Communities of practice and value co-creation: the motivational engagement system of the Italian consortia

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Abstract: The research moves from the idea that there is a relationship between the motivation (engagement) to exchange knowledge in communities of practice, where the generation of knowledge is implemented in terms of solving common problems – and the value co-creation process planning along its three dimensions (social, economic and environmental). The aim was to investigate how the make-up of the motivational engagement system of the companies that allows to communities of practice to become an innovative process to reinforce relationships. We used a conceptual framework called CDI (Connection, Discussion and Influence), elaborated in previous studies, which has been tested in the protection consortia of the Italian agri-food sector. In these, the hypothesised virtuous circle among the CDI dimensions exists and is a driver to enhance their relational heritage through the knowledge exchange. The paper provides fundamental guidelines to enhance engagement in these virtual environments.

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Keywords: communities of practices; engagement; value co-creation process; agri-food sector; consortia; online communities; influence; discussion; connection, Italy.

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1 Introduction

Academics and practitioners consider the value creation as key to gain competitive advantage in the marketplace (Ostrom et al., 2010), and even the core purpose of economic exchange (Vargo et al., 2008). An interesting approach suggests that the value emerges when actors integrate and share resources with other actors (Gummesson and Mele, 2010; Lusch et al., 2010; Vargo and Lusch, 2011). Moreover it is influenced by the benefits and sacrifices perceived in the processes or outcomes of interaction (Grönroos, 2004). Previous studies have investigated the nature of collaborations and that of the resources exchanged by suggesting how both are fundamental in this process (Davies, 2009; Tuli et al., 2007). The key challenge is represented by the need to align the different objectives that emerge from the several perspectives involved in the process, so as to make collective knowledge and organisational routines a key element of the value creation in the network (Del Giudice and Maggioni, 2014; Del Giudice et al., 2013).

In this sense, the adoption of a participatory and systemic perspective is fundamental, where a relevant role can be assumed by knowledge sharing (Robinson et al., 2006) for its relevant effects in terms of reducing the environmental impact of the management processes and, at the same time, increasing the added value. Ignorance and lack of information (Usai et al., 2018), in particular for what concerns the accountability of environmental and social performance (Spangler et al., 2014), are the main barriers for the organisational change oriented to value co-creation (Lozano, 2012).

Today the exchange of knowledge is facilitated by web interactive tools (Imran et al., 2019; Letheren et al., 2019); these have a significant role in virtual community (Madupu and Cooley, 2010; Schau et al., 2009; De Valck et al., 2009; Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016; Park and Kim, 2014; Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014; Cai et al., 2020), intended as places where individuals interact because they share the same interest (Aksoy et al., 2013; Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010), exchanging information and knowledge (Gabisch and Gwebu, 2011; Brodie et al., 2013; Chiravuri, 2018; Chen et al., 2019; Bahl et al., 2019).

Therefore, we refer to those virtual communities that exist according to the intensity of the relationships that are activated among the members who share a common interest (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and in which the sharing of knowledge is implemented in terms of solving common problems (Wegner, 1998). In this virtual place people interact when they feel engaged (Ray et al., 2014), when they perceive intrinsic motivations (Baldus et al., 2015; Sukoco and Wu, 2010; McAlexander et al., 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004; Brodie et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the motivational system underlying the co-creation of value is largely unexplored.

To partially fill this gap, the paper explores the motivational engagement system of companies that allows communities of practice to become an innovative process to reinforce relationships, orienting them to the value co-creation process.

To this end, we use a conceptual framework proposed by Fait et al. (2019a) called CDI 'Connection-Discussion-Influence'. This model is based on three dimensions along which the motivational levers representing the main drivers for participation in a community oriented to the synergistic reinforcement of relationship can be formed.

The basic idea is that there must be a relationship between the motivations to exchange knowledge and the shared planning of value co-creation process along the three dimensions that characterise it – social, economic and environmental. The model is tested

in the agri-food sector, today called to adopt innovative strategies to enhance the offer's quality (Cillo et al., 2019; Fait et al., 2019a; Iaia et al., 2019).

The companies involved in the empirical analysis, conducted with the aim to verify the research hypotheses, joined a network – Agri-Food Protection Consortia – that are a clear example of creation and maintenance of a relational heritage oriented to the value co-creation in terms of the awareness of a territory, its products and its values (Maizza et al., 2015, 2019).

In fact, they represent a natural meeting place for knowledge, experiences and skills from which exchange can derive a synergistic competitive advantage.

2 Literature review

2.1 The value co-creation

The value co-creation is a complex concept for researchers interested in understanding its elements (Payne et al., 2008). It implies the presence and the contribution of all the parties involved in the business engagement (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008; Normann and Ramirez, 1993), as well as the mutual value creation (Ramaswamy, 2011). Value co-creation is not necessary about transactions, goods or money (Michel et al., 2008; Auh et al., 2019); it regards the integration of resources and the value they create during the exchange (Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Gummesson and Mele, 2010; Vargo and Lusch, 2008) through a direct interaction (e.g., Grönroos, 2011; Grönroos and Ravald, 2011). Such value in some cases comes up naturally (e.g., positive feelings related to some actions), and in the most other cases is specifically created (e.g., doing something to get something) (Grönroos, 2012). This shows that the value produced from the exchange could be different for each person (Vargo and Lusch, 2008), as it depends on the combination of several factors, such as circumstances and social background (Edvardsson et al., 2011) and specific purpose (Epp and Price, 2011). In fact, for Grönroos (2008, p.303) value for customers "means that after they have been assisted by a self-service process (cooking a meal or withdrawing money from an ATM) or a full-service process (eating out at a restaurant or withdrawing cash over the encounter in a bank) they are or feel better off than before".

In the management literature, authors said that companies can create profitable value when relationships develop conversation and exchange (Auh et al., 2007) and when they are solid (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). However, the term 'co-creation' highlights the importance of customers in the relationship with firms and so in the process of value creation, which comprises three more sub-processes (Grönroos, 2012):

- companies only support customers in their value creation, but acts alone
- consumers create value individually for themselves, combining accessible resources (Grönroos and Ravald, 2011)
- companies and consumers interact, converse and create value together for both adopting a co-creation approach (Grönroos, 2011).

The value co-creation is particularly interesting when assuming the service-dominant perspective, according to which value should not be analysed referring to customer and supplier distinctly, as largely discussed in the literature (Grönroos and Helle, 2010).

On the contrary, their connections are considered as "reciprocal promises of value, operating to and from suppliers and customers seeking an equitable exchange" (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006, pp.334–335). Moreover, in the service-dominant logical viewpoint, value is co-created when network structures are characterised by complexity and dynamicity (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Maglio and Spohrer, 2008). Thus, all network nodes look for relationships through which taking and providing resources (Cantù et al., 2012), demonstrating that network are able to engage even more actors able to create value by mean of interactions (Gummesson and Mele, 2010; Kothandaraman and Wilson, 2001; Lusch et al., 2010; Grewal et al., 2019).

2.2 The engagement of the online communities

Nowadays the online community phenomenon is even more discussed in different fields of studies (Li, 2004).

The online community or web community are defined as "an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact based on a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported or mediated by technology and guided by certain protocols and norms" (Porter and Donthu, 2008).

Web communities are, therefore, digital platforms that encourage collaborations, interactions (Kuem et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019) and knowledge sharing (McAfee, 2006). In this perspective, managerial studies emphasise the communicative dimension, defining a social aggregate that emerges from a network of relationships that is activated around a topic of common interest (Rheingold, 1993), a group of individuals who share common norms and policies and interact through the web (Preece, 2000).

In other words, the creation of communities derive from the need of socialisation (*relationship community*), and access to information of common interest (*community of interest*), or from the aim to satisfy both objectives (*learning community*).

This paper is focalised on communities of practice (Wenger et al., 2002), where groups of people share common practices (Aggarwal et al., 2006) and help each other solve problems (Pan and Leidner, 2003) in an informal environment. Community of practices are formed by knowledge, people, organisational processes, and infrastructure (Pan and Leidner, 2003), in which members are engaged in several initiatives, from problem-solving activities to knowledge sharing (Hew and Hara, 2006). In this manner, they are able to create a proper community's knowledge orientation (Pan and Leidner, 2003; Scarborough and Swan, 1999) based on a mutual engagement deriving from theoretical concepts and practical direct experiences.

Engagement is considered a mental state that stimulates individuals to adopt a pro-social behaviour whose effects are significant for themselves and for the group (Kahn, 1990). Patterson et al. (2006) found that the engagement is a psychological state which is identified in particular by a different degree of vigour, dedication, absorption and interaction with other individuals or with the company's brand.

In the technological perspective of online communities, engagement was considered an abstract concept, instead, it emerged as a relevant theoretical and empirical construct in other fields (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bakker et al., 2008; Kahn, 1990). In particular, online communities are able to increase the engagement of users in collaborating, promoting and purchasing (Algesheimer and Dholakia 2006, Ma and Agarwal, 2007; Brandtzæg and Heim, 2008, Lee et al., 2003).

Engagement permeates each aspect of communities and it is the reason why members feel part of the community, the reason they belong to it (Hafeez et al., 2018). Based on the Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) framework, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) studied user engagement in online communities and identified the main motivations for users to participate in online discussion forums. These reasons include attention to other consumers, social benefits, presence of a moderator who solves problems, self-improvement, and the possibility of expressing one's emotions.

Moreover, engagement is one of the elements that shapes the community of practices competences based on three elements (Wenger, 1998): mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger, 2000). In particular, studies show that the exchange of knowledge in communities of practice is stimulated mainly by intrinsic motivations (Osterloh and Frey, 2000).

3 Conceptual framework

3.1 Objectives of the research and hypothesis

The value co-creation process involves different actors, who, by the network, integrate resources and apply them through interaction (Gummesson and Mele, 2010; Kothandaraman and Wilson, 2001; Lusch et al., 2010). Some contributions took an interest in the systemic and synergistic effects of value co-creation (Lusch et al., 2010; Vargo et al., 2008) and have suggested that the interaction between companies is the primary mean for them to integrate their activities and resources, and the mechanism through which resource benefits flow among companies (Håkansson et al., 2009).

A driver that facilitates such interaction is the community of practices. These communities are formed by knowledge, people, organisational processes, and infrastructure (Pan and Leidner, 2003), in which members are engaged in several initiatives, from problem-solving activities to knowledge sharing (Hew and Hara, 2006). In the present study, the interaction regards the companies' motivations that characterise their engagement (Baldus et al., 2015; Sukoco and Wu, 2010; McAlexander et al., 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004; Brodie et al., 2013) in the value co-creation process. Then, it was guided by the following research question:

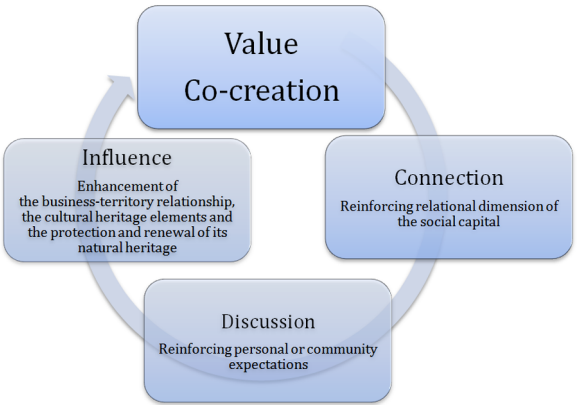
> *RQ: Which areas characterise the motivational engagement system of companies that allows to communities of practice to become an innovative process to reinforce the value co-creation process in the agri-food sector?*

The basic idea is founded on the existence of areas that active the relationship and create a link between the motivations to exchange knowledge and the value co-creation process. In this perspective, we adopt the framework –CDI model (Figure 1) – proposed in our recent study (Fait et al., 2019a), which has already allowed us to observe that in the agri-food sector the virtual community's motivational system is characterised by the engagement, which operates around three motivational dimensions, such as Connection, Discussion and Influence.

In the perspective of the reinforcement of value co-creation process, the Connection variable implies a relationship based on knowledge sharing and on the perception of the benefits of sharing (Baldus et al., 2015). The explanatory variables of the expected benefits could be referred to the relational dimension of the social capital, as they respond

to a specific type of norms – trust, reciprocity and solidarity – and to the identification process that involves members of a network (see Table 1).

Figure 1 The conceptual model (see online version for colours)



Source: Adapted from Fait et al. (2019a)

Table 1 Explanatory variables of Connection

Phase of the model	*Purpose*	*Explanatory variables*
Connection	Reinforcing the relational dimension of the social capital	Reinforcing trust for reducing internal conflicts
		Conveying and sharing values and traditions
		Operating according to the consortium's purposes
		Involving human resources with specific skills
		Reinforcing actors' sense of belonging
		Generating a network identity

Source: Adapted from Fait et al. (2019a)

Therefore, we consider that:

Hp1: The motivations that characterise the Connection leverage are able to influence the decision-making process behind knowledge sharing, oriented to reinforce value co-creation process.

The explanatory variables of Discussion (see Table 2) represent the interest of each member of the network to talk about a common topic (Baldus et al., 2015), when this can satisfy personal or community expectations (Zhang and Hiltz, 2003; Kolekofski and Heminger, 2003; Lesser, 2000) and generate a perceived advantage (Lin et al., 2009; Chen and Hung, 2010).

Therefore, we consider that:

Hp2: The motivations that characterise the Discussion leverage are able to influence the decision-making process behind knowledge sharing, oriented to reinforce value co-creation process.

The Influence is intended as the inclination of network's actors to take part and actively influence the value co-creation process, involving different factors and actors of territory. Hence, the explanatory variables (see Table 3) implies to enhance the business-territory relationship (Fait et al., 2019a), to enhance the cultural heritage elements and to protect and renewal of its natural heritage (Peters, 1997; Hall et al., 2000; Telfer, 2001; Siano, 2001; Hall and Mitchell, 2002; Siano et al., 2008; Bresciani et al., 2016; Scorrano et al., 2018).

Table 2 The explanatory variables of Discussion

Phase of model	*Purpose*	*Explanatory variables*
Discussion	Renforcing personal or community expectations	Enhancing the image of productions
		Generating social innovation
		Facilitating common strategies aimed at protecting productions
		Enhancing productions and sharing supply chain
		Creating useful services for members of network
		Generating an increase in the reputation of enterprises

Source: Adapted from Fait et al. (2019a)

Table 3 The explanatory variables of Influence

Phase of model	*Purpose*	*Explanatory variables*
Influence	Enhancement of the business-territory relationship and of the cultural heritage elements; protection and renewal of its natural heritage	Safeguarding terroir's value
		Regenerating territory's natural resources
		Safeguarding cultural heritage
		Enriching the landscape respecting its vocation
		Participating into a shared process of interventions designing
		Facilitating companies' productive capacity while respecting the territory

Source: Adapted from Fait et al. (2019a)

In the light of this scenario, we assume that:

Hp3: The motivations that characterise the Influence leverage are able to influence the decision-making process behind knowledge sharing, oriented to reinforce the value co-creation process.

4 Methodology

4.1 Sample

The conceptual framework described above has been tested in the agri-food sector, which is invested with a growing responsibility concerning the implementation of the

value co-creation process. In fact, the agri-food sector involves the typically environmental aspects related to terroir and its productions, as well as:

- the *social aspect*, referable to the social capital that traditionally characterises all companies which operate in it, and to the value of the territorial identity of its productions
- the *economic dimension*, inherent to the competitive advantage that it can generate not only for companies but also for the territory on which they operate.

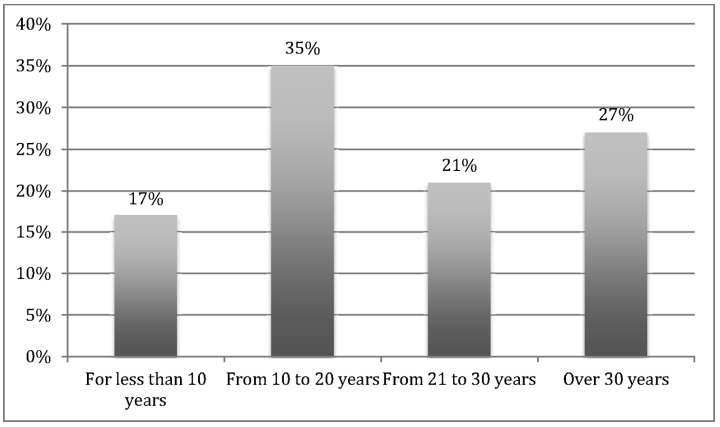
Within this sector, the survey focused on the companies belonging to the Agri-Food Protection Consortia. The protection consortia are network organisations whose purpose is represented by the search, in a socially responsible way, for the common good (being), that is, territory and typical products (Santoro et al., 2019; Caputo et al., 2019). A goal that requires a far-sighted vision, means taking care of the different actors, sharing knowledge and strategies in the name of the common good (Maizza et al., 2015; Scuotto et al., 2017; Ferreira et al., 2018). They are organisations in which it is important to reinforce the relationships, the trust, the sharing of value and knowledge.

The survey method for data collection was adopted (Singleton et al., 1999; De Leeuw, 2008) preparing a questionnaire, sent by e-mail in the period November–December 2018, to companies' directors of appropriately selected consortia. Our research interested the most important agri-food areas in the Italian economic context – wine production, ham production, dairy, olive oil and fruit farming. The 11 Consortia were identified considering the period of activity and the number of consortium's members.

As we carried out an exploratory research, conducted on a selected sample of companies, the technique of sampling of convenience was applied and a total number of 300 validly completed questionnaires were collected, considered and analysed.

Respondents were members in a consortium as follows: 35% from 10 to 20 years; 21% from 21 to 30 years; 17% for less than 10 years, and 27% for over 30 years (see Graph 1).

Graph 1 Years of membership in the consortium

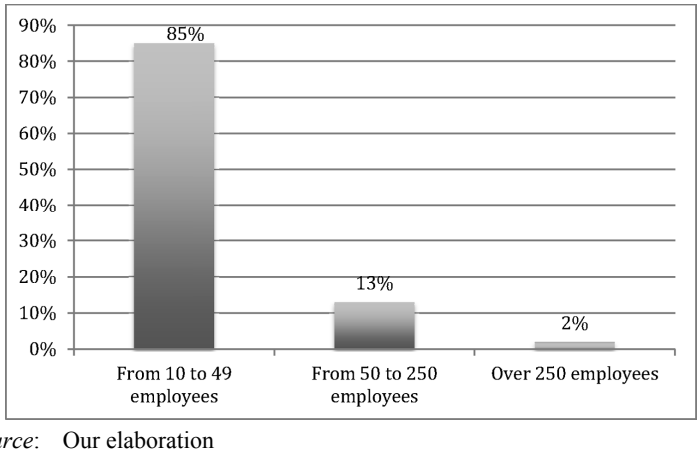


Source: Our elaboration

The 85% of respondents had from 10 to 49 employees, the 13% from 50 to 250 employees and 2% have over 250 employees (see Graph 2).

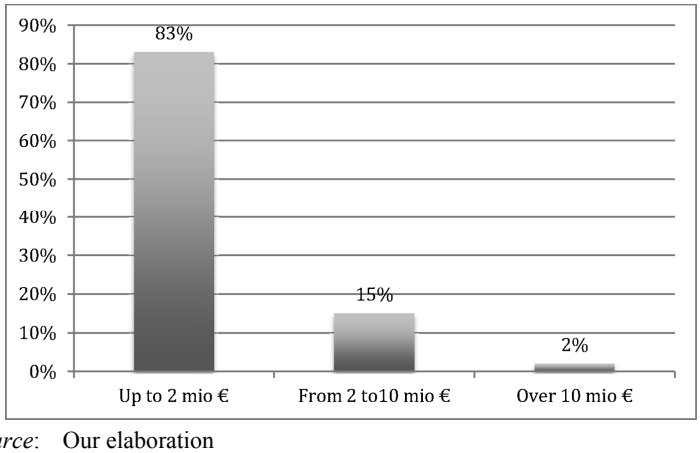
Additionally, 83% of the sample had a revenue of less than two million euros, 15% had a revenue from two millions to 10 million euros and 2% had a revenue of over 10 million euros (see Graph 3).

Graph 2 Employees



Source: Our elaboration

Graph 3 Revenues



Source: Our elaboration

4.2 Survey

The questionnaire was structured taking into account the three dimensions of the CDI model – *Connection*, *Discussion*, *Influence* – and preparing the questions so that respondents could express their judgement on a Likert scale (Likert, 1932) from 0 (not important) to 7 (very important). The empirical phase verified which areas that characterise the motivational engagement system of the companies allow to communities of practice become an innovative process to reinforce the value co-creation process in the agri-food sector.

To this end, to confirm the existence of the proposed structure with the model, a *confirmatory factor analysis* was applied, elaborated by SPSS (Stock and Watson,

2007; Bracalente et al., 2009). This technique allows, in fact, to observe whether the decision to participate in a web community oriented to reinforce indispensable relationships for value co-creation process is structured on all the items identifying the motivations or, rather, companies choose some items as guidelines of their behaviour. The results of the KMO test (0.564) and the Bartlett test are indicative of a correlation between the variables (p value > 0.05), confirming the sufficient acceptability of the factor analysis.

The analysis has extracted six elements that explain 66.56% of the variance (values of 60–70% considered acceptable in terms of information function) (see Table 4).

Table 4 Total variance explained

	Initial eigenvalues			*Loading sums of the extraction squares*			*Loading sums of the rotation squares*		
Factor loading	*Total %*	*Variance %*	*Cumulative %*	*Total %*	*Variance %*	*Cumulative %*	*Total %*	*Variance %*	*Cumulative %*
1	4401	24,251	24,251	4401	24,251	24,251	2372	13,175	13,175
2	1944	10,800	35,251	1944	10,800	35,251	2272	12,623	25,798
3	1697	9430	44,681	1697	9430	44,681	2008	11,155	36,953
4	1415	7863	52,543	1415	7863	52,543	1913	10,628	47,581
5	1294	7189	59,733	1294	7189	59,733	1731	9615	57,196
6	1230	6832	66,565	1230	6832	66,565	1686	9369	66,565

Extraction method: principal component analysis.

Rotation method: Varimax rotations with Kaiser normalisation.

a. Convergence for the rotation performed in 21 iterations.

Source: Our elaboration

5 Results

The interpretation of the factors took place through the rotated component matrix (see Table 5), which shows the correlations between the original variables and the components identified (factor loading). Each variable is associated with the factor with which it has the highest correlation and the factor is named considering what it has in common with the variables associated.

The first two components, respectively called Network identity and Sense of belonging, allow us to confirm the first hypothesis (Hp1). In fact, the variables that characterise them show that companies are motivated in sharing knowledge when benefits are represented by the participation of human resources with specific skills (0.708) that convey and share values and traditions (0.642), and facilitate the creation of a network identity (0.606). At the same time, sharing knowledge reinforce trust that reduce internal conflicts (0.730) and create harmony in the way actors behave in the consortium (0.635). Therefore, the motivations that characterise the Connection leverage are able to influence the decision-making process behind knowledge sharing, oriented to reinforce the value co-creation process because they reinforce the relational elements of the social capital and the actors' sense of belonging (0.775).

Table 5 Rotated component matrix

	Network identity	*Sense of belonging*	*Enhancement strategies*	*Production assets*	*Vocation of the territory*	*Common growth*
Items			*Factor loading*			
Conveying and sharing values and traditions	0.642					
Involving human resources with specific skills	0.708					
Generating network identity	0.606					
Reinforcing trust for reduce internal conflicts		0.730				
Operating according to the consortium's purposes		0.635				
Reinforcing actor's sense of belonging		0.775				
Enhancing the image of productions			0.731			
Generating social innovation			0.553			
Facilitating common strategies aimed at protecting productions			0.698			
Safeguarding terroir's value				0.768		
Safeguarding cultural heritage				0.796		
Facilitating companies' productive capacity while respecting the territory				0.573		
Regenerating Territory's natural resources					0.776	
Enriching landscape respecting its vocation					0.725	
Participating into a shared process of interventions designing					0.567	
Enhancing productions and share supply chain						0.792
Creating useful services for members of network						0.567
Generating increase in the reputation of enterprises						0.683

Extraction method: Analysis of the main components.

Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser standardisation.

a. Convergence for rotation performed in 12 iterations.

Source: Our elaboration

The availability of community actors to exchange knowledge – Discussion – is activated through topics that are indicative of personal or community expectations and the perceived advantages (Hp2). The components called Enhancement strategies and Common growth confirm the second hypothesis (Hp2). The first component indicates that the perceived expectations is linked to the possibility of generating an unique image of productions (0.731), to stimulate forms of social innovation (0.553) such as to facilitate common strategies aimed at protecting productions (0.698). Similarly, the variables Enhancing productions and share supply chain (0.792), Creating useful services for members of network (0.567) and Increasing the reputation of enterprises (0.683) suggest that actors of consortium share knowledge when they perceive the common growth as advantage.

The fourth and fifth components – Production assets and Vocation of the territory – are characterised by items that confirm the third hypothesis (Hp3). The explanatory variables suggest that the actors' actively influence concerns the enhancement of the business-territory relationship – Facilitating companies' productive capacity while respecting the territory (0.573), Participating into a shared process of interventions designing (0.567) – and the protection of the cultural heritage and natural heritage of territory – Safeguarding terroir's value (0.768), Safeguarding cultural heritage (0.796), Regenerating territory's natural resources (0.776) and Enriching landscape respecting its vocation (0.725).

6 Discussion, conclusions and managerial implications

The objective of this study was to observe the relationship between the motivations involved in the knowledge exchanging within an online community as well as the shared planning of the value co-creation. According to the literature that considers engagement as the key to an efficient and effective participation in these virtual environments (Ray et al., 2014), a model has been empirically tested (Fait et al., 2019a, 2019b) it has allowed identifying which areas can be considered relevant for a constant and active engagement of the online community's members, when this is created with the purpose of planning the value co-creation of the companies.

The decision to test it within the companies participating in the Agri-Food Protection Consortia is justified by the particular type of network they represent, characterised by the presence of a relational heritage built through the dissemination of productive and cultural knowledge, and the sharing of common vision, mission, organisational, and territorial values (Maizza et al., 2015). An area, therefore, suitable to evaluate the motivational structure underlying the exchange of knowledge, oriented to the value co-creation planning. The confirmatory factor analysis shows that the first phase of knowledge sharing – Connection – into virtual community is characterised by a motivational engagement system based on the strengthening of the relational elements of social capital and on the identification process that involves network's members. The development of Connection dimension can represent a driver to increase ability of subjects to act together, effectively, based on the same conception of the project.

Moreover, results confirm that the advantage connected with the knowledge exchange about a common topic – *Discussion* – lies in the possibility to satisfy personal or community expectations. The perception of the potential advantage derivable from the exchange of knowledge lies, in fact, in the possibility of defining common strategies

aimed at enhancing enterprises, to create a univocal image of its productions, and to generate social innovation; without neglecting the objective of maintaining a high standard of production and supply chain, of creating useful services for the community members that will generate an increase in the reputation of its enterprises. It is through the coordination between personal and community expectations that value co-creation process can be planned as the capacity to produce and maintain within the community – understood as a network of enterprises that share values and goals – the maximum of the possible added value.

Lastly, the motivational engagement is characterised by the awareness that the reinforcement of relationship by knowledge sharing process can influence on the enhancement of the business-territory relationship, on the protection and renewal cultural heritage elements and on natural heritage on which they operate. The paper, therefore, helps to confirm that the engagement is the key to active participation in this unique socio-technical environment (Ray et al., 2014), especially when the goal of sharing knowledge is as specific as the value co-creation process is.

The paper participates in the literature discussion, talking about the importance of engagement in virtual communities. The nature of explicative variables of the different dimensions suggests that exists a relationship between them. The sharing is activated by the strengthening of the relational elements of social capital that reinforce the will to stand in relation (Connection) and facilitate the identification process involving members of a network and allows satisfy personal or community expectations (Discussion). At the same time, the strengthening of identity makes well aware the companies that their path of a common growth as this can influence territory (Influence). Consequently, these reflections suggest that the on line communities must become places for sharing a common project that takes into consideration social-economic and environmental objectives and not simply professional interests (Chiu et al., 2006; Wasko and Faraj, 2005), specific (Ma and Agarwal, 2007) or general topics (Bateman et al., 2011).

In this perspective, it is possible to create a virtuous circle well defined, based on the orientation of the knowledge sharing towards strategic objectives of value co-creation appropriately shared. The improvement of the systemic relationships generates attractiveness, management improvement and attracts other companies potentially aggregable.

7 Future directions and limitations

Our study focused mainly on the analysis of the motivational system that induces the actors of a network to exchange knowledge when it is oriented towards the design of value co-creation. In other words, we wanted to analyse the substrate on which a knowledge sharing strategy should be formed so that it can become a driver of value creation. The study has some limitations. The first is that the conclusive data on the value co-creation process cannot be generalised. However, the results provide important reflections for the networks operating in the agri-food context, today called to intervene in the planning of a process of value co-creation.

A second limitation is represented by the fact that the interviewees do not participate in a virtual community but have been asked only if they are potentially interested in participating to it, and the importance they give to specific motivations. Therefore, a possible development of work could be to focus on a sample of companies that actually

participate in these types of operations. Lastly, a further limitation is represented by not having considered the relationship that exists between participation in the creation of value and appropriation of it, which undoubtedly represents an important layer for future research.

The study, however, showed that knowledge sharing is perceived as relevant for the shared design of value and that this process must take place on several levels and perspectives, which could be further investigated in this perspective. In fact, the motivational system that derives from the model applied demonstrates that the actors of a consortium are aware of the existence of three dimensions of relationships oriented towards the creation of value. They are willing to engage in the exchange of knowledge if this strengthens the relational elements – trust, identification, sharing of norms, etc. – and if the Discussion areas are shared with a view to an individual or community benefit. At the same time they perceive the importance that the exchange of knowledge assumes with reference to factors external to the relations between companies such as relations with the territory and the protection of cultural and natural heritage. Ultimately, the study suggests some guidelines, at least valid for the agri-food sector, for the design of virtual communities. The basic logic is that the pro-social behaviour of the members must be oriented towards shared planning on several levels – economic-social and environmental –, such as to generate a strengthening of identity with the community (Quaglione et al., 2020), the creation of a culture knowledge sharing aimed at the generation of systemic services, the self-feeding of knowledge through a virtuous circle created by it.

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