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## The Effect of Synergies Between the Informal and Formal Tourism Sectors on Farmers' Tourism Microentrepreneurial Intentions

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# **The Effect of Synergies Between the Informal and Formal Tourism Sectors on Farmers' Tourism Microentrepreneurial Intentions**

## **Introduction**

There is a growing call for empirically-based and theoretically-driven solutions to support tourism microentrepreneurship initiatives, which stand to enhance the authenticity, uniqueness, and competitiveness of the destination (Hallak, Brown, & Lindsay, 2012; Morais, Ferreira, Gaharamani, & Nazariadli, 2017; Jones Lang LaSalle, 2018; Destinations International, 2019; Çakmak, Lie, & Selwyn, 2019). Leveraging the popularity of the foodie scene (Weiss, 2019), signature farm tourism is emerging as one of the most promising niches for tourism microentrepreneurs (Morais, Lelekacs, Jakes, & Bowen, 2017; Ferreira, Morais, Szabo, Bowen, & Jakes, 2020). However, farm tourism is uncharted territory for most farmers who may not be confident entering a new business sector they may know little about (Mikko Vesala, Peura, & McElwee, 2007; Haugen & Vik, 2008; Joyner, Kline, Oliver, & Kariko, 2018). Also, destination management organizations have not adequately reached out to farmers and have not consistently incorporated farm experiences in the local tourism product (McGehee, 2007). In the current work, we seek to explore the effect of farmers' symbiotic vertical and horizontal relationships with actors in the tourism business ecosystem on their intentions to start or expand farm tourism activities. We posit that bridging social capital affords farmers various sources of entrepreneurial self-efficacy, which leads to increased entrepreneurial intention.

## **Literature review**

There has been a growth of demand and supply of farm tourism experiences over the last decades (Barbieri, Xu, Gil-Arroyo, & Rich, 2016). Agritourists seek educational and recreational experiences, quality of life enhancement and socialization opportunities, and relaxation (Srikatanyoo & Campiranon, 2010; Barbieri, 2017). And, farmers see farm

tourism as one way to generate supplemental farm income to retain family farmland and lifestyle in the face of financial pressure (Ollenburg & Buckley, 2007).

Importantly, agritourism also provides the opportunity for the diversification of product lines. For example, some farmers have switched to growing specialty crops because more consumers are trying to shorten their food supply chains and support local farmers (Schilling, Sullivan, & Komar, 2012). Accordingly, the local foods movement has been instrumental in this transition by affording farmers additional outlets to sell their products directly to consumers through farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), and direct sales to high-end farm-to-table restaurants (Morais, Lelekacs, Jakes, & Bowen, 2017). In turn, *foodies* eager to learn more about where their food comes from may increase the demand for farm experiences (Chase, Stewart, Schilling, Smith, & Walk, 2018).

However, many farmers have a relatively low entrepreneurial identity (Mikko Vesala, Peura, & McElwee, 2007; Ohe, 2018) and only a limited understanding of the tourism market (Joyner, Kline, Oliver, & Kariko, 2018; Nazariadli, Morais, Bunds, Baran, & Supak, 2019). Farmers may also be skeptical of the profitability of agritourism (Schilling, Attavanich, & Jin, 2014) and concerned about the legal liability they are subject to (Centner, 2010; Pegas, Ollenburg, & Tynon, 2013; Ferreira, Morais, Szabo, Bowen, & Jakes, 2020). It is thus paramount to investigate the variables that might hinder or foster farmers' involvement in agritourism.

Research on community-based tourism has consistently identified the critical role of social capital in influencing individuals' involvement in tourism entrepreneurship (Jones, 2005; Pawson, D'Arcy, & Richardson, 2017; Diedrich, Benham, Pandihau, & Sheaves, 2019; Musavengane, 2019). Social capital was first defined by Bourdieu (1986) as "the

aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in group" (p. 286).

At the destination level, Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste (2019) contend that social capital resides in three levels of social ties: internal ties in a group; bridging horizontal ties with new actors or groups; and linking vertical ties with actors or groups in power or control of key resources. Similarly, Ferreira, Morais, Brothers, Brookins, & Jakes (in press) propose that the success of grassroots tourism initiatives depends on the ability of microentrepreneurs to establish mutually benefiting relationships with actors in the formal sectors of the destination, an approach called Permatourism (Ferreira & Brothers, in press). According to that approach, microentrepreneurs should be integrated with partners in three zones of the tourism business ecosystem: 1) tourism authority and other support organizations; 2) formal private tourism sector actors; and 3) other informal microentrepreneurs (e.g., farmers engaged in tourism). In farm tourism, Cooperative Extension is a prominent support organization (zone 1), and chefs and restaurateurs are important connections in the formal private sector (zone 2). To clarify, we adopted Morais and Ferreira's (in press) conceptualization of microentrepreneurship informality which is premised primarily on a range of observed informal arrangements (e.g., labor, channels, structure, nonmonetary exchange) and largely independent of the legal status of the firms (Boanada-Fuchs & Boanada Fuchs, 2018).

Another variable of interest is self-efficacy, defined as one's belief in one's ability to succeed in a target behavior (Bandura, 1977). The theory holds that if people perceive themselves to be capable of accomplishing certain activities, they are more likely to undertake them in the future (Alkire, 2005). Ferreira, Morais, Pollack, and Bunds (2018)

adapted the construct to tourism microentrepreneurship, defining it as one's belief in one's ability to successfully perform the various roles and tasks of microentrepreneurship in the tourism business sector. Importantly, several studies document a positive relationship between self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intention (De Noble, Jung & Ehrlich, 1999; Markman, Balkin, & Baron, 2002; Arenius and Minniti, 2005; Markman, Baron, & Balkin, 2005; Wilson et al., 2007). Moreover, network ties with actors across the tourism business ecosystem provide opportunities for mastery experiences, modeling, and social persuasion, all of which are sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2008). Finally, research suggests that self-efficacy is an important mediator between social capital and successful behavior (Liñán & Santos, 2007; Brouwer, Jansen, Flache, & Hofman, 2016). Hence, our hypotheses are as follows:

H1: There is a positive relationship between bridging social capital and tourism microentrepreneurial self-efficacy.

H2: There is a positive relationship between tourism microentrepreneurial self-efficacy and tourism microentrepreneurial intention.

## **Method**

This study subscribes to a transformative worldview (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). The research team and study participants are equals in the research process and pursue a shared horizon in which tourism microentrepreneurship is an enabler of endogenous socio-economic prosperity. In terms of research methods, Participatory Action Research can use either quantitative or qualitative methods or both (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). This study is part of a larger longitudinal research project (Morais et al., 2017), wherein quantitative and qualitative data are linked by way of a multi-wave survey design, conducted in parallel with continuous fieldwork (Flick, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Under this mixed-methods approach 1) qualitative approaches (e.g., formal interviews,

impromptu conversations, community meetings) were used to co-generate research questions, develop the questionnaire, and refine scales; 2) quantitative methods were utilized to test the hypotheses empirically; and 3) qualitative data (e.g., interviews transcripts, field notes, reflexive memos) were used to triangulate the data from the survey.

The survey used five-point Likert-like scales to measure three main constructs of interest. The Individually-Owned Bridging Social Capital scale was adapted from Chen, Stanton, Gong, Fang, and Li (2008) to the context of farm TMEship, to capture relationships with actors in three permatourism zones (i.e., Z1, Z2, Z3). Then, we used Ferreira, Morais, Pollock, and Bunds (2018) scale to assess tourism microentrepreneurial self-efficacy. Principal component analysis with varimax rotation (Garson, 2013) conducted on the scale's 13 items revealed a two-factor underlying structure, unlike the original 5-factor original structure obtained on a sample of urban microentrepreneurs. Importantly, the first factor included eight items relating to personal (i.e., internal) entrepreneurial capabilities, whereas the second 5-item factor captured participants' perceived ability to cope with external factors. Finally, the entrepreneurial intention scale was adapted from Chen, Greene, and Crick (1998) to capture a range of common business intentions and goals emerging from the qualitative fieldwork with farmers.

We created a database with 1,200 North Carolina farms participating in agritourism and local foods initiatives. An online survey was administered through Qualtrics, yielding 273 responses, corresponding to a 23% response rate, which is in line with expected response rates of survey research in a region like North Carolina (Groves et al., 2011). To test the hypotheses, firstly, we conducted Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to ascertain the

validity of the measures, and secondly, maximum likelihood Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to explore the structural relationships between the constructs.

## **Results**

Participating farmers were mainly female (56.5%), white (93.2%), and in their mid-adulthood (53.6 years old), which is consistent with demographic trends among farm tourism microentrepreneurs in North Carolina (Xu, Barbieri, Rich, Seekamp, & Morais, 2014). More than two-thirds (38.2%) of the participants worked exclusively on-farm, and most (42%) held a bachelor's degree. All but seven farmers actively pursued agritourism opportunities, with business models reliant on 1) sales of product directly to chefs and restaurants, 2) sales of product directly to visitors to the farm, farm stand or farmers market, and 3) sales of experiences/tours/stays to visitors to the farm.

The CFA revealed that the measurement model had an acceptable fit with the data:  $\chi^2(265) = 412.9$ ,  $CMIN/DF=1.556$ ,  $CFI=.950$ ,  $TLI=.944$ ,  $SRMR=.075$ ,  $RMSEA=.052$ ). Internal self-efficacy, external self-efficacy, and intention had adequate reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Furthermore, we assessed each first-order factor's internal consistency construct validity through the Cronbach-alpha statistic and concluded that they are acceptable for exploratory purposes.

The SEM revealed adequate model fit:  $\chi^2(267) = 470.4$ ,  $CMIN/DF=1.762$ ,  $CFI=.931$ ,  $TLI=.923$ ,  $SRMR=.1253$ ,  $RMSEA=.061$ ).

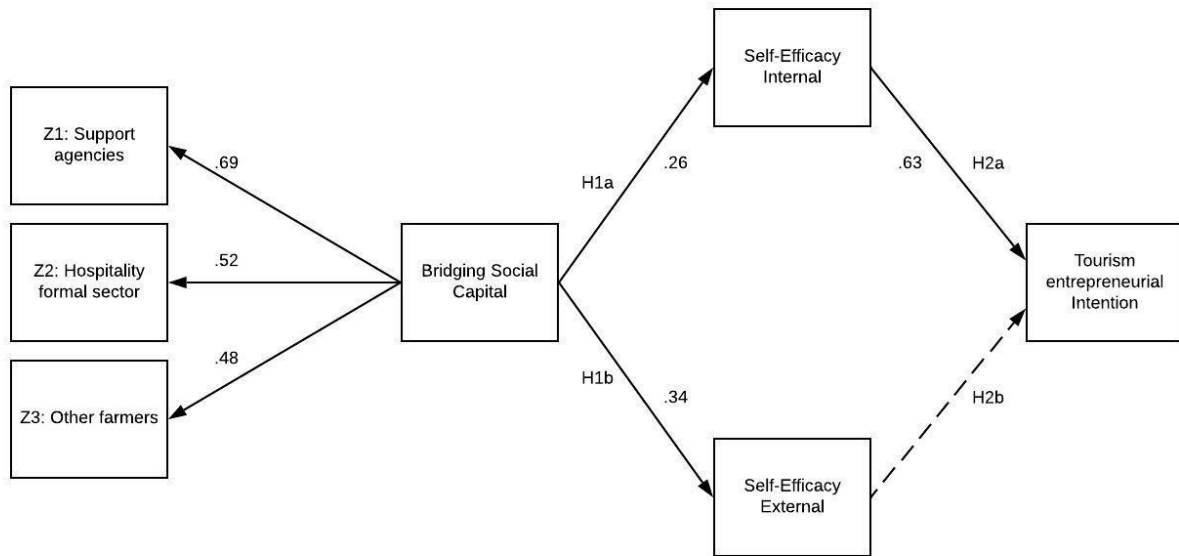


Figure 1. Structural equation model

Hypothesis H1a and H1b tested the relationship between social capital and self-efficacy. Given that social capital had a positive and significant relationship both with internal self-efficacy ( $\beta=.27$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and external self-efficacy ( $\beta=.34$ ;  $p < .05$ ), the study supported both H1a and H1b. This finding mimics previous reports in the educational context where social capital was also found to have a positive relationship with self-efficacy (Liñán & Santos, 2007; Brouwer, Jansen, Flache, & Hofman, 2016).

Hypothesis H2a and H2b tested the relationship between self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intention. Internal factors self-efficacy had a positive and significant relationship with intention ( $\beta=.63$ ;  $p < .05$ ), therefore hypothesis H2a is supported by the study. This finding also supports previous research in entrepreneurship where self-efficacy was also found to have a positive relationship on entrepreneurial intention (De Noble, Jung & Ehrlich, 1999; Markman, Balkin, & Baron, 2002; Arenius and Minniti, 2005; Markman, Baron, & Balkin, 2005; Wilson et al., 2007). However, External Factors did not have a significant relationship with entrepreneurial intention, which warrants further



examination. Although not expected, this finding is partially supported by the qualitative data, which suggests that most farmers engage in agritourism regardless of their knowledge of the regulatory framework governing agritourism. Our fieldwork suggests that farm tourism microentrepreneurs have to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty because the local government cannot provide precise regulation or support. For example, one of the participating farmers complained that he could not get a license to run a Bed & Breakfast in his log cabin but was abiding by the law renting it through Airbnb. Also, another farmer stated that *"It was a nightmare to have them approve my project. Every time they came to inspect, somehow they always managed to find something wrong."*

### **Conclusion and discussion**

As reported in related literature, social capital was significantly and positively associated with self-efficacy. However, to our knowledge, this study was the first to empirically examine this relationship in the context of farm tourism microentrepreneurship. Additionally, this finding also suggests that informal networks, more welcoming and less threatening than rigid and bureaucratic formal structures, can be equally effective in nurturing and supporting farm tourism microentrepreneurs (Karampela, Kavroudakis, & Kizos, 2019). Hence, destination management organizations may need to loosen their formal requirements for partnerships and collaborations with informal players in the interest of destinations' uniqueness and competitiveness. One such constraint we have observed in the field is the requirement of TDAs to support only businesses that overtly contribute to overnight stays (the source of occupancy tax). Such a shift in institutional approach would help TDAs better serve the community and not just the formal lodging industry (Destinations International, 2019; Buhalis, forthcoming).

In addition to being positively associated with social capital, internal self-efficacy was a positive and significant predictor of microentrepreneurial intention. This indicates that

self-efficacy is a vital psychological mechanism for converting network embedded resources into intentions to engage in the farm tourism business. Hence, the role of supporting agencies is central in the competitiveness of the destination because elevating farmers' tourism microentrepreneurial self-efficacy leads to a more diversified and unique tourism product. Recent research, however, indicates that extension agents, the par-excellence mentors and supporters of farmers, do not feel entirely qualified for this task (Ferreira et al., 2020).

In turn, external self-efficacy was not significantly associated with intention. This is surprising because one would assume that farmers' perceived ability to abide by regulations governing the industry, acquire adequate liability coverage, or find staff would influence their intention to engage in microentrepreneurship. However, our experience in the field suggests that farmers, out of choice or need, do not necessarily wait until they have a good domain of farm tourism's legal landscape to start their ventures. Furthermore, compared to internal factors, external self-efficacy's observed lower values suggest that information is ambiguous regarding licenses, insurance, and taxes due for tourism businesses.

While farmers' concern about liability for personal injuries of participants and their revindication for clear instructions from agritourism regulatory bodies is not new (Leff, 2011; Centner, 2010), this study suggests that these are not necessarily perceived as impediments for engaging in those activities. Hence, agencies tasked to deliver agritourism training focusing on insurance, liability, or risk management (Infante-Casella et al., 2018) should target both nascent farm tourism microentrepreneurs and those already in business.

In conclusion, this study used a mixed-methods approach to explore the extent to which farm tourism entrepreneurial intentions can be predicted by the strength of bridging ties with public sector support agencies (e.g., Extension agents and TDAs), formal private sector partners (e.g., farm-to-table chefs), and with other peers (e.g., other farmers involved in farm tourism microentrepreneurship). In the model proposed, social capital predicts both dimensions of entrepreneurial self-efficacy. However, only internal self-efficacy has a significant relationship with entrepreneurial intention, which suggests that farmers' intention to engage in farm tourism microentrepreneurship is independent of their perceived efficacy in understanding the industry's regulation, getting adequate liability coverage, and ability to find helpers. In totality, this study supports that multilateral tourism initiatives involving actors across different zones of the tourism business ecosystem effectively increase farmers' intention to develop the supply of farm tourism experiences.

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