

Article

The Development of Social Capital during the Process of Starting an Agritourism Business

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Abstract: The role of social capital in the early phases of development of a family business is well documented, but the dynamism of the entrepreneur's social capital in the agritourism business remains a relatively lesser-studied area. The current research, on an inductive, exploratory, and qualitative basis, aims to uncover the place and role of social capital in the establishment of agritourism enterprise, from concept formation to stabilization. The results of the study highlight the importance of governmental help in finance and networking for launching an enterprise, especially in remote areas where these additional activities are relatively lesser-known. The role of a network is relatively weak in the risk analysis of the business. This fact enhances the vulnerability of enterprises.

Keywords: agritourism; entrepreneurship; network; social capital; rural lodging; Tunisia



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1. Introduction

There are many different theories and approaches that describe agritourism as an economic, social, cultural phenomenon [1]. There is a consensus that rural areas represent the essential, core source for the expansion of agritourism as a complex touristic product, serving the satisfaction of the urban community's demand for peace and outdoor space for recreation [2]. Agritourism is a rather complex touristic product, embracing a wide array of touristic services [1] and contributing to the general development of rural regions. This complexity highlights the importance of collective decision-making, integrating all relevant stakeholders [3].

Agritourism consists of numerous micro-, small-, and medium-sized entrepreneurs (SMEs). Under this condition, it is essential to create an environment that promotes the cooperation and collaboration of tourism service providers [4]. Cooperation and the formation of networks are particularly important for very specialized entrepreneurs who seek the survival of their businesses in agritourism. It is therefore essential to comprehend the driving forces behind their propensity to cooperate.

The ability and dynamism of the entrepreneur to develop and mobilize social capital is a key factor in the agritourism business [5]. Social capital helps the entrepreneur to spare time, cost, or effort to acquire the different resources necessary for establishing or running the business [6]. The results of preliminary research have shown that the structure of the mobilized social capital is different in various stages of the life cycle of a business [6,7]. Depending on changing needs of the entrepreneur in the quantity and quality of resources, his/her network structure changes dynamically.

Most of the existing research results have focused on the structure of the network between entrepreneurs in a rather static way, analyzing this system at a given point in time [7]. The dynamic aspects of network relations have been obtaining relatively lesser importance [7]. Understanding the dynamic character of the entrepreneurs' network is

a gap in the current literature, which is why the focal point of the current paper is the analysis of the changing social capital structure of entrepreneurs in the set-up phase of their businesses. We will analyze this question based on the context of Tunisian rural lodgings entrepreneurs. In the framework of this inductive, exploratory, and qualitative research, ten persons, including persons whose partners and friends are starting the rural lodgings businesses, will be interviewed. The current paper is structured as follows: the first Section is the present introduction, the second Section analyses the relationship of agritourism with entrepreneurship, the role of agritourism business in Tunisia, and the important role of social capital. The third Section describes the methodology applied for the qualitative research, and the fourth and fifth parts summarize the results, discuss them and outlines their implications. Finally, the sixth Section provides our conclusions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Agritourism as a Business Opportunity for Entrepreneurs*

Today, the increase in the attractiveness of agritourism and the relatively low market entry barriers have made agritourism-related entrepreneurship a major component of green entrepreneurship in rural areas and an approach to support local sustainable development [8].

All over the world, there is a high level of interest in agritourism as a driver of rural economic development. Based on the effective market demand, there is a possibility to shift from agriculture to agritourism-related services by introducing innovative methods and decreasing the inherent risk of agricultural activities through diversification.

In the opinion of Bosworth and McElwee [9], agriculture has become increasingly market-oriented in recent decades, as periods of socio-economic crisis have prompted farmers to be more flexible, to develop and mobilize innovative skills and competencies, and to renovate themselves from “mere managers” to “entrepreneurs”. Therefore, agritourism entrepreneurship refers to business initiatives based on agritourism lodges, aiming to develop economic activities in rural areas as an additional activity to agriculture (or food industrial, e.g., wine, cheese production) to respond to a change in the socio-economic environment [10].

Compared to traditional agritourism, the concept of entrepreneurial agritourism highlights the entrepreneurial character of this activity [11]. Therefore, its economic aspects are counterbalanced by its social and cultural characteristics when examining agritourism entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurial character is reinforced by the perceived market opportunity, practical initiatives, and risk-taking through the creation of an innovative business. Therefore, the crucial characteristic of agritourism entrepreneurship refers to the agritourism entrepreneur’s perspective of achieving his or her entrepreneurial goals, even if the profit of this activity is well below the level of another sector’s net income-generating capacity [12].

2.2. *Creation of Agritourism-Related Enterprise as a Business Process*

Despite the complexity and uniqueness of each case of new business creation, authors, to facilitate the understanding and study of the phenomenon, have tried to schematize the process by breaking it down into stages/phases or activities that show the path of the project, from the idea to the business. A classic model in the study of SMEs was created by Churchill and Lewis [13]. This model, which includes five stages: existence, survival, success, take-off, and resource maturity, deals not only with the creation phase of an SME but with its entire life cycle. Other authors have focused more specifically on the creation phase. One model that targets the creation phase is the one proposed by Filion, Borges, and Simard [14]. It groups the main activities of the business creation process into four stages. This model was successfully used in a study on business creation in Quebec, in which 196 new businesses participated, and 77 of which were technology-based. Table 1 presents this model.

Table 1. Steps and activities in the process of starting a business.

Steps	1. Initiation Phase	2. Preparation	3. Start-Up	4. Consolidation
Activities	1. Analysis and identification of the business/market opportunities 2. Reflection and development of the business idea 3. Owner's decision to create the business 4. Preliminary financial planning	1. Preparation of the business plan 2. Conducting the in-depth market study 3. Setting up a preliminary concept on the mobilization of resources 4. Building and education of the entrepreneurial team 5. Registration of a trademark and/or patent	1. Legal registration of the company 2. Creation of physical infrastructure (if necessary): Installation of facilities and equipment 3. Development of the first product or service 4. Hiring of employees 5. First sale	1. Carry out promotional or marketing activities 2. Selling 3. Achievement of break-even point 4. Formal financial planning 5. Management structure development

Source: Own edition, based on Borges and Filion (2012).

2.3. Agritourism in Tunisia

In Tunisia, the tourism sector contributes to the equilibrium of the balance of payment, to job creation and to the polarization of investments. Thus, its contribution to GDP varies between 7 and 14%, depending on the sources [15]. This gap reflects the public authorities' reservations about the real contribution of the sector to the national economy due to losses or "hemorrhages" of foreign exchange inflows and its unsustainable effects on other economic sectors, especially under the impact of crises. In Tunisia, the exploitation of the sun and the shores for nearly 6 decades, has generated spectacular development in the mass seaside hotel industry. However, the mismatch between demand and Tunisian tourism supply explains the current crisis in its tourism system [16]. Most tourist areas in the country are in an advanced stage of the life cycle [17]. Thus, the various political, security, and health crises of COVID-19 have further weakened the destination by the reduction in attendance. The repercussions are significant on several levels, including significant job loss, aging of hotel establishments, and indebtedness of promoters.

In this context, sustainable tourism is considered an alternative to mass tourism. This was already the subject of debate before the pandemic, considering its goals of developing a new, more responsible tourism in line with the environmental, economic, and social concerns of the players in the tourism system. Despite all the problems it poses, the current crisis linked to COVID-19, has accelerated this change to the tourist paradigm and presents an important moment to question all past policies [15]. Like elsewhere in the world, in Tunisia, sustainable tourism products, including ecotourism, evolve according to circumstances and opportunities based on nature preservation policies [18]. Since the 1970s, the tourism system in Tunisia has produced mass seaside tourism, concentrated in coastal towns. The tourist infrastructure—essentially seaside resorts—is often assimilated into the hotel industry.

This nonactivity, being favored by a certain sectoral policy, has been responsible for the current tourist crisis with all its dimensions: economic, social, and environmental. The political instability that followed the 2011 revolution and the terrorist attacks in 2015 drastically reduced tourist numbers in the country. These political and security crises were caught up in their recovery by the COVID-19 [15]. The priority of the actors in Tunisian tourism is therefore to restart this sector. Faced with these consecutive crises of mass tourism, Tunisians are therefore becoming aware regarding the need to engage in alternative and more sustainable forms of tourism. The challenge of developing sustainable tourism consists of establishing a dynamic balance between the economic and social development of the territories concerned and the sustainability of the ecosystems while considering the needs of the host communities and creating the conditions meeting the needs of both the "host" and "guest" populations [16]. At the same time, an awareness of environmental issues has emerged in recent years, leading some actors to promote the development of a new type of more sustainable tourism. The prospect of developing sustainable and responsible

tourism must be part of a value chain and contribute to the reduction of social and territorial disparities through an inclusive approach. To this end, the pandemic would have served as an indicator and accelerator of this changing activity. Moreover, in the post-COVID-19 context, travelers are advocating for local and ecological tourism. Everything is in favor of “soft tourism” instead of the mass tourism that was more common before COVID-19. Tunisia, like many countries, has been affected by this paradigm shift [15].

In Tunisia, agritourism is currently in its infancy, but it is a revenue-generating niche [19]. It constitutes an added value for tourism, hence the ultimate need to pay more attention to this sector and bring it up to standard. For professionals, the problems they attribute to the sector are various: the product itself, administrative hassles, marketing, and promotion. Some challenges include fundamentally high prices, mediocre services, poorly presented products, lack of promotion and, above all, DIY. However, this tourism is part of a perspective that is both responsible and fair with opportunities regarding contact with the local population, including meetings, cultural activities, homestay accommodation. However, this role is not often defended by the profession. Contrary, there are newcomers to this profession who lack professionalism and know-how.

The development of agritourism needs a network of several tourist operators, several craftsmen (agricultural and others) to offer tourists a diversified range of products, and also meetings with local actors. This promotes the need to overhaul the tourism system with a view towards “sustainable development” [20]. In addition to the environmental, social, economic, and spatial dimensions, in the post-COVID context, the paradigm of sustainable tourism, a hinge of sustainable development, brings out another dimension: health [15]. Agritourism is included in the new Tunisian national tourism strategy. It is registered in the program of the Ministry of Tourism and the Tunisian Federation of Hotels. This is one of the challenges to be met in the future. However, this activity needs a dynamic strategy and a legal framework. The approach to this tourist product should be changed. Specifications are required for the reorganization of this niche and its revaluation because today, low-end products and DIY which risk harming the reputation of the tourism sector. This tourism aims to reverse the balance based on the benefits it offers to local, rather than to international, agencies. This tourism is not a simple fad for tourists in search of adventure, it is a way to fight against the effects of mass tourism, because Tunisia has a great deal to offer, in food, nature, and culture to supporters of bed and breakfasts and rural lodgings.

2.4. Social Capital

The concept of social capital, which measures the potential to produce wealth arising from various forms of collective associations, explores the impact of civil society on economic performance [21]. According to Khazami and Lakner [22], it is possible to identify at least four mechanisms by which the social capital found in social networks stimulates economic growth: (i) high levels of social trust and strong norms of reciprocity reduce the costs of operation; (ii) social networks dilute risk, allowing members to engage in innovation and increased risk-taking; (iii) social networks promote the rapid spread of information and, therefore, reduce asymmetries; and (iv) social networks make it easier for members to solve collective action problems. Personal approaches emphasize the role of individuals as providers of benefits and resources [23]. Social capital is defined by Burt [24] as the set of friends, colleagues, and public contacts where the individual finds opportunities to use their financial and human capital. Sociological approaches emphasize the functionality of resources as “an aggregation of actual or potential resources integrated into a network or belonging to a group” [25]. Putnam [26], adopts a constructivist approach, preferring to base his definition not only on the utilitarian character of social relations but also on the voluntary behaviors and attitudes that characterize individuals who hold social capital. He defines the latter as being the participation of the individual in collective social activities: leisure, political activities, religion, etc. The utilitarian approach to social capital focuses on the recognition of all personal and collective benefits produced by social

structures. The first focuses primarily on the ability of individuals to effectively activate and mobilize a network of social ties [27], while collective benefits essentially focus on the benefits of society [28]. Indeed, social capital facilitates the alternation between knowledge and information within and between networks [23]. Social capital consolidates a feeling of homogeneity in a network, which stimulates trust, reciprocity, and cooperation [29] and reinforces collective work [30]. Generally, the personal and collective benefits that are discussed above are summarized in three dimensions: structural, cognitive, and relational [23]. The structural dimension defines the general pattern of social ties and relationships in networks (e.g., associations), revealing the presence/absence of network ties [31]. Since links are the source of social interaction that activate knowledge exchange and information sharing, the structural dimension captures the possibility of mobilizing available resources (such as capital and equipment) within the network [32]. The cognitive dimension reveals the homogeneity of the members in terms of values, attitudes, beliefs, and points of view within the groups [31]. This homogeneity facilitates mutual understanding between members, which improves support from social work [33]. The relational dimension refers to the quality or strength of network ties in terms of trust, reciprocity, and cooperation between individuals [34]. This dimension typically reveals the how long members remain in a social relationship and how emotionally intimate they are, as well as the frequency of members' mutual behaviors [35]. Although the examination of social capital in the context of tourism has increased in recent years, it is still understudied [36]. The lack of research is most evident in the context of tourism and particularly in relation to agritourism [37].

2.5. Social Capital and Agritourism

Most of the current literature has focused on the synergistic relationships between social capital and community development in tourist destinations, indicating overall positive effects [38]. Finding a positive relationship between cohesive communities based on the success of tourism efforts [39] and the impact of tourism development on increase a community's social capital [40]. In the agritourism sector, social capital strengthens the identity of the company [22] and the chances of success of its operators [41]. It is also essential that farms in agritourism destinations encourage the creation of social capital with the local population, as this can broaden their customer base [37]. Social capital helps us to understand how agritourism entrepreneurs mobilize resources, solutions and means to transform their way of life from an agricultural activity to an economic activity linked to tourism. Social capital allows us to know how entrepreneurs seek, imagine, and invent resources and solutions through social relations inside and outside rural areas in order to adapt the tourist presence to their culture [42].

Social capital, as an important force for the development of different touristic attractions and services, has been studied intensively in different countries. We have collected the most important results from Web of Science database, which is considered a high-quality, comprehensive collection of academic publications on different topics [43].

We have applied the search term: TS = (("social capital" OR "mutual trust") AND ("Tourism*" OR "hospitality*")).

On this basis, our search produced 431 results. However, the WoS database contains data from 1975. The first result on the role of social capital on tourism development appeared just in 2001. Since then, we can see a rapid increasing rate of publications: In 2019 and 2020, a total of 137 publications appeared on these topics. It can thus be determined that nearly one-third of our knowledge base on this problem has been formed and published in the last years. Next, we analyzed the topic structure of different publications by Vos's viewer software on basis of co-occurrences of words and expressions in the title, abstract and keywords of the documents [44]. The results of the analysis yielded five clusters of publications, which are depicted in Figure 1. The different clusters are indicated by colors and the size of the words, and expression are proportional with their frequency.

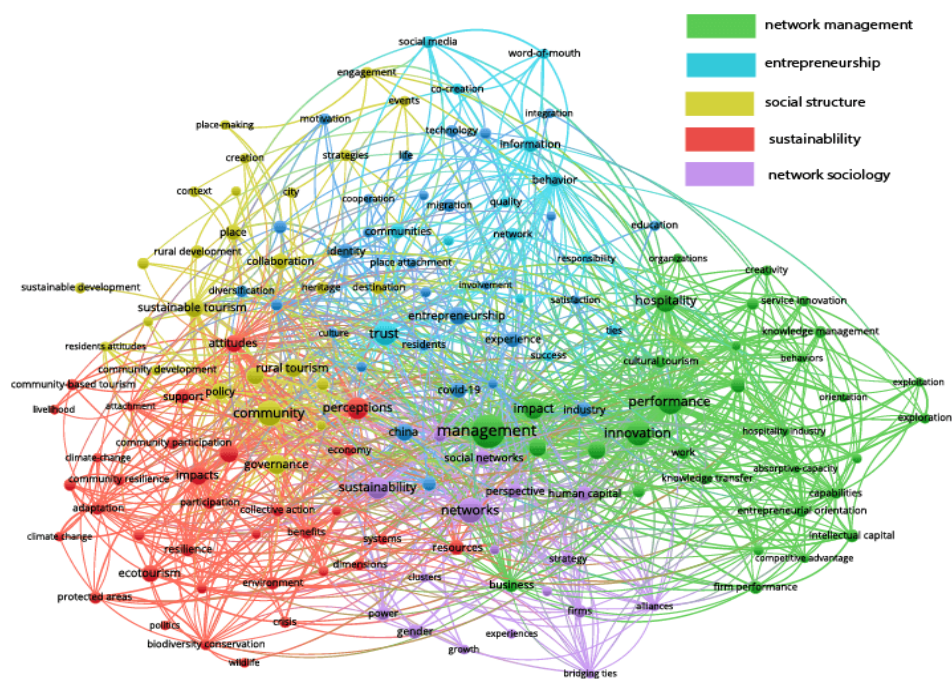


Figure 1. The most important cluster of research on social capital and tourism.

One of the largest clusters considers social capital as an important factor contributing to the formation of network of tourism service providers and performance enhancement of tourism sector in each country or region. Another cluster, indicated by the blue color, analyses social capital from point of view of the formation and strengthening of enterprises. This approach is the nearest to our goal. A relatively small cluster analyses the social structure of networks, indicated by a yellow color. Social capital plays an important role in the sustainable development of tourism, especially in formation of individual, nature-close touristic attraction; this cluster is indicated by a red color. The social capital in tourism is an increasingly important part of sociology. A cluster of research topics focusing on the sociological aspect of network formation, is depicted by a lilac color.

It is well documented, that social capital is an important driver of tourism, because the intense bounding relations enhance mutual trust between tourism entrepreneurs and bridging ties increase the prestige of the region and facilitate the inflow of resources (knowledge, experiences, money) into the region [45].

Social capital is especially important in such cases when the touristic attraction is built on a cluster of different individual enterprises, because in these cases the wide choice of different service providers is an important part of the formation of a touristic attraction.

The contribution of social capital to the process of enterprise creation and its impact on this procedure are a focal point on entrepreneurial research [21,46]. However, this research on the role of social capital can be considered as a part of the mainstream research.

The objective of this study is to determine the evolution and the formation of the social capital mobilized in the context of the agritourism sector and, more specifically, rural lodgings, based on the example of Tunisian entrepreneurs. In the framework of the current study, we investigated the following research questions:

How can the place and the role of social capital during the early life of agritourism enterprises be characterized?

What types of social capital have been applied in different parts of the starting cycle of agritourism enterprises?

How have the different types of network-based assistance been changed during the starting cycle of agritourism enterprises?

3. Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the Tunisian entrepreneurs of rural lodgings in the agritourism sector. This method has been the most successful for determining real drivers and processes of entrepreneurial development and activity.

3.1. Sampling

For the achievement of our research objectives, we contacted the owners of rural lodgings and selected ten Tunisian entrepreneurs who started their business more than one year ago. We choose single entrepreneurs as well as couples, family members and friends who started their businesses together. All of respondents operated an agricultural enterprise at least part-time. During the process of respondent selection, we tried to mirror the diversity of the Tunisian agritourism sector (Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of the qualitative sample.

Entrepreneur	Case	Experience of Entrepreneur
Man in his 50s	Rural lodging + local dishes	Work experience as an agriculture engineer + Experience in farming
Man and woman (a married couple in their 40s (Both interviewed))	Rural lodging	Experience as doctors
Man and woman (a married couple in their 40s (Both interviewed))	Rural lodging + Equestrian farm	Work experience as doctors + Experience riding horse for a woman
Two men in their 50s (brothers and both interviewed)	Rural lodging + Equestrian farm	Experience as both in hotel services
Woman in her 40s and man in his 50s (married couple and both interviewed)	Rural lodging + Green pedagogic space for children	Training on the food sector for the woman Man long experience as a food engineering
Woman in her 40s	Rural lodging	Experience as a teacher

Source: Own compilation, N = 10.

3.2. The Interview Guide for Entrepreneurs of Rural Lodgings

The interview guide with rural lodgings entrepreneurs was divided into four main parts. The first theme was network building problems and opportunities, a second theme was network support, the third theme deals with the use of resource networks, and the fourth theme addresses the funding network.

Investigation Procedure

The research was carried out in Tunisia in 2020, among entrepreneurs of rural lodges located in five cities: Bizerte, Nabeul, Tozeur, Mednine, and Bèja. The cities were chosen to represent the geographical diversity of the agritourism sector in Tunisia.

A temporal deconstruction strategy based on the phases of the business development process (Appendix A) was applied [8]. Initially, this formed as a descriptor allowing us to retrospectively reconstruct the history of the business development process, and to evaluate the mode and intensity of the application of social capital in each case. The duration of the interviews was between one and three hours. The qualitative data collection took place between January and March, 2020 (in Tunisia, in the middle of March, the situation changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic).

The materials were transcribed, then the recordings of each case were compiled before intra-case and inter-case analysis.

4. Results

We analyzed the different categories of entrepreneurial social capital, namely the knowledge and information network, family and other categories, the resource and business network, and finally the financing network.

For each category of social capital, a figure is presented, offering an overview of the mobilization intensity of these networks at different stages of the business creation process. In the figures, the intensity of using social capital is indicated, ranging from low to high. This intensity is intended to graphically illustrate our interpretation of the analyzed cases. There are considerable changes in entrepreneurial social capital at different stages of the business creation process. This social capital develops from a network predominantly consisting of knowledge and information to a more diversified network, including all categories of networks, diversified resources and business contacts. These observations confirm the results of other research [8,14] that noted the dynamic, progressive, and evolving character of entrepreneurs' social capital as the process of the creation of their enterprise progresses.

- (a) Knowledge and information network. After deciding to start their business, entrepreneurs need to seek information and acquire knowledge about developing projects in the agritourism sector. These pieces of information are vital to start a successful business. The participants of the interviews used their previous contacts to get information and advice, which are described in Figure 2. For example, the owner of *Côté ferme* in Mjez ilbeb, a rural lodging that offers visitors the opportunity to discover life in the countryside and enjoy agritourism services, in the preparatory phase of his enterprise, based on his wide network, visited other lodgings and observed their solutions and technologies, with special emphasis on harmonization of agriculture and tourism. The entrepreneur of *Côté ferme* was able to compare the different services offered by other lodgings and get inspiration as well as experiences before launching his enterprise.

The proprietor of "El nour sahara" (a rural house in the south of Tunisia) could not find information and knowledge through his informal network. The owner of this rural lodging tried to contact other managers of rural lodgings in different cities in Tunisia because he wanted to get advice and help. Time and distance were efficient barriers in this process, so, he contacted the municipality, which turned out to be a wise choice. The lack of information in his informal network was filled based on the help of the government as a formal link. Finally, he was able to get the necessary pieces of information. He gained knowledge about starting, planning, and running a business, which was vital to him during this time. This is a positive example of the mediating role of the local public administration.

In another case, the owner of the rural lodging "Dar Ennour" used social networks as a source of information and inspiration to create and develop the project. The entrepreneur found what he needed to launch his project on Facebook groups.

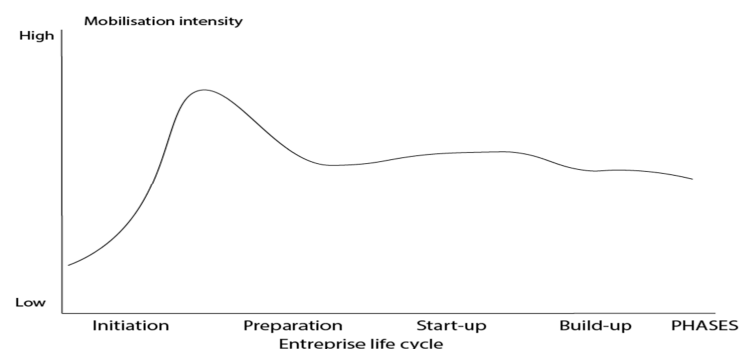


Figure 2. Mobilization of the knowledge and information network.

- (b) Family and other networks. Entrepreneurs begin to talk with family members, friends, or colleagues about the possibility of creating an agritourism-related enterprise. To advance their business ideas or evaluate business opportunities, entrepreneurs, based on the information their core entrepreneurial colleagues provide, seek information and opinions from other contacts in their network, often family and friends. These are contacts who have expertise in the relevant field or who have some knowledge regarding the market in which the entrepreneur is considering to start his own business (Figure 3). For example, aspiring entrepreneurs talk to family members or friends who already have projects in agritourism sector. Four of the five entrepreneur cases progressed in this way. As the entrepreneurs' knowledge deepened, the importance of these relations decreased. This is in line with the results of other researchers [47].

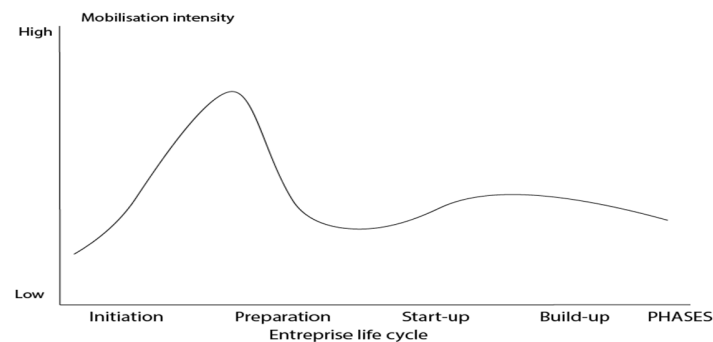


Figure 3. Mobilization of family and other networks.

The family was primarily a source of encouragement and financial resources in most cases. Family contacts were applied to a lesser degree than we had previously expected. There was an official, functional structure of enterprise support infrastructure behind the projects. The result showed that family exerts a strong significant influence on the development and success of a business since most Tunisians rely heavily on family support and have more confidence in it. The better the interactions between entrepreneurs and their families, the higher the level support they receive from their families and are less likely they are to experience problems at the launch level of their businesses. In other words, the more intense the emotional bonds between the launchers of projects and their families, the more their businesses tend to succeed.

- (c) Resource and business networks. This type of network plays a rather limited role in the early stages of the enterprise creation process. One possible explanation of this fact is that mobilization of third-party capital and knowledge begins only in the start-up phase when the entrepreneurs begin to commercialize their services or products, which are depicted in Figure 4.

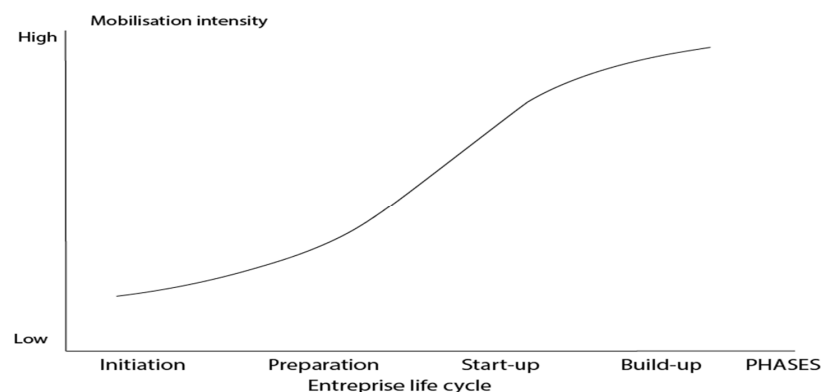


Figure 4. Mobilization of the resource and business networks.

Despite the importance of the formation of the idea regarding the development and marketing of an agritourism product to potential customers or at least to someone who knows the intended market, our results highlight that rural lodgings entrepreneurs rarely mobilize resource contacts in the initiation phase. As we have experienced, they often begin their enterprise without serious market research or at least a face-to-face meeting with a potential customer. Under these conditions, the preparatory phase is often guided by the wishful thinking of the entrepreneur, and not on a basis of actual pieces of market information. The lack of risk analysis enhances the vulnerability of enterprises.

When entrepreneurs start their business, they all need help, like in the example of “Green ranch”. The owner has applied his informal network and friends’ contacts to decorate the lodge. He had contact with his friend from his network to work on the place in his free time, evenings, and weekends. He told him that they would eventually pay him when the income started. According to Shane [48], this knowledge reflects the characteristics of network theory that strong ties offer advantages over weak ties. Strong ties are often vital during the development of the business process.

- (d) Financing network. The financing network is mobilized from the preparation phase and continue to be mobilized throughout the establishment of business activity and consolidation phases. There were four sources of foreign capital. The outside finance arrived from governmental funding agencies. In almost all cases, we found that venture capital funds had been mobilized too. Entrepreneurs mobilize financial resources from banks as well as from family members, which are represented in Figure 5. The basis of starting the agritourism business is generally the capital of the entrepreneur and his/her family. These results are in line with other studies [49].

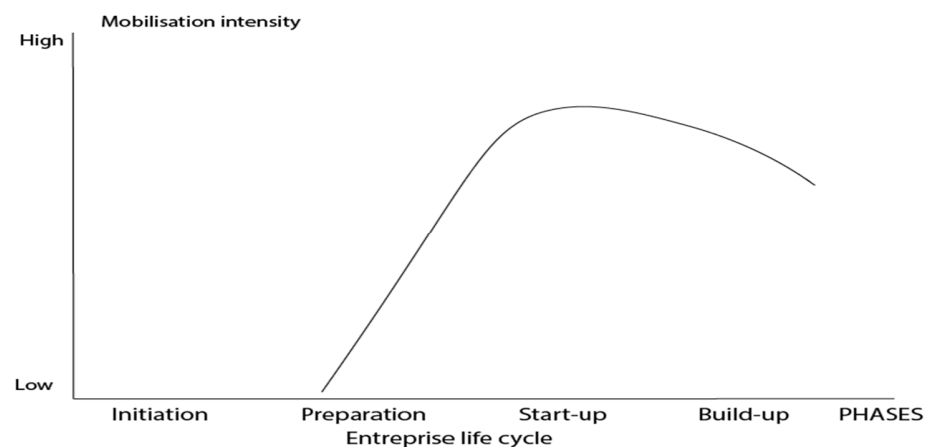


Figure 5. Mobilization of the funding network.

5. Discussion

The interviews showed that entrepreneurs’ social capital had sometimes allowed them to access to new resources. Relationships can often be more local (within the territory) and stronger than before (relationships with friends). Some owners discovered the existence of certain subsidies and thus benefited from additional financial capital. When the tourist accommodation activity is accompanied by a catering or leisure activity, this type of relationship often allows entrepreneurs to find casual workers more easily than via temporary work agencies.

Other entrepreneurs have been able to benefit from the experience of other accommodation owners, providing them with advice on the management of their business (e.g., membership of networks and choice of labels, investments, etc.). As with access to new resources, this form of learning emerges more in cases where the entrepreneur has strong relationships with people from the same group, in this case, tourism entrepreneurs or accommodation owners.

The interviews showed that, in terms of the mechanisms linked to the circulation of information, it is important to differentiate the type of information involved. Social capital can influence the image of an activity, if it is present on the widest possible scale, and concern people from different circles. Therefore, the entrepreneur who has many contacts in both local and remote areas will be favored by numerous professional relationships and other advantages. On the other hand, for advice or resource information, the entrepreneur will have easier access to information because of the presence of many people from different groups, within the professional sphere. Finally, relative geographic proximity can be advantageous when the information exchanged concerns the daily management of the business.

Agritourism managers must be careful during the development of their businesses by adopting a social approach. Indeed, the results related to the effect of social capital on entrepreneurs in the agritourism sector highlight the importance of the social capital links that these entrepreneurs must foster in the development of their businesses. It also facilitates certain steps to improve the progression of their functional skills and to identify the right strategy to adapt to market their products and services.

6. Conclusions

This study sought to explore the main characteristics of the industrial network and how they were used by new Tunisian entrepreneurs in the agritourism sector. Focusing on qualitative interviews, the impacts of networks were mapped according to the entrepreneurial creation process, to answer the research question: How did the Tunisian entrepreneur benefit from his or her networks throughout the entrepreneurial process of developing his or her agritourism business?

Most of the entrepreneurs interviewed belonged to several local professional networks (e.g., tourist office, agricultural office, etc.) or national networks, often associated with general or thematic labelling. They considered the legibility and image of their enterprise among tourists were mainly due to these formalized relationships or, increasingly, to the creation of a website. However, their acquaintances (friends of friends, family, friends) sometimes use word of mouth and e-word of mouth to attract local and international tourists. Thus, it appears that entrepreneurs with many weak links to both local contacts (other tourism entrepreneurs such as restaurateurs, leisure activities, or even sometimes other accommodation facilities) and close contacts (mainly family members) can benefit from the dissemination of information about the location and the quality level of their establishment. However, it was found that within social capital, interpersonal relationships tend to fill the gaps between the more formal relationships (network of professionals, internet).

One of the limitations of existing research on social capital in entrepreneurship is that it generally takes a cross-sectional perspective and ignore the changes that occur during the process of creation. Our contribution regarding this point has been to conduct a retrospective study that presents a detailed and careful analysis of the development of social capital during the set-up of the farm development process. The variations in the mobilization of different networks are illustrated in the Figure 6. It is important to note that some contacts sometimes act as multiplex contacts. A multiplex contact is a contact that plays several different roles or serves as a vehicle for several resources, not just those that are typical for its category. Thus, mobilizing a contact from one category can sometimes allow entrepreneurs to gather resources that would normally be channeled from another category of contacts.

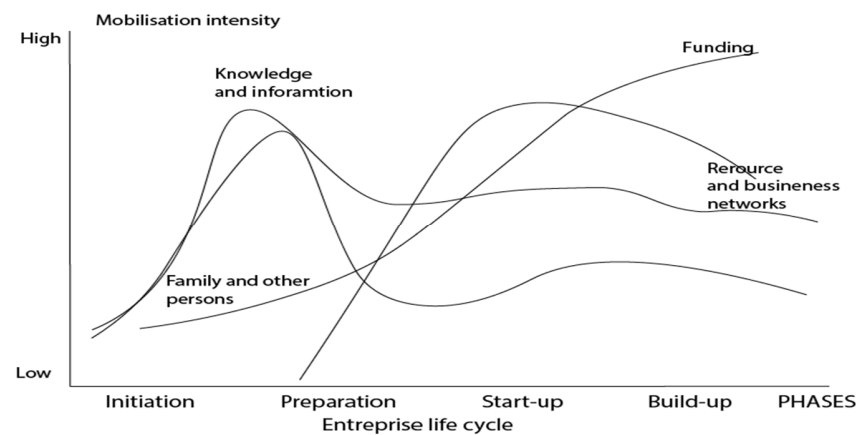


Figure 6. The social capital mobilized by each network throughout the four stages of the development process of a rural lodging.

Thus, this study suggests the steps of the establishment of an environment and a support structure for entrepreneurs to expand and diversify their network be taken before the development process of rural accommodation begins. This step allowed us to clarify the portfolio of social capital that an entrepreneur used the most during the business development process.

The analysis allowed us to see that the social relations of agritourism entrepreneurs play an important role in the process of developing a rural accommodation and in the dissemination of information. However, it prompts us to distinguish between different forms of social capital: the varieties relating to communication, knowledge, and information around the accommodation structure involving distant social capital and weak ties, and those relating to start-up and management. The mainstream of tourism activity occurs through relationships with government organizations and other local tourism entrepreneurs, which leads to stronger ties. The interviews also confirmed the role of social capital, and more specifically the role of strong local ties, on the strategic behavior of agritourism entrepreneurs.

Future research could extend our findings. It is important to test our results empirically in the context of agritourism to obtain a more complete picture of the dynamism of social capital in the process of agritourism business development. Further investigations are needed to understand demographic factors such as gender, and education. It could be interesting to activate the dynamism of social capital during the business development process to discover new relationships through it. Moreover, future studies could focus on exploring the roles of other variables with social capital, such as social motivation and the social identity of an entrepreneur, in the context of agritourism.

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Appendix A. Interview Guideline

Introduction to share capital

1. In your opinion, who was most important to you during this period in terms of information and acquiring knowledge?
2. Have you actively used your network to obtain information useful for your rural lodging development?

Network of opportunities

1. When did you think about starting a rural house for the first time? alone or with others?
2. How did you discover the possibilities of creating a rural lodge?
3. How have you used your experience in this process?
4. How did you obtain information about the existence of such an opportunity (from whom)?
5. When you saw that this opportunity was there, how do you continue the process?
6. Who have you been in contact with during this process?
7. How did they help you along the way?
8. How did you use the network that you had created during this period?
9. How did you look for relevant information on starting a rural house?
10. Whom did you contact?
11. How would you describe what your network looked like at that time?
12. Among the most important person during this period, how would you describe the relationship you had with him?

Support network

1. How important was the network after you decided to start a rural house?
2. Which new players did you have to contact during this period?
3. What was the most difficult during the creation phase?
4. Did you get help to solve these problems?
5. Who were the most important people during this period?
6. How did your network develop towards the completion of a rural lodge?

Resource network

1. How did you use the network to get the resources you needed?
2. Who did you collaborate with within this process?
3. Who were the most important people?
4. Did you need to get new contacts on the network to access the relevant resources?

Funding network

1. How did you finance rural lodging?
2. How did you use the network to obtain capital?
3. How important was the network to get the funds?

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