who studied the development of rural tourism as diversification of local economy in the North-West side of Italy. They found that farmers expressed a strong vocation toward sustainability and their commitment to protecting the environment and landscapes. The same authors state that farmers' commitment is relevant moving forward to a green transition as the European Union aims to reduce the environmental footprint.

Additionally, current findings have seen participants engaging in some activities as someone else has introduced them to the local network, such as the case of entrepreneurs participating in the swapping group in Matakana. This has allowed the entrepreneurs to meet and share knowledge, as well as increasing awareness on local products and regenerative practices. The connections and collaboration entice dynamics that drive towards common goals, and one of these is stewardship of the natural capital. However, while the environmental theme emerged from the findings as something that drives the work and vision of participants, it was possible to see that this was shared by many as well as in Pustertal. At the local level, several initiatives reflected this commitment. For example, in Matakana, a community swapping group was formed, allowing producers to exchange unsold products. Collaboration has helped and contributed to the increase of awareness and actions in place toward an environmental sustainability vision. Findings presented a common vision on the environmental issue, which is of a key element to have when guiding toward tourism development.

### **5.2.2 Informing Tourists**

Findings from both case studies revealed that tourism activity in rural areas is increasing the willingness of rural entrepreneurs to inform tourists and visitors about environmental and cultural aspects of their living, their products and their land. An example was given in Matakana where an entrepreneur decides to introduce beekeeping courses for adults as part of their product offering. In Pustertal, an entrepreneur proposes videos showcasing the long history of their business which, includes local traditions. Additionally, a farmer took the time to explain to tourists the ways of growing their fruits and the ancient stories behind some of the products. This not only has the option of selling more products or expanding the portfolio of products and services, but it also has a deeper meaning of providing information and increasing awareness of what is beyond the simple product/service. While, it is a voluntary sharing of information, sometimes it becomes a necessity to keep the area safeguarded and apply the territory rules. An example was given by a participant who shared an experience with some international tourists who had no idea about the rules in place for recycling. Despite instructions being available in English, German and Italian, the tourists did not follow them – genuinely unaware of the guidelines likely due to language barriers or lack of understanding. It is important to consider that very few tourists purposefully damage a destination environment, as Safonov and Hall (2023) found out, however not knowing the rules in place or not respecting them can forge into a problematic for rural areas. As stated by these latter authors, individual tourists do not recognise their impacts as affecting the environment because they do not understand how tourism affects the environment on a global and local scale. The role that rural entrepreneurs can have by often being in direct contact with tourists and also by providing information, can have influence on the way tourism develops.

Contributing to tourism development through informing and sharing knowledge with tourists also increases the awareness of the community towards themes such as environmental and cultural protection and conservation (Litheko & Potgieter, 2021). This is in line with the findings that present the necessity to increase the participant's awareness towards the tourism impacts, providing tourists with concrete information on products and services and the limitations in rural areas. For instance, an entrepreneur in Pustertal had to inform tourists about the unavailability of products due to unfavourable weather conditions of that specific year. By explaining the situation, the entrepreneur emphasised that this limitation could be seen as a sign of high product quality. They noted that while it might be easier to increase production by using artificial ingredients, they had deliberately chosen to avoid such practices.

Some participants felt important increasing awareness among tourists about the place they are visiting and the products and services they are purchasing. Nevertheless, other studies have shown the willingness of local businesses to educate tourists (Kimbu et al., 2022) and farms that have diversified their core business, becoming centres of education stemming from their identity (Ohe, 2020). Utami et al. (2023) have seen cooperation among local stakeholders in terms of educating each other on the habit of not littering and keeping the rural places clean and preserved. They have discussed the need to include tourists in this way of thinking, as they have a great impact on littering and, shaping the quality of life of rural communities. This can also be expanded by sharing information with tourists, as they are part of the tourism development and how the rural place is shaped.

Environmental aspects were often mentioned, as often participants were working in close contact with nature, such as being farmers, growers, farm-to-table restaurants, beekeepers. In contrast, less was detected about cultural and traditional heritage, specifically Māori in Matakana and Ladin in Pustertal – except for a few cases. These cases were proposing either local dishes with Ladin names, or some other products with Ladin origins, which that culture has been mentioned more compared to Matakana case study. The lack of information or the fact that was not mentioned, it might be a prompt for future research. It could confirm findings from other studies such as Liu et al. (2023), which suggest that the socio-cultural perspective is considered to have less priority or even considered the “least important”.

While discussing the importance of traditions and culture for the community, a participant in the Pustertal case study sustained that these elements were not one of tourists’ highest motivations to come there. As a result, culture was perceived as less significant in terms of pull factors attracting visitors and tourists to the destination. This insight was based on a long-term study conducted by the participant. Other participants expressed the idea that informing tourists is a benefit in conserving agricultural heritage, as well as having an educational function. Support of this view was shown by Tang and Xu (2023), who discuss how farms are experiencing a transformative approach to agri-tourism. This business model helps the sustainability of local people’s way of living and conservation of a cultural lifestyle.

In summary, participants are not there only to contribute to the local economy, but their function is greater, by informing tourism and visitors. Therefore, they might increase awareness of the rural aspects to tourists and visitors. Yet, tourism collaboration has the function of sharing information among peers, sharing knowledge among participants that they consequently may get to know the area better themselves and inform tourists, making them more aware of the place they are visiting.

### **5.2.3 Traditional Knowledge Transmission**

Mainly referred to the Pustertal case study, where history is centenary, entrepreneurs were showcasing ancient machines and tools for agricultural production, herbs and oil production, also integrating them with videos that explained the use and history. Moreover, while visiting a local butcher who is part of the Farmer's Market, one surprising detail stood up. At the entrance, the owner's mother was showcasing the disappearing art of weaving wool with the traditional wooden machine.

Rural entrepreneurship has a special function of valorising cultural heritage as suggested by Stroe (2019). A participant explicitly pointed out that the knowledge of herbals, plants and flowers benefits is getting lost, and his family could share it and keep it alive through his business. Understanding the importance and being aware of the heritage that these entrepreneurs embrace is a key point in planning tourism. In contrast, Matakana, with a more recent history behind it, also has a multicultural entrepreneurship system compared to Pustertal. However, no traditions were mentioned when defining the tourism contribution in Matakana. Some participants also expressed the idea of avoiding cultural appropriation, referring to Māori culture in order to respect it, but the same are inspired by this culture. Indeed, some local entrepreneurs were very focused on the environment and its protection, which in Māori is considered the Kaitiakitanga as the guardian of the environment (Te Ara – NZ Govt, 2024). As such, one respondent expressed the idea of increasing and sharing the knowledge on regeneration, reinforcing the so-called “*zero waste sustainability thinking*”, and another restoring a native forest, planting native trees and regenerating the bee's activity.

This might be related to Stroe's (2019) models of rural entrepreneurship, defined as mono-culturalism and multi-culturalism. The first one refers to “consuming culture in different places but mainly with the same traditions and same culture topic” (p.1123). The second one refers to “being a meeting point of some mixed population and tradition [...] leading in time to mixed tradition, mixed culture and mixed activities that particularised the area” (p.1123). In this sense, it was interpreted by the researcher as many of the participants from Matakana immigrated there not long ago, which applies the multi-culturalism model, while the one in Pustertal has been there for generations. Even though this was not the focus of the research, it was interesting to realise how the Matakana rural entrepreneurs are in some way creating this tradition or culture of green thinking, sharing and empowering with many other businesses. The collaboration can bring to an empowerment of the

“green thinking” by sharing, supporting, connecting, creating and promoting and these influence and affects tourism offer in rural areas.

Moreover, keeping traditions alive was strictly related to Pustertal case study. In contrast, in Matakana, collaboration appears to be shaping a new rural identity, strongly connected to the green thinking and its emerging reputation as a foodie destination. This has been shared by a participant, who needs to be noted as part of the “newcomers”, and as cited before, it created a product to give a unique identity to Matakana. In both cases, collaborating guides to strengthen the social structure of the rural areas, either by increasing the opportunities for entrepreneurs to connect and sustain their business, and from there, shaping the future of traditions.

#### **5.2.4 High Quality and Authenticity**

When discussing the contribution to tourism provided by participants, one of the main themes that was highly recognised was the “high quality and authenticity.” The findings in both cases revealed that “high quality and authenticity” are widely perceived by many participants as being as one major value shared. The following quote presents the idea of offering what can be offered, even when we can make more.

*“Offering what you have and if you have little is a quality factor because it means that we do not add preservatives or anything else to increase the quantity, but we maintain what we have and the high quality. And if nature has given us less of some things this year, then tourists should understand and appreciate the work” (NZ08)*

Giving emphasis to the quality of products and services and rather than focusing solely on the increasing sales through higher quantities or the use of additives like preservatives, as suggested by this participant, denotes a strong commitment to value-driven entrepreneurship.

Moreover, when talking about high quality and authenticity, most participants referred to gastronomy, as part of their business related to this field. Particularly for the Matakana case study, gastronomy was detected as the uniqueness of the place. Indeed, local food is a key component of Matakana rural tourism, and previous studies have seen that it increases the destination brand identity and community pride, and it helps economic development (Zhang et al., 2019; Badurina et al., 2023). At the base of the everyday life of these participants, who have a business or activity related to tourism, is about providing authentic, or real as defined by some participants, experiences and products and concurrently with high quality. Authenticity is defined by Ram et al. (2016) in terms of “its

characteristic being real, reliable, trustworthy, original, first hand, true in substance” (p.111). Another study has shown a positive relation between authenticity and place attachment, which is considered the emotional link that connects the self and the place, detected in international visitors (Ram et al., 2016).

It is important to note the words that were shared to make the researcher aware of how it is perceived. Indeed, this was related to the idea of growing your own products and selling directly to the consumers, and more importantly being acknowledged of the origins of the products, that could be easily tracked. Indeed, products are taken care of from the ground to the finished product.

*“The quality is that of a handmade artisanal product. And they don't always taste the same and it's always the same. Although I sell meat, I think we should eat less meat, but what we eat we need to know where it comes from. And this applies to all other products. (ITA11)*

It was highly important to be knowledgeable of the product and service’s life cycles. Sharing authenticity and high quality as a value within the tourism offer has many advantages as already seen in the literature. Indeed, studies have shown that quality is a key player in order to achieve competitiveness based on the enterprise’s point of view (Komppula, 2014). It was also observed that participants expressed the idea of not getting bigger at all costs as they want to keep real and authentic and provide high-quality services and products. Participants shared their thoughts about understanding the limit to keep authenticity. It was expressed that this needs to follow the tourism expectation of having an authentic experience instead of looking at the other way around of safeguarding traditions and sharing them with tourists. Also, limits were mentioned under an environmental lens, where farmers were discussing the need for regeneration and respect for the land.

“High quality and authenticity” emerged among many participants that are part of the tourism offer. This emphasis revealed the potential of preserving local history and safeguarding the local production against the intensified and extended agricultural production that is nowadays pressuring rural areas (Nicholls et al., 2020). To provide value to local products, an entrepreneur in Matakana has created, together with other entrepreneurs, a product that comprises and promotes local producers. Specifically, this participant expressed the following thought: *“It was a way to celebrate the region where we are and then to bring something that is giving an identity that's unique in Matakana.” (NZ07)*

This confirms the strengthening of rural identity through collective projects from a bottom-up approach. Accordingly, Basile and Cavallo (2020) suggest bottom-up processes help the

reconstruction of rural identities and the strengthening of local cultures. Indeed, when proposing the rural areas sustainable development framework, it is highlighted the importance of identity and authenticity as a basic pillar to achieve sustainable economic development, allowing to restore centrality to territorial features (Basile & Cavallo, 2020). This current research findings have shown the importance given by rural entrepreneurs to high-quality products and services and preservation of authenticity. Rural entrepreneurs do not only aim to improve their quality but also connect with each other and strengthen their origins and identity. Relationships, connections, and identity are an intertwined complex framework in which authenticity and high-quality values play a key role (Zhang et al., 2022).

While the importance of authenticity was discussed, it also came up the difficulty in keeping authenticity, avoiding the commodification of rural destinations to increase the number of visitors. In some places, traditional events are being replicated solely for tourists. This practice contributes to the development of the so-called commodification – which is the destination conversion into a commodity as a consequence of tourism demand that originates in the erosion of the culture of rural areas to attract visitors (Weaver & Lawton, 2014). This highlights the blurred boundaries of integrating the tourism activities into rural traditions and denotes how far this phenomenon can go with or without deteriorating the socio-cultural asset. As Tang and Xu (2023) suggest, cultural integration in tourism practices is not always successful, leading to destruction and commodification of local cultures, making local people feel displayed as objects and resulting in loss of local identity.

Having these values of high quality and authenticity, shared between the tourism offer side, may lead to the preservation of traditions and respect for the place and its history. It reinforces the sense of identity and belonging and increases awareness over the limit, so preferring quality over quantity.

### **5.2.5 Human Connections**

This research stated the importance of connections, either with other entrepreneurs or with tourists as well. Literature has seen the value of connections merely from an economic point of view. Building personal contacts and inform tourists are seen as strategies to increase future sales. This approach addresses an extremely important aspect of business sustainability, as it is per se the primary condition to keep rural economy ongoing (Tomay & Tuboly, 2023). When discussing tourism collaboration, participants noted that personal contact and direct contact with visitors were essential for tourists or customers and other entrepreneurs. The willingness to build direct contact with the

other, not only generates a positive impact on the value of the company, but participants discuss the idea of feeling like a family. Participants from Pustertal have mentioned the feature of having returning tourists who have been coming back since they were young (counting decades). One participant emphasised the fact that time is dedicated to the tourists becoming like part of the family. It is not only about the increase of future sales but also about reciprocity of time spent with the other. This concerns tourists and visitors, as well as also entrepreneurs' peers and other local actors such as DMOs. The connections are part of the economic sustainability of the enterprise and the destination, particularly for the Case Study of Pustertal, where tourists have been coming back for a long time.

Through collaboration, a participant mentioned the fact of feeling part of a family, and this has helped its business sustainability. Valuing personal contact aligns with the findings of Yachin and Ioannides (2020). Their research into the potential of entrepreneurs' capability in utilising local resources to develop rural tourism, found out that the personal contact with local and public actors embedded in the rural area can facilitate the mobilisation of resources. This has positive consequences in reducing dependency on external resources due to the limited availability that rural areas have and the reduced size of the businesses. Direct and personal contact give visibility and trust to another person, and it nurtures the sense of family as expressed by a participant.

### ***5.2.6 Promoting Each Other***

Particularly for the case study of Matakana, promotion was one of the main contributions. Many entrepreneurs reported they promote other businesses and the destination as a way to contribute to tourism, either by word of mouth, by press, magazines, or social media. In particular, gastronomy plays a key role in cross-referring and promotion. Some entrepreneurs were using local supplies to create their products, developing a virtuous promotion cycle among tourists and other local businesses. Studies have found similar findings detecting gastronomy as a dimension in which it is possible to see the presence of cooperation by entrepreneurs who select local supplies as their first choice when proposing dishes or even selling local products as souvenirs.

Besides the solely promoting their business, many promoted others, creating an effect of reciprocal promotion. This is in line with other authors who suggest that partnerships with other local businesses positively strengthen the destination image and each actor's attractiveness, as well as their competitive position (Sanagustín Fons et al., 2011). Moreover, the same study has observed that this influences the tourist's choices, often encouraging them to extend their stay. Additionally, the sense

of recognition, by being referred by other peers, develops a mutual benefit, in the upselling of products and visibility and increasing motivation in what the business is doing. This is in line with Cunha et al.'s (2020) findings that show that the recognition and prestige achieved develop improvement and expansion of the businesses and attract others to invest in a business.

Promotion is related to collaboration as it allows synergy effort among entrepreneurs and encourages the local supply chain. By promoting one another, entrepreneurs can sell their products and services directly to both tourists and locals, increasing the connection and contact with them. When rural entrepreneurs showcase other local products alongside their own, they not only boost word-of-mouth awareness but also reinforce mutual support and trust. This approach values the entrepreneur's work, increases its exposure to the market, allows more sales, and it can provide a higher awareness of its business activity among locals and tourists. Achieving this level of visibility independently would often be more difficult due to limited resources. Tourism collaboration has also been seen to provide sharing of knowledge and increase of skills of entrepreneurs, such as learning from another peer the online sales platforms, which become increasingly important during COVID-19.

In conclusion, tourism collaboration has been observed to positively influence rural development, particularly in tourism-focused areas. It fosters stronger networks, enhances visibility, supports sustainability, and empowers entrepreneurs through shared resources and knowledge. Themes that have emerged have touched some of the community capitals seen in the literature review, such as environmental, cultural, social, and human capitals. The following section provides a final discussion on the mobilisation of the tourism collaboration asset.

### **5.3 Challenges and Facilitators Towards Tourism Collaboration**

The benefits and positives of creating networks and forging collaboration in rural areas have been previously discussed. However, literature highlights that in some rural areas, there is a low propensity to generate networks (Peira et al., 2021). Additionally, there may be a lack of ability to organise a system and synergy actions which are considered fundamental elements for developing rural tourism destination (Peira et al., 2021). This section explores the reasons and challenges faced by the two rural destinations in order to forge and improve the tourism collaboration of rural entrepreneurs.

### **5.3.1 Tourism Collaboration challenges**

One of the main challenges revealed by the findings is lack of leadership, which is specifically referred to in the Matakana case study. Participants expressed a common opinion such as the following one:

*“Everybody is trying so hard at their little businesses that they run here that there's no major leadership to go right now, we get together and you talk. We are really missing that” (NZ03).*

The limited resources in rural areas, compared to urban areas, reflect the difficulties in managing tourism. This is one of the reasons why the public-private partnerships are frequently recommended by scholars (Badurina et al., 2023; Melović et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022; Peira, 2021; Yu & Artz, 2019), but it is also stated that, cooperation within these is lacking (Komppula, 2014). The necessity to have some sort of leadership was again stated from another perspective:

*I think that without that someone at the helm and willing to actively promote or drive the network, it just is that everyone could be a bit too busy but their all lives and their all business to be very efficient with it. There are always things happening outside the bigger network [...] but I think you do need someone that's got the time and effort to drive the whole thing, fun ways to bring the business together. (NZ07)*

Participants felt that a challenge for collaboration was the lack of someone who leads the destination. Not having a strong destination management organisation in place felt like missing, and having someone who oversaw helping and supporting with the guidance on tourism development was in need. On the opposite, Pustertal is strongly driven by tourism organisations, and this helps not only the marketing itself, but also the vision. The lack of leadership was found within the set of barriers for tourism development by Wang et al. (2016). Brooker and Joppe (2013) found that within the eight categories of challenges for rural tourism operators, there is collaboration in terms of lacking leadership, entrepreneurship and understanding of the value of rural tourism amongst residents.

Participant (NZ07) underlined the lack of time and energy and the need for someone who leads the destination and the network. Other participants have stated the lack of time and energy in collaboration, specifically when they are single entrepreneurs who are dealing with all the business development and at the same time, acknowledging the essential role of relationships and collaboration. Indeed, Stoddart et al. (2020) found that difficulties in building collaboration are related also to the lack of engagement and availability of time. This was particularly found in Matakana, and it might be related to the initial stage of this rural destination, as being at its beginning phase and not

having strong DMOs who are leading the path. For Pustertal, there was no mention of the leadership problem; this might be dependent on the DMOs which help the management of tourism.

Growing at a fast speed and having limited resources – as referred by some the participants in Matakana – is a challenge to face in terms of tourism development. However, having a common vision and consequently developing a tourism strategy is felt missing for the case study of Matakana, creating a barrier towards possible collaborative approaches and tourism development. Similar findings (Van Den Bergh, 2014) show that having different visions and viewpoints limits the collaboration when building the tourism offer. Additionally, Kumppula (2014) states that the lack of common vision provides the inhibition of the tourism destination development. Managing a tourism destination means interacting with a variety of personalities that have different ideas, visions and beliefs. The challenge of having different vision and beliefs integrate with Jesus and Franco's (2016). Their comparative case study between predominantly urban and predominantly rural tourism destinations presents the existence of different points of view as disadvantages. They also identify barriers such as bureaucracy and varying needs, which can hinder the development of collaborative systems and synergy in rural tourism. In contrast, Luongo et al. (2023) stated that through a collaborative network, it is possible to include a diversity of stakeholders and facilitate the exchange of ideas and resources, which results in a collective problem-solving approach and improvement of innovation.

One of the challenges that participants face is the lack of communication. This is particularly highlighted from Matakana case study. This can generate a gap in information and support among local stakeholders, as seen from previous studies when, during the COVID-19 pandemic, people in villages felt demotivated. For instance, Utami et al (2023) have seen that by sitting together and discussing the future of tourism development creates encouragement and strengthen internal cooperation. Communication plays a key role in building collaboration and enhancing the cooperation and collaboration (Fontefrancesco et al., 2023; Ramayah, 2011) as well as improving the relationship between stakeholders (Peira et al., 2021). Rainero and Modarelli (2020) suggest that sharing messages and direct involvement with local community in organising events that attract tourists, play a crucial role in the engagement among people, as well as overcomes ideological barriers. Moreover, good communication between entrepreneurs and to the local community is identified as a key factor for the success of rural tourism (Kumar & Shekhar, 2020).

Finally, the lack of human resources is also mentioned in the results as being an obstacle to development of the tourism industry in rural areas and a future challenge for many rural

entrepreneurs. The lack of human resources suggest that entrepreneurs have less time to spend on projects, as they would need to focus solely on their business. However, Utami et al. (2023) have shown that for some specific categories or fields of expertise, the lack of human resources can be overcome by collaborating with universities and local government. No further thoughts were than disclosed, beside when another entrepreneur did not want to collaborate, which ended in the creation of some tension among them.

Finally, Mei et al. (2017) discuss the challenges and barriers to networking and collaborating within tourism operators and found that willingness to engage is one of the main challenges towards collaboration, as well as involvement and trust among participants. However, this is in contrast with the research findings as it seems that there is willingness to engage and collaborate, particularly on the recent tourism destination of Matakana. The challenges discussed provide a barrier to collaborative approaches and some suggestions were given to provide more opportunities to entice connection and collaboration among rural entrepreneurs.

### ***5.3.2 Facilitators for tourism collaboration***

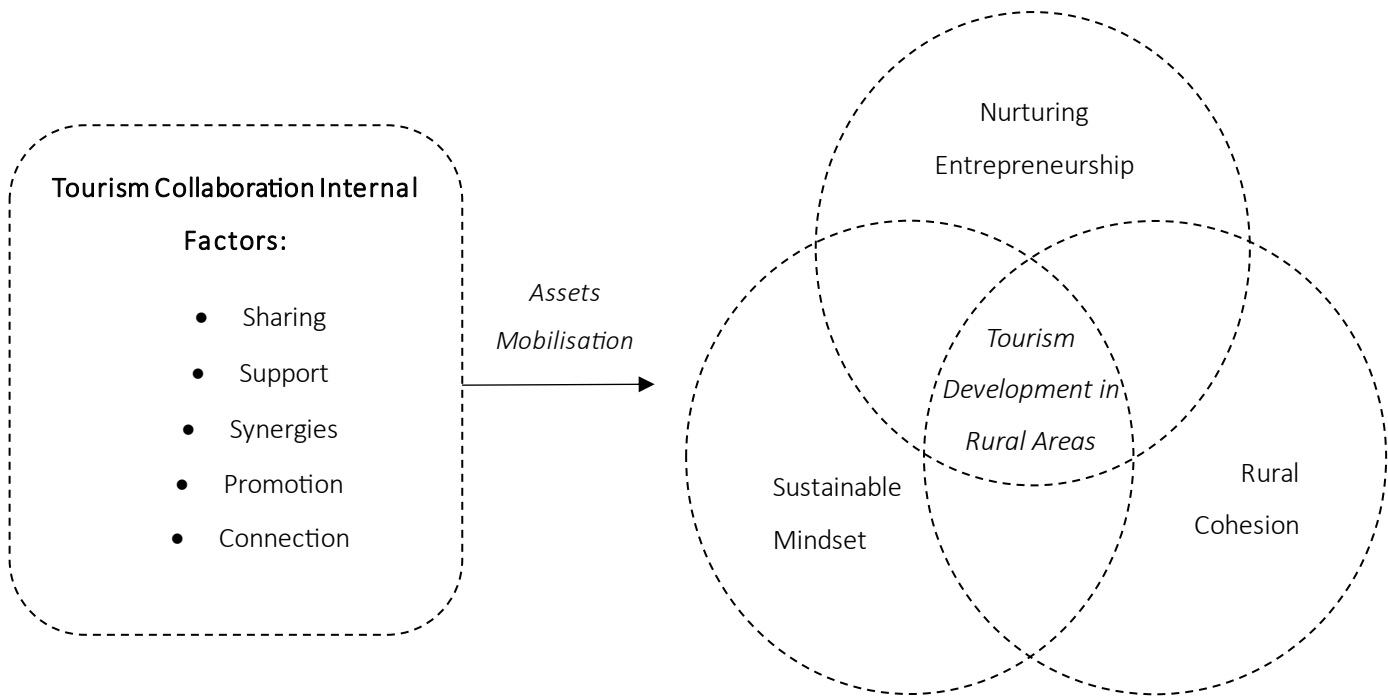
Suggestions on facilitators to improve tourism collaboration highlighted the need to have meetings, planning tourism, and share and discuss a common vision of the future of the area. Networking events were considered important as it is a way to connect and bond with others. These events can create opportunities for new partnerships, for the creation of new projects or for getting different feedback. A participant in Matakana, discussed the frequency of attending to these types of events pre-COVID 19 and the benefits of connecting and getting to know other entrepreneurs, particularly for newcomers. Other suggestion was the organisation of Farmers Market, which help the local economy and as well as the development of tourism. However, in Matakana there are strict rules to become a stallholder at the Farmers Market, limiting the possibility to be part of it. While aiming at having a unique Farmers Market, some other entrepreneurs were left out. Finally, it is highlighted the value of community groups, where is involved local community and entrepreneurs, and provide opportunities to exchange ideas and visions, as well as share local products and increase business visibility and network.

## 5.4 Assets mobilisation in rural areas through tourism collaboration

By analysing the internal factors of tourism collaboration and the rural entrepreneurs' contribution to tourism through a collaborative lens, three key assets have emerged that can foster and enhance tourism development in rural areas. The following **Figure 5.2** illustrates the assets' mobilisation through tourism collaboration in rural areas. It starts with the internal factors of tourism collaboration (TC), which have been previously described and discussed (Section 5.1), and are considered the sharing, support, synergies, promotion and connection factors. TC not only generates multiple benefits to rural entrepreneurs, but it also facilitates the transfer of tangible and intangible assets, leading to positive impacts on local community and tourism development. The arrow indicates the action of mobilising assets through tourism collaboration that influence tourism development in rural areas. There are three main assets that are considered: the sustainable mindset, rural cohesion and nurturing entrepreneurship.

**Figure 5.2**

*Assets Mobilisation Through Tourism Collaboration in Rural Areas*



Credit: Researcher Elaboration

#### **5.4.1 Rural Cohesion among Rural Entrepreneurs**

Tourism collaboration among rural entrepreneurs is a key driver of rural cohesion. This research argues that such collaboration fosters cohesion between and within entrepreneurs in rural area, leading to enhanced economic sustainability and the development of valuable social capital. The current research findings highlight that this “rural cohesion”, driven by collaborative tourism initiatives, not only strengthens entrepreneurial relationships but also provides strategic advantages for businesses and destination operating in this sector. Joint efforts in creating new products and events, alongside cross-promotion and mutual support, not only forge new relationships but also strengthen existing ones. For instance, the primary driver behind these entrepreneurs’ actions is the fundamental goal to achieve economic sustainability and collaboration may influence it by collectively expanding their tourism offerings. The vulnerability experienced by some entrepreneurs highlighted the necessity of connecting with others for support in overcoming difficult situations and informing decision-making processes.

Through initiatives such as workshops and swap groups proposed by entrepreneurs and locals in Matakana, participants engage with one another, learn and acquire new knowledge, and build trust and reciprocal relationships. As a result, they strengthen the social capital that is vital for navigating challenges and fostering innovation within the rural tourism sector (Guo et al., 2018; Kim & Shim, 2018). The positive influence of social capital and the opportunities provided through workshops and community groups in enhancing the human capital which concerns skills development, knowledge, and information sharing (Emery & Flora, 2006). Synergistic efforts made by entrepreneurs when planning projects together or using local suppliers stimulate the local supply chain and local economy, further amplifying the effect of promoting and cross-referring each other, supporting reputation and trust among rural entrepreneurs. These collaborative efforts have proven to be an advantageous strategy in the business environment and in building long-term and sustainable relationships (Holubčík et al., 2023). It has been observed that these elements encourage rural cohesion among entrepreneurs, enabling individuals to feel part of a community and share similar values. Particularly, the case study of Matakana has shown that collaboration can help the integration and engagement with other entrepreneurs within the community. Some participants shared their experiences of moving to Matakana. For them, it became essential to build networks and collaborate with other entrepreneurs. This collaboration helped strengthen relationships and provided support in developing their businesses through the incorporation of diverse perspectives on business and tourism strategies.

Therefore, TC plays a role in facilitating relationships with other entrepreneurs and the broader community.

While interactions and relationships built on trust and reciprocity are crucial, it is acknowledged that not all relationships are uniformly the same, potentially impacting business activities and rural tourism development. Interpersonal difficulties can hinder collaborative efforts. As such, feelings of being left out, challenges arising from differing visions, and the lack of communication can impede effective collaborative approaches. Therefore, to mitigate these vulnerabilities and foster growth, entrepreneurs may need to cultivate strong, reliable relationships with their peers. This development of cohesive relations within the entrepreneurial ecosystem can ultimately strengthen the entire tourism destination. By fostering a more unified and resilient network of offerings and shared vision among its operators, these relationships contribute to shaping elements of a renewed rural identity. Tourism collaboration encourages the mobilisation of resources, both tangible (e.g., shared machineries) and intangible (e.g., collective marketing) and it could be considered a fertile layer for nurturing rural identity and consequently forging strategies for territorial branding.

Furthermore, beyond its role in fostering rural cohesion through collaboration, the development and strengthening of a shared rural identity is another crucial aspect influenced by these collective efforts among tourism entrepreneurs. Tourism collaboration not only provides a sense of belonging and closeness but also results in influencing the sense of rural identity. Tourism collaboration can serve as a powerful tool for positively shaping and strengthening the bonds within the community. Basile and Cavallo (2020) state that “identity is based on social relations, and it is an on-going relationship between stakeholders, territorial characteristics and civicness” (p. 4). Similarly, Hofstede (2024) describes rural identity as “the emotional connection that people have with places, which has been studied using a range of concepts such as place attachment, sense of belonging and place identity” (p. 2). Discussing current findings, participants highlighted elements such as a sense of belonging when considering tourism's contribution to preserving traditions in Pustertal or the creation of synergistic products in Matakana, aiming to enhance the place identity. Some participants also relocated to Matakana or centred their businesses around its tourism destination, recognising its central role in their financial stability. Attachment to the place, driven by tourism's contribution, was also evident in Pustertal, where entrepreneurs felt part of a family when collaboration was in place and expressed willingness to share their heritage with future generations. The network of

relationships and connections enables the mobilisation and allocation of resources benefiting the individual and the collective (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020).

Finally, tourism collaboration can potentially help to provide a vision for tourism development, bringing different voices together. Collaboration has been observed as a meaningful way of connecting with other people. It encourages engagement, strengthens relationships, and provides opportunities for entrepreneurs to get stronger in the market. By working together, they can consolidate the tourism offer by having a common vision for the development of tourism, contributing to a more cohesive and resilient rural destination. Rural cohesion can provide the ground to foster a positive territorial brand, resulting in a competitive edge in the tourism market. This rural cohesion can influence the development of a strong territorial brand for Matakana. By collaboratively showcasing their unique offerings and shared values, these entrepreneurs cultivate an authentic regional identity that enhances the destination's image and attractiveness to visitors, providing a crucial strategic advantage in the competitive tourism market. This strong territorial brand can, in turn, foster greater visitor loyalty and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the rural tourism sector. This has been seen in Pustertal, where participants highlighted the customer loyalty to their businesses.

#### **5.4.2 Sustainable Mindset**

Tourism collaboration plays a significant role in cultivating a sustainable mindset among rural entrepreneurs. A key contribution of entrepreneurs to rural development lies in their environmental stewardship, characterised by a shared responsibility for preserving the natural environment. Collaboration can create a sustainable tourism ecosystem where entrepreneurs and other stakeholders are committed to environmental protection, enhancing the long-term viability of the tourism industry in the area.

Entrepreneurs frequently adopt a wide range of sustainable practices and actively engage in knowledge sharing with fellow entrepreneurs, tourists, and the wider community. This fosters a fertile ground for sustainable development. In managing their businesses, rural entrepreneurs are mindful of product quality, the origin of raw materials, and the environmental impact of their activities. Their choices—such as opting for eco-friendly materials, avoiding unsustainable imports, and reducing carbon footprints—demonstrate a conscious commitment to environmental responsibility. These entrepreneurs also engage tourists by highlighting the value of local products and explaining production processes, thereby raising awareness and promoting environmentally responsible behaviour among visitors and the community. These actions resonate with the findings of Teruel-

Sanchez et al. (2025), who argue that sustainable practices are influenced by entrepreneurs' personality traits and values, as well as socio-cultural pressures from stakeholders. The current research findings have shown that participants expressed shared values around environmental protection and an openness to knowledge exchange with others.

Although not widely discussed among participants, an emergent concept of limit was raised and may reflect a departure from growth-oriented mindsets, and instead embraces a philosophy grounded in ecological boundaries. This finding integrates Eusébio et al.'s (2014) research on rural tourism and environmental carrying capacity and extends it to the domain of entrepreneurial production. Importantly, rural entrepreneurs are not solely focused on the economic sustainability of their enterprises. They often assume leadership roles in promoting sustainable decisions and practices, potentially shaping new models for regional economic development.

While investigating tourism collaboration, many themes such as environmental stewardship, traditional knowledge transmission, high quality and authenticity were highlighted. The emphasis lies on the socio-cultural and environmental aspects, beside the economic sustainability which is at the base of the entrepreneurial activity. By collaborating with each other, entrepreneurs share ideas and knowledge and organise and participate in events that promote the sustainable pillars, enticing and preserving the natural and cultural capital of rural areas. Overall, entrepreneurs expressed their close bond to the territory and also their concern about protection and safeguard of traditions and natural aspects of it. Through collaboration, it has been seen that in the case study of Matakana, there was a sort of creation of identity, where entrepreneurs who were coming from different cultures and backgrounds, were connecting with others and producing a territorial identity. While, for the case study of Pustertal, the focus was more into preserving traditions and transmission of these.

### ***5.4.3 Nurturing Entrepreneurship***

Tourism collaboration can influence the overall rural area by mobilising assets that allow the development of tourism. Indeed, by sharing resources and knowledge, cross-promoting others, the individual risk of each entrepreneur is reduced as this creates a support network and an environment for business growth. At the same time, by creating something together which can go from product and services to events and other projects that involve the community and tourists as well, the destination can create more attractive tourism offerings and can bring to its diversification. The support received, which can vary from material objects to intangible encouragement. This support

can provide positive effects on the entrepreneurs' self-esteem, decision-making strategies, and generation of ideas and projects. However, when the lack of collaborative approach is present, due to multiple variables. These may include constraints related to time, effort, energies and different beliefs and visions. When such barriers exist, collaboration can be limited and this discourages entrepreneurs from cooperating, to work together and promote and support each other. While considering collaboration essential, some rural entrepreneurs could not grow without it, almost being compelled to collaborate. This example was given by an entrepreneur who was working with another one, who had different values and vision, making it difficult to deal with, but at the same time was essential for the business.

The entrepreneurial ecosystem can become a supportive environment where people start their own business or take over one. There have been examples of entrepreneurs who have moved to the area and opened a business, or others who are taking over their family business. Having these opportunities to grow and try to develop a business in a rural area, can bring to the creation of diversified tourism offerings, where more and more entrepreneurs are focusing on specific niches of products. Examples include farm to table restaurant, honey beekeepers who focus on native plants and beekeeping courses and workshops, a chocolate shop which promotes and integrates a local supply chain. These businesses and some of these products were not even existing a decade ago. In contrast, other research suggests that diversification in the tourism entrepreneurship offer is a challenge and propose innovation as a key element for development (Teruel-Sanchez et al., 2025).

Participants, particularly those referred to in the Pustertal case study, have highlighted the idea of diversifying tourism offerings. The variety of tourism offerings proposed in both case studies ranges from accommodation, wineries, maso and agri-tourism, outdoor activities (for example horse riding, kiwi tours, picnics, skiing, local flower pick-ups, farm-to-table restaurants, local food festivals). Educational activities also play a role, including honey or herbs courses, local culinary workshops, artisanal learning spaces. So, while in Matakana, tourism diversification is at its beginning, in Pustertal, diversification is still evolving and becoming the uniqueness of many entrepreneurs. This diversification strengthens linkages within a variety of stakeholders, particularly through local sourcing. It also helps position each business activity with a unique selling point (USP), as entrepreneurs begin to see themselves as part of a broader value chain, as suggested by Kimbu et al. (2022). Participants in Pustertal feel that they have a unique selling point, something that can be difficult to replicate, as it is forged by history, knowledge passed through generation, innovation, and discovery. Examples are the mobile chicken coop or the enchanted witches' attic where herbs

knowledge is shared with children and adults. This has led to understanding the ranges and what participants feel about contributing to tourism as a single entrepreneur and through collaboration. Moreover, this element is also strictly related to environmental aspects. For instance, local supply chains are used in both case studies, and this further strengthens the environmental dimension, as participants are providing evidence of other local businesses buying their products or services.

Everett and Aitchison (2008), while studying the role of food tourism in developing the regional identity, found that restaurateurs perceive the tourism-related diversification as being an economic support for the primary activities. Local community benefits from food festivals that by means result in an affirmation of the sense of belonging in the Matakana case study. This has perhaps been seen in the collaboration created to organise events, projects, and even products. If the results were successful, the collaboration was stronger and continued; however, even where the results were positive, it was not always easy to maintain that collaboration actively. For example, two entrepreneurs who organised a honey festival in Matakana were unable to continue the initiative the following year. The event demanded considerable bureaucratic procedures, and they lack the necessary time and energy to sustain their commitment to the project.

This research has also seen opportunities to strengthen the rural entrepreneurs' market presence through collaboration. For example, securing a specific shelf place in a local supermarket, can provide more visibility among consumers, facilitates sales and promotes entrepreneurs' businesses. Indeed, in Pustertal, a group of rural entrepreneurs has been noted supplying their goods to supermarket, demonstrating the benefit of collection action. In the case study of Matakana, the area's growth and expansion in terms of tourism, have attracted entrepreneurs to relocate to the area and open a tourism business there. Tourism collaboration has facilitated some of these entrepreneurs, both at the early stage and during their business development, by encouraging investment in rural area and fostering a supportive environment.

#### ***5.4.4 Additional Consideration on Findings***

It is known that tourism in rural areas brings a diversified economy (Fontefrancesco et al., 2023; Ibănescu et al., 2018). Pustertal, has presented a change from a predominantly agricultural sector towards an integration of the tourism sector. Matakana has faced this change in more recent time, where the tourism industry is growing, bringing high numbers of visitors and tourists to rural areas. Almost all participants in Matakana opened their businesses less than a decade ago and mainly

transferred to the area. This has brought a change in the local economy, moving from an agricultural-centred economy to a different one. A participant expressed concern about this transition as the property and land issues are increasing as people move to Matakana and farmers sell their land to newcomers that “got sold in exchange for a lifestyle” (NZ01). However, as locals might sell their farms, as it is more convenient in terms of money, a decreasing trend of agricultural and biodiversity cultivation is expected, as expressed by the same participant. Local economy has been developed in terms of a variety of sectors, increasing the job opportunities for locals but at the same time creating concern inside the local community. An example of this fast evolution is the new PAK’n’SAVE ([www.paknsave.co.nz](http://www.paknsave.co.nz)) – a supermarket store investment of 46\$million – opened in June 2023 just about 10 minutes by car from Matakana. The same month, the new Northern Motorway was opened. While tourism is developing, the whole rural area is shaping the local economy into a multifaceted system, which was mainly dominated by agriculture. Economic diversification increases, providing tourism related jobs and a variation of other job types. However, areas alongside this growth, several social challenges have emerged. These include issues with housing regulations and expansion, rising property pricing, difficulties integrating newcomers, and also the loss of farmers and farmland.

Therefore, it might be worth to further study how tourism collaboration can support or influence a positive change against these challenges. The development of new business ideas and services, providing diversification of offerings, that can be directly or indirectly related to tourism, is of key importance for rural areas, as the absence of entrepreneurship represents the main impediment to the revitalisation and economic development (Md Sharif & Tuan Lonik, 2017).

## **5.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has offered a discussion on the themes emerged from the data analysis and a discussion on the interpretation of data. It has started by discussing the tourism collaboration key elements from a subjective point of view. Beginning by the discussion on the key element of sharing, from material to immaterial things, it was important to highlight that sharing vulnerabilities was mentioned as well. Elements such as support and promotion, were associated with a reciprocal approach, while synergies was seen to be in place predominantly through a bottom-up approach in Matakana and top-down approach in Pustertal. It has been discussed the importance of the element of connection, as an essential human need, particularly in rural areas.

The chapter then follows with the discussion on tourism collaboration's contribution to rural development, which overview themes of environmental stewardship, informing tourists, traditional knowledge transmission, high quality and authenticity, human connection and promotion. It then follows a discussion on the challenges encountered when creating and developing tourism collaboration, from the lack of leadership and communication in Matakana, to the lack of energy and time in Pustertal. Some suggestions are given, to entice networking opportunities. Finally, the findings were interpreted through three overarching themes—rural cohesion, sustainable mindset, and nurturing entrepreneurship—showing how tourism collaboration activates assets critical for rural resilience and innovation.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This doctoral study aims to enhance understanding of tourism collaboration from a subjective perspective, focusing on rural entrepreneurs' perceived vision and impact of collaboration on tourism and rural development. By investigating two rural destinations that of Matakana (New Zealand) and Pustertal (Italy), the thesis has developed an understanding of tourism collaboration perspectives and tourism collaboration's contribution on tourism and rural development. Additionally, this thesis sheds light on the barriers towards collaboration and seeks to conceptualise tourism collaboration as an intangible asset for rural development. Indeed, in some rural areas, the speediness of tourism growth contributes to constantly changing dynamics within the local community. Specifically, tourism affects rural entrepreneurs who are offering their products and services and, are also in direct contact with tourists. Collaboration plays an important role, which has been discussed and investigated in this thesis.

This concluding chapter revisits the research objectives underpinning the thesis and summarises the key research findings presented in the context of the research aims and objectives. This chapter also presents research's limitations and provides suggestions for future research.

### 6.1 Revisiting the Research Aims and Objectives

This thesis aims to investigate rural entrepreneurs' points of view on tourism collaboration within the rural tourism context, as they are essential players in rural development. It aims to provide a deep comprehension of the perceived meaning of tourism collaboration within the rural tourism context and identify barriers and the tourism collaboration influence on the development of rural tourism. Finally, this thesis has conceptualised tourism collaboration as more than a strategy; it is seen as a valuable, intangible tool that mobilises resources, reinforces ties, and broaden the rural tourism offerings.

The researcher is re-proposing the research questions described in Chapter One to provide a final statement of this thesis's results.

**Research Objective 1:** To develop an understanding of the key elements that characterise tourism collaboration among rural entrepreneurs:

RQ1: How do rural entrepreneurs perceive tourism collaboration?

RQ2: In what way/s does tourism collaboration affect rural entrepreneurs?

**Research Objective 2:** To explore the challenges and facilitators for tourism collaboration:

RQ3: What are the barriers that hinder tourism collaboration among rural entrepreneurs?

RQ4: In what way tourism collaboration can be facilitate?

**Research Objective 3:** To understand the contribution of tourism collaboration in rural areas:

RQ5: How does tourism collaboration contribute to the rural development?

RQ6: What assets are mobilised through tourism collaboration within the rural area?

The findings revealed a rich conceptualisation of tourism collaboration among rural entrepreneurs. Rural entrepreneurs identified five interconnected elements—sharing, synergies, support, promotion, and connection—as foundational to collaboration. All these elements can be considered intertwined, as one can influence the others. By sharing resources and collaboration, rural entrepreneurs purchase some materials together and set up events or other initiatives, enhancing product visibility and sales by promoting local offerings. This is related to cross-promotion, as it increases support among each other. Sharing comprises also struggles and challenges among entrepreneurs, particularly among newcomers. Having others' support and point of view, can strengthen trust and navigate throughout difficulties and uncertain times. Discussion on promotion was a key aspect of tourism collaboration, and it is considered essential, particularly in Matakana. Cross-promotion seems to strengthen trust and encourages reciprocal benefits, enhancing entrepreneurs' reputation and visibility. The theme of support has seen to initiates valuable projects, which may involve other entrepreneurs, local community and tourists. Supporting each other also aids in overcoming challenges. Moreover, tourism collaboration is perceived as providing synergic efforts, such as creation of products and services as well as encouraging the local supply chain among entrepreneurs, which increase connections. While, it has discussed the importance of connections and sense of community, some entrepreneurs have mentioned difficulties in engaging with other and feeling part of a community, particularly for newcomers. In context where newcomers were still integrating into the community, such as Matakana, collaboration became a gateway to build relationships, spark joint ventures, and feel part of a collective effort. Through the creation of products

and projects, these relationships are further strengthened, contributing to both rural cohesion and business development.

Different elements have been seen for each case study on the obstacles that rural entrepreneurs encounter when trying to achieve tourism collaboration. In Matakana, a more recent tourism destination, it is perceived the lack of leadership and structure tourism governance emerged as a significant barrier, and this may relate to its recent tourism development and lack of initial resources. Participants expressed the need for an entity or figure to help coordinate collaborative efforts, leading and guiding tourism development. Additionally, communication plays a key role as a barrier fragmenting collaborative attempts. In contrast, Pustertal which has a more established tourism history, the barriers related more to interpersonal factors such as differences in visions, values, beliefs or simply the limited availability of human resources for collaboration.

During the analysis and discussion chapter, community capitals served as a useful lens to explore rural entrepreneur's activity and collaboration influence these capitals. Both Matakana and Pustertal exhibited strong environmental consciousness—some participants mentioned it as "green thinking"—and collaboration often reinforced this through sustainable practices, shared supply chains, and eco-conscious product development. Beyond the environmental dimension, participants also described a role in preserving and transmitting traditional knowledge, including local stories, farming practices, and artisanal techniques, especially when these were shared with tourists or among other entrepreneurs.

Crucially, tourism collaboration also proved to be a catalyst for product and service diversification. It created an environment where experimenting with tourism offerings—such as markets, local festivals, or educational workshops—became more feasible and supported. The concept of cooptition—a blend of cooperation and competition—was apparent, as entrepreneurs supported one another even while cultivating unique selling points.

This thesis proposes that tourism collaboration should be understood as a form of intangible capital: one that strengthens rural cohesion, supports innovation, and deepens place-based identity. In doing so, it becomes a tool for rural development—not only economically, but also socially, culturally, and environmentally. This research contributes to the broader discourse by showing how tourism collaboration, while complex and context-dependent, holds transformative potential for rural areas and their entrepreneurial communities.

## **6.2 Practical Implication**

This thesis highlights the potential of tourism collaboration in rural development, resilience and sustainability. It identifies collaboration as a tool for mobilising community assets towards common goals. It has been seen that rural entrepreneurs who engage in collaborative practices contribute not only to their own business sustainability but, also to environmental stewardship, knowledge transmission, and preservation of authenticity and traditions.

This study emphasises the importance of understanding collaboration among entrepreneurs in rural settings, and their perspectives on collaboration focusing on the tourism development. This knowledge may provide further discussion for future policy that may include the rural entrepreneurs in the tourism development and the importance of collaborative approaches. Given the benefits provided and the challenges encountered, this thesis findings highlights the role of collaboration as nurtures a sustainable mindset, with entrepreneurs acting as leaders in environmental stewardship regenerative practices. It also may reduce individual risk, support diversification and encourages innovation, enabling new business model and tourism offerings.

This thesis recommends that policymakers and destination managers, when in place, support networking opportunities to foster collaboration. Additionally, tool such as Scenario Cards Game is shown to be effective in collecting participants opinions on tourism planning and development. Finally, the findings also suggest that collaboration enhances rural cohesion by diversifying economies and building social capital which can be particularly critical for rural resilience by adapting to external shocks such as COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the thesis provides practical insights for rural tourism development seeking to build on cohesive, innovative and sustainable tourism ecosystems.

## **6.3 Theoretical Insights**

Rural tourism has gained dominance as a strategy for economic diversification. It has been observed to increase rural resilience and sustainable development (Spector et al., 2019; Riddle & Thompson-Fawcett, 2019; Fountain et al., 2021). Within the rural tourism settings, collaboration has shown potential to contribute to the sustainable development field. This includes opening start-ups, revitalising rural places and providing new opportunities for locals (Le Penec & Rauffet, 2018; Li et al., 2021). However, literature also highlights gaps. There is lack of information on rural entrepreneurs' perspectives regarding collaboration and networking. Additionally, there is limited awareness among

local stakeholders on collaboration and cooperation benefits (Rosalina et al., 2021; Bitsani & Kavoura, 2014; Badurina et al., 2023; Qiu et al., 2024).

As tourism's influence in rural areas continues to attract attention from both practitioners and academics, efforts are being made to share knowledge with a focus on rural settings and entrepreneurs (Priatmoko et al., 2023; Reina-Usaga et al., 2024). A key contribution of this thesis includes investigating a subjective point of view of rural entrepreneurs on tourism collaboration in rural tourism settings. It highlights the importance of relationships in developing tourism and strengthening communities.

Particularly, this thesis conceptualises tourism collaboration as a dynamic, intangible asset that mobilise resources, strengthen social ties, and enhance and sustain rural tourism offerings. The research findings reveal the collaborative approaches influence rural cohesion, which is seen to strengthen or create relationships among rural entrepreneurs. Additionally, it reveals the challenges in maintaining collaboration active as necessitates of time and energy which is considerate an issue. The lack of leadership and communication was found to be a challenge, particularly in Matakana which may be related to the fact of being a recent tourism destination.

Drawing on interpretivism paradigm, this thesis has highlighted subjective point of view which disclosed experiences of participants, taking into consideration rural entrepreneurs. While Stakeholder Theory provides a lens to examine the roles, interests, and power dynamics of actors involved in a group or network (Freeman, 1984), it has been critiqued for its limited attention to the informal level relationships, and particularly the community-based actors while focus more on the managerial perspectives (Nilsson & Aquino, 2021). This thesis has valued Beritelli's (2011) suggestion which considers paying attention to relationships and interactions among stakeholders by exploring the participants' points of view.

The research has also integrated the resource-based view (RBV) and the community capitals framework, through which the research positions collaboration not merely as a managerial and economical tool, but as a more collaborative approach embedded in relationships. Collaboration has been seen to influence the intangible assets such as local knowledge and rural identity. These elements can be considerate sources of competitive advantage (Kruesi & Bazelmans, 2023). This thesis views tourism collaboration and networks as strategic assets that contribute to destination resilience and tourism sustainable development. Additionally, community capitals framework helps the development of understanding on how capitals are involved and influenced by the collaborative

approached within rural tourism settings. This thesis has seen collaboration influences on human, social, cultural and environmental capitals.

The findings identify five key elements of collaboration – support, sharing, synergies, connection and promotion – providing an understanding of how collaboration is perceived and works in the rural tourism settings. Collectively these elements foster rural cohesion, a development of sustainable mindset and strengthened in the support for entrepreneurship provides a starting point for future research in expanding the knowledge on sustainable tourism development practices. In this thesis, rural cohesion is considered as the strengthening of social ties, trust, and rural identity among rural entrepreneurs, achieved through ongoing collaboration, resource sharing and mutual support. This cohesion is not only the important for community resilience and innovation, but also essential for mobilising the diverse assets – human, social, cultural and natural – to support the sustainable rural development. The outcomes of rural cohesion have seen to be diverse. Increased social capital, and reciprocal relationships enable effective mobilisation of community assets for rural development.

These findings the research gap on entrepreneurs' subjective experiences which have been neglected to consider in this particular topic.

## **6.4 Limitations of the Research**

Overarching limitations remain as they are associated with the interpretative nature of this thesis, which prevents any generalisation of the results, although they offer some insights into the topic and similar contexts. The limited number of interviewees and the qualitative nature of the study do not allow for the generalisability of results (Strobl & Peters, 2013). The interpretivism approach aims to uncover the subjective view of participants, which implies that participants' subjective opinions and personal experiences filter their visions (Sá et al., 2018). The illustration of results presented in this final chapter is not generalisable as well. However, it aims to be a starting point of discussion for further research on tourism collaboration in rural areas.

Limitations of this research can be found in the linguistic equivalence and possible restrictions related to the variety of languages spoken by participants (section 3.4.1). This research explored two case studies that are located in rural settings in New Zealand and Italy. The different settings, particularly the difference in the languages spoken, could have potentially imposed a limit on the interpretation of data. In Italy, participants often shared the Ladin, German and Italian cultures, while in Matakana,

the multicultural background of participants was more varied. Even though the researcher has lived in both countries for many years, possible misunderstandings may be present. However, queries to participants were asked if the researcher did not feel secure on the meaning given to a specific word.

The aim of giving voice to rural entrepreneurs was achieved, collecting a great number of data that allowed the research objectives to be addressed to the complexity of the research topic. However, limitations on not having two separate groups of stakeholders, rural entrepreneurs and tourism organisations, such as DMOs, may be argued. This could have potentially generated a comparison among these groups, which is suggested for future research. Reasons that support the choice of having a whole group of participants, avoiding an internal comparison, stand on the aim of the research which focuses on the understanding of the subjective perspective of tourism collaboration.

Therefore, rural entrepreneurs and tourism organisations such as DMOs were analysed in this research as an all-encompassing group. A further suggestion for future research would be using a multi-group analysis to examine the topics would allow the effectiveness of collaboration considering tourists, which could expand findings (Elshaer & Saad, 2021). Participants provided insights on subjective perceptions of tourism collaboration, and this is followed by a discussion chapter that represents the researcher's interpretation and construction of the reality of participants' points of view. Findings are drawn from the majority of participants that were categorised as rural entrepreneurs; other participants, such as DMOs, were considered as well. Since this research is based on the interpretivism paradigm, results are an interpretation of reality which is constructed among participants and the researcher. Indeed, gaining participants' knowledge and seeking meanings – which is undoubtedly influenced by the researcher's personal experiences and knowledge – could potentially present limitations. While it has been seen that collaboration can provide benefits, the researcher aimed to understand its deeper meaning by questioning participants when these meanings were not clear.

The limitation of focusing solely on specific cases has been highlighted by other scholars (Elshaer & Saad, 2021). However, aiming at depth in knowledge rather than quantity allows the understanding of such a complex topic, especially given the diversity of realities among participants. Having two cases and doing qualitative research could be integrated with quantitative data that may support or disprove these theoretical implications. Another limitation is that the research is dominated by a qualitative interpretivist approach using data collected in rural areas. Hence, the results of this

research may not fully represent other types of rural areas, such as those in developing or less developed countries or other similar cases. An expansion of the criteria of case study selection could favour the collection of new data and the discovery of new knowledge.

## **6.5 Recommendations for Future Studies**

This thesis on tourism collaboration among mainly rural entrepreneurs in New Zealand and Italy offers a stimulus for future comparison research with similar or different settings. This thesis is based on qualitative data collected, which aims at gaining deep knowledge. Future research suggestions would include the quantitative approach to confirm, confute, or compare, by having a bigger sample of participants, the findings of the present thesis. Future research should include a more quantitative setting as the results cannot be generalisable, but quantitative data could be collected in order to increase its validity. The investigation of the strategies applied by rural areas and the level of collaboration in place could be of the next proposal. It would also be valuable to explore the intensity of collaboration and identify which strategies provides major impacts in terms of tourism, safeguarding of the identity and enhancement of authenticity.

The research has focused on a qualitative approach, investigating deeply the participants' perspectives. A further investigation would be suggested into the role of tourism collaboration on newcomers and how this affects their integration to local community and how effect tourism development. This research explored two case studies that are located in the rural settings of New Zealand and Italy. The next step suggested would be to increase and expand the research to other rural areas and more participants trying to understand similarities and collecting the spectrum of challenges and possible solutions.

Further research should be developed to understand the new trend of digital nomads and workcation. These trends have recently appeared and can contribute to solving regional problems such as a decrease in the local population, de-seasonalised and enticing long periods of stays (Shin et al., 2024). Within this context, it might be proposed to investigate how tourism collaboration can entice this phenomenon and understand its effects. Since the authenticity and high quality have been observed as common goals among rural entrepreneurs, future research could also explore the role of sustainable certification. This may serve as a tool to preserve authenticity and guide consumer choices. A focused study on rural destination that have achieved such certification could provide

deeper insights into its impact. Indeed, it has been found by previous scholars that sustainable certification makes consumers' choices more aware of the destinations that are less harmful to the environment and more authentic (Costa et al., 2019).

Discussion with participants in Matakana indicated some issues such as the lack of guidance and leadership on tourism management, and collaborative strategies among rural entrepreneurs. In contrast, participants in Pustertal seem to take advantage of the tourism organisations' work and denoted the efforts done from a marketing point of view, which was perceived as lacking in Matakana. Thus, increase of tourism collaboration from a bottom-up and top-down approach could benefit the rural areas. Future studies could investigate effective communication and collaboration strategies. This could potentially mitigate issues and enable rural entrepreneurs and tourism organisations such as DMOs to entice benefits brought by tourism collaboration.

Finally, a potential focus on the direct link between rural cohesion and territorial brand may be studied, investigating the correlations between these two elements. Tourism growth in rural areas and the pressure on sustainable development may provide specific ground for research that connects territorial branding and rural cohesion among entrepreneurs, which can be extended to local communities and other stakeholders.

## **6.6 Final Reflections**

This doctoral research investigated an important contemporary issue in tourism studies and investigating how rural entrepreneurs perceive, experience, and engage in tourism collaboration, revealing its multifaceted role in shaping rural tourism development. It is recalled in literature the need to find the balance between tourism development and the safeguard of cultural and environmental aspects in rural communities (Reina-Usuga et al., 2024). Through an in-depth investigation of two case studies, this research has shown that tourism collaboration is not merely a strategy for the economic gain. It has seen to be a potential and powerful tool that facilitates tourism development towards an environmental and socio-cultural sustainable path in rural areas. Tourism collaboration can be facilitated by providing opportunities for rural entrepreneurs and other local tourism actors in rural areas. It can bring many benefits on guiding tourism development towards a

sustainable approach, and it can help the integration of newcomers or reducing the abandonment of rural areas.

In conclusion, this thesis has shared the experiences, views, and stories of the individuals actively involved in tourism development. It has offered insights that may help to understand tourism collaboration perceptions among rural entrepreneurs and its influence on tourism development in rural areas.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in the Research (English Version)



Cover Letter

PhD Research Proposal

The role of networks in rural areas and their relation to tourism: the cases of Matakana and Castelrotto.

Faculty of Culture and Society – School of Hospitality and Tourism

Dear Participate Candidate,

Kia Ora, my name is Karin Malacarne and I am PhD student at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). This research is part of my PhD qualification in tourism and the interview will contribute to develop my thesis. I would like to invite you to participate in this study and share your knowledge and experience as rural entrepreneur.

You have been identified as a potential participant in this research because of your role in the rural area and in tourism sector and I believe your contribution can bring enhancement and new knowledge to academic theory and management strategies. It would be fantastic to have your point of view and it will help in exploring and understanding the value and role of rural connections (networks) and the engagement with tourism.

I will conduct an interview and use cards that can be used to write on or select. The semi structured interview, which means that some questions are already prepared by myself and the rest of discussion will be freely developed, will be conducted in person one-to-one. I will ask you to allow around 45 to 60 minutes of your time for the completion of this interview. At any time, you can withdraw the interview or skip questions you do not want to answer. Prior the acceptance of my request to participate in this research, please read the attached "participant information sheet" which provides all the details of the interview.

If you have any further enquiries I would like you to contact me. I will be happy to answer any questions. Once, you decide to participate, please send me an email to discuss a date and place to meet.

I am looking forward to hearing from you and to start this exciting part of my research.

Kind regards,

Karin Malacarne – PhD

Student Email: [Karin.malacarne@aut.ac.nz](mailto:Karin.malacarne@aut.ac.nz)

Mobile: 02102891230

## Invitation to Participate in the Research (Italian Version)



### Cover Letter (imprenditori rurali)

Salve,

mi chiamo Karin Malacarne e sono una dottoranda dell'Università di tecnologia di Auckland (Nuova Zelanda). Questa ricerca è parte del mio percorso accademico e questa intervista contribuirà nello sviluppo della mia tesi.

Mi piacerebbe invitarti a partecipare a questo studio e condividere le tue conoscenze ed esperienze come imprenditore rurale.

Sei stato identificato come potenziale partecipante a questa ricerca per il tuo ruolo in quest'area e nel settore turistico e credo che il tuo contributo possono portare un miglioramento e nuove conoscenze alla teoria e alle strategie manageriali.

Sarebbe fantastico se potessi condividere il tuo punto di vista e contribuire ad esplorare e capire il valore e ruolo delle connessioni/rete rurali ed il loro coinvolgimento nello sviluppo turistico.

Condurrò un'intervista di circa 30-45 minuti e utilizzerò delle carte che potranno essere usate per sviluppare la conversazione. L'intervista è semi-strutturata ovvero alcune domande sono impostate mentre altre verranno sviluppate durante l'intervista. Hai la possibilità di concludere l'intervista in qualunque momento e non rispondere alle domande se non vuoi. Prima di accettare la richiesta per partecipare ti prego di leggere il Foglio informazione che ti ho messo a disposizione.

Se hai altre domande non esitare a contattarmi. Una volta che decidi di partecipare ti prego di contattarmi così da poter organizzare una data e luogo d'incontro.

Cordiali saluti,  
Karin Malacarne

Email: [karin.malacarne@aut.ac.nz](mailto:karin.malacarne@aut.ac.nz)

Mobile: 3484259608

## Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet (English Version)



### Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced: 02/02/2022

**Project Title:** The role of networks in rural areas and their relation to tourism: the cases of Matakana and Castelrotto.

#### An Invitation

Kia Ora, I am Karin Malacarne, a PhD student at Auckland University of Technology (New Zealand). This research is contributing to develop my thesis, which is required for PhD qualification. I would like to invite you to participate in this study and share your knowledge and experience as rural entrepreneur. Your contribution will help in exploring and understanding the value of rural connections and engagement with tourism. I will conduct an interview that will last around 30-45 minutes and I will use cards to develop the discussion.

#### What is the purpose of this research?

This study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on the value of rural networks and how they influence and relate to rural tourism. The research focuses on:

- exploring rural networks and identifying main factors and dynamics within rural connections
- understanding the value of rural networks for tourism and its salient elements
- advancing rural tourism development.

The research considers two case studies: Matakana, in New Zealand, and Castelrotto, in Italy. Both are well-known destinations for their quality of rural products and both are experiencing tourism growth. The proposed research aims to advance the knowledge around the value of rural networks, their role, the relation to the territory and the effects on tourism, focusing on the rural tourism entrepreneurs' point of view. It will also give policymakers information about the practical strategies taken by tourism operators and entrepreneurs in rural areas that are recovering from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study will provide findings that can help in efforts to diminish, or even reverse, the phenomenon of people abandoning rural villages, with the resultant loss of cultural, historical, culinary, and traditional heritage. Finally, it will also generate knowledge to support and improve integration of newcomers in rural areas through tourism. The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

#### How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Participants in this study are rural entrepreneurs who have tourism related activities that operate in Matakana or its surroundings. The identification of participants has been conducted through a web-audit (existing websites) that gathered information of entrepreneurs in this area such as farmers, wineries, cheesemakers, beekeepers, local shops, renting shops. The contact details were gathered through publicly information. Also, I might have found you at the Farmers Market and introduced you the opportunity to participate to this research and your personal experience and opinions could provide important information to this project.

#### How do I agree to participate in this research?

I would be glad if you'd like to participate in this research. In this case, you can contact me and we can arrange date and time for an interview. Prior the interview, I will seek your consent. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and you are able to withdraw from the study at any time of the interview. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

#### What will happen in this research?

If you decide to give your contribution to this research, you will take part in a 30-45 minutes interview conducted by myself. The interview will preferably be face-to-face, at your company or a public space such as cafeteria. I will also use some cards that you can use to write your comments or as inputs. The place and time will be arranged to meet the most suitable option for you. Some questions are already structured and others will be developed around topics like rural connections, factors to facilitate, the value of creating a network, its relation with tourism, tourism development. The interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. During my visit I will also take notes (to summarize aspects, impressions and information that I cannot record). Also, if you agree I will take some pictures that will help me show some important features such as tourism promotion, peculiar elements of your business (I will avoid to photograph people).

At any time, you have a veto you can decide to practice or not. The information will be used for the purpose of this research only. If you like, I will send the transcript to allow you to add other information or change something (following the duty of care principle).

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

I will try to smooth the conversation, listen and talk when necessary, also I am interested in your story and so I just need to know your perspective with no pressure and whatever you would like to talk about regarding my topic. Also, the use of cards will facilitate the conversation and create more engagement.

You can withdraw anytime and you are free to skip questions if you are not comfortable in answering them. Moreover, I will allocate each participant a code so no individual names are mentioned in the study.

AUT Student Counselling and Mental Health is able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research and are not for other general counselling needs. To access these services, you will need to:

- drop into our centre at WB203 City Campus, email [counselling@aut.ac.nz](mailto:counselling@aut.ac.nz) or call 921 9998.
- let the receptionist know that you are a research participant, and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet.

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling on <https://www.aut.ac.nz/student-life/student-support/counselling-and-mental-health>

What are the benefits?

Your contribution to this research may be helpful in understanding the value of collaboration and providing support for possible practices and strategies that enable other rural community to improve tourism in their area. The results of this research move beyond simply finding different approach but also discover practices and knowledge that can be sustainable and integrative in the combination of rural community and tourism.

Also, the benefits are also considered to be the achievement of PhD qualification and possible publication of papers.

How will my privacy be protected?

I will allocate each participant a code so no individual names are mentioned in the study to provide fully protection of your data. Only the undersigned (myself) is allowed to access your data that will be kept in a safe computer.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The interview will take from 40 to 60 minutes of your time. The interview will be conducted face-to-face at the place chosen with you.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You have a period of time of four weeks to consider this invitation. During this period you are also welcome to ask any additional question or clarification for accepting or declining the invitation.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

If you are interested in receiving a 1-2 page summary of this research I will send it by email to participants who chose to receive in the Consent Form.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Massimo Morellato, [massimo.morellato@aut.ac.nz](mailto:massimo.morellato@aut.ac.nz), (+649) 921 9999 ext 8167

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

*Researcher Contact Details:*

Karin Malacarne, [karin.malacarne@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:karin.malacarne@autuni.ac.nz)

*Project Supervisor Contact Details:*

Dr. Massimo Morellato, [massimo.morellato@aut.ac.nz](mailto:massimo.morellato@aut.ac.nz)

# Participant Information Sheet (Italian Version)



## Documento d'informazione per il partecipante. (Imprenditori rurali)

Data in cui è stato prodotto il documento: 02/02/2022.

**Titolo del progetto:** Il ruolo delle reti rurali and delle loro relazioni con il turismo: i casi di Matakana e Castelrotto.

### Invito

Salve, sono Karin Malacarne, una dottoranda dell'Università di Tecnologia di Auckland (Nuova Zelanda). Questa ricerca contribuisce allo sviluppo della mia tesi, requisito necessario per ottenere il titolo di studio di dottorato. Vorrei invitarti a partecipare al mio studio e a condividere la tua esperienza personale come imprenditore rurale. Il tuo contributo mi aiuterà ad esplorare e capire il valore delle connessioni/relazioni rurali e la loro influenza con il turismo. Per fare la ricerca, dovrò condurre delle interviste e utilizzerò delle carte gioco per sviluppare la discussione su determinati temi.

### Qual è l'obiettivo della ricerca?

Questo studio punta ad espandere la conoscenza del valore delle relazioni rurali tra imprenditori e come queste influenzino il turismo rurale. La ricerca si focalizza su:

- - Esplorare le relazioni rurali imprenditoriali ed identificare i fattori e le dinamiche di queste relazioni
- - Capire il valore di queste relazioni per il turismo
- - Migliorare la conoscenza sullo sviluppo turismo rurale.

La ricerca prende in considerazione due casi studio: Matakana, in Nuova Zelanda e Castelrotto, in Italia. Entrambe sono destinazioni turistiche molto conosciute per la loro qualità dei prodotti e l'esperienza di un turismo in continua crescita (pre-covid). La ricerca ambisce ad apportare un avanzamento teorico e pratico sul valore delle reti rurali, il loro ruolo, la loro relazione con il territorio e gli effetti sul turismo, focalizzandosi sul punto di vista degli imprenditori rurali. Potrà anche permettere di avere delle informazioni per definire delle strategie per il turismo in aree che hanno sofferto gli effetti del Covid-19.

Questo studio genererà risultati che possono aiutare a diminuire, o cambiare, il fenomeno dell'abbandonamento dei paesini rurali, che subiscono una perdita del patrimonio culturale, storico, culinario e delle tradizioni. Infine, la ricerca potrà anche creare nuove conoscenze per il supporto e l'integrazione di persone che si trasferiscono in questi posti. I risultati di questa ricerca potrebbero servire per fare delle pubblicazioni accademiche e presentazioni.

### Come sono stato identificato e perché sono invitato a partecipare alla ricerca?

I partecipanti a questo studio sono imprenditori rurali che hanno a che fare con il turismo e operano nell'area di Castelrotto. L'identificazione dei partecipanti è stata fatta tramite una ricerca online che ha raccolto informazioni su imprenditori in quest'area. Se sei stato selezionato per partecipare, vuol dire che sei un candidato adatto a questo progetto. I contatti sono stati raccolti online attraverso informazioni pubbliche.

### Come acconsento a partecipare a questo progetto?

Sarei molto onorata se partecipassi a questa ricerca. In questo caso puoi contattarmi così da organizzare una data per l'intervista. Prima dell'intervista ti chiederò di firmare il Documento di Consenso che ti ho mandato nell'allegato di questa email. La tua partecipazione è su base volontaria e hai il diritto di ritirarti per qualsiasi motivo dal progetto quando vuoi. Se scegli di ritirarti, ti chiederò di scegliere se avere tutte le tue informazioni rimosse oppure permettermi di continuare con l'uso di quelle raccolte fino a quel momento. Tuttavia, una volta che avrò analizzato e prodotto i risultati della ricerca, rimuovere i tuoi dati non sarà più possibile.

### Cosa succede se partecipo?

Se decidi di partecipare e dare il tuo contributo, ti verrà chiesto di fare un'intervista di 30-45 minuti che sarà condotta da me. L'intervista verrà fatta preferibilmente in persona, nella tua azienda o in uno spazio pubblico (bar o biblioteca). Utilizzerò anche alcune carte gioco create da me dove potrai scrivere i tuoi commenti. Il posto e l'ora verranno organizzati insieme a te, in modo da trovare la soluzione migliore per te. Alcune domande sono già strutturate altre invece verranno fatte in base alla discussione. L'intervista verrà registrata e poi trascritta. Durante la mia visita, prenderò anche degli appunti sull'azienda, sull'intervista in se e su impressioni ed emozioni.

Inoltre, se ti fa piacere, vorrei scattare qualche foto per catturare l'importanza di alcuni dettagli della tua azienda, come la promozione verso i turisti o altri elementi caratterizzanti (eviterò di fare foto alle facce delle persone). In qualunque momento hai diritto di veto sulle foto. Le informazioni che raccoglierò verranno utilizzate solo a scopi di ricerca. Se ti fa piacere posso inviarti un trascritto della tua intervista e se vuoi puoi aggiungere o cambiare informazioni.

#### **Che tipo di disagi o rischi sono attribuiti a questa ricerca?**

Non sono presenti alcuni rischi di cui io sono a conoscenza. Si tratta di informazioni che vengono date direttamente dall'imprenditore o chi per lui e relative al turismo. Ricordati che puoi ritirarti in qualunque momento e puoi saltare le domande se non ti senti a tuo agio. L'unico disagio è presente se non ci senti a proprio agio ad esser intervistati. Tuttavia sarà come fare una chiacchierata con qualcuno.

#### **Come vengono alleviati questi disagi e rischi?**

Cercherò di rendere la conversazione il più tranquilla e semplice possibile. Sono semplicemente interessata alla tua esperienza personale e al tuo punto di vista con nessun tipo di giudizio e pressioni. Inoltre, l'uso delle carte gioco faciliteranno la discussione. Infine, ad ogni partecipante allocherà un codice in modo che nessun nome sia fatto durante la stesura delle tesi. Tuttavia, essendo un'area così piccola ed il numero di intervistati così piccolo posso offrire solo un livello di confidenzialità limitato.

#### **Quali sono i benefici?**

Il tuo contributo a questa ricerca sarà di beneficio alla conoscenza del valore delle collaborazioni rurali e inoltre potranno creare la base per possibili strategie turistiche per altre comunità rurali. I risultati della ricerca non solo riguardano il capire diversi approcci al turismo in aree rurali, ma anche alla scoperta di pratiche sostenibili e integrative per le comunità rurali. Inoltre, attraverso questo progetto potrò ottenere il dottorato e possibili pubblicazioni.

#### **Come verrà protetta la privacy?**

Allocherà ad ogni partecipante un codice in modo che nessun nome personale verrà iscritto nella tesi. Solo io posso accedere alle interviste che verranno tenute in un posto sicuro e in un armadietto chiuso a chiave. Tuttavia, a causa del numero limitato degli intervistati, dell'area piccola e delle foto, è possibile garantire solo un limitato livello di confidenza. Le foto non conterranno foto di persone e i partecipanti le potranno vedere e verrà richiesto il loro consenso. Appena sono pronte le mandarò al partecipante per chiedere il consenso oppure utilizzerò il principio di diligenza.

#### **Quali sono i costi per partecipare?**

L'intervista richiede solo 30-45 minuti e verrà condotta in persona (preferibilmente) nel posto scelto insieme.

#### **Quanto tempo ho per decidere?**

Se possibile la prego di confermare o meno entro una settimana dell'arrivo di questa email con invito annesso. Durante questo periodo puoi chiedermi qualsiasi informazioni riguardante la ricerca.

#### **Riceverò un riassunto dei risultati della ricerca?**

Se sei interessato ti invierò un riassunto di 1-2 pagine che manderò via email a chi decide di riceverlo nel Modulo di Consenso.

#### **Cosa faccio se ho delle domande sulla ricerca?**

Per tutti i dubbi sulla ricerca puoi richiedere informazioni al supervisore del progetto : Massimo Morellato massimo.morellato@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 8167. Se hai domande riguardanti l'intervista puoi contattare direttamente Executive Secretary of AUTEK, ethics@aut.ac.nz , +64 9 921 9999 ext 6038.

#### **Chi devo contattare per altre informazioni?**

Ti prego di tenere questo documento e una copia del Modulo di Consenso. Puoi contattare:  
RESEARCHER CONTACT DETAILS: Karin Malacarne, [karin.malacarne@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:karin.malacarne@autuni.ac.nz) (+39 3792679109)  
Project Supervisor Contact Details: Dr. Massimo Morellato, [massimo.morellato@aut.ac.nz](mailto:massimo.morellato@aut.ac.nz)

**Approvato dalla commissione etica dell'Università di Tecnologia di Auckland nella data 09 febbraio 2022. AUTEK numero di riferimento: 21/440.**

## Appendix C: Consent Form (English Version)



### Consent Form

(Rural entrepreneurs)

*Project title:* The role of networks in rural areas and their relation to tourism: the cases of Matakana and Castelrotto.

*Project Supervisor:* **Massimo Morellato**

*Researcher:* **Karin Malacarne**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated .....
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes  No
- I wish to receive a transcript of the interviews (please tick one): Yes  No
- I agree the researcher is taking pictures: Yes  No

Participant's signature: .....

Participant's name: .....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date on which the final approval was granted* AUTEK Reference number *type the AUTEK reference number***

*Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.*

# Consent Form (Italian Version)



## Modulo di consenso (Imprenditori rurali)

**Titolo del progetto:** Il ruolo delle reti di imprenditori rurali e la loro relazione con il turismo: i casi di Matakana e Castelrotto.

**Supervisore del progetto:** Massimo Morellato

**Ricercatrice:** Karin Malacarne

- Ho letto e capito le informazioni della scheda informativa dei partecipanti sul progetto di ricerca.
- Ho avuto l'opportunità di chiedere informazioni e riceverne risposte.
- Ho capito che verranno prese delle note durante l'intervista e che questa verrà registrate e trascritta.
- Comprendo che la partecipazione a questo studio è volontaria and che posso ritirarmi in qualunque momento senza conseguire nessun svantaggio.
- Comprendo che se decido di ritirarmi posso scegliere di far rimuovere tutti i dati che posso essere ricondotti a me oppure permettere di continuare l'uso di essi per la ricerca. Tuttavia, quando i risultati verranno prodotti, non potrò più chiederne la rimozione.
- Sono d'accordo a partecipare a questo studio.
- Vorrei ricevere un riassunto dei risultati dello studio (esprimi una preferenza): Yes  No
- Vorrei ricevere la trascrizione dell'intervista (esprimi una preferenza): Yes  No
- Sono d'accordo che la ricercatrice possa fare foto ai prodotti, servizi e materiali condiviso durante l'intervista: Yes  No

Firma del partecipante: .....

Nome e Cognome del partecipante: .....

Contatti del partecipante: .....  
.....  
.....

Data:

**Approvato dalla commissione etica dell'Università di Tecnologia di Auckland nella data 09 febbraio 2022 AUTEK numero di riferimento: number type the AUTEK 21/440.**

*Nota Bene: il partecipante dovrebbe tenersi una copia di questo modulo.*

Consent Form Exemplars 032020.docx

page 1 of 1

This version was last edited in September 2021

## Appendix D: Interview Guideline for Semi-structured In-depth Interviews

### Interview Guideline

Part	Structure	Main Arguments
Part 1	<i>Ice-breaker</i>	Introduction about the business and history
Part 2	<i>Tourism (+ branding and peri-urban)</i>	Understanding the flows of tourism and what is unique about Matakana/Pustertal and the link/contribution that the business has with tourism.
Part 3	<i>Network (values)</i>	Exploring the perceptions of the network/collaborations and the perceived value for Matakana (*Remember to withhold my definitions).
Part 4	<i>Policies</i>	The role of local government in the network/support for the businesses.
Part 5	<i>COVID-19</i>	Impacts, changes and challenges, what is happening next, any opportunity.
Part 6	<i>Future Plans</i>	Your wishes, vision for the next five years, long-term development plan of business. (*Remember to cover to current and future challenges).

[\*if not sufficiently covered, remember to revisit key arguments in the last part of the interview]

**Steps:**

1. I moved tourism section above because it might be more effective to start from something that is commonly known and then continue with network.
2. The column “further questions” contains Qs do further analyse and explore the topic.

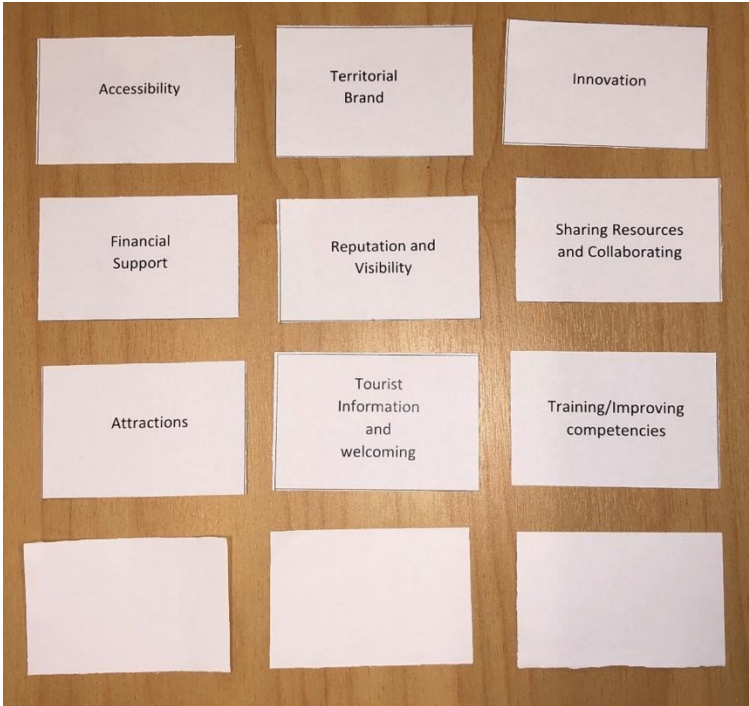
Topic	Interview Guideline	Further Questions/Comments
-------	---------------------	----------------------------

<b>Ice-breaker</b>	Tell me about yourself, your activity and connection with Matakana.	
<b>Tourism</b>	Let’s talk about the tourism...  Where the most of your tourists come from?  Why do you think tourists are coming to Matakana?  In which way your activity is contributing to Matakana/ Pustertal and the tourism? (example)  What do you think that make your activity/business unique?	Are tourists mainly from Auckland? Domestic/international? Changes /Pattern of tourists Peri-urban/Proximity Three things that the tourist bring home Three things to preserve in Matakana New Products and services (examples) / Matakana Logo and Brand Competitiveness and cooperation
<b>Network</b>	About your collaboration...  Which type of collaboration/interaction do you have with other entrepreneurs? (examples)  How these collaborations have been developed?  In which way a network can help your business? (being more competitive, sharing resources, reciprocal support)  What “Matakana/ Pustertal network” means for you?	Possible stimulus for the conversation: How do you define a network? Different words for networking, what you give and get, pro/cons Entrepreneurship in the network. Shared values/mission/vision within the network? Are these transferred to the community? (examples) Elements that enable an efficient network and how can be improved? What are the network’s challenges, and does it support your business?

In which way this network helps developing sustainable tourism and your products/services?

<b>Policies</b>	<p>Is there any local government/association in If Māori culture is not included in the response: the network? (localAre there any policies in place to strength the Māori board/council/CoC/government /iwi/farmers culture? association/business association/DMO)</p> <p>Stewardship and kaitiakitanga of environment, What is their role and support for your businessorganic labels. and for the tourism in Matakana/ Pustertal? (examples of initiatives)</p> <p>Exploring possible promotion of Matakana through territorial brand. Strategic Plan 2018</p>
<b>COVID-19</b>	<p>How did COVID-19 negatively impact your activity? Did you learn anything about your business that you didn't know before (examples: "don't let the crisis goes to waste", problems that were there but you</p> <p>Were there any positives that come out of thisdidn't know, did this business tourism community experience? (network) help each other?)</p>
<b>Future Plans</b>	<p>Where do you see your business in the next 5 years? And what about the long-term plan? Reconnect/revisit territorial brand/network values.</p> <p>Any foreseen challenges?</p> <p>How can the network help you developing these plans?</p>

**Appendix E: Examples of Cards Used to Collect Data in Case Study 1 –  
Matakana**



## Appendix F: Themes Selected and Their Meaning

Cards	Meaning	
Reputation and Visibility (AV)	Importance of a destination's name, value, and alignment with marketing efforts.	Austin & Seitanidi (2012) <i>Collaborative creation value</i>
Innovation (SV)	Creation of new products and services for the destination.	
Training/Improving competencies (IV)	Opportunities for learning and skill development.	
Financial Support (TRV)	Public or private financial resources for tourism development.	
Sharing Resources and Collaborating (TRV)	Collaboration with other businesses and networking.	
Territorial Brand (pull factor)	The destination's image and its appeal to tourists.	
Information and Welcoming (pull factor)	Providing clear information and a welcoming environment for tourists.	
Accessibility (pull factor)	Ease of reaching the destination, considering infrastructure, travel time, and effort.	

## Appendix G: Matakana Codes

Matakana		Files
<input type="radio"/>	Name	^ Files
<input type="radio"/>	Attractions	0
<input type="radio"/>	Branding	0
<input type="radio"/>	Competition	4
<input type="radio"/>	Contribution to tourism	0
<input type="radio"/>	Covid-19	0
<input type="radio"/>	Entrepreneurs in Matakana	0
<input type="radio"/>	Environment	7
<input type="radio"/>	Future	0
<input type="radio"/>	History	0
<input type="radio"/>	Maori Culture	0
<input type="radio"/>	Memorable Quotes	1
<input type="radio"/>	Networking	0
<input type="radio"/>	Preserving the place	0
<input type="radio"/>	Promotion	0
<input type="radio"/>	Proximity	1
<input type="radio"/>	Things that tourists bring home	0
<input type="radio"/>	Trending	0
<input type="radio"/>	Uniqueness	0

Drag selection here to code to a new code

In Codes ... Code to

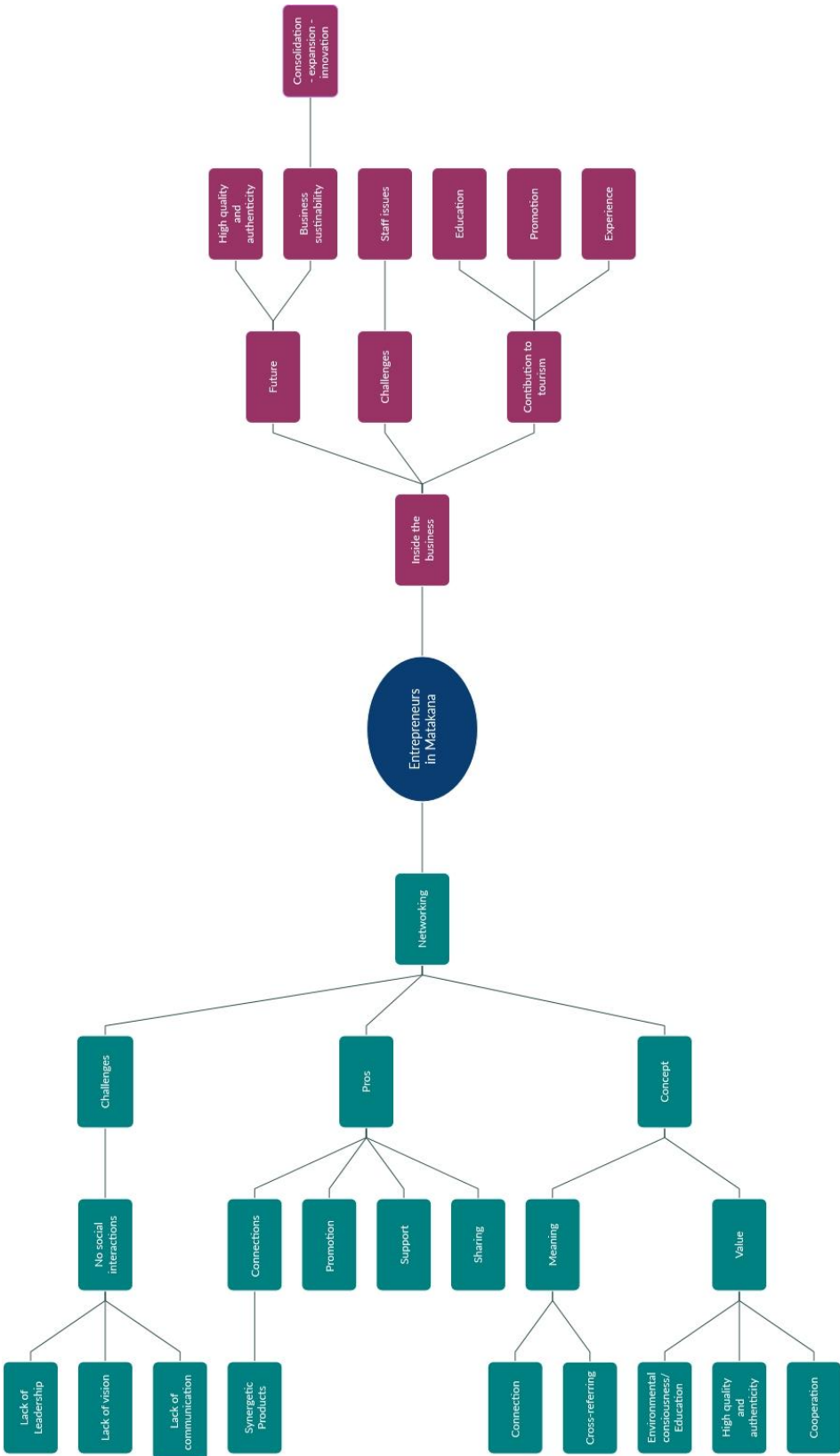
KM 197 Items

## Appendix H: Pustertal Codes

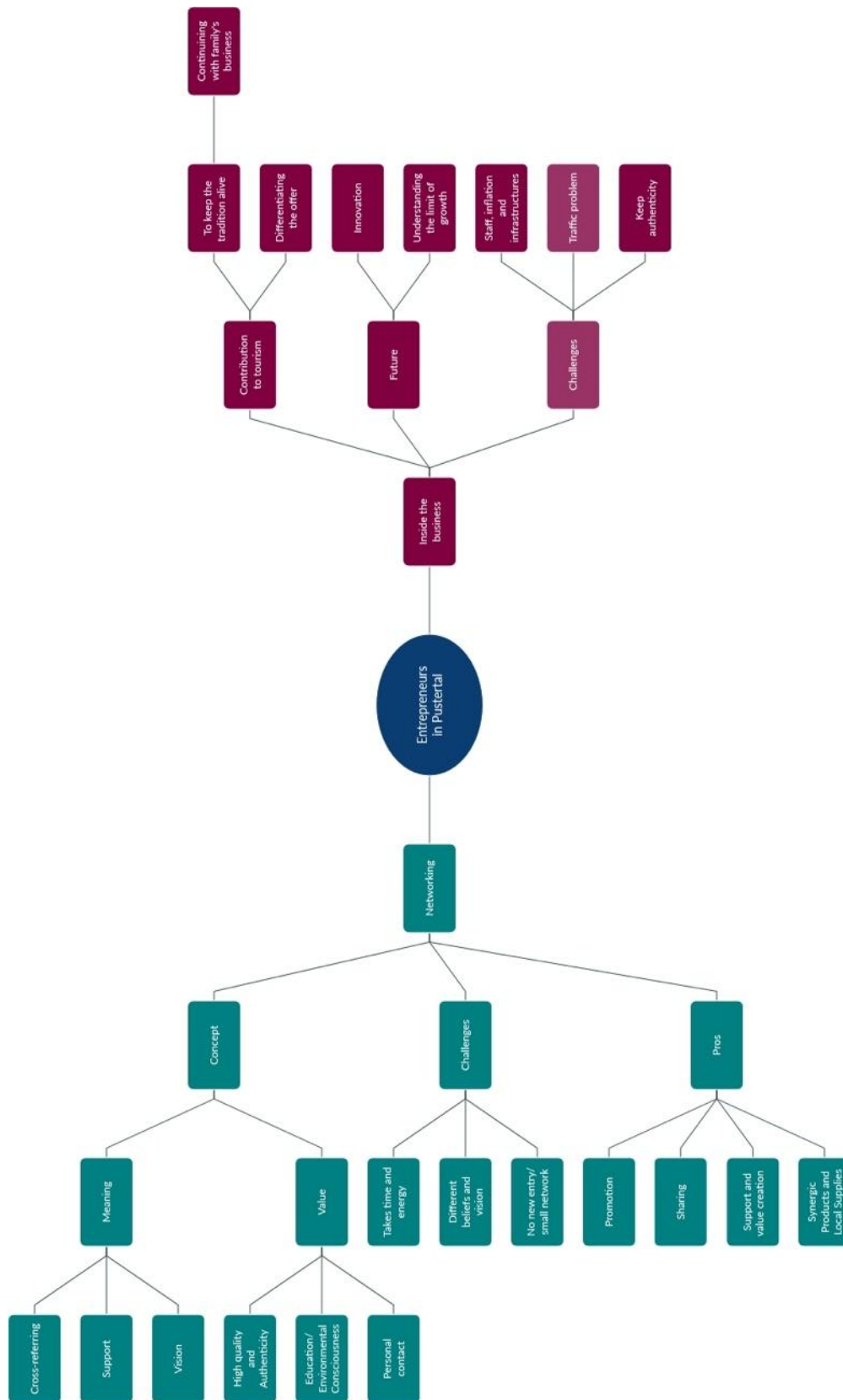
Val Pusteria			
	Name	Files	References
<input type="radio"/>	Branding	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	competition	1	1
<input type="radio"/>	contribution to tourism	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Covid-19	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Enviroment	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Future	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	History	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Local culture	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Networking	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Preserving the place	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Promotion	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Proximity	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Things that tourists bring home	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Things to do	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Trending	0	0
<input type="radio"/>	Uniqueness	0	0

◀ KM 182 Items

# Appendix I: Matakana Mind Map



## Appendix L: Pustertal Mind Map



## Appendix M: Scenario Cards Game Results

### Scenario Cards Game Dataset:

The following tables present the analysis of Scenario Cards Game for each case.

Indicator / Matakana Participant	NZ 01	NZ 02	NZ 03	NZ 04	NZ 05	NZ 06	NZ 07	NZ 08	NZ 09	NZ 10	NZ 11	NZ 12	Total Score
Accessibility	8.5	5.0	7.0	4.0	5.0	2.0	3.0	5.0	7.0	6.5	5.5	5.0	63.5
Reputation and Visibility	8.5	3.0	8.5	2.5	8.0	5.0	8.0	8.0	8.0	3.0	8.0	4.0	74.5
Information and Welcoming	7.0	7.5	5.0	6.5	3.0	9.0	6.0	2.0	4.0	4.0	8.0	1.0	62.0
Resource Sharing & Collaboration	6.0	7.5	6.0	8.5	9.0	8.0	6.0	3.0	5.0	6.5	2.0	9.0	76.5
Learning Opportunities/Innovation	4.5	2.0	4.0	8.5	4.0	1.0	6.0	9.0	3.0	8.5	3.0	3.0	56.5
Attractions	4.5	1.0	8.5	6.5	1.0	6.0	4.0	7.0	6.0	8.5	1.0	6.0	60.0
Enhancing Competencies	3.0	6.0	1.0	5.0	6.0	3.0	1.0	1.0	2.0	2.0	4.0	7.0	41.0
Financial Support	1.5	9.0	2.0	2.5	7.0	4.0	2.0	4.0	1.0	1.0	5.5	8.0	47.5
Territorial Brand	1.5	4.0	3.0	1.0	2.0	7.0	9.0	6.0	9.0	5.0	8.0	2.0	57.5

**Notes:** Scores range from 1 to 9, with higher values indicating more important elements.

"NZ01" through "NZ12" represent distinct Matakana participants. The "Total Score" column represents the sum of scores for each indicator across all participants.

Indicator / Value Pustertal Participants	ITA01	ITA02	ITA03	ITA04	ITA05	ITA06	ITA07	ITA08	ITA09	ITA10	ITA11	ITA12	ITA13	ITA14	ITA15	Total Score
Accessibility	5.0	3.0	2.5	4.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	3.0	7.0	4.0	9.0	9.0	4.0	6.0	84.5
Reputation and Visibility	3.0	2.0	2.5	8.0	8.0	5.0	2.0	4.0	2.0	3.0	2.0	2.5	5.0	7.0	4.0	60.0
Information and Welcoming	2.0	5.0	6.5	6.0	9.0	8.0	9.0	9.0	8.0	5.5	7.0	1.0	8.0	8.0	8.0	100.0
Resource Sharing & Collaboration	4.0	8.0	1.0	5.0	5.0	2.0	3.0	6.0	5.0	4.0	8.0	5.0	7.0	9.0	5.0	77.0
Learning Opportunities/Innovation	6.0	6.0	4.5	9.0	4.0	4.0	1.0	2.0	7.0	2.0	9.0	5.0	3.0	1.0	9.0	72.5
Attractions	7.0	4.0	8.0	7.0	6.0	6.0	6.0	1.0	9.0	8.0	1.0	8.0	1.0	2.0	2.0	76.0
Enhancing Competencies	9.0	7.0	4.5	2.0	2.0	3.0	5.0	8.0	6.0	5.5	5.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	7.0	78.0
Financial Support	1.0	1.0	6.5	1.0	1.0	1.0	4.0	3.0	4.0	1.0	6.0	2.5	2.0	3.0	1.0	38.0
Territorial Brand	8.0	9.0	9.0	3.0	3.0	9.0	8.0	5.0	1.0	9.0	3.0	7.0	6.0	6.0	3.0	89.0

**Notes:** Scores range from 1 to 9, with higher values indicating more important elements. "ITA01" through "ITA15" represent distinct Matakana participants. The "Total Score" column represents the sum of scores for each indicator across all participants.

## Appendix N: AUTECH Approval



### Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH)

Auckland University of Technology  
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ  
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316  
E: [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)  
[www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics](http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics)

9 February 2022

Massimo Morellato  
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Massimo

Re Ethics Application: **21/440 The role of networks in rural areas and their relation to tourism: the cases of Matakana and Castelrotto.**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 9 February 2025.

#### Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTECH in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTECH prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.
8. AUTECH grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz). The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTECH Secretariat  
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: [karin.malacarne@aut.ac.nz](mailto:karin.malacarne@aut.ac.nz)