5 Exploring the Role of the University in the Creation of Knowledge Networks in the *Aso* Valley, a Rural Area in Marche Region (Italy)

Sabrina Tomasi, Concetta Ferrara, Gigliola Paviotti, Chiara Aleffi, Alessio Cavicchi, and Giovanna Bertella

Abstract

Rural areas are often disadvantaged by their peripheral position, depopulation and the scarcity of primary services, but they also have specific characteristics, especially in terms of cultural capital, that can make them attractive as tourism destinations. Sustainable tourism paths can be developed through collaboration between various actors with complementary skills and areas of expertise, especially local cooperatives and associations. In this context, universities can have a crucial role in creating knowledge networks and enhancing "rural buzz" that is the flow of information and knowledge among the individuals, organizations, and businesses in a rural area through face-to-face interaction. This study focuses on an Italian case study from the Marche Region: the collaboration between the University of Macerata (UNIMC) and a local association, *Agritur-Aso*, has been chosen as an example of a network for the co-valorization of regional cultural capital.

Introduction

Rural areas are often disadvantaged by their peripheral position, depopulation, and the scarcity of primary services (Barca et al., 2014). This study argues that universities, through the creation of knowledge networks, could help their areas develop the economic and social resilience needed to counter these difficulties and to thrive.

Rural areas can be attractive tourism destinations because of their peaceful, natural beauty, made even more inviting when combined with opportunities to learn about their cultural and historical heritage, enjoy local traditional festivals, and savour their special foods and wines. This cultural capital should be exploited to develop sustainable tourism (Richards, 2002; Rinaldi, 2017) through collaboration between various actors with complementary skills and areas of expertise (Sharpley, 2002), especially local cooperatives and associations

(Aref & Gill, 2009; Johnson, 2010; Nair et al., 2013), which may organize activities and events featuring typical products and expressing the values and knowledge of their local historical heritage.

In this context, universities can have a crucial role in creating knowledge networks and enhancing "rural buzz" that is the flow of information and knowledge among the individuals, organizations, and businesses in a rural area through face-to-face interaction (Bathelt et al., 2004). Of particular value for both the site and the students are the university-organized opportunities for experiential learning (Kolb, 1984); student work with local actors contributes to the creation of knowledge networks for sharing and using different types of knowledge (Phelps et al., 2012) and to the enhancement of "rural buzz" (Thomas, 2016). These factors can foster innovation and rural development (Lane & Oreszczyn, 2013).

An Italian case study from the Marche Region, the collaboration between the University of Macerata (UNIMC) and a local association, *Agritur-Aso*, has been chosen as an example of a network for the co-valorization of regional cultural capital. The study research question is this: *How and to what extent can universities stimulate knowledge networks to valorize regional cultural capital in remote rural regions?*

Theory

Knowledge networks in rural areas

In a knowledge network, the participants are the nodes, and their shared knowledge constitutes the links. While several types of knowledge networks are discussed in the literature (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Cooper, 2006; Ngo et al., 2018), this study focuses on informal ones based on openness and reciprocity that draw together different types of knowledge in a rural region and lead to the creation and utilization of regional resources and competencies that support concrete collective and collaborative actions (Lane & Oreszczyn, 2013; Kolehmainen et al., 2016). When existing social relations form the basis for such a network, the participants often share common values, attitudes, and interpretative schemes, and this encourages the flow of information, allowing all the members to learn and benefit as each member shares his or her knowledge (Fesenmaier & Contractor, 2001). Temporary knowledge clusters are also formed through events that facilitate interactions among different actors (Bathelt & Schuldt, 2008).

Regional development and innovation in remote areas can be fostered when local communities form knowledge networks. This flow of information, created face to face, in co-presence and co-location among actors and firms from the same industry, place, or region, can be defined "local buzz" (Bathelt et al., 2004). "Global pipelines" are links beyond the local level, which can have a role in knowledge creation and innovation, as they integrate information from

other environments with potential to increase local interpretation and usage of knowledge (Bathelt et al., 2004).

An example of a rural knowledge network and "local buzz" is provided by a Welsh case study (Thomas, 2016), which observed five dimensions: (a) interaction between farmers; (b) interaction between different agricultural suppliers/ service providers; (c) interaction between the government and farmers; (d) interaction between knowledge transfer specialists and farmers; and (e) spread of knowledge throughout the community and beyond.

In the tourism sector, a similar model was applied by Bertella (2011a) to the concept of community of practice (CoP) as developed by Wenger (1998), indicating groups of people who participate together in a collective process of learning about tourism to produce a shared practice. In a CoP, members reflect on and engage to learn how to achieve an objective perceived as meaningful (Bertella, 2011a). The actors involved feel a sense of belonging to the place where they act and to the group with whom they work: a sense of reciprocal trust, of responsibility towards the community, and strong identity usually characterize a CoP (Bertella, 2011a) and distinguish it from a generic learning/ knowledge network. CoPs can be significant for promoting tourism in their area, as knowledge and identity give value to the natural and cultural resources on offer.

The role of universities

In the last decade, universities progressively involved in their local contexts. According to Goddard et al. (2016), civic universities are actively engaged with the local community through a holistic approach to impacting society beyond the academy. Characterized by a sense of purpose and a sense of place, they want to impact society by addressing societal challenges, or specific global or local problems, and view their local areas as a "living laboratory" (Goddard et al., 2016).

For civic universities, "teaching has a strong community involvement with the long-term objective of widening participation in higher education and producing well-rounded citizens as graduates" (Goddard & Kempton, 2016, p. 13). In particular, through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), their students connect the academic environment to local communities and, consequently, play an essential role in creating knowledge networks (Phelps et al., 2012).

Community-academic partnerships (CAPs) are collaborations between community members of rural areas and nearby universities to foster knowledge exchange (Drahota et al., 2016).

> [They] are characterised by equitable control, a cause(s) that is primarily relevant to the community of interest, and specific aims to achieve a goal(s), and involve community members (representatives or agencies) that have knowledge of the cause, as well as academic researchers.
>
> (Drahota et al., 2016, p. 192)

The community context in which the collaboration process is formed and the relationships among the participants are significant for taking actions (Brookman-Frazee et al., 2012). Interpersonal factors that facilitate the collaboration are trust and respect, the presence of shared visions and goals, good communication (common language) and capacity to solve conflicts, and clear division of roles and functions.

Benefits of knowledge networks in rural areas

Previous research in rural areas has pointed out different types of knowledge that can be developed (Fonte, 2008; Csurgó et al., 2008; Bertella, 2011b). In terms of food, networks can foster scientific knowledge. This is a standardized form of knowledge from research, for example, in the case of food and gastronomy. Moreover, political and managerial knowledge can be enhanced: this is related to the organization of production of food that is considered a competitive tourism product. In addition to the others, local knowledge, namely "how things work", is a technical form of knowledge about how to produce and prepare local food.

CAPs can yield a variety of outcomes such as partnership synergy, knowledge exchange, tangible products (proximal outcomes), development of/ enhanced capacity to implement programmes or interventions, improved community care, creation of sustainable CAP infrastructure for collaboration, and changed community context (distal outcomes, which depend on the proximal) (Brookman-Frazee et al., 2012; Drahota et al., 2016). Students benefit from this collaboration process and active engagement in activities promoted in the local community by several local actors, as they learn new knowledge, identify employability opportunities, and are encouraged to be active citizens (Goddard & Kempton, 2016, p. 13).

Background context

The University of Macerata

The Italian university system consists in three cycles, corresponding to the main academic degrees: bachelor (3 years), master (2 years), and PhD (3 years) (Bologna Process, 1999) and is aligned to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (Eurybase, 2007).

UNIMC is located in the Marche Region (central Italy), populated by 1,518,400 inhabitants (Marche Region, 2019). In 1290 a School of Law run by a private master was founded under the protection of Macerata Municipality, thus having the features of a public university. In 1540, Pope Paul III reorganized it as the *Studium Generale Maceratense* with the classic four faculties (law, theology, philosophy, medicine) (Pomante, 2013).

UNIMC has today five departments: it is the only Italian university exclusively focused on Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities. Accordingly, its

motto is "Innovation through Humanities": through a humanistic approach, it finds innovative interdisciplinary solutions for social and economic challenges (Compagnucci et al., 2018). In the AY 2017/2018, 10,083 students enrolled at UNIMC, 438 of them were international (USTAT, 2018).

As articulated in its 2019–2020 strategic plan, UNIMC seeks to expand its function as a public space where interactions with the city and the territory occur (UNIMC, 2018). In line with the National Strategy for Inner Areas (Barca et al., 2014), the Operational Programme for Regional Development based on the European Regional Development Fund (Marche Region, 2014) and the Regional Smart Specialisation Strategy (Marche Region, 2016), the university works with local actors to market the region, serving as a facilitator for discussions and planning working tables involving a network of various organizations to reinforce relationships among participants and foster co-creation of sustainable development.

UNIMC has coordinated or been involved in a wide range of European projects at the international level, also related to agriculture, food and wine, and tourism (Compagnucci et al., 2018).

More specifically, since 2009 a team from the Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism Department has been working on agri-food marketing and territorial branding in rural areas, using an action research approach (Gilmore & Carson, 1996; Grant et al., 2001) and an emphasis on mutuality and commitment. In this context, a collaboration between UNIMC and the *Agritur-Aso* association began.

The **Agritur-Aso** *association*

In the southern part of the Marche Region, between the *Sibillini* mountains and the Adriatic coast, lies the *Aso* valley (or Valdaso, named after the *Aso* River), straddling the provinces of Ascoli Piceno and Fermo. This land, populated by 29.392 inhabitants (ISTAT, 2019) living in 21 municipalities, is characterized by small hillside rural villages, surrounded by orchards, vineyards, and vegetable gardens and marked by a strong local cultural heritage, long-standing culinary traditions, and many typical local food products (Ferrara, 2015).

Agritur-Aso association was founded in 2007 by 6 rural accommodation facilities and farms and has now 22 members. The president, Roberto Ferretti, owns the B&B *La Scentella*. *Agritur-Aso* collaborates with local tourism promoters and organizes cultural events based on local resources to foster community engagement and revitalize abandoned sites and small villages. The association offers hospitality enriched with experiential activities (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) based on traditional, seasonal local gastronomy, natural and cultural resources, and the valorization of local traditions (Bertella & Cavicchi, 2017), thus combining experiential tourism (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013), relational tourism (Grolleau, 1987), and community-based tourism (Okazaki, 2008).

Agritur-Aso has a twofold aim and carries out initiatives mainly addressed to tourists and/or guests of its facilities, local community/stakeholders, and students.

On the one hand, the association aims at creating projects that promote a better quality of life for local communities based on solidarity and sustainability among all the actors involved in promoting the territory. The underlying philosophy of "Lu 'rajutu", reciprocal help, is deep-rooted in the rural culture. To this aim, the association designed the following events:

- The *Salata* (2007–2013): a rural neighbourhood dinner evoking the ritual of the pork slaughter and promoting the values of conviviality.
- *Lavandaso* festival (ongoing since 2012): lavender festival, including a market of local fresh products and handicrafts and cultural activities to bring abandoned villages/cultural sites back to life, by raising awareness in the local community and tourists on the importance of caring about the future of these places through an *agora* to discuss the future of the place (Bertella et al., 2020).
- *Li Tajulì pilusi* festival (ongoing since 2014): traditional home-made pasta festival that includes entertainment and cultural activities and an *agora* between the community and tourists to discuss the sustainability and quality of local life for the repopulation of rural villages. On the other hand, *Agritur-Aso* works to promote a form of hospitality based on authentic and spontaneous relationships between hosts and guests through activities and events that valorize the local culture, history, and traditions, and in doing so, to reinforce the sense of belonging of locals.

To this aim, the following events are carried on:

- *Vintage* festival (2009–2012): historical re-enactment of traditional winemaking and *vincotto* preparation, a traditional mulled wine.
- *Marche in your suitcase* (ongoing since 2009): *Agritur-Aso* members travel abroad during low tourist season to the towns of their former guests to promote Marche Region through cultural events and dinners, featuring products from small local rural firms, to attract more visitors to the region (Bertella & Cavicchi, 2017).

Methodology

A longitudinal case study (Yin, 2003) was chosen to investigate changes in small communities, especially when there is a collaborative relationship with those being studied (Holland et al., 2006). This long-term research activity was based on the Participatory Action Research approach, mainly used in the field of rural development (Cahill, 2007): it is an umbrella term for a series of methods aimed at analysing and deepening a specific situation and co-creating solutions through active participation of researchers in collaborations

with non-researchers (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Kindon et al., 2007; Bertella, 2019).

Research activities were carried out from 2014 to 2019 and included interviews, observations, and formal and informal meetings between the researchers and the association members. The data on which this specific study relies derive mainly from various documents and a series of fieldworks. Concerning the documents, two authors carried on desk research. They retrieved information by monitoring tourism promotion websites (7), blogs (7), social media pages/profiles (2), and YouTube channels (1). A review with 15 videos and 27 articles published in online magazines was also compiled.

As for field research:

- two authors conducted a semi-structured interview with the *Agritur-Aso* association president and a focus group with international students participating in the *Lavandaso* festival in 2019. These were recorded and transcribed. Other two team members operated the coding: identification of emerging aspects, categorization, summary of the main points emerged.
- all the authors practised participant observation: in the classroom and at UNIMC events and respectively during *Lavandaso* (2017; 2018) and *Li Tajulì pilusi* festival (2017). These activities included informal conversations with organizers and participants.

To analyse the data, a framework built on an adaptation from the "rural buzz" model described by Thomas (2016) was developed with a focus on the role of the university in fostering knowledge networks. Such framework (Table 5.1) supports the analysis of the multiple levels of knowledge exchange between UNIMC and rural actors in terms of the five dimensions (in Table 5.1 authors refer to them as D1–D5) of rural buzz and adds a sixth one (D6): the "global pipeline" (Bathelt et al., 2004). The model considers rural residents as active subjects in a network of knowledge development.

Findings

Collaboration in the field

Two UNIMC initiatives in the Fermo area involved *Agritur-Aso*: one is the International Student Competition on place branding and Mediterranean Diet (ISC, 2020), a short study-abroad programme organized since 2015 in collaboration with the Piceno Laboratory on Mediterranean Diet. This initiative offers international students and their professors an opportunity to spend a week in Fermo province to experience the area: learn about its culture and food traditions and compete in a contest to produce the best ideas for promoting the Mediterranean Diet territorial brand through social media and for fostering sustainable development in the area (Tomasi et al., 2019). The *Agritur-Aso* president, who is also one of the Piceno Lab founders, hosted some

Table 5.1 The rural buzz dimensions adapted to the *Agritur-Aso* case study (authors' elaboration from Thomas, 2016; Bathelt et al., 2004)

Rural buzz adapted dimensions		*Description*
D1	Interaction between tourism and hospitality operators	General interaction between tourism and hospitality operators from *Valdaso* on an informal/conversational level. **Horizontal but informal knowledge exchange**
D2	Interaction between tourism and hospitality operators and other service providers from the area	Temporary co-presence: opportunity to observe and communicate with each actor contributing to rural buzz. **Horizontal knowledge exchange** **Temporary clustering**
D3	Interactions between tourism and hospitality operators and the government	Government presence at events encourages trust and fosters communication between different rural actors. This allows operators to express their views to the government and to influence policy. **Vertical knowledge exchange** **Temporary clustering**
D4	Interaction between knowledge transfer facilitators and tourism and hospitality operators	Tourism and hospitality operators can benefit from knowledge transfer facilitators (specialists providing information on innovative practice in tourism, training courses, and support). **Vertical knowledge exchange** **Temporary clustering**
D5	Knowledge spreading	The knowledge created can spread throughout the region over time (through media, word of mouth, events, relationships based on trust) and enable complex information flows and rural transformation. **Trust** **Buzz**
D6	Global pipelines (Bathelt et al., 2004)	The links created beyond the local level can have a role in knowledge creation and innovation, as they integrate information from other environments with the potential to increase local interpretation and usage of knowledge. **Vertical knowledge exchange** **Horizontal (potentially informal) knowledge exchange**

Source: Adapted from Thomas, 2016; Bathelt et al., 2004

students in his B&B. This direct engagement enabled him to build relationships with international participants, some of which invited the association to organize events in their own countries. Thanks to those relationships, by 2019, *Marche in your suitcase* had already organized three events in Belgium and two in the United States. The other initiative is the Wine Hackathon. UNIMC hosted the *Agritur-Aso* president as the key speaker at this 24-hour event organized in 2018 as part of the European project *The Wine Lab. Generating innovation*

between practise and research (TWL, 2018). During the event, groups of students, researchers, and professionals competed to propose innovative ideas to promote the Marche Region as a food and wine destination.

Two *Agritur-Aso* festivals in the *Valdaso* have, in turn, involved UNIMC. During the first one, in 2017 UNIMC organized a participative process event (*agora*) to share ideas about the contribution from the population to revitalize small abandoned villages in the rural areas of Marche.

1. As for the second one, since 2017, national and international volunteering students from the master degree in *International Tourism and Destination Management*, supported by some PhD students, managed some part of the event programme (Bertella et al., 2020). In 2019, two students from Ghana, two from India, and one from Azerbaijan organized the ethnic cooking class and prepared traditional dishes from their country. The authors involved them in a focus group to evaluate the cooperation between the association and UNIMC. They expressed satisfaction for the opportunity to interact with and learn about the local community and the surrounding area. They also valued the opportunity to practise on soft skills. They suggested that in the future it could be beneficial to involve them early on in the event design and organization, to increase the visibility and enhance the reputation of the event thanks to the involvement of the university.

Collaboration at the university

Two initiatives in academia have benefitted both *Agritur-Aso* and UNIMC students. These are the agri-food marketing classes (problem-based learning approach, Barrows, 2002), during which, since 2015, *Agritur-Aso* president has presented the association's promotional activities, primarily focusing on *Marche in your suitcase*. Students adopting the case developed proposals coherent with the theory studied in the class. The president answered students' questions and later put into practice the most innovative and feasible ideas presented. In 2020 the students worked on the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder, 2004) and proposed some ideas to help *Agritur-Aso* members during the post-COVID-19 recovery.

The other academic initiative is a UNIMC event about the recovery after the 2016 earthquakes in Central Italy (January 2017): local stakeholders from education, agriculture, tourism, and culture, discussed in groups coordinated by the UNIMC, on proposals and projects about the social and economic reconstruction of the territory. *Agritur-Aso* presented its initiative to raise funds to rebuild a church in a village through the donations of international contacts from *Marche in your suitcase*. During the event, *Agritur-Aso* enriched its network meeting a former high school German teacher. She put the association in contact with an association of Italians in Germany. As emerged from the interview, they then organized together *Marche in your suitcase* events in Obertshausen and Dudenhofen in 2017 and 2018. In turn, *Agritur-Aso* organized some concerts

in the small historical theatres of Marche for a mandolin orchestra of Duden-hofen. These were planned for 2020 but postponed due to COVID-19.

UNIMC has also established an official agreement with *Agritur-Aso* for cur-ricular students' internships.

Collaboration in Italy and abroad

UNIMC's national and international network has helped *Agritur-Aso* expand its activity.

As reported during the interview, the association established relations with the Wine Route of Tuscany, participated in Tuscan events, and shared its expe-riences at the post-graduate course in Wine in the Calabria Region. Moreover, in September 2019, the association presented its activities at the Summer School on Sustainable Development promoted by the University of Siena (Tuscany).

Supported by UNIMC, *Agritur-Aso* presented the experience of *Marche in your suitcase* in an application for the 2019 European Cultural Tourism Net-work Award for sustainable cultural tourism (ECTN, 2019). At the 12th Inter-national Conference for Cultural Tourism in Europe held in 2019 in Granada (Spain), the association was awarded first prize as a Destination of Sustain-able Cultural Tourism in the "Culinary Heritage, Wine, Food & Gastronomy Tourism" category (Europa Nostra, 2019).

Agritur-Aso also met Arizona State University students interested in sustain-able agriculture, through UNIMC experiential learning activities organized for *Edulingua*, an Italian Language and Culture School in San Severino Marche (MC). Students visited *La Scentella*, attended to a presentation about *Agritur-Aso*'s goals and activities, especially *Marche in your suitcase*, and featured the quintessence of sustainable tourism, a *Ciocheciò* ("whatever is available") dinner prepared with seasonal products, home-grown or bought from local farmers.

Discussion

The long-term relationship between the *Agritur-Aso* association and UNIMC, even though mainly informal, suggests that reciprocal exchange of knowledge can emerge from an existing social tie based on trust, respect, good commu-nication, shared goals, and a sense of belonging and identity (Wenger, 1998; Bertella, 2011a; Brookman-Frazee et al., 2012; Drahota et al., 2016). Over time, this interaction enabled the association to broaden its network locally, nationally, and internationally (Fonte, 2008; Csurgó et al., 2008; Fesenmaier & Contractor, 2001; Lane & Oreszczyn, 2013). This resulted in the exchange of various types of knowledge, particularly tourism knowledge about the valori-zation and exploitation of rural resources as experiences, and local manage-rial and political knowledge about the socio-cultural aspects of the specific area (Bertella, 2011b). In the following paragraphs, the relationship between UNIMC and *Agritur-Aso* according to the rural buzz adapted dimensions (Table 5.1, D1-D6) will be discussed.

Rural buzz in the classroom

The UNIMC courses in *Agri-food marketing* and *Place branding and rural development* engage students in experiential learning and problem-based learning activities (Kolb, 1984; Barrows, 2002), to support their employability by experiencing real challenges in the working environments (Goddard & Kempton, 2016). Specifically, in the *Agri-food marketing* course, students who did their course project on the *Agritur-Aso* case took part in a temporary knowledge cluster (Bathelt & Schuldt, 2008): as they learned about it during the class presentation, they spoke with its members and other stakeholders and, in some cases, worked with them during curricular internships; they started sharing its goals and sought to support it. There is a two-way exchange of information: the students learn about the specific characteristics of the area and the associations' activities and at the same time serve as knowledge transfer facilitators (D4), providing the association with new knowledge to support its promotion of the area.

Through the participatory approach event promoted by UNIMC to discuss with local stakeholders about the post-earthquake recovery, the university also facilitated knowledge exchange with other stakeholders from the same or different fields (D1, D2).

The event was also participated by public bodies, with whom the university regularly deals. In this sense, the university supports reciprocal awareness among stakeholders that may influence policymaking (D3). Through these events, government and institutional participants understand the activities going on in the rural areas and the needs for resources.

Rural buzz in the area

UNIMC participation in *Agritur-Aso* events such as the *Li Tajulì pilusi* festival and, in exchange, *Agritur-Aso* operators participation in university events and learning experiences in the area, such as the International Student Competition, can be related to several dimensions of the rural buzz framework (Thomas, 2016). As a civic-engaged university, UNIMC considers the local area as a living laboratory (Goddard et al., 2016). These events foster interactions among tourism and hospitality operators (D1), other service providers (D2), and the local community and help identify the needs of the local community, providing the university with a deeper understanding of the local context, which is the subject of research of its studies, through a participatory action research approach (Cahill, 2007). This link is also applicable to the role of students working as volunteers in the frame of events such as the *Lavandaso* festival: by supporting organization and implementation of the events, students can apply the theoretical knowledge gained during their university courses (D4). The dimension of CAPs to enhance care for the community (Brookman-Frazee et al., 2012; Drahota et al., 2016) is retrievable in the case of the *agora* managed by UNIMC at the *Li Tajulì pilusi* festival,

during which participants discussed the future of the abandoned villages of rural areas. The *agora* served to share ideas on the topic and build relationships with other participants and professionals: new relationships support the development of new opportunities for collaboration (D1, D2, D4). The CoP concept also comes into play here: the university students and teachers and the residents can be viewed as practitioners who possess different types of knowledge and share the same interest and concern for the local area (Wenger, 1998). As such, UNIMC contributes to horizontal rather than vertical knowledge exchange, as the transfer of knowledge is reciprocal, and the local cultural values are part of the knowledge flow (Thomas, 2016). In this collaborative inquiry, all the participants, including the university itself, invest their professional identities as part of a dynamic, forward-looking community (Wenger, 1998).

Rural buzz beyond the Fermo area: a "global pipeline"

Through the UNIMC network, *Agritur-Aso* could share knowledge (Thomas, 2016) throughout the region (D5) and beyond (D6), by participating in several initiatives to present and provide experiences related to its activities. Thanks to the UNIMC collaboration with Edulingua in San Severino Marche, it happened locally with the involvement of the Arizona State University students in a field trip. It also occurred outside the region, at the Wine Route in Tuscany, the Wine Master in Calabria, and the Summer School in Siena.

In a "global pipeline", links with actors abroad expand the potential for knowledge creation and innovation (Bathelt et al., 2004), as information can be transferred to other contexts but can also come from different environments, thus increasing local interpretation and usage of knowledge (Bathelt et al., 2004). In this context, UNIMC has facilitated new partnership synergies and helped actors to implement programmes or interventions beyond the local area (Brookman-Frazee et al., 2012; Drahota et al., 2016). For example, UNIMC helped *Marche in your suitcase* by sharing its network to meet new partners who decided to support the initiative. It is also valid for the involvement of international students in the *Agritur-Aso* activities, as they can promote interculturalism and place-making (e.g., ethnic cooking classes), gain local knowledge, and also provide to locals an international perspective and become "ambassadors" for the region in their countries (Wenger, 1998; Bertella, 2011a; Brookman-Frazee et al., 2012; Drahota et al., 2016) (D6).

Conclusions

This study investigated the role that universities can play in stimulating knowledge networks to valorize regional cultural capital in remote rural regions through a participatory action research approach. It explored the long-term relationship between UNIMC and *Agritur-Aso*, a local association of tourism and hospitality operators from a Marche region's rural area.

The findings suggested that the reciprocity between UNIMC and *Agritur-Aso* contributed to creating the basis for temporary proximity, tacit knowledge, and situational learning; furthermore, results highlight that *Agritur-Aso* benefitted the expansion of its network significantly through UNIMC contacts.

Thus, universities can play a significant role in stimulating knowledge networks to valorize regional cultural capital in remote rural regions. The horizontal knowledge exchange and expansion of learning relationships beyond the local area and the significant amount of time developing reciprocal trust and mutual commitment based on a shared vision of rurality and the related challenges and potential strongly emerge. These factors were addressed in terms of the concepts of Rural Buzz, CoP, and CAP. This case presents some critical aspects: UNIMC–*Agritur-Aso* collaboration, based on trust and mutual commitment and related to researchers' and students' personal and informal engagement, has never been officially structured. The lack of structure prevents it from a long-term vision. For example, the relationships built in the classroom sometimes were not nurtured after the end of the course and had not a follow-up in practical terms.

Moreover, the association's activities are mainly based on volunteering: they depend on the free availability of human and financial resources. In this way, continuity cannot be guaranteed: this is one of the main reasons why some of the events stopped (e.g., the *Salata*, the *Vintage* festival). A more structured collaboration with the university could provide the association with more opportunities to access public funding and direct contact with local and regional public authorities. More generally, creating a sustainable CAP infrastructure for collaboration could also share the university's wider network with local stakeholders and turn these relationships into concrete collaborations from a long-term perspective.

This study presents some limitations. Firstly, it lacks precise measurements of these relationships' impact in terms of improved community care and changes the community's context. Concerning this, future studies should be dedicated to understanding the actual nature of the knowledge exchange between the actors involved and how it is translated into concrete actions. A second limitation concerns the existence of perspectives on the local development of tourism that differ from the view advocated and promoted by the investigated university and association. Such an issue can be related to possible conflicts and power relations that might have been overseen, partly due to the researchers' active role in the investigated collaboration. As a research team, we discussed this aspect and strived to gain a broad view of possible relevant topics and actors excluded from the cooperation. Nonetheless, future studies about the rural buzz and the collaboration between universities and local associations might include a seventh dimension representing the lack of interactions among potentially relevant actors.

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