

# Keep dreaming: how personality traits affects the recognition and exploitation of entrepreneurial opportunities in the agritourism industry

Personality in  
the agritourism  
industry

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper analyses how entrepreneurs recognise and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities following a sustainable approach that respects the equilibrium among environmental, social and commercial purposes, and how their personality affects this process. The main personality traits focused in this study are narcissism, locus of control and sustainability orientation.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This single case study involves Essentia Dimora Rurale, a small agritourism business, located in Molise (Italy), characterised by a sustainable business model that generates value for the local environment, thus revitalising abandoned territories. Data are collected using qualitative and quantitative methods and are analysed using the Gioia methodology.

**Findings** – The Essentia Dimora Rurale’s approach is rooted in the concept of sustainability and the development of tourism in the territory. The preservation of traditional values and the creation of a network allow the firm to prosper and survive. The personalities of the two sibling entrepreneurs fuel the process, and the authors show that each personality trait plays a different role in each phase of the firm’s growth.

**Research limitations/implications** – From a theoretical point of view, the study contributes to entrepreneurial, sustainability and personality literature. However, using a single case study can represent a limit for the research.

**Practical implications** – Various practical implications are recognised concerning several stakeholders, such as the owners and the entities linked to the regional promotion and tourism sectors.

**Originality/value** – The novelty of the research relies on the importance of entrepreneur opportunity identification, particularly in sustainable firms. Moreover, the authors fill the literature gap investigating the impact of three personality traits in this process.

**Keywords** Agritourism, Sustainability, Narcissism, Locus of control, Sustainability orientation, Territory

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

Sustainable firms create products and services that are environmentally friendly and competitive on the market and can implement technological and digital innovations that bring new and unexploited opportunities, especially for the food and agritourism sector (Garousi Mokhtarzadeh *et al.*, 2020; Mokhtarzadeh *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, sustainable firms see, identify and create opportunities to counteract existing negative environmental impacts (e.g. natural resource exhaustion) and generate various environmental, social and economic benefits (Jafari-Sadeghi *et al.*, 2020; Secinaro and Calandra, 2020). The creation of sustainable firms, especially in the food and tourism industries, enables value generation for the local environment, revitalising abandoned territories (Matzembacher and Meira, 2019).

Agritourism emerged in response to the productivism model to counteract its negative effects on the environment, society and economy of rural territories (Anthopoulou and Melissourgos, 2012). Since 1990s, agritourism entered the academic and policymaker debate as a form of diversification for farms, as farming entrepreneurs continually work to identify and exploit new business opportunities with the aim at creating value from their businesses and activities, while preserving the environment and cultural heritage, and promoting sustainable rural development (Alsos *et al.*, 2011; Vesala and Jarkko, 2008).

In recent years, agritourism firms have strengthened their identity and reputation as a form of tourism activities, affecting tourists' choices of a tourism destination (Rozier Rich *et al.*, 2016). For destinations, agritourism represents a form of relevant tourism in both developed and emerging countries and an engine of opportunities for rural renewal (Anthopoulou and Melissourgos, 2012). It offers consumers new experiences ranging from back to basics to being satisfied with high-technology services, involving tourists also in pre-travel, on-site and post-travel experiences. Entrepreneurs of agritourism are happy and proud to welcome tourists in their territory and to show and share their traditions, culture and hospitality.

The global market size of the agritourism industry was assessed at more than US\$42 bn in 2019 and is forecast to reach almost US\$63 bn by 2027 (CAGR (compound annual growth rate) 13.4% in the period 2021–2027) (Allied Analytics, 2021). The USA estimated an increase of US\$600 m (2002–2012) in the agritourism-related activities (USDA: NASS, 2007; USDA: NASS, 2014), while agritourism revenue in India is about +20% (Business Economics, 2019) and in Israel it is +15% (Israel Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2014). In Italy, agritourism revenue (2019) is around 1.5 bn euros (+3.3% in 2019, +37% in 2007) (Ismea-Qualivita, 2019).

The field of agritourism research is increasing year-by-year (Rozier Rich *et al.*, 2016), producing multifaceted research studies. However, there is still a need to study the benefits of this form of tourism (Tew and Barbieri, 2012) and to strengthen this research area, in general (Barbieri, 2009; McGehee and Kim, 2004; Ollenburg and Buckley, 2007). In particular, agritourism research needs to focus on, among others, the antecedents of entrepreneurial personality and characteristics (Seuneke *et al.*, 2013), heritage conservation (Barbieri, 2020), sustainable development (Anderson, 2015) and the usage of technology (Rauniyar *et al.*, 2021).

The paper aims to answer two research questions:

- RQ1. How can entrepreneurs recognise and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities following a sustainable approach (i.e. considering environmental, social and economic aspects)?
- RQ2. How does the personality of entrepreneurs affect the search for entrepreneurial opportunities that allow them to create sustainable firms and bring value to the socio-economic development of their territory?

According to the Upper Echelons theory, entrepreneurs' choices are influenced by their personal values, dispositions and prior experiences, and they choose organisational strategies that fit their managerial schemas and preferences (Hambrick and Mason, 1984;

Reina *et al.*, 2014). Thus, entrepreneurs, through their personalities and sustainable management practices, can create value for sustainable firms, prioritising societal interest over the purely economic perspective (i.e. profit seeking). Therefore, entrepreneur personality has a strong impact on firms' sustainability, enabling the entrepreneur to define the orientation towards sustainability in an enduring manner.

In this paper, we consider personality traits as the way people behave and explain why people behave differently when in the same situation (Leonelli *et al.*, 2016; Leonelli and Masciarelli, 2020). We focus on three main personality traits that promote someone to choose sustainability: narcissism, locus of control and sustainability orientation. Narcissism refers to individuals' self-enhancement and self-esteem. In this paper, we consider three aspects of narcissism which are leadership/authority, grandiose exhibitionism and entitlement/exploitativeness. Locus of control investigates the extent to which individuals believe events are generated by their own actions (i.e. internal locus of control) or are generated by external factors they cannot control (i.e. external locus of control). Finally, sustainability orientation is the firm management's belief in the connection between environmental and societal issues. We selected these traits because narcissism and locus of control are often positively associated with entrepreneurship (Hansemark, 1998; Leonelli *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the choices of narcissistic entrepreneurs are generally different from those of non-narcissistic entrepreneurs (i.e. more visible or risky decisions) (Leonelli, 2021), and, thanks to their charisma, narcissistic entrepreneurs easily gain followers (Gruda *et al.*, 2021). Finally, sustainably oriented entrepreneurs are more interested in pursuing initiatives and starting firms that encourage sustainability (Kuckertz and Wagner, 2010).

We used a single case study to investigate in detail the above dynamics. The case analyses the history of two young sibling entrepreneurs who recognised an entrepreneurial opportunity and created a sustainable agritourism company in the south of Italy in order to create value for this area. We explain the process that led them to recognise an entrepreneurial opportunity, their sustainable idea and how their personalities impacted these choices, enhancing the sustainable development for the whole territory. Our research questions are summarised in Figure 1.

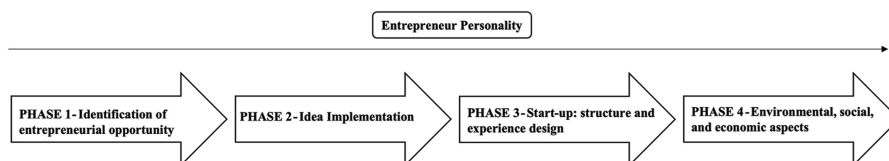
The paper is organised as follows. We introduce our research with a theoretical background regarding agritourism as an opportunity for rural and tourism sustainability and regarding the personality of the entrepreneur. Thus, we describe the methodology and the achieved results. In the last part of the paper, we discuss and link the results with the research questions, providing implications for academics, practitioners and policymakers, as well as the limitations and future lines of research.

## Theoretical background

### *Agritourism as an opportunity for rural and tourism sustainability*

Nowadays, the amount of research in the field of agritourism is increasing (Rauniyar *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, the literature is highly fragmented at the conceptual level (Barbieri, 2020), as several terms are used to define it (Anthopoulou and Melissourgios, 2012), and there is little research on which marketing measures have effective outcomes (Roziar Rich *et al.*, 2016).

Farm tourism, green tourism and rural tourism are a few terms often employed to identify agro/agritourism (Bazin and Roux, 1997; Fleischer and Tchetchik, 2005; Phillip *et al.*, 2010;



**Figure 1.**  
Essential phases of  
entrepreneurial  
opportunity  
exploitation

Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997; Yang *et al.*, 2010). In the literature, agritourism is conceptualised as hospitality-related activities that are practicable in rural areas, as they are the “product”, defined by types of accommodation, activities, products and experiences (Kizos and Iosifides, 2007). Agriculture-related tourism activities are complemented by farming activities, which are run by agricultural entrepreneurs in localised, small-scale, family-cooperative or community structure (Phillip *et al.*, 2010; Sonnino, 2004). They involve different stakeholders in local/rural communities and the state (Anthopoulou and Melissourgos, 2012; Barbieri and Mshenga, 2008; Nilsson, 2002). Agritourism provides opportunities for both working farms and rural communities in terms of territorial synergies, locally added value and supplementary incomes to rural holdings (Phillip *et al.*, 2010).

From the farm business perspective, agritourism activities are a form of business diversification based on existing firm resources that do not require more investments, as food production remains the principal objective (Veeck *et al.*, 2006). Income is generated from services, such as directly selling their own production (Barbieri and Mshenga, 2008), offering educational farm activities (Fleischer and Tchetchik, 2005), etc. Scholars do not agree on a common list of typical agri-tourism services (lodging and food services) (Fleischer and Tchetchik, 2005; Iaia *et al.*, 2016; Ilbery, 1991; McGehee *et al.*, 2007; Ollenburg and Buckley, 2007). Despite this, authors agree on the importance of agritourism in adding new economic support to small business, especially family firms (Iaia *et al.*, 2017; Schilling *et al.*, 2012) or business run by younger entrepreneurs with high-standing transcultural skills (Pechlaner *et al.*, 2012).

The benefits of agritourism are not affordable for all businesses, depending on their features and the local context they belong to, such as if they operate in a tourism destination or in the proximity of tourist attractions (Saxena *et al.*, 2007). In this sense, agritourism offers new income and well-being to rural communities and supports the development of both rural sustainability and sustainable tourism, reducing the negative impact of tourism (Iaia *et al.*, 2019; Sharpley, 2009; Su *et al.*, 2019). In fact, where the rural economy is prevalent, agritourism activities represent an opportunity for local employment, boosting the rural development (Van der Ploeg, 2015). Besides, agritourism highlights the sense of local pride and territorial identity and strengthens it through the preservation of local gastronomic, cultural traditions, agricultural practices and artisanal know-how (Anthopoulou and Melissourgos, 2012). Agritourism activities help to preserve the physical environment, enhance the value of existing or abandoned buildings and promote extensive, environmentally friendly agriculture (Roberts and Hall, 2001).

Lastly, academic interest related to the combination of tourism activities and rural development is fully supported by scholars, which recognises its relevance in terms of knowledge and value generated for both sectors (Torres and Momsen, 2011; Vogt and Andereck, 2000).

#### *The personality of entrepreneur*

*Entrepreneurial narcissism.* “Narcissism refers to the individual’s attitudes, actions, and understandings related to managing self-esteem” (Masciarelli and Leonelli, 2020, p. 42). Narcissism is a personality dimension that can assume low and high levels and become a personality disorder when extreme levels are reached. In this paper, the focus will be on non-pathological narcissism, which is common of those people who manifest vanity, superiority and entitlement (Leonelli, 2021). Narcissists are also characterised by high levels of self-love and self-admiration, and they consider themselves more unique, smarter and more attractive than others (Leonelli *et al.*, 2019; Mathieu and St-Jean, 2013). Only a few studies investigate the relationship between narcissism and recognition and exploitation of entrepreneurial opportunities. Tucker *et al.* (2016) showed that because of narcissists’ desire for self-enhancement and admiration, they will not use their peers’ or employees’ human capital for a better opportunity in the discovery process. Narcissists are characteristically only willing to listen to others who validate their ideas (Grijalva and Harms, 2014), and they have the

propensity to resist any criticism, even if the criticism is beneficial for refining the opportunity (Liu *et al.*, 2021). Wales *et al.* (2013) revealed that entrepreneurs' narcissistic characteristics allow them to implement high-risk strategies that cause sales revenue fluctuations. Finally, Leonelli *et al.* (2019) reported an inverted U-shaped relationship between entrepreneurial narcissism and start-up innovation, even if this curvilinear relationship is affected by industry characteristics (e.g. market dynamism).

Furthermore, the link between narcissism and corporate ethical conduct and/or corporate social responsibility (CSR) is not deeply investigated in the literature, even if it has started attracting research attention (Al-Shammari *et al.*, 2021; Lin *et al.*, 2021; Petrenko *et al.*, 2016; Rijsenbilt and Commandeur, 2013).

Rijsenbilt and Commandeur (2013) showed that narcissistic chief executive officers (CEOs) might behave unethically in order to achieve their goals and satisfy their need for admiration. For these reasons, they suggest to not leave CEOs uncontrolled because their behaviour might threaten the firms' interests. However, Petrenko *et al.* (2016) reported that narcissism positively affects organisational CSR practices, stating that entrepreneurs can be pushed in implementing CSR initiatives to bring further media attention and self-image improvement. Finally, Lin *et al.* (2021) studied a sample of manufacturing firms in China and confirmed that narcissistic CEOs invest more in corporate green marketing programmes and that corporate environmental strategy covers an important mediator role in the relationship.

Accordingly, narcissistic CEOs will likely commit greater time and resources to activities that have greater potential to garner attention (e.g. CSR activities) than to activities that have less of such potential (Al-Shammari *et al.*, 2019).

*Locus of control.* Locus of control indicates how much people perceive they can control life events (i.e. internal locus of control vs external locus of control) (Rotter, 1966). People with an internal locus of control believe they can influence life with their actions and are usually more confident. Conversely, people characterised by an external locus of control think that the events in their lives are influenced by unpredictable forces, such as luck, fate, influential people or institutions (Leonelli *et al.*, 2016).

Only a few studies investigated the relationship between locus of control and recognition and exploitation of entrepreneurial opportunities. Some authors show that more business owners manifest an internal locus of control as opposed to non-business owners (Rauch and Frese, 2000; Shane *et al.*, 2003; Vecchio, 2003). Wijbenga and Van Witteloostuijn (2007) reported that entrepreneurs characterised by internal locus of control have a high degree of innovativeness, competitive aggressiveness and autonomy. Asante and Affum-Osei (2019) affirmed that entrepreneurs manifesting internal locus of control are more likely to recognise entrepreneurial opportunities. However, they underlined the importance of the mediator role of entrepreneurial intention. Finally, other authors show that entrepreneurs' internal locus of control is significantly related to venture growth (Boone *et al.*, 2000; Howell and Avolio, 1993; Lee and Tsang, 2001).

*Sustainability orientation.* Sustainability orientation is a moral cognition rooted in sustainable entrepreneurs that underlines their role as wealth generators by integrating sustainability into their firms' daily routines (Leonelli and Masciarelli, 2020; Soo Sung and Park, 2018; Wahga *et al.*, 2018). Sustainability orientation allows entrepreneurs to balance ethical and moral values when exploiting opportunities, allowing them to differentiate themselves from traditional entrepreneurs who sometimes sacrifice their values (Fisscher *et al.*, 2005; del Pilar Casado-Belmonte *et al.*, 2020). In this vein, entrepreneurs with high levels of sustainability orientation can manage their business in the most ecologically and socially responsible way (Kuckertz and Wagner, 2010). Sustainable-oriented entrepreneurs should improve their foresight thinking, embrace diversity and interdisciplinarity, and employ strategic management. These skills allow entrepreneurs to understand and predict the impact of short- and long-term decisions on the environment and social equilibrium; for a detailed review, see Masciarelli and Leonelli (2020).

Sustainability orientation is seen as an antecedent to entrepreneurial intention, since it motivates one to discover environmental and market problems and then solve them (Criado-Gomis *et al.*, 2017; Dean and McMullen, 2007; Wagner, 2012). Moreover, some authors show that sustainability orientation positively impacts firms' performance in developing new products, enhancing operational efficiencies and saving costs (Claudy *et al.*, 2016; Soo Sung and Park, 2018).

### Methodology

We adopted the case study method in order to understand how sustainability aspects and personality traits may be used to grasp the opportunities in the agritourism sector. The case study method allows a deeper comprehension of the studied phenomena in a real-world case (Dal Mas *et al.*, 2020), overcoming the limitations of a descriptive approach (McKeown, 2004). In particular, the single case study is an effective approach for justifying the theory building when supported by a rigid protocol method (Darke *et al.*, 1998). Adding to this, Gioia's method, with its inductive research approach, supported the elicitation between the information collected and the theory (Secinaro *et al.*, 2021). In fact, our aim is to provide relevance and effectiveness to both sustainability and the personality trait theories (Dana and Dana, 2005) in a real context (George and Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2009).

The case study we chose for our research is *Essentia Dimora Rurale*, as it fits our requirements (Patton, 1990; Stake, 1995). First, this agritourism firm is assumed to be sustainable, as it is in commercial activities, and it has strong connections with the territory. Second, the bond with the territory allows us to observe how entrepreneurs create sustainable firms and bring value to the socio-economic development of their territory. Third, this further allows us to examine the evolution of the agritourism sector, applying sustainable and entrepreneurial theories.

We collected data from primary and secondary sources (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Secondary sources came from the Internet and from advertisements and promotional material on agritourism. Primary data came from an in-depth, semi-structured (Alvesson, 2003) and face-to-face interview (Bernard, 1988) with the entrepreneurs that recorded their perceptions of their roles as entrepreneurs and managers. This gave us a picture of the company's structure and area. Two of the authors conducted the face-to-face interview with Marina, one of the entrepreneurs, which lasted about 100 min and took place in July 2021. After stating the objective of the research, we posed a few open questions related to history and the critical phases of the creation and running of the business. Some examples of the questions are as follows: How was the business idea born? Why did you decide to invest in this sector? What were the critical issues encountered in the business creation phase? Following the interview, we asked Marina and Salvatore (i.e. the two sibling entrepreneurs) to complete a survey to evaluate their personality traits and the sustainability aspects of their business. The survey was composed by different questions that follow a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree. To measure narcissism, we used the 13-item scale developed by Gentile *et al.* (2013). To measure locus of control, we used the ten-item scale created by Mueller and Thomas (2001). Finally, to measure the sustainability orientation, we used the six-item scale developed by Kuckertz and Wagner (2010).

The aim of the study was threefold: (1) to investigate how the entrepreneurs identified, implemented their business idea and created their agritourism company (*Essentia Dimora Rurale*); (2) to investigate how this sustainable firm increased and contributed to the sustainability of the territory and (3) to explore how their personality traits and their sustainable orientation were relevant to grasp the opportunities in the agritourism sector.

We employed an inductive approach to analyse our data (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), and we followed an open-coding procedure. An analysis of the interviews was done to identify the main emerging topics, which the authors then discussed to agree on representative labels. This analysis was performed only on the last two phases of the firm's creation, as these depend on the choices of a sustainable firm, strongly impacting on the survival, overall performance and territory enhancement (Rauniyar *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, a second-order analysis was performed to identify deeper patterns in the data, which provided a set of second-order topics and reprised between theoretical conjectures related to agritourism intended as a sustainable business practice, the development in rural area research and the descriptive concepts. The findings of this process, which includes aggregate dimensions, second-order concepts and first order concepts, are presented and discussed in the next sections. The procedure followed is summarised in Figure 2.

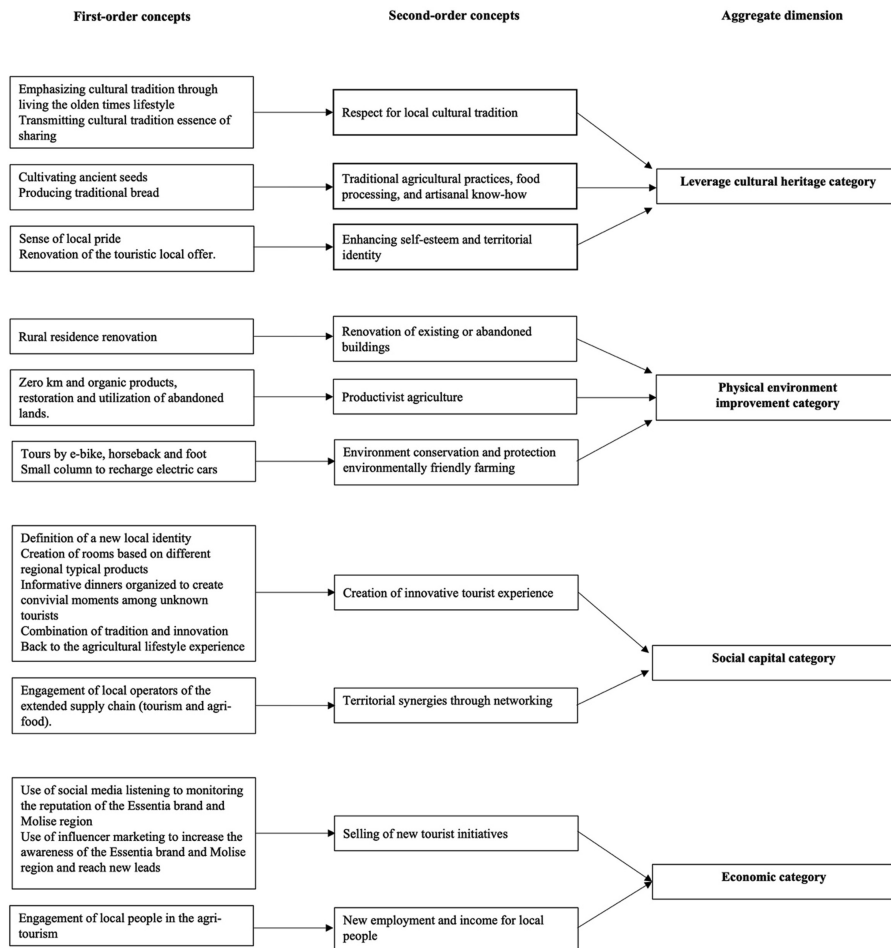


Figure 2. Data structure and multi-level concepts aggregation

## Results

### *Case study: Essentia Dimora Rurale*

Essentia is not simply an agritourism [business]. Essentia is an invitation to (re)discover and share a different world and way of life: a rural world made of genuineness and conviviality. Our goal is to rediscover and share with our guests the essence of that world as authentically as possible.

*The identification of the entrepreneurial opportunity.* Neither Marina or Salvatore remember who came up with the business idea or when it happened, as they had it in mind since childhood. They have always seen an unexpressed potential in their territory, an artistic, cultural, culinary, traditional and environmental heritage to be systematised and enhanced. Added to this is the absence of an organic tourism offering, in which the operators of the territory do not understand the importance of networking in order to bring out the tourist destination which, even in the Italian tourist panorama, has difficulty getting started. The Molise region, in fact, has been jokingly renamed on social media “Molisin’t” to imply that Molise does not exist (D’Auria and Tregua, 2020). This qualification is due to the small geographical area – it is the second smallest region in Italy after the Valle d’Aosta region – but above all to the weak identity of the region, underlining the inability to be attractive for tourists as well as to compete on the national and international scene. However, the main traits of Molise’s identity and its willingness to contribute to the creation of a proper destination image are clear in the Marina’s words:

The Molise region will become a destination when tourists look for new tourist destinations. The potential is there, but it depends on how the territory and the tourist offer are communicated. [. . .] When there is awareness of the existence of the territory and its heritage, when the potential tourist is aware of the territorial value, only then [the tourist] will become curious and come to Molise to appreciate it. Our commitment is aimed at making traditions known and appreciated, because they are beautiful, authentic and identify our region.

*A new concept of agritourism implementation: path and criticisms.* The desire to realise this project dictated both entrepreneurs’ university studies, resulting in four university theses and a business plan. The Molise region provided funding to promote youth entrepreneurship in the area, which marked the official start of their entrepreneurial path. Since June 2016–February 2018, renovating the rural residence took physical and financial effort.

The next important step for the entrepreneurs was to attend Borsa Internazionale del Turismo (BIT), an international travel trade fair in Italy to develop business connections with the main actors in the world. Although the renovation work was still ongoing, the entrepreneurs created a promotional kit of their offer and sold the first tourist packages. In particular, participating at the BIT event was the opportunity to reach their desired target of tourists from northern Europe and Italy who travel to more attractive destinations nearby in southern Italy.

The difficulties encountered by entrepreneurs in starting the business were many. Among the first was the inaccessibility of regional grants won during the first year of activity. Next, it was difficult to find reliable employees to manage the rooms and the restaurant. An example of this difficulty and the importance of the family in this small business to face obstacles is when the entrepreneurs hosted 15 people for dinner. The chef did not show up, and, thus, Salvatore managed to prepare the dinner with their parents’ help. Marina remembered that, despite this, it was a wonderful evening.

*An agri-tourism is born start-up structure and experience design.*

Keyword is ‘authenticity’. The name Essentia, from the Latin ‘essence’, is what we want to transfer to our guests, to experience the essence of the territory (Source: [www.essentia.it](http://www.essentia.it)).

Essentia is characterised by a new concept of agritourism: from the proposal and management of activities to the design of the structure to communication with the target market.



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The competitors in the Molise region mostly offer a farm visit that includes restaurant service as a primary tourist activity. The distinctive element of *Essentia* is the clear link between hospitality and catering, which is reserved only for its guests, and it offers a return to tradition and the latest innovative and sustainable technologies (such as e-bike tours).

Leveraging their cultural heritage, the touristic experience offered to the guest is a rustic experience to reconnect with and increase their knowledge about the rural area and the products. This is the entrepreneurs' view of authenticity. Guests are invited to be directly involved in the product cultivation and transformation to experience what happened in olden times, when social time was controlled by the rhythms of agricultural work, which kept people together and corroborated the relations following the seasons (e.g. the wheat harvest, the grape harvest and the olive harvest).

Leveraging the physical environment improvement, the entrepreneurs renewed the old family farmhouse, transforming it into a rural residence to offer hospitality in a rediscovered place. The original elements restored to that tradition, comfort and modernity were perfectly balanced.

The management of the agritourism business required an intense workload in the first start-up period. The two siblings covered all roles and duties related to the agritourism activities to achieve the break-even point in the planned time; extra-costs were avoided, thanks to the familiar character of the business. While the business grew, the roles of the two siblings and the tasks to be carried out were naturally defined according to their skills and inclinations. Marina is in charge of the hospitality, stays in contact with guests before arrival via email and telephone. She is at the entrance to welcome the guests who continue their regional journey with Salvatore. Salvatore is the guardian and the storyteller of the local identity. He has recovered typical agricultural practices, food processing and artisanal know-how with the cultivation of some disused ancient cereals in their grandparents' region where the agritourism organisation is located. His propensity to discover and divulge the history and tradition of his land has turned him into the storyteller of *Essentia*. Salvatore takes care of the guests during dinners, entertaining them with stories of dishes, food products and local cultural traditions. Along with this, Salvatore manages the business's technology as well as the offline and online communication aspects of their business.

In order to create innovative tourist experiences, every detail of the residence's design has been taken care of. The entrepreneurs' concept of authenticity is related to the typical agricultural products to which every room has been dedicated: the wheat room, the oil room and the tomato room. Their idea is that the journey to discover Molise begins with the first step into the room, where infographics explain the product characteristic (in Italian and English), and furnishing accessories recall the product processing and usage (e.g. the bedside tables or lighting in the oil room are old terracotta oil containers).

Guests learn by experiencing and participating in one of the most convivial moments in the rural residence: Salvatore's dinners. Informative dinners are organised to stimulate spontaneous relationships among guests. The result is represented by tourists who become friends and are struck by what and how much they learn during the dinners. In this way, they revive the rural world, transmitting its essence of sharing.

Tradition meets innovation through respect for the environment. There are e-bike tours to discover the short food and wine supply chain from harvesting to processing. At the residence, there is a recharging station for the electric cars and e-bikes.

To sell these new touristic initiatives, communication on social networks plays a fundamental role. The interview highlights they pay proper attention to social media to reach new leads and to create awareness and a reputation for the *Essentia Dimora Rurale* brand and the Molise region.

During the lockdown period, a famous Italian influencer and journalist made a joke about the possibility of travelling between regions with the same "colour", as they were limited by

the same pandemic restrictions. She wrote from Milan (Lombardy, North of Italy) on her Instagram account: “Well, then I’m going to buy bread in Molise”. Salvatore read the post and invited her to Molise, posting a photo of homemade bread on the social network. She accepted the invitation, showing to her 1.5 million fans on Facebook and 1.1 million followers on Instagram *Essentia Dimora Rurale* and the Molise territory that she had visited by showing a booklet Marina had given her on how to get to know and visit Molise in three days. Using influencer marketing is also a way to stand out, identify and make the territory known by bringing high visibility to both the *Essentia Dimora Rurale* brand and the Molise region.

*Sustainability building: the enhancement of environmental, social and economic aspects.* The care and attention of entrepreneurs towards the rejuvenation of agritourism, the preservation of ancient seeds, the cultivation of organic products, the recounting of traditions to tourists, the use of the territory with tours that have no impact on the territory (on foot, on horseback and by e-bike) and recharging station for electric cars show that this activity shows great respect to the environmental and social heritage. The entrepreneurs said: “*The role of our business is to continue with our idea, being faithful to it, continue to work well, with new ideas to bring add value to the territory*”.

The start-up of the business activity has brought new local employment for both agritourism, which in the high season reaches six units, and the operators of the extended supply chain (i.e. tourism and agri-food). Salvatore and Marina involve local producers, restaurateurs and entrepreneurs of recreational local activities in their business, thus creating a network of companies with the same desire to guide guests towards an authentic destination experience (Festa *et al.*, 2015). They also suggest other local touristic activities when they are not able to satisfy their guests’ demands. Such a network is boosted even more during some typical events of the area (e.g. Larino Christmas lights and Trivento crochet) that promote the cultural heritage of the Molise region, for which Salvatore and Marina have been the first to offer different types of touristic packages year-round, creating added value for the territory. Although the attractiveness and reputation of the Molise region has increased in recent years owing to nearby tourism, Marina fears for the growth in tourism due to the lack of proper regional touristic policies. Hopefully, the entrepreneur states “*The Molise region can become a small treasure chest to be known*”.

*The role of entrepreneurs’ personality traits in the sustainability process.* At this point, we analyse the personality of the entrepreneur to understand the antecedents of the process described above to confirm what emerged from the interview.

Even if we cannot measure statistical differences between the two observations (i.e. the answers of the two entrepreneurs), results show important differences (Table 1).

Regarding narcissism, results show that both entrepreneurs score low in measuring this personality trait (29 for Salvatore and 21 for Marina, out of 65).

During the interview, Marina always used the first plural pronoun “we” when referring to their agritourism company or their efforts to create and manage the firm, confirming her low level of narcissism. For instance, when she talked about how they decided on the name of their

	Gender	Age	Narcissism			Locus of control		Sustainability orientation
			LA	GE	EE	Internal	External	
Salvatore	Male	34	29/65 10/20	6/25	13/20	17/20	10/30	26/30
Marina	Female	32	21/65 6/20	6/25	9/20	17/20	9/30	29/30

**Table 1.**  
Identity card of the  
*Essentia Dimora*  
*Rurale*’s entrepreneurs

**Note(s):** LA = Leadership/Authority; GE = Grandiose exhibitionism; EE = Entitlement/Exploitativeness

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agritourism firm, she said: *“The name (i.e. Essentia Dimora Rurale) was a common sentiment, to clarify who we are, what we do, who we speak to, and what we want to say. It is the way we affirm the reason why we started our business.”*

Moreover, we detail this result investigating the three factors underlining narcissism, including leadership/authority (LA; “I am a born leader”), grandiose exhibitionism (GE; “I really like to be the centre of attention”) and entitlement/exploitativeness (EE; “I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve”) (Ackerman *et al.*, 2011). Results show that Salvatore’s narcissism mainly related to the entitlement/exploitativeness factor (13 score out of 20), which has to do with having others’ respect and expecting the maximum from them to achieve his goals. This factor also includes the manipulative side of narcissistic entrepreneurs, but Salvatore scored very low in his answer to the item (not reported here). Concerning the leadership/authority factor, Salvatore reports a score of 10 out of 20. He reports a higher score in the items related to being viewed and behaving as a leader in the firm. Finally, both Salvatore and Marina scored very low in the grandiose exhibitionism factor, showing that their main goal is to manage their firm not to exhibit themselves but to really take care of the environment, the sustainability of their business and their consumers. The narcissistic personality was predominant when the two sibling entrepreneurs moved from the identifying the entrepreneurial opportunity stage to implementing the idea stage. In particular, they recognised the importance of their entrepreneurial idea in enhancing the territory value, underlining they were the first movers in defining and offering their “authentic” tourist experiences.

Regarding the locus of control, Salvatore and Marina report high levels of internal locus of control (both 17 out of 20). In this vein, the results show they are strongly convinced to influence their lives through their actions. In detail, internal locus of control was predominant particularly when Essentia Dimora Rurale moved from the idea implementation phase to the start-up phase. In fact, Marina remembered: *“We did not get any help; we had to roll up our sleeves to reach our goals and make our dream come true.”* Their internal locus of control was relevant when, during the inauguration of their agritourism company, there was an earthquake. Marina recalled: *“Among the various difficulties we had faced to get here, the earthquake was added, but we kept calm and helped our guests to feel safe”.*

Both Salvatore and Marina show a very high level of sustainability orientation, reporting a score of 26 and 29 out of 30, respectively. Marina shows a slightly higher level of sustainability orientation compared to her brother. However, the two sibling entrepreneurs are very oriented to sustainability, and the way they created and managed the business reflects this. In detail, sustainability orientation was predominant when Essentia Dimora Rurale moved from the start-up structure and experience design phase to the enhancement of environmental, social and economic aspects. Numerous sentences of Marina’s interview underline their high levels of sustainability orientation: *“We want to contribute to making the territory known, to making other activities known, driven by the desire to want to do something. [. . .] We created our agritourism to stimulate the territory and help in development, to attract tourists again and enhance our traditions. We created a sustainable farmhouse in southern Italy, in order to create value for this territory.”*

We have assessed the entrepreneurs’ personalities on their own, but we surmise that the combination of their personalities is their strong point for success in this entrepreneurial activity: *“Marina was an inexperienced person, who hit her head and still has to do it to understand how to go forward. You must have more determination and confidence. I am the cordial, sweet person who welcomes them. While Salvatore is the ‘matador’. It’s all a mix, a whole, a complementarity of characters, roles and skills.”*

*Validity and reliability check.* Following the work of Gibbert *et al.* (2008) and Riege (2003), we tested to assess if our research and our results followed good methodological rigour regarding validity and reliability. In detail, we tested construct validity, internal and external

validity, and reliability to underline our research's rigour. Construct validity did not affect our data because we used multiple sources of evidence during the data collection phase, such as a triangulation of interviews, online documents and questionnaires (Peräkylä, 1997). Moreover, we showed a chain of evidence in the data collection phase by using interview transcripts, notes, online information and a survey, which cross-checks different sources of evidence (Hirschman, 1986). Internal validity did not affect our data because we displayed illustrations and diagrams in the data analysis to assist with our explanation (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Furthermore, we assured the internal coherence of the findings in the data analysis phase, which again can be achieved by cross-checking the results (Yin, 1994). External validity did not influence our results because we defined the scope and boundaries in the research design phase, which helped achieve reasonable analytical generalisations (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). Moreover, we have compared our evidence with the extant literature in the results and discussion paragraphs to clearly outline contributions and generalise those within the scope and boundaries of the research (Yin, 1994). Finally, we have increased the reliability of our results using a semi-structured case study protocol (Yin, 1994), acting as multiple researchers who continually communicated about methodological decisions (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982) and providing the real name of the business and the entrepreneurs (Gibbert *et al.*, 2008).

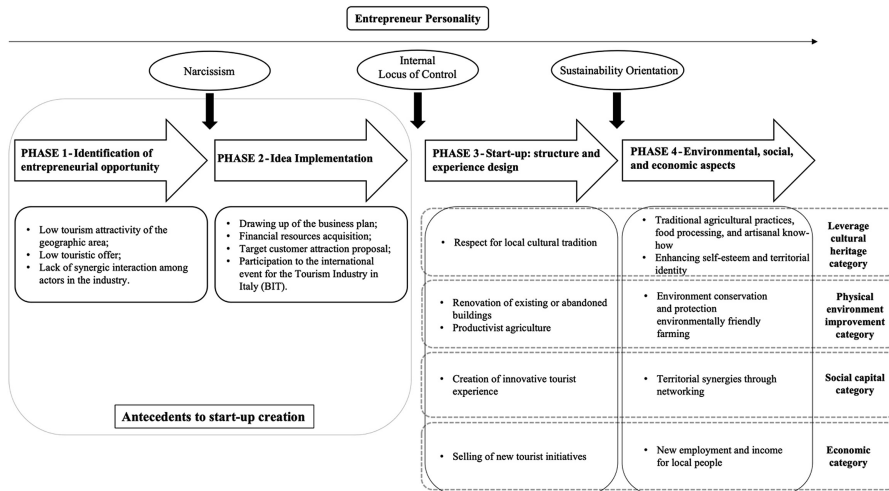
### Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to analyse how entrepreneurs recognise and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities following a sustainable approach that respects the equilibrium among environmental, social and commercial purposes, and how their personality affects this process. The case study presented clearly shows the bond between the entrepreneurs and their territory, the respect towards its traditions and environment and the sustainable orientation that permeates the choice for agritourism (Brundtland, 1987; Sims, 2009). Agritourism reduces the negative effect of tourism due to its ability to enhance the well-being of a financially distressed rural community and contribute to sustainable tourism development (Sharpley, 2009; Su *et al.*, 2019). *Essentia Dimora Rurale* represents a *best practice* to create added value in rural landscapes. Although the business was recently established, in its first three years, *Essentia Dimora Rurale* has shown that the creation of a sustainable firm positively impacts on the territory (Brundtland, 1987; Cruz and Matsypura, 2009).

Moving from our research questions (*RQ1: How can entrepreneurs recognise and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities following a sustainable approach (i.e. considering environmental, social and economic aspects)? RQ2: How does the personality of entrepreneurs affect the search for entrepreneurial opportunities that allow entrepreneurs to create sustainable firms and bring value to the socio-economic development of their territory?*), we analysed the process that led to recognising entrepreneurial opportunity, creating a framework of sustainable orientation made up of four main steps (i.e. identifying the entrepreneurial opportunity, implementing the idea, designing the start-up structure and experience and enhancing the environmental, social and economic aspects).

Figure 3 depicts a timeline of the main phases of the entrepreneurial process across the four main constructs of analysis (i.e. leverage cultural heritage, improve physical environment category, improve social capital and improve economy).

The first two phases of our framework can be categorised as antecedents to creating the start-up because they are mandatory to be prepared to compete in the business area. The second two phases, then, are related to the management of the firm and its contribution to the area's sustainable development. In identifying the entrepreneurial opportunity (Phase 1), entrepreneurs had the ability to read the context and understand the potentiality of their territory. The word "Molisin't" is explanatory of the common perception of a region without



**Figure 3.** Detailed phases of entrepreneurial opportunity exploitation combined with the analysis of second-order concepts and aggregate dimensions

attractions, which is not recognised as a tourism destination because one of the main pillars is not available (D’Auria and Tregua, 2020). On the contrary, Salvatore’s and Marina’s motto is as follows: “Come and discover the Essence of our land”. This sentence explains their ability to see the region’s potential and express it by identifying and grasping its identifiable traits and working on the image of their agritourism enterprise as a synonym for the tradition of Molise agricultural culture.

Implementing the idea (Phase 2) is a common phase that is fundamental for creating a firm in any industry. In this phase, a quintessential role is covered by the educational background of the two sibling entrepreneurs. During their studies, they followed numerous entrepreneurship and strategy courses that are useful for successful business plans. The relationship between educational level and conceiving successful business plans is often underlined in the literature (Henry et al., 2005). Also, participating in the international event for the tourism industry pushed them to sell their first tourist packages, even though the renovations were still ongoing. This confirms that entrepreneurs’ ability to explore and exploit opportunities leads to the achievement of a competitive advantage (Rua et al., 2018).

Designing the start-up structure and experience (Phase 3) lays the foundations for the environmental, social and economic aspects (Phase 4) that create a sustainable development. In particular, by examining and reorganising the elements of the case study, we elicited four different categories of factors, described below (cfr. Figure 1).

Through the leverage cultural heritage category, this study highlighted the importance of traditions in respecting the local culture. This has brought an enhancement of old agricultural practices and rediscovering of artisanal know-how of food processing. On the other side, it confirmed that those aspects are able to boost citizens’ self-esteem and local pride, thus building and strengthening territorial identity (Anthopoulos and Melissourgios, 2012). Exploring the physical environment improvement category, the combination of renovating existing or abandoned buildings and (re)appropriating ancient heritage is mandatory for environment conservation and protection. In line with previous studies, such practices show their relevance for the creation and management of environmentally friendly farming (Roberts and Hall, 2001).

Social capital represents a set of resources rooted in relationships (Burt, 1997; Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Masciarelli (2011) suggested that the relationships that

one has with other individuals is a form of capital that provides access to resources and information. According to Bourdieu (1980), the social resources inherent in these relationships may be used by the individual to pursue economic ends. The uniqueness of family firms affects the definition of social capital (Masciarelli, 2011). Bubolz (2001) posited that “the family is a source, builder and user of social capital”. Families have inimitable advantages in their development of social capital within the family and with the firm’s main stakeholders. This advantage lies in the capabilities to generate long-term relations that make it more likely that stakeholders will develop more solid personal attachments to a family that owns the business rather than to an impersonal firm (Masciarelli, 2011). Moreover, the inimitable motivation and commitment of family members to the business make them more trustworthy from stakeholders’ point of view. Therefore, the robust connection of the family to the business and the former’s consequent high level of commitment put families at an advantage in terms of the generation and maintenance of social capital.

The economic category moves from the creation of authentic and innovative tourist experiences to their sale through the implementation of new forms of communication, such as digital and influencer marketing. At destination level, *Essentia* has diversified the business activity and has contributed to redefining the destination image (Scorrano *et al.*, 2018; Stavrianea and Kamenidou, 2021), utilising higher resources, spreading economic benefits locally and regionally (Bramwell, 2004).

Our research shows that entrepreneurs worked on the identity of their enterprise, its sustainability, tradition and innovation. They faced difficulties and obstacles while increasing the well-being of the community and bringing added value to the region (Brundtland, 1987; Cruz and Matsypura, 2009). In this sense, we contribute to the sustainability literature, underlining how a sustainable approach that respects the equilibrium among environmental, social and commercial purposes can add value to the territory. In particular, we confirmed that in leveraging cultural heritage, an agritourism organisation is able to improve the physical environment, enhance the cultural capital and produce economic growth for the territory, reducing the negative impact of tourism (Iaia *et al.*, 2019; Sharpley, 2009; Su *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, the results of the paper underlined the importance of entrepreneurs’ personalities during all the processes – from generating the idea to managing the agritourism enterprise. In particular, Salvatore and Marina manifested low levels of narcissism and high levels of internal locus of control and sustainability orientation, giving the right combination for management and fuelling the firm’s growth. In detail, Salvatore shows a slightly higher level of narcissism compared to his sister. This result is in line with previous studies investigating gender differences in narcissistic entrepreneurs, which demonstrate that male entrepreneurs are generally more narcissistic than female entrepreneurs (Leonelli, 2021). Moreover, the entrepreneurs report high levels of internal locus of control. This result supports previous studies showing that entrepreneurs characterised by an internal locus of control generally take care of their own environment and implement sustainable practices because they perceive environmental events as a weight on their shoulders (Yang and Weber, 2019). Finally, they manifest high levels of sustainability orientation that strongly impacts on the way they ideated and managed their business.

As we mentioned, the three personality traits considered in this study strongly impact the overall process of exploiting entrepreneurial opportunity of a sustainable firm. However, our main contribution is related to identifying which traits predominate in each phase (see Figure 3). First, we underline the importance of entrepreneurs’ narcissism in order to move from identifying the entrepreneurial opportunity phase to the idea implementation phase. A high level of narcissism can push entrepreneurs to think outside the box and have the strength to implement their business idea. Second, we highlight the importance of entrepreneurs’ internal locus of control in order to move from the idea implementation phase to the start-up phase.

Entrepreneurs might encounter various difficulties in starting up their business (e.g. legal, financial and administrative issues), and internal locus of control is essential to overcome them and not be discouraged. Finally, entrepreneurs' sustainability orientation is important in order to move from the start-up phase to the enhancement of environmental, societal and economic aspects phase. Sustainability orientation permits entrepreneurs to balance ethical and moral values when exploiting opportunities, considering the environmental, societal and economic aspects together with the profit. In this case, the creation and management of an agritourism organisation combined with the sustainability orientation of the two sibling entrepreneurs contributed to preserving the physical environment, valorising existing buildings and promoting extensive and environmentally friendly agriculture. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have investigated the real impact of personality traits in the different phases of a sustainable firm exploiting entrepreneurial opportunity.

The paper also has several practical implications for stakeholders, such as owners and managers, investors of young companies, policymakers and educators. For owners and managers, *Essentia Dimora Rurale* can represent a best practice for owners and managers who want to create new agritourism or want to improve and implement a solid connection to a specific territory. In addition, firms' owners and managers should be aware of the importance of personality traits and understand how each trait might affect the entrepreneurial processes from the discovery of entrepreneurial opportunities to the building and management of a new firm.

Our results also provide some insights for investors that are willing to support young firms. To make their investment choices, investors could benefit from the consideration of measures to assess personality traits such as narcissism, locus of control and sustainable orientations.

Furthermore, policymakers can benefit from this research, understanding the importance of creating networks and practices to favour valuing the territory's resources. Finally, results of this study have implications for educators who should develop courses for the understanding and promotion of entrepreneurial abilities among future firm founders, while also providing training to improve sustainable orientations in future entrepreneurs.

#### *Limitations and future studies*

The study has some limitations that can represent avenues for future researches. First, we use a single case study, and even if it represents the industry, it could benefit from a comparison with other case studies. Future studies can extend our first stage, confronting our results with other agritourism organisations in the same or different geographic areas (in both Italy and other Countries), also analysing the impact of different firms' dimensions or ages. In particular, future studies focusing on entrepreneurs operating in different countries may show whether and how some cultural variable (i.e. language spoken, religion beliefs and social capital) might affect how personality traits influence the entrepreneurial process.

However, it would be interesting to compare our case study with firms belonging to other industries to investigate how various activities can contribute to the enrichment and promotion of a territory. Second, even if we use a qualitative-quantitative approach and primary and secondary data, we have interviewed only the entrepreneurs. In future research, we could interview a greater number of people involved in the company or industry experts to proceed with a triangulation. Finally, our results are not generalisable because culture, education and environmental factors can affect the personality of entrepreneurs and also their sustainable choices.

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