

# The orchestrator and its role in the birth and development of a niche-tourism ecosystem

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## Abstract

**Frame of the research:** Oleotourism, an emerging opportunity for rural diversification, is thriving in Mediterranean regions. This niche caters to the rising demand for authentic tourism products and creative experiences that enhance agricultural livelihoods.

**Purpose of the paper:** The paper explores characteristics and activities of facilitator-orchestrator organizations that further the growth and development of niche-tourism ecosystems.

**Methodology:** Primary and secondary data were collected from the case study of the oleotourism niche in Italy. In particular, the Italian National Association of Oil Cities has been selected as the case study due to its preeminent work in supporting the birth and development of oleotourism in Italy.

**Findings:** The analysis reveals the facilitator-orchestrator role played in developing the oleotourism ecosystem. Findings unveil three orchestrator characteristics (embeddedness, agility, and capability) and six activities (lobbying, participant recruitment and engagement, regulation, research and development, capacity building, and promotion). Findings support the growth of oleotourism stakeholders and develop the oleotourism business ecosystem.

**Research limits:** The paper analyses only a single case study and examines only the orchestrator's perspective.

**Practical implications:** This study supports practitioners as well as policymakers in several ways. It offers implementation mechanisms to support a fragile and fragmented niche-tourism ecosystem. It also highlights possible obstacles to overcome.

**Originality of the paper:** Oleotourism is a topic of particular interest to advance cultural and creative industries as drivers for local tourism development and innovation. However, it reveals a fragile ecosystem composed of a plethora of stakeholders and proposals that are still in an infant stage. Unveiling the main orchestration mechanisms that support the development of such an ecosystem is of great importance in boosting the sustainable growth of the oleotourism business ecosystem.

**Key words:** niche-tourism; oleotourism; olive-oil business ecosystem; facilitator; orchestrator

## 1. Introduction

Olive oil tourism, or oleotourism, represents an emerging diversification opportunity for rural areas. This tourism niche is flourishing in

Mediterranean areas (Pulido-Fernández *et al.*, 2019) to meet the growing demand for authentic tourism products (Campón-Cerro *et al.*, 2017) and creative experiences (Della Lucia and Segre, 2017) that complement agricultural activities. The oleotourism ecosystem can be viewed as a socio-economic community of individuals, enterprises, and organizations at the nexus between the olive oil and tourism value chains. The olive-oil value chain consists of fragmented and heterogeneous stakeholders of the producing places, natural resources (such as land, water, climate), and the local milieu (landscape, culture, and intangible heritage) (Alonso and Northcote, 2010).

The tourism value chain related to this environment comprises tourism operators that access various components of the olive-oil value chain to create additional value through a more diversified and differentiated tourism experience. However, the oleotourism environment's fragmentation, heterogeneity, and sectoral diversification may constrain coordination and collaboration because of the incongruence of goals, interests, and competencies (Čehić *et al.*, 2020). To overcome such challenges, these networks often require facilitation by a hub actor, orchestrator, or facilitator (serving as a bridging organization). The presence of such a player able to facilitate both the building of the business ecosystem - among already connected actors (Kirkels and Duysters, 2010) or by bringing together dispersed and independent members (Dhanaraj and Parkhe, 2006) can help a niche tourism product to emerge and overcome the above challenges through the identification of mutually beneficial collaborative activities and collective goals.

Despite acknowledging the importance of this player and the related collaborative activities in such a fragmented and heterogeneous environment, this strategic bridging role in thematic tourism niches such as oleotourism remains under-theorized (Park and Kohler, 2019). This paper fills this gap by exploring the main characteristics and activities of the facilitator-orchestrator that organizes and facilitates the emergence and development of a distinctive ecosystem for oleotourism in Italian rural areas.

Shedding light on this topic is timely as research on oleotourism is still in its early stages (Folgado-Fernández *et al.*, 2019) and studies to date are non-specific and fragmented (Pulido-Fernández *et al.*, 2019). The paper has been designed to answer the following two specific research questions:

- 1) What characteristics are required in a facilitator-orchestrator for optimal coordination and development of the oleotourism ecosystem?
- 2) What activities should the facilitator-orchestrator implement to foster, nurture, and develop the oleotourism ecosystem?

The research is focused on the analysis of the Italian National Association of Oil Cities as facilitator-orchestrator of the emerging Italian oleotourism ecosystem as an exemplary case study to analyse these issues. The study reveals key characteristics and key activities of the facilitator-orchestrator. In the first group there are three salient characteristics (agility, capability, and embeddedness) while in the second group there are six activities (lobbying, participant recruitment and engagement, regulation, research and development, capacity building, promotion).

## 2. Theoretical background

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### 2.1 Thematic niche-tourism business ecosystems based on olive-oil processes

Oleotourism's characteristics involves experiences linked to the olive tree culture, its environment and the food culture based on it (Ruiz Guerra *et al.*, 2018).

Oleotourism captures the interest of tourists who want to participate in this self-realisation experience (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022), fascinated with activities based on olive oil and the local culture, heritage, landscape, and customs that revolve around it, deepening their knowledge about olive-oil through new experiences with emotional and experiential meaning (Almeida and Silveira, 2021).

Oleotourism is a place-specific form of rural tourism that relies on authentic experiences based on activities related to olive oil production, its tasting, and some linked rural experiences such as harvesting and other experiences linked to the olive culture, its environment, and the food culture based on it (Ferreira *et al.*, 2023). It is an amalgam of communities and businesses with a strong sense of place, usually spatially clustered in unique socio-economic contexts (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005). It encompasses a wide range of stakeholders, examples of which are producers, museum spaces, municipalities, associations, recreation enterprises, accommodations and restaurants (Almeida and Silveira, 2021). Examples of services include visiting oil mills, olive groves, olive-oil tasting, participation in production processes and events, workshops, health and well-being-related treatments, visitation of museums, purchase of products, and overnight in accommodations linked to the production of olive-oil (Pulido-Fernández *et al.*, 2019).

The nexus between the olive oil industry and the tourism industry offers many opportunities and implies complementarity with other types of tourism, such as active tourism and culinary tourism (Ruiz Guerra *et al.*, 2018).

Tourism has been shown to complement agricultural activities, generating economic, social, and cultural value (Guizzardi *et al.*, 2022). Visitor demand for oleotourism goods and services not only complements (boosts) farmers' incomes, but also has a multiplicative effect on sales, production, income, value added, and employment through the interdependence of the different sectors of the local economy (Arjona-Fuentes and Amador-Hidalgo, 2017). Indeed, it may lead to the creation of entirely new enterprises (in)directly related to oleotourism (López-Guzmán *et al.*, 2016). Oleotourism positively affects place branding and destination marketing, as well as engendering local pride and the development of social capital (Fernández *et al.*, 2020).

A full realization of these opportunities requires integrating community-based olive oil production with an oleotourism ecosystem that collectively creates value through interpretation, participation, and interaction (Millán-Vazquez de la Torre *et al.*, 2017). There are several constraints to negotiate in pursuing this goal including overcoming the inertia to collaboration, providing public subsidies to farmers, and

improving the service orientation and required infrastructure (Čehić *et al.*, 2020). Collaboration barriers are the most evident. Stakeholders engaged in the olive-oil value chain/processes have diverse competencies as well as aims and interests that often conflict (Pulido-Fernández *et al.*, 2019). Pursuing oleotourism requires further sectoral diversification which exacerbates stakeholder heterogeneity by including tourist-related businesses (e.g., accommodation, restaurants, catering services, travel agencies/associations, tourist routes), cultural heritage organizations (e.g., museums), as well as institutional and management bodies such as public agencies, tourist associations, and destination management organizations (Murgado, 2013).

## 2.2 Facilitator-orchestrator's characteristics and activities for the growth of niche-tourism business ecosystems

The creation and growth of a cohesive and collaborative business ecosystem is a result of the collective value from heterogeneous stakeholders (Yachin and Ioannides, 2020), the building of shared trust (Dagnino *et al.*, 2016), and the acknowledgment of mutual benefits by stakeholders, that absent coordination, usually manifest in a reluctance to work together (Westley and Vredenburg, 1991). In such a context, the rise of an “independent third party - voluntary or appointed - that has not emerged from the ecosystem but is historically separate and distinct in terms of resources and personnel” (Westley and Vredenburg, 1991, p. 68) can play a strategic role in overcoming or reducing the constraints of stakeholder fragmentation, heterogeneity, and sectorial diversification (Perks *et al.*, 2017). This actor can be labelled as a ‘facilitator-orchestrator’ and can be defined as a “boundary-spanning actor interested in the development within and of the network as a whole by ensuring the wide spreading of innovative ideas and mutual cooperation” (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen and Nätti, 2018, p. 47).

The facilitator occupies a particular structural position among the network actors (Kwon *et al.*, 2020).

As stated by Pinnington *et al.* (2021, p. 438), “third-party facilitators can provide the leadership and resource access needed to exploit innovative ideas and to help SMEs lacking relational skills or conviction to collaborate”. The third-party facilitator orchestrates the business ecosystem’s genesis, mediating trust, and conflict among members (Giaccone and Longo, 2016), and controlling resource accumulation, development, and allocation (Klein *et al.*, 2019).

It pushes actors to recognize mutual value in joining the network and spontaneously sharing knowledge, mobilizing valuable resources and assets (Autio and Thomas, 2021), discovering complementarities (Giudici *et al.*, 2018) and valuing distributed skills and capabilities (Millán-Vazquez de la Torre *et al.*, 2017).

To support the rise of a business ecosystem, the facilitator must implement a variety of “observable, repeated and routinized single (or set of) activities” (Perks *et al.*, 2017, p. 106) to coordinate independent network members’ interactions within a loosely coupled context (Dagnino *et al.*,

2016). These activities span from participant recruitment and engagement to regulation, lobbying, and promotion.

In the early stages of business ecosystem creation, firms must coalesce to share their ideas and projects as well as awareness and commitment (Qu *et al.*, 2022). The role of the facilitator is to develop a medium-long term strategy to identify and create opportunities that have a broad enough appeal to foster a sense of togetherness within the developing community (Perkins *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, it must mobilize adequate resources, financial support, and the required skills and capabilities (Reyppens *et al.*, 2021). In the formation stage, the facilitator is engaged in formulating standards, guidelines, and codes of conduct to regulate the heterogeneous operators' participation and develop common definitions, understanding, and language (Park and Kohler, 2019).

A further activity of the facilitator is to develop a reciprocal collaboration with government departments, senior bureaucrats, and elected officials with the aim of influencing policy to either benefit the ecosystem members or minimize damage to them (McKercher, 2022). Through this lobbying activity, facilitators influence, either directly or indirectly, the decisions of policy makers and the legislation they enact (Pillmayer and Scherle, 2014). When the ecosystem is emerging, it is extremely important that facilitators create as many opportunities as possible for ecosystem members to promote their proposals. In this sense, facilitators work to boost the ecosystem's legitimacy and facilitate connections between the design and the spread of innovative tourism experiences (new supply) with demand in the marketplace (Caridà *et al.*, 2022).

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### 2.3 *The facilitator's role under the lens of the neo-micro-institutional approach*

The previous section clarifies how the 'institutional work' approach fits well as the lens to understand the facilitator. In fact, the term 'institutional work' refers to the actions through which actors create, maintain, or disrupt institutional structures (Lawrence *et al.*, 2009). It can involve a variety of activities, such as developing new social norms, negotiations about the meaning of particular institutions, challenging existing power structures, or lobbying for specific actions. Lawrence and Suddaby (2006, 215), defined institutional work as "the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions". This definition introduces how "the meaning and relevance of institutions can be maintained, altered, contested, or even fundamentally rejected and replaced through the ongoing actions and interactions of actors within a governance system" (Beunen and Patterson, 2019, p. 13). It follows that, although institutions are often analysed as fixed structures that help to explain behaviour and outcomes, the reality is that institutional structures tend to continually change, and this change depends on several factors such as the sustained actors' endeavour and effort (Van Assche *et al.*, 2014; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010).

In these terms, facilitators can be viewed as "organized actors with sufficient resources that see in new institutions an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly" (DiMaggio, 1988, p. 14). Defined as

institutional entrepreneurs and moved by ideological or material interests (Colomy, 1998), they implement “divergent change” (Battilana *et al.*, 2009, p. 67) by developing new practices, organizational forms, or technologies. The role is not just related to launching new organizational forms involving entrepreneurial activities (Tracey *et al.*, 2011). Institutional entrepreneurs must also attain legitimacy for the change and convince others that it is an appropriate solution to perceived problems (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). They do so by engaging in discursive (e.g. Zilber, 2007), political (e.g. Garud *et al.*, 2002), relational (e.g. Lawrence *et al.*, 2002), and regulative activities (e.g. Child *et al.*, 2007).

Based on a review of the literature, we argue that neutral and independent facilitators - such as the Italian National Association of Oil Cities - are ideally positioned to support the creation of a niche-tourism ecosystem - such as the oleotourism ecosystem - when they possess specific characteristics and can facilitate specific value-creating activities. In the following section, we develop our exploratory analysis of oleotourism in Italy.

### 3. Research design

Given the relative recency of oleotourism as a phenomenon and the limited tourism experiences that exist related to this niche, it is perhaps no surprise that a consolidated olive-oil tourism ecosystem does not exist. This is even true for Italy, a country steeped in a rich history of olive-oil production, a mature and globally recognized tourism destination, and a pioneer of the oleotourism concept. The following exploratory study seeks to address this limitation by exploring the enabling conditions for the development of an oleotourism ecosystem in Italy. More specifically, the Italian National Association of Oil Cities, is assessed for its potential to fulfil the role of facilitator-orchestrator for the Italian olive-oil tourism ecosystem. We employ a descriptive-comprehensive approach to provide insight into the nature and scope of resources, capabilities and observed activities of the facilitator.

#### 3.1 The Italian National Association of Oil Cities

Information about the Italian National Association of Oil Cities was retrieved mainly from public sources and later confirmed and elaborated with key informant interviews.

Founded in 1994, its mission is to “spread the culture of the olive tree and quality olive oil; protect and promote the environment and the olive landscape; disseminate the history of olive cultivation; offer security to the consumer through the valorization of designations of origin, the organization of events, the implementation of communication and marketing strategies aimed at getting to know the great Italian olive heritage” ([www.cittadellolio.it/](http://www.cittadellolio.it/)). It is a non-profit public organization and central to the protection of the image and brand of Italian olive oil. Consequently, it is acknowledged as the central player of many stakeholders

involved in the olive oil industry and vital to the protection of the Italian cultivation and culture of olive oil. The Association has approximately 400 members - consisting of municipalities, provinces, chambers of commerce, local community groups, and parks - mainly located in areas representative of the tradition and culture of Italian olive oil production. Its thirty years of activity have earned the Association legitimacy among different stakeholders, sectors, geographical areas, and markets.

The Association's goal of building a genuine cultural movement that stimulates knowledge, dissemination, and promotion of olive oil has recently garnered the attention of the tourism industry. This interest stems from an existing belief in the synergies between the broader agricultural industry and tourism whereby a connection between the two (termed "agritourism"; for insights e.g. Fanelli, 2022) has led to new authentic forms of tourism product for Italy while also creating new revenue streams for the agricultural industry. As a first step in this direction, the Association's strong commitment to the development of oil tourism led to the launch of the 1st edition of the National Oil Tourism Competition in 2020. The 2020 competition led stakeholders to recognize the broader tourism potential and culminated in the development of a dedicated site linking olive oil with tourism ([www.turismodellolio.com](http://www.turismodellolio.com)) to showcase the best Italian practices of oleotourism.

### 3.2 Data collection

Qualitative methods were used to collect primary and secondary data on the Association's facilitation (orchestration) role and its related activities from multiple sources to enable data triangulation (Jick, 1979) and reduce the risk of informant bias, control for individuals' subjective assessments, and increase construct validity (Gibbert *et al.*, 2008). Table 1 lists all the sources utilized for the case study. Primary data were collected in February 2022 through two semi-structured in-depth online interviews with primary stakeholders - the Director of the Association and the Project Manager of the oleotourism platform. These two interviews provided a comprehensive perspective as the Association's organization is very small.

Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. The interview protocol was designed to explore critical issues related to facilitating the oleotourism ecosystem's growth and development.

The content and analysis of the interviews were guided by the coordination role that destination management organizations play in collaborative destinations (Presenza and Cipollina, 2010) and the tools used to engage stakeholders in destinations - both on the supply and demand side - on digital platforms and offline (Trunfio and Della Lucia, 2019). An interview questionnaire composed of ten open-ended questions was utilized. Examples of questions are as follows:

1. Can you tell us what in your opinion is the Association's role in the birth and development of the Italian olive oil tourism system?
2. Can you explain which activities of the Association encouraged the birth and growth of the Italian olive oil tourism system?



The interviews began with a neutral presentation of the general study’s aim without making presumptions. This allowed interviewees to talk freely about the aspects they thought to be more significant. Then, a narrative interview method was adopted, which can contain topics from the immediate context, and allowance for unanticipated insights (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). This encouraged the interviewees to speak freely and uninterruptedly. When necessary, more detailed questions were posed to enhance the understanding of their comments concerning a specific topic and/or a strategy developed by the Association.

The Association’s websites and social media communications were monitored for a period of five months to confirm/disconfirm interview data and to develop further insights helpful to the study objectives. Finally, we conducted a series of searches of the popular media, blogs and websites of experts and operators, and YouTube videos to supplement the primary findings. A series of iterations was conducted between these primary and secondary data and the literature thereby strengthening the theoretical-empirical linkages.

Tab. 1: Data, sources, and main contributions

Data	Sources	Main contribution
Direct interviews	Semi-structured in-depth online interviews with primary stakeholders: the director of the Association and the project manager	The interview protocol explores the role and functioning of the Association to reveal the critical issues that support the growth and development of the oleotourism ecosystem
Documentary information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Association’s official website (www.cittadelloio.it/)</li> <li>• Association’s oleotourism website (www.turismodellolio.com)</li> <li>• Association’s social media profiles</li> </ul>	Identification of the main topics related to the development and functioning of the Italian oleotourism ecosystem
Archival records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specialized sources, such as blogs and websites of experts and operators, and YouTube videos</li> <li>• Media (press clippings) from the local, national, and international press</li> <li>• Scientific journals</li> </ul>	Understanding how oleotourism is conceptualized and viewed as a product in terms of its characteristics and value chain

Source: our elaboration

### 3.3 Data analysis

The methodological prescriptions for case study analysis (Micelotta *et al.*, 2019; Stake, 2006), with the combination of the analytical principles and techniques of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2017) and thematic analysis (Bruner, 1991) guided the approach. We followed the principle of “constant comparison” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that states data should be collected and analyzed simultaneously. Our use of grounded theory is consistent with the aim of elaborating middle-range theory around a specific phenomenon. Before entering the field, we familiarized ourselves with the peculiarities of each context. We started by developing case study



write-ups, which traced the historical changes in developing the Italian olive-oil tourism system, recent activities, main objectives, and target areas of activity of the Italian National Association of Oil Cities.

As first stage of coding, interview data and archival data have been open-coded. Memos of interviews were added to the process of open coding for manifesting a specific moment and for highlighting first bits of the relationship between emerging concepts. To increase trustworthiness, the authors coded the data independently and met regularly to discuss the codes as they emerged. Instances in coding interpretation was solved by discussion. At the same time, the highlights have been critically interpreted to give sense of the phenomenon under study.

In the second stage of coding, we aggregated the highlights and provided tentative conceptual explanations, by iterating between data, emergent theory, and the literature. By cycling between data and theory, we identified nine recurring items. We further coded each of the occurrences in our dataset, both from interviews and from archival data. We iteratively cycled between data and emerging interpretations to crystallize our findings. When we settled on these interpretations, we engaged in members check (Miles *et al.*, 2019) to strengthen the trustworthiness of our findings that unveiled three key facilitator-orchestrator characteristics and six key activities for developing the oleotourism ecosystem.

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## 4. Findings

The secondary data and the deeper context and detail provided by the interviews, created a thorough understanding of the Italian oleotourism business ecosystem and the critical role of the Italian National Association of Oil Cities activating as ‘facilitator-orchestrator’. The following subsections give answer to the two research questions by illuminating the Association’s key characteristics and activities.

### 4.1 Key Facilitator-orchestrator characteristics for developing the oleotourism ecosystem

*Agility.* Findings reveal that the Italian National Association of Oil Cities is cultivating an agile mindset to cope with rapid changes and uncertainty. Consequently, it is open to new ways of thinking to speed up the growth of the Italian oleotourism ecosystem. Agility requires the facilitator-orchestrator to purposefully broker connections and create cooperative relationships that would not otherwise occur due to the variety and fragmentation of the stakeholders involved. The characteristic of agility is expressed by several sources. For example, the Association President (in a YouTube video) explains it as follows: “Even with high potential to grow, oleotourism is still at an early stage. Of course, to be helpful we must assume an agile behavior. This means to become more flexible and adaptive, and to quickly reply to participants’ needs”. It requires us “to collaborate with stakeholders that have different goals and backgrounds. As being in its infancy, the growth of oleotourism requires significant effort. We have to learn about consumers’

behavior and needs, to understand the best strategies to develop, and mix together olive oil and tourism chains” (the Director).

*Capability.* The Association must be capable of balancing diverse forces such as collaboration and competition, formal and informal links, and trust and bargaining. In this regard, the Director’s statement (reported in various press outlets) is clarifying: “our aim is to deal with potential network members about resources, roles and responsibilities. Investing in good negotiation skills aids in aligning different goals and objectives and makes it easier to share strategic information, to collaborate, and make compromises which contribute to the long-term nurturing of the olive oil tourism in Italy”.

*Embeddedness.* To be embedded in multiple stakeholder networks remarkably affects the potential facilitator-orchestrator’s ability to succeed in fostering development of the oleotourism ecosystem because social relationships create opportunities for cooperation by deepening awareness, trust, and commitment. Founded in 1994, the Association is acknowledged for its leadership on important issues related to olive growing and in particular “on topics such as those of the culture of olive civilization, oleotourism, landscape valorization, environment and biodiversity” (from the official Association website). Credibility that has been built over time not only “with events and initiatives that we carry out in each Oil City, but also by continuous institutional relationships that make us perceived as a community with a strong cultural identity” (Director interview). The Association’s embeddedness has also been recently reinforced at the international level with the President being elected Senior Vice President of Re.Co.Med (the Network of Mediterranean Oil Cities).

#### *4.2 Key activities for developing the oleotourism ecosystem*

*Lobbying.* Through public and institutional relations, the Association constantly lobbies national and regional political bodies to raise awareness of the importance of the olive oil sector and its tourism value. A recent example is the approval by the Italian Parliament of a law (Budget Law 2020/Art. 1) that formally recognizes oleotourism as an expression of Italian material culture. This recognition allows oleotourism not only to be equated to wine tourism but also to add an institutional layer of certification and protection that reinforces the Protected Designation of Origin and Protected Geographical Indication already in existence for olive oil.

Furthermore, the Association, where appropriate, has signed memoranda of understanding such as the “Spello Agreement”, a formalized collaboration between the Association and the other three most prominent Italian organizations dealing with food and wine tourism. These collaborations were “created with the aim of identifying common ground between the various bodies, to nurture a proactive dialogue with the institutions, and design a medium and long-term sector strategy for the future of wine and oil tourism in our country” (extracted from the Agreement).

*Participant recruitment and engagement.* The recognition of oleotourism encompasses the entire olive-oil supply chain and the ecosystem must be populated accordingly by recruiting and engaging relevant organizations. Being a nascent ecosystem, oleotourism requires the creation, consolidation, and protection of its identity. The identity is multi-faceted encompassing components of the entire olive oil value chain. It also represents the social and economic value of high quality and healthy products (such as Italian extra virgin olive) and their conscious consumption. This identity must be widely communicated and promoted, especially through the Association's websites as well as through the organization of, and participation in, relevant events and workshops. The creation and official recognition of this identity leads to the gathering of a critical mass of actors in the olive-oil supply chain who recognize and identify themselves with oleotourism or see the potential alignment.

Through multiple communication channels including online initiatives, the Association has managed to populate the ecosystem, one outcome of which is the 'National Oil Tourism Competition' now garnering growing attention and importance. To participate in the Competition, proposals must include the profile of the applicant, segmented by category (farms and mills, olive oil shops, museums, restaurants, accommodation and tour operators and travel agencies) and the experience they aim to promote. The proposals, which first pass a screening conducted by the Association, are then evaluated by a jury of experts according to several criteria, including the quality and innovation of the experience, the tourism market segment focus, the communication, and promotional tools used, and the enhancement of the surrounding landscape. As stated by the President of the competition jury, "the National Oil Tourism Competition aims to identify and bring out the best practices in the exercise and organization of tourism linked to the Italian olive oil".

*Regulation.* This key activity refers to developing codified standards and rules. In this sense, the 'Charter of Commitments for Sustainability and Wellbeing' is a useful example. Through the Charter, the label 'Marchio Città dell'Olio' is awarded to stakeholders "who demonstrate that they share the Association's values and principles and are committed to carrying out concrete actions aimed at enhancing the olive culture in its social, economic, environmental, tourist and territorial dimensions and with a view to sustainability" (from a newspaper's interview with the Director).

*Research and development.* This key activity reflects the Association commitment "to encourage study, research and experimentation for the enhancement of local varieties and the protection and enhancement of areas with a high olive-growing vocation and historical oil environments" (Director interview). It also recognizes the importance of a scientific foundation for the development of oleotourism. In this vein, the Association collaborates with universities and research centers on scientific reports as well as workshops and conferences. Furthermore, the Association supports member applications for funding from national, European, and international support agencies.

*Capacity building.* Both the Director and the Project Manager pointed out that the major challenge of the Association's training initiatives is to

foster the transition from a product-driven culture and set of business models (farmers and olive oil mills) to service-driven ones that are more relevant to oleotourism operators. This shift is accomplished through the key activity of capacity building and specifically by sharing knowledge. The Association's knowledge sharing activities aim to provide integrated information on a wide range of topics to stakeholders in the Italian olive-oil value chain. Knowledge sharing actions include workshops and thematic events, discussion forums and stakeholder dialogues organized with the support of the affiliated communities, local action groups, olive oil producer associations, and trade associations. In collaboration with universities and other partners, the Association also offers specialized courses. For example, the 'Città dell'Olio Master Camp' is a specialized course targeting town administrators. The aim of this course is to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills to enhance and better manage local systems.

*Promotion.* Among its numerous communication initiatives, an increasingly key activity of the Association is to strengthen its brand. The Association carefully regulates the granting of the brand 'Città dell'Olio'. This is reflected in its statement of purpose: "to increase the quality level of the olive oil production and tourist offer in a sustainable perspective of safeguarding the bio-cultural value of olive growing; support the development of local entrepreneurship committed to producing goods and services linked to the olive culture and civilization; enhance local identities and typical local productions linked to the production of extra virgin olive oil, and the related cultural, productive and tourist offer; as expressions of the territory and its communities and to promote the development of an integrated offer between extra virgin olive oil, culture and tourism".

Italian oleotourism is promoted through a variety means from publications to the organization of events and workshops geographically spread throughout the country in collaboration with the associated towns and other partners. The Association also participates in national and international fairs and exhibitions. As stated by the Director, "events are strategic and versatile means for promoting our Association and the olive oil Italian culture and to expand stakeholders' network. An example that well explains our philosophy related to the event is "The Walk among the Olives". It is an opportunity to re-establish a link between citizens and their land, a way to make the landscape of a great millenary civilization known and to let the many enthusiasts of the food culture of our country discover the geographic origin of the product through the olive trees and the men who look after them". For online promotion, the Association manages an Institutional website ([www.cittadellolio.it](http://www.cittadellolio.it)) and is active in the main social media channels.

The Association also achieves the key activity of promotion through collaboration with several intermediaries offering travel and tourism-related services to targeted national and international segments. These collaborations are more effective and efficient than the Association attempting to reach these audiences on its own. The partnership with the association MAAVI (Autonomous Movement of Italian Travel Agents) is perhaps the best example. Through this initiative, affiliated members

of both associations can collaborate to create new tour packages among other possibilities. Perhaps its most ambitious project is a virtual presence through [www.turismodello.com](http://www.turismodello.com). Launched in 2021, the website's mission (explained by the Director) is to become "the virtual space and tribal community of oil lovers and a marketplace for booking unique experiences based on a strategic resource of Italian heritage". The platform is directly managed by the Association and contains approximately 250 experiences grouped in six categories (Olive farms/Oil mills/Olive cooperatives; Restaurants/Pizzerias/Osterias; Oil museums; Olive oil stores; Accommodation; Travel Agencies/Tour Operators/Other Entities) and ten activities (i.e., Tastings, workshops, tours, etc.), organized in nineteen regions. For each oleotourism experience there is a dedicated page to provide a general explanation, imagery and videos, specific details, and contact information. Noticeably absent from the website is a booking engine to capture and process direct online reservations. Thus, there is room for improvement.

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## 5. Discussion

Findings highlighted how the adoption of a service-oriented approach can successfully accommodate tourists' expectations of having varied activities to choose from ranging from less engaging (tasting or purchasing olive oil) to more engaging (e.g., educational activities and cultural attractions). This highlights the salience of a service-oriented approach in rural communities wishing to participate in oleotourism. These communities are likely more culturally and attitudinally oriented to producing the product of olive oil and hence more product-oriented than service-oriented. To optimize oleotourism may require a deep change in the mindset of olive oil value chain stakeholders (such as farmers) from olive oil production to the provision of tourist services and building adequately capacities and skills for addressing new markets and needs.

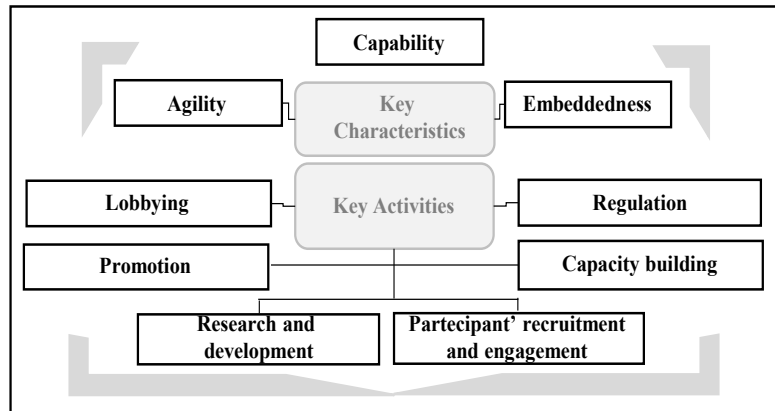
As stakeholders are fragmented (typically small and micro enterprises in peripheral rural areas), heterogeneous (overlapping between different value chains), and of varying organizational form (private companies, public bodies, not-for-profit), building networks is arguably the biggest challenge (Martini and Buffa, 2015). The challenge of creating functional networks for oleotourism may be similar or even greater than in the agriculture-tourism industry. Agriculture-tourism interaction requires the presence of a critical mass of business/tourist infrastructures and services in rural areas. The risk is that oleotourism remains marginal appealing to local communities (Hernández-Mogollón *et al.*, 2019) or being viewed as a complementary activity of other tourism proposals (Murgado-Armenteros *et al.*, 2021) where either farmers' service orientation or the number and the quality of specialized tourist services and infrastructures are inadequate. These circumstances constrain the exploitation of oleotourism potential in small rural communities (Millán-Vazquez de la Torre *et al.*, 2017) and the emergence of clusters of complementary businesses that "collectively deliver a bundle of attributes to make up a specialized regional product"

(Michael, 2003, p. 133). However, the risk of marginalizing oleotourism (or any form of niche tourism) may be minimized with the proper antecedent organizational support and activities.

The present paper identifies orchestration by an appropriate facilitator-orchestrator as the critical antecedent condition that, with a specific set of staff skills, serves as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinates participating organisations (De Chiara, 2015). The emergence and consolidation of the nascent Italian oleotourism ecosystem offers evidence, whereby the Italian Association of Oil Cities as facilitator-orchestrator can help oleotourism initiatives and local communities advance from a micro-level to a macro-level (from disconnected peripheral rural areas to a national network of rural areas). In doing so, it takes the form of a reiterative process (macro-micro-macro) that enhances the structural ties within the entire ecosystem and encourages its stability and scalability (Frow *et al.*, 2019).

As the Association emerged as a ‘facilitator-orchestrator’, it became clear that its neutrality and independence were important to effectively facilitating collaboration, whereby it had to understand and align individual actors’ intentions and institutional arrangements while facilitating value creation from different types of stakeholders and resources. In this vein, findings revealed both characteristics and activities of this specific facilitator-orchestrator (Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Key characteristics and activities of the facilitator-orchestrator for developing the oleotourism ecosystem



Source: our elaboration

The Association exhibits three main characteristics essential to serving as an effective facilitator-orchestrator, especially given that the Italian oleotourism ecosystem is at an embryonic stage. We argue that a facilitator-orchestrator with the correct key characteristics supporting the right key activities is particularly crucial in this early stage of ecosystem development since the ecosystem does not emerge on its own (Fuller *et al.*, 2019), and the engagement of actors is otherwise happenstance occurring on a voluntary basis (Giudici *et al.*, 2018). The facilitator-orchestrator

also adds value by providing proactive and focused support to dispersed and largely independent members within the business ecosystem to seek and pursue opportunities based on well-designed tourism products/experiences that attract novel markets, all of which is also supported by the facilitator-orchestrator accessing resources and competencies that are hard to reach autonomously.

The embeddedness characteristic is exhibited with the Association being well embedded in the Italian olive oil sector. This characteristic does not solely depend on the power it wields within the ecosystem, or its ability to convince network members with rational arguments. Alternatively, the facilitator may influence them “by capitalizing on the relationship or even making use of indirect relationships to put pressure on them” (Perks *et al.* 2017, p. 107) or utilize specific knowledge, key resources, and technologies (Gulati *et al.*, 2012), legitimacy (Reypens *et al.*, 2021) and reliability (Hingley *et al.*, 2015). This facilitator’s embeddedness and neutrality enhance its legitimacy and ability to enact strategy to establish a common identity of the ecosystem and trust within it, especially in a context with a diffuse mixture of actors (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen and Nätti, 2018).

A further characteristic is agility. It requires a novel recombination of complementary knowledge, resources and capabilities distributed across the business ecosystem (Teece, 2012). In this capacity the facilitator-orchestrator can be seen to deploy agile thinking as a ‘change agent’ in the sense that it “seeks to implement social change in how the object of legitimacy is evaluated by relevant audiences” (Suddaby *et al.*, 2017, p. 452). The ability to extend generate ecosystem agility by viewing possible configurations of the ecosystem actors and resources in a way that meets emerging opportunities is a valuable key characteristic.

Capabilities plays a fundamental role in orchestrating the rise of emergent niche-tourism ecosystems where participation is voluntary, and coordination looks more like enabling leadership rather than simple management. In this sense, findings revealed how the Association accomplishes a set of observable, repeated and routinized activities that produce direct effects on the oleotourism ecosystem’s configuration and functioning. Over time, the growth and development needs of the oleotourism ecosystem have evolved resulting the Association having to deploy different capabilities appropriate to the needs at that point in time. This is commensurate with the notion that facilitator-orchestrators must deploy different skills and competencies for that go across different fields “from sensing and seizing of fragmented and emergent knowledge to agenda setting along with the formation of means for collaboration, joint learning, and market growth” (Perks *et al.*, 2017, p. 106).

Findings revealed six key activities of the Association. Clearly the Association plays a pivotal role in strong lobbying activities to garner public sector involvement as in the case of the approval of the law relating to oil tourism. The Association undertakes recruitment and engagement activities to convene as many participants as possible using communication and tools that best fit with the peculiarities of each stakeholder. The end goal of a creating a recognizable and legitimate oleotourism business ecosystem

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requires the transformation of oleotourism communities into extensive stakeholder networks that collectively create value through participation and interaction and mixed production-service orientation (Hernández-Mogollón *et al.*, 2019). Given its infancy, the oleotourism ecosystem needs rules and regulations activities that govern oleotourism proposals and that define the intended competitive arena. Because participation in the ecosystem is voluntary, each participant must find sufficient motivation to join the ecosystem. On the other hand, the ecosystem's functioning requires shared rules of the game that regulate the players' behavior (Autio and Thomas, 2021).

Research and development activities and capacity building activities form the foundation of the oleotourism ecosystem implementation. From the analysis it was possible to extract several examples of the importance of these two activities for the Association and as such confirming the preeminent role of searching, elaborating, and disseminating new knowledge for supporting the ecosystem and its stakeholders in evolution and growth (Madanaguli *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, the case study highlighted how promotion activities are multifaceted and require a remarkable commitment of the Association's energy and resources. Shaping and promoting the oleotourism identity is the Association's main goal for two reasons: first, to raise awareness in the marketplace; but also, to give the oleotourism partners a sense of pride and belonging. Particularly for the second reason, findings are in line with previous works (Jamal and Getz, 1995) that argue tourism collaboration and partnerships are more successful when a convener (facilitator-orchestrator) is perceived as having legitimacy, expertise, resources, and authority. The Association manages directly or indirectly a wide portfolio of events and recognizes their great role as a primary motivating factor for travel. In this sense, research has shown them to become meaningful drivers that support the emergence of marginal specialist food production regions (Okumus, 2021). They can also function as a lever to incentivize community cohesion, a sense of place, belonging, and identity. It underlines the importance of "creating a sense of shared participation to spread knowledge about oleotourism, and sensitizing stakeholders to the relevance of this business" (Ferreira, 2023, p. 489).

The oleotourism study also confirmed the widely accepted central role of digital marketing in promoting growth of the ecosystem. The Association uses the mainstream of social media quite effectively; however, an improvement would be possible through a deepening of capabilities regarding the recent launch of the website [www.turismodello.it](http://www.turismodello.it). If the Association envisions it to become the meeting point for operators and olive oil lovers, it will need to evolve beyond its present configuration as a communication tool to include a cohesive set of core technologies that enable the composition, optimization, management, and delivery of contextualized digital experiences, typical of a full-service digital platform. Its improvement would generate value for the entire ecosystem and also enhance the sense of pride and belonging among members. This assumption is in line with Ruiz Guerra *et al.* (2018, p. 123) that state "to reinforce this new niche in the tourist market, the development of strategies

is needed for the creation of tourist products with singularities, attractions and improvements in the on-line distribution”.

Indeed, connections between stakeholders could be increased, diversified, simplified, and more easily managed using technology infrastructure and software applications and processes that become an orchestration architecture per se, enabling virtual orchestration practices (Altman and Tushman, 2017).

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## 6. Theoretical contributions and managerial and policy implications

This section presents theoretical and practical implications and concludes with limitations and future research directions.

### 6.1 Theoretical implications

The recent past has seen a notable increase in research that underlines the importance of niche tourism, being one of the fastest growing sectors within the domain of tourism. Previous studies have also highlighted how gastronomy is often the most important resource in niche tourism (Buonincontri *et al.*, 2023; Sánchez-Cañizares and López-Guzmán, 2012) although less is known about specific agricultural products aside from wine which has a more consolidated tradition of research. Our study addresses this vacuum by providing an empirically based foundation and definition of oleotourism, a gastronomy tourism niche that presents significant growth opportunities. Moreover, this research uses the theoretical lens of business ecosystems to deepen the understating of the players and the links that comprise this emerging form of tourism. In particular, we focus on the role of the facilitator-orchestrator in the management of the early stage of the development of the oleotourism ecosystem. Through a qualitative analysis, we address researchers' calls for conceptual clarity (Park and Kohler, 2019) revealing three key facilitator-orchestrator characteristics and six key activities implemented by this organization in its strategic bridging role.

### 6.2 Practical implications

This research provides novel insights into how a neutral and independent collaboration facilitator can play a pivotal role in facilitating-orchestrating emerging niche tourism ecosystems. Findings show how the presence of a such organization can support actors that are otherwise fragmented, dispersed, and myopic to diversify and collectively achieve better and more sustainable competitive positioning. Findings also reveal how the facilitator-orchestrator can benefit greatly from the use of the digital platform to promote shared value creation within the business ecosystem. By placing networked stakeholders in a virtual environment and repositioning collective value creation on the physical-virtual continuum, a well-designed digital platform can generate a positive impact on knowledge sharing and the creation of value.

The paper analysed a single case study based on empirical data related only to the facilitator-orchestrator perspective. Further research could consider the perspective of other oleotourism stakeholders and tourists interested in this thematic niche-tourism to reach more robust conclusions. The similar exploration of other gastronomy tourism niches may reveal some findings to be more generalizable and others more contextual. Furthermore, it would be valuable to consider different empirical contexts to observe whether other orchestrators, moderators or institutional entrepreneurs exhibit similar characteristics or implement similar key activities, or whether they differ. The Italian context might also be compared to other countries to differentiate generalizable from contextual findings. Finally, a longitudinal analysis of the growth and development of the Italian oleotourism ecosystem would also yield useful theoretical and practical findings.

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