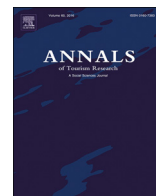


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The overembeddedness impact on tourism cooperation

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ABSTRACT

According to the concept of social embeddedness economic decisions are determined by actors' embeddedness in social relations. Too high level of this embeddedness leads to so-called 'over-embeddedness effect' having negative consequences for business activity. The aim of the paper is to identify the negative consequences of social embeddedness for business cooperation among entrepreneurs in a tourist destination. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 48 entities associated in the Wisła Tourism Organization in Wisła – a tourist destination in Poland. As a result, numerous negative consequences of actors' social embeddedness for cooperation were identified. These are: limiting the innovativeness of cooperative activities, less adaptive abilities, limiting economic rationality of partners' decisions, nepotism, interpersonal conflicts and being vulnerable to a partner's opportunist behavior.

Introduction

The opening of economics to other disciplines, which had begun in the 1980's, has started new trends in research within this discipline. One of them is the establishment of New Economic Sociology (NES), based on the achievements of both sociologists and economists. The core concept of NES is the so-called social embeddedness, coined by Mark Granovetter (1985). This author criticized the classic *homo-oeconomicus* model, as well as the *homo-sociologicus* model proposed by sociologists. He claimed that individuals do not act solely through the selfish desire to maximize their own usefulness (neglecting such elements of social context as, for example, values, customs or social norms), nor are they completely and passively subordinated to them. Granovetter recognized that economic goals are most often accompanied by non-economic objectives related to a given social context. In his opinion, all economic activities are embedded in the network of social (interpersonal) relations of the individuals undertaking them (Granovetter, 1985, 2005). The author also claims that economic relations can be used to build social (personal) relations. In his and other authors' (e.g. Brennecke, Schierjott, & Rank, 2016) opinion, market transactions and social relations are intertwined. Thus, analyzing economic models without relating to social factors (and more specifically social relationships) makes economic analysis incomplete and irrelevant.

In previous literature it is emphasized that social relations provide access to key resources, allow for quick diffusion of these resources between partners and enable reduction of transaction costs, e.g. searching for a partner or reaching an agreement in court (Arribas, Hernández, & Vila, 2013; Czernek-Marszałek, 2020; Garcia-Pont & Nohria, 2002; Gulati, 1995; Scuotto, Del Giudice, & Carayannis, 2017). However, social embeddedness can affect economic results also in a negative way (Chowdhury, Gruber, & Zolkiewski, 2016; Tähtinen & Blois, 2011). While the positive effects of social embeddedness have been relatively more often discussed in the literature, the negative effects (so-called actor's social overembeddedness) are rarely the subject of in-depth considerations (Mitrega & Zolkiewski, 2012). This concerns both more general scientific literature as well as tourism literature.

Moreover, assuming that all decisions and actions taken by economic entities are embedded in the network of their social relationships, one can presume that social embeddedness also plays a key role in the increasingly important collaborative processes

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taking place in various sectors of the economy. One of these sectors is tourism (Gursoy et al., 2015). The importance of social embeddedness in business cooperation among tourist entrepreneurs can be considered as high, since the sector is dominated by micro, small and medium-sized enterprises located close to each other, and represented by owners who are members of local communities and are connected by social ties. What's more, in order to provide tourists with a comprehensive, competitive offer for a tourist destination, tourist entrepreneurs operating in the destination have to cooperate with one another (Baggio, 2011).

The aim of the paper is to identify the negative consequences of social embeddedness (i.e. its dark sides) for business cooperation among entrepreneurs in the tourism sector (in particular in a tourist destination). To achieve this aim, the results of research conducted in Wisła – a tourist destination in the south of Poland – are presented. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 48 entities associated in the Wisła Tourist Organization aimed at promoting Wisła as an attractive tourist destination.

The article consists of four parts preceded by an introduction and ending with conclusions. The first part presents the effects of the dark sides of social embeddedness on business activity identified in the literature so far. The second part presents the research methodology. The next part is devoted to presentation of the results of empirical research, i.e. identification of the negative consequences of social embeddedness in cooperation among tourist entrepreneurs. In the fourth part, the author discusses the results of previous research in the context of own research, and presents the paper's contribution to the subject.

Theoretical background

Social embeddedness is not clearly understood or defined in the literature. In general, it is perceived as the nature, depth and degree of bond of a given entity with the environment (social community). In this work, it is understood as an actor's embeddedness in interpersonal relationships – i.e. at the micro level (interpersonal relationships with another entity) and the *meso* level (in a wider network of social relations existing in a given area e.g. in municipalities and/or in the industry).

Social embeddedness conceptualization is usually done on the basis of a comparison between socially embedded relations and the opposite type (Dubini & Aldrich, 1991). Such a distinction was made by Granovetter (1973) who defined the so-called strong and weak ties. The strong ties are perceived as socially embedded relations, while their strength is determined by a combination of factors such as time, reciprocity (mutual services), emotional intensity and proximity (trust) (Granovetter, 1973). The opposite to strong ties are so-called weak ties, which can be characterized as one-off, *ad hoc*, non-emotional relationships with no trust or reciprocity (Uzzi, 1997). They are aimed at conducting market transactions and generating individual economic profit. The aforementioned constitutive elements of social embeddedness regulate, according to Uzzi (1997), the mutual expectations and behavior of the partners, resulting in the parties achieving economic benefits.

However, social embeddedness can also lead to negative consequences. The situation where it leads to more problems than benefits is termed the 'overembeddedness effect'. In the case of business cooperation, this can occur at the level of both bilateral relationships (Gulati, 1995) – i.e. dyad cooperation – as well as in multilateral/network relationships (Hagedoorn & Frankort, 2008) – cooperation with more than one partner. It is reflected in situations where there are limited or no benefits that entities can obtain from cooperation, or where – with the duration or development of social ties – various types of threats, costs or problems between partners, outweighing benefits, appear.

Some, though still not many, empirical studies have paid attention to these negative consequences of social embeddedness. The dark sides of social relationships (strong ties) are presented by the author of the social embeddedness concept himself – Mark Granovetter. However, he does not identify them explicitly, but points to the advantages of the opposite type of relationship – that is the weak ties. The result of these advantages is the so-called 'strength of weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973). Namely, Granovetter (1973) claims that weak ties play the role of bridges – enabling contact between partners who would otherwise never contact each other. Therefore, the strength of weak ties lies in the wide potential diffusion of information and resources in the network.

The dark sides of social embeddedness are reflected therefore by too dense a relationship structure, and by information circulating only among entities bound by strong ties (Uzzi, 1996, 1997). This reduces the innovation and development opportunities of a given entity, leading to its passivity. Uzzi and other authors claim that such a network closes in on itself and can cut off sources of information from the outside (Burt, 1992; Grabher, 1993; Obukhova and Zhang, 2017).

According to Jack, Dodd, and Anderson (2008), excessive reliance on social ties may limit the diversity of enterprise resources. Birley (1985) came to similar conclusions. Based on studies in St. Joseph County, he argued that entrepreneurs excessively using social ties were unaware of the resources available to them outside their network of personal relationships with family and friends. Therefore, they did not use specialized institutions that could offer them objective advice or provide financial support (e.g. leasing). Moreover, if based mostly on social relationships, entrepreneurs only followed known models of running a business – they operated on a small scale (locally), ran small enterprises, employed local citizens, etc. They were not aware of other solutions (e.g. hiring employees according to the rules of the free job market).

Meanwhile, remaining closed to resources coming from the outside, in addition to a reduction in innovativeness, also generates opportunity costs. Here one should consider the lost profits that the entrepreneur would be able to generate by entering into a relationship with another, previously marginalized entity (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1996, 1997).

Moreover, Grabher (1993), Håkansson and Snehota (1998), Mizruchi and Stearns (2001) or Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) argue that an enterprise which is too deeply socially embedded is less adaptable, as it adjusts its relationship with regard to specific, known entities. Furthermore, conducting transactions only or mainly with these entities lowers the quality of information and hinders access to new opportunities.

An additional negative consequence of social embeddedness is, according to Uzzi (1997), the throttling of effective entrepreneurial activities when the social aspects of relationships replace economic rationality (maximizing own business profits in the

short term). [Johannisson and Mønsted \(1997\)](#), for example, indicate that social relationships can somehow enforce compliance by the parties or require them to fulfill certain expectations of hidden rules, which may then limit business activity and creativity in this activity. As an example, they indicate that dismissing family members from work can lead to tension and conflict in the enterprise. It is indicated that, in extreme cases, the sense of obligation and friendship between the parties conducting the transaction can be so high that despite its own losses, the company can support other entities in the given environment ([Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993](#); [Tähtinen & Blois, 2011](#); [Uzzi, 1997](#)). The negative role of socially embedded relationships based on strong loyalty, which sometimes leads to negative phenomena such as nepotism or socially harmful activities, is also stressed by [Podgórecki \(1998\)](#). He calls communities characterized by the occurrence of such phenomena as ‘dirty communities’.

In addition, the development and maintenance of strong ties can be associated with high costs in the form of time and resource allocation ([Larson, 1992](#); [Obukhova & Zhang, 2017](#)). Enterprises should therefore invest in the development of this type of relationship only when there is a high moral hazard. In its absence, according to this author, there is no justification for such an investment.

The next negative consequence of social embeddedness is the high risk of unforeseen changes in the company resulting from a strong dependence on a partner with whom the actor has social ties ([Garcia-Pont & Nohria, 2002](#); [Uzzi, 1997](#)). If for some reason this partner breaks off the relationship, then the entities may have temporary problems in their day-to-day operations.

There may also be additional costs related to maintaining relationships with other partners that are important for the company's activity. Therefore, there is a negative domino effect, which directly or indirectly affects the situation of a given entity and its cooperators. In an extreme situation, when a given company collapses, partners linked to it via social ties may also have a problem remaining on the market. Therefore, according to [Uzzi \(1997\)](#), social ties work well in stable situations, but not in situations with a high degree of uncertainty.

Another disadvantage of social relationships is the fact that interpersonal conflicts, quarrels and negative emotions may grow between partners connected via this type of relationship (e.g. when one of the entities fails to meet the other's expectations). According to [Waluszewski and Håkansson \(2006\)](#), entrepreneurs do not behave according to the *homo oeconomicus* model, and emotions play a key role in their approach towards partners with whom they cooperate. According to [Tähtinen and Blois \(2011\)](#), actors feel strong negative emotions such as humiliation, anger and frustration in problematic relations, which results in significant consequences for the permanence of these relationships, including the breaking of ties. The reason for such conflicts may also be the ‘burning out’ of the partners – cooperation lasting too long, and weariness with maintaining strong mutual social bonds. This lowers the economic efficiency of actions undertaken by these actors ([Anderson & Jap, 2005](#); [Tähtinen & Blois, 2011](#)).

Moreover, social relationships based on trust make individuals more vulnerable to opportunistic actions ([Chowdhury et al., 2016](#)). The literature indicates that opportunism may take an active or passive form ([Mitrega & Zolkiewski, 2012](#); [Wathne & Heide, 2000](#)). The former is when a company uses its strength in relation to a partner to force him/her to take certain actions. The latter consists of a partner's worse negotiating position, or less effort made by one or a few of them in relation to the others. Although enterprises can generally tolerate passive opportunism and ‘lighter’ forms of opportunistic behavior, over time even this form of opportunism significantly limits satisfaction from maintaining a given relationship ([Seggie, Griffith, & Jap, 2013](#)).

The overview of negative consequences of social embeddedness identified so far in the literature is presented in [Table 1](#), which is the conceptual framework for this paper. It will constitute a starting point for research on the negative impact of social embeddedness on cooperation in the tourism sector.

Study methods

The research in the paper follows the interpretative research paradigm. It means that it is based on the assumption that social reality is not objective and it is shaped by human experiences together with a social context in which they operate (ontology). This entails the researcher epistemological position, according to which the reality should be studied within the social context by presenting subjective opinions and interpretations of interviewees creating it.

Therefore a qualitative research was used. This kind of research allows to identify and describe new concepts, categories or relations, which is particularly useful when there is no theory or the existing one is not sufficient to explain a particular issue ([Graebner, Martin, & Roundy, 2012](#)). A case study method which serves to clarify, deepen and illustrate a phenomenon ([Siggelkow, 2007](#)) and to present it in its specific context and from different perspectives e.g. different interviewees was used ([Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007](#)). In this research, the case study method was used mainly to deepen knowledge on and illustrate the dark side of social embeddedness in business cooperation. To achieve this aim, the Wisła Tourist Organization, operating in the Wisła municipality in the south of Poland, was chosen for the case study.

This choice was purposeful for several reasons. Firstly, the Wisła Tourist Organization is located in Wisła – a well-known tourist destination in Poland. The place is a popular mountain destination with many attractions, based on active tourism (mainly skiing). Moreover, Wisła is a relatively small town (about 11 thousand citizens) where a lot of entrepreneurs know each other and where – because of historical reasons – exists a strong sense of local identity. This is an important issue regarding actors' social embeddedness.

Secondly, the organization, established in 2008, has some years of experience in inter-organizational cooperation aimed at promoting the destination. It is known as an active and popular Destination Marketing Organization in the south of Poland because for the last ten years the organization has conducted a range of activities (including workshops and seminars for its members) to encourage tourists to visit Wisła and the whole region. The organization's members can be perceived as the most engaged tourist entrepreneurs in Wisła, and also the most engaged in different types of business cooperation in the municipality. What is important regarding the aim of the paper – many of them – about 50% - had Wisła origin and were residents of this municipality. This allowed to

Table 1
Negative consequences of social embeddedness for business activity.

Type	Characteristics	Author
Lower level of innovativeness	Remaining closed to resources (information, innovation, capital, etc.) and entities from the outside, which causes lack of diversity, reducing the inflow and use of new ideas – lack of ‘fresh look’ and so-called ‘collective blindness’	Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 1992; Uzzi, 1996, 1997; Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000; Mitrega and Zolkiewski, 2012
Lower adaptability	Adaptation to familiar partners resulting in lower adaptability	Grabher, 1993; Mizruchi & Stearns, 2001; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Håkansson & Snehota, 1998.
Bearing alternative costs	Loss of opportunities, e.g. for introducing a new product, lowering prices, etc. thanks to doing a business with unknown partner	Uzzi, 1996, 1997; Granovetter, 1985
Limiting economic efficiency	Suppression of economically effective activities, including entrepreneurship, due to the replacement of economic rationality with loyalty – the desire to fulfill expectations or abide by hidden rules;	Uzzi, 1997; Mizruchi & Stearns, 2001; Pages & Garmise, 2003; Anderson & Jap, 2005; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008
Negative phenomena, e.g. nepotism	The desire to meet expectations towards the other party leading to nepotism	Podgórecki, 1998; Jack et al., 2008;
High costs associated with the development and maintenance of strong ties	Costs of capital employed, time, engagement and other resources etc.	Larson, 1992; Jack et al., 2008; Obukhova & Zhang, 2017
The costs of breaking existing strong ties (domino effect)	High risk and costs of unforeseen changes in the enterprise or partner organization resulting from strong dependence on the partner (e.g. adaptation costs and costs related to looking for a new partner)	Uzzi, 1997; Garcia-Pont & Nohria, 2002; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993
Interpersonal conflicts	Quarrels or negative emotions (e.g. anger, humiliation) caused by being tired of relationship and/or better knowledge about the partner and his/her faults	Uzzi, 1997; Waluszewski & Håkansson, 2006; Tähtinen & Blois, 2011; Anderson & Jap, 2005; Tähtinen & Halinen, 2002; Holmlund-Rytkönen & Strandvik, 2005
Greater susceptibility to opportunistic activities of partner(s)	Ties based on trust increasing the susceptibility of entities to opportunistic activities (fraud); the more trust in a partner, the greater the potential benefit of his/her opportunism (active or passive)	Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Granovetter, 1973; Chowdhury et al., 2016; Seggie et al., 2013; Wathne & Heide, 2000; Mitrega and Zolkiewski, 2012

Source: own elaboration.

assume that, as experienced collaborators, socially embedded in local community, they will be appropriate informants in research on the dark side of social embeddedness in tourist business cooperation.

Thirdly, thanks to previous longitudinal research in this area, the researcher had knowledge about the context of the establishment and development of the Wisła Tourist Organization and about the process of tourism development in Wisła. This knowledge allowed for better access to interviewees and a better understanding of the issues analyzed.

Data was collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with 48 members of the Wisła Tourist Organization (which was around 90% of the formal members of the organization at that time; 7 entities did not agree to take part in the research, although a few attempts were made by the researcher to convince them to participate in the research). In order to facilitate access to the interviewees, the help of one informant was used – it was a person working in the organization (it's secretary) with whom the interview was conducted first, asking for passing information to all members of the organization that the researcher is going to contact with them in order to conduct the research. This significantly facilitated access to the interviewees and made the researcher more credible.

The interviewees were owners or managers of companies offering: accommodation, transport, gastronomy, tourist attractions and other services connected to the tourism sector in a direct or indirect way. They were people responsible in their firms for cooperation with other companies in Wisła or the region. The Wisła municipal authorities were also interviewed since they were engaged in the Wisła Tourist Organization as a participant and an important board member.

The decision tree on Fig. 1 clarifies a process of choosing interviewees to the research. As can be seen it was based on three main attributes:

1. Official membership in Wisła Tourist Organization;
2. Consent to participate in the study;
3. Being an owner or manager of a chosen entity having knowledge on business cooperation with other entities.

With the use of semi-structured interviewees interlocutors were asked questions about their activity in the Wisła Tourist

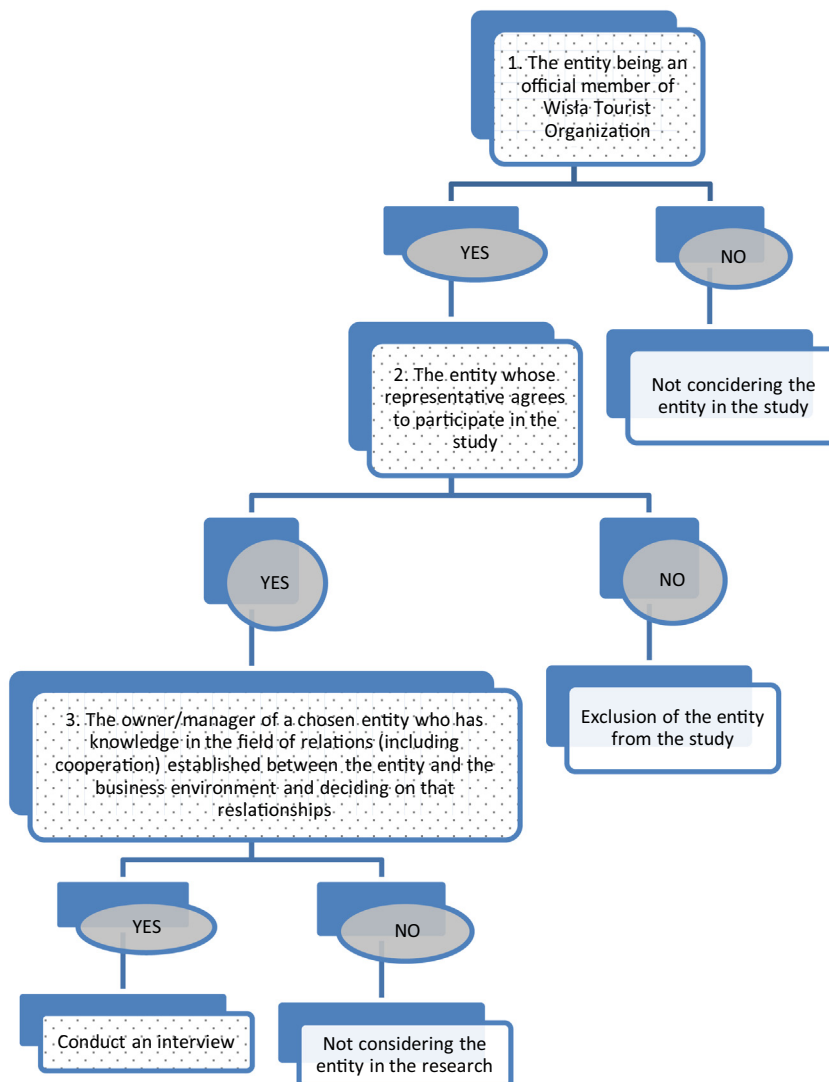


Fig. 1. Decision tree presenting the process of selecting interviewees for the research.

Organization and other types of business cooperation with other organization's members. Moreover, they were asked about their social relationships with their business partners – if those relationships existed and if yes how they had influenced their decision on establishing business cooperation (i.e. starting bilateral business cooperation or becoming a member of a partnership organization), its process and results. Each time interviewees presented the context of those relationships – the history and process of building, their results, etc.

After being conducted, the interviews were immediately transcribed and analyzed. Qualitative data analysis consisted of the following activities (Miles & Huberman, 1994):

- Data reduction – transcribing all interviews (including digressions) and creating case cards for all 48 interviewees, then coding the whole material,
- Data display – initial codes (negative consequences of social embeddedness identified in the literature – the categories from Table 1) were particularized and ordered,
- Data verification – data obtained through the empirical research was interpreted with the use of literature concepts and theories.

The researcher started with deduction – using the potential dark sides of social embeddedness identified earlier in the literature. Next, these codes were particularized inductively – based on the research results – regarding the research context, i.e. business cooperation in the tourism sector. To code interviews, the Atlas.ti v.7.0 qualitative data research software was used. Interview transcription allowed quotes to be added to the text to scientifically validate the analysis.

Moreover, to deepen knowledge about the Wisła Tourist Organization and then to deepen the conclusions of the research, in

Table 2
Criteria of the research evaluation.

No.	Criteria of qualitative research evaluation	The meaning of the criterion	Activities taken
1.	Credibility	Enables presenting a real picture of the phenomenon under investigation – i.e. overembeddedness effect ('dark side' of social embeddedness)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A familiarity with the Wisła local context ensured by using one informant having knowledge about the Wisła Tourist Organization, local community and its specificity; ● Organizing meetings in places proposed by interviewees, thus assuring them conditions to speak freely; ● Prolonged engagement and persistent observation of the situation in Wisła – data collected iteratively; previous longitudinal research in this area, ● Presenting a thick description of the phenomenon (i.e. overembeddedness) through collection and detailed analysis of field notes and full transcriptions (along with any digressions).
2.	Transferability	Possibility of formulating some recommendations for other places	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Providing information about the context in Wisła and indication of how research findings may be useful in other tourist destinations
3.	Dependability	To increase the possibility of conducting a similar study in the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A detailed protocol was set up, ● Creating and checking: full transcripts, definitions of codes and their applications, ● Documenting all procedures
4.	Confirmability	To demonstrate that findings emerged from the data, not own researcher's predisposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Using triangulation of methods (interview, organization's documents – e.g. minutes from meetings, and field notes analysis) (Mason, 1996) ● Triangulation of informants (Silverman, 2008), i.e. interviewing different types of private entrepreneurs and local authorities, possibly having different perception on the analyzed issue; ● Presenting some limitations of the study (see conclusion section) and an in-depth methodological description in order to scrutinize the research results

addition to the use of interviews and field notes, the organization's materials – brochures, folders, and meeting minutes were also analyzed.

Finally, in order to increase the trustworthiness of the research, it was decided to take certain steps in order to fulfill four criteria – i.e. credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability – used for qualitative research evaluation Guba (1981). Those criteria, together with their meaning and activities assigned to them, are presented in Table 2.

Findings

Limiting innovativeness of cooperative activities

The research identified a number of negative consequences of social embeddedness for cooperation among the researched entities.

The first group were factors related to the limitation of innovativeness in cooperative activities. As previous research suggest – closing to new resources leads the lack of fresh perspective on new, previously unknown phenomena or possibilities (Uzzi, 1996, 1997; Mitrega and Zolkiewski, 2012).

The research has shown that too strong social embeddedness, characteristic of entrepreneurs in Wisła, hindered starting cooperation with and by actors who were not socially embedded in the local community. This led, inter alia, to a reduction in inflow and the use of new ideas coming from such 'outside' entrepreneurs. For example, one entrepreneur who had lived for many years in Japan and had innovative ideas, regarding tourism development, suggested the introduction of many changes in Wisła. Ultimately, the Wisła Tourist Organization authorities did not accept them, as they considered them as 'too detached from reality'. This is visible in the words of one of the organization's representatives:

'There was a gentleman who developed the program. The program was cool, but in order to enter it, we would have had to make him mayor of Wisła [laugh]. This is also an interesting man (...). This man lived half a year in Poland and six months in Japan. This is a person who has been abroad for such a long time that he has some other idea about reality, and the Polish reality is completely different (...). It cannot be that we enter a completely new [collaborative] program in the middle of the year' (Interviewee no. 39).

At the same time, alongside the passive attitudes towards cooperation presented by many socially embedded Wisła inhabitants, the interlocutors emphasized the high activity of some entrepreneurs originally coming from the outside and staying only a few years in Wisła. They emphasized their high commitment in the organization, reflected, for example, in active participation in its meetings:

'It seems to me that ... these [active members] were mainly people who run their business somewhere here, but they are not from Wisła (...). And those people who came here were very skeptical, and said: 'what will we get from this, and why should we do it?'. And that's how it

was. It [the engagement in organization's meetings] alone speaks of how these local entrepreneurs are interested in these activities" (Interviewee no. 38).

Remaining closed to outside (not socially embedded) entrepreneurs meant that Wisła entrepreneurs themselves limited the opportunity to learn from them and implement alternative ways of running activities. This, in turn, further lowered the innovativeness of cooperative activities, making cooperation more difficult. This unwillingness is reflected in the words of an official in Wisła, who had the opportunity to cooperate with many entrepreneurs – Wisła natives and people originally coming from the outside:

Interviewee: "There are people – Wisła Tourist Organization members – who remind other people that they are not from here, they have fewer rights to speak, to publish even some leaflets, to say how it used to be. Because these [not socially embedded entrepreneurs] are people who, for example, want to expand their offer, issue some folders, leaflets, describe something, look for different things, learn, and really you have to appreciate them for having the will to learn about our history, our culture. Because our people don't want to know this. They don't know a lot and what they know is the 'best' because they are all simply 'infallible'. This is the point of pointing out errors (...). And it is also the case that if you are successful, there is jealousy, and you really can see this jealousy".

Researcher: 'Because our [Wisła natives] should succeed'.

Interviewee: 'Yes. And why didn't he succeed? Because he sits around and does nothing. This is also what it is like' (Interviewee no. 47).

The research has shown, therefore, that overembeddedness of some Wisła entrepreneurs led to a lack of a 'fresh view' on local tourism development. This was manifested by so-called 'collective blindness' (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), negatively affecting cooperation with actors from the outside and discouraging innovative actions. The owner of one of the guesthouses, coming from outside Wisła, described her impressions after a meeting of Wisła Tourist Organization members being mostly local citizens:

"The involvement, also at this meeting, it seems to me, was quite weak (...). And rather it was on the basis of complaining about the local government and some shortcomings, than ideas, what to do to create more benefits' (Interviewee no. 26)

Lower adaptation abilities of partners and partner organizations

Another negative consequence of social embeddedness according to the previous literature (Håkansson & Snehota, 1998; Mizruchi & Stearns, 2001) was the lower adaptation abilities caused by adjusting to known, familiar partners. This was also a dark side of social embeddedness identified in this empirical research. It generated problems with continuing cooperation, including the costs associated with the breakdown of existing social ties and the necessity to find a new partner. An employee of one of the accommodation facilities in Wisła described this situation as follows:

'I was always surprised that this guy wouldn't come to talk to me. I tried, but he is pretty difficult. I didn't offer food and he has a bar opposite, so it just begs for us to [cooperate].. I worked with this place when it was called [previous name of restaurant] until the owner was killed, and his wife sold it and now it is [current company name]. As [previous company name] there was great cooperation between us – sometimes people stayed with us, his family, I sent, encouraged or even pressed guests to eat there, it was mutual cooperation' (Interviewee no. 33).

Limiting the economic rationality of partners' decisions

The research also showed that actors bound by social ties often made decisions based on mutual loyalty instead of economic rationality, i.e. fast maximization of one's own interest. As some previous research has shown (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Mizruchi & Stearns, 2001; Uzzi, 1997) this can reduce the effectiveness of cooperative activities and negatively affects the functioning of the enterprises involved.

One of the interviewees – the owner of a guest house – emphasized that the result is the inability to make decisions that are optimal from an economic point of view:

"They [socially embedded entrepreneurs] are entangled. Here, everybody knows you, so later somebody asks you for something: "get to work here, and get something done". Well, then it's like making a chair where every leg wobbles' (Interviewee no. 40).

Some of the interviewees emphasized that their too strong commitment to cooperation (time, energy and capital devoted to cooperation), due to their willingness to fulfill obligations to other people with whom they maintained social relationships, negatively affected the functioning of their own enterprises, their personal life, and thus could discourage cooperation in the future:

'Natasza was also in the [Wisła Tourist Organization] board from the very beginning. Then we managed to get away a bit, because Natasza couldn't manage anymore (...). She already had too many meetings. Besides, time is ... everyone has only 24 hours, that's a day' (Interviewee no. 12).

'You know what, the mayor, he always puts us [Agrogościna members] everywhere as a great example, that nobody gets along as we do. However (...) it also has an impact on our time, right? That each of us sacrifices her time to make it look like that, right?' (Interviewee no. 12).

In addition, the fact that entrepreneurs had personal relationships also meant that they had excessive expectations as to the cooperation and its expected effects, which in turn often reduced the assessment of cooperation and willingness to continue cooperation. An example of this is the statement of one of the interviewees. This person, due to a past relationship with the owner of one

of the largest hotels in Wisła, having an attractive swimming pool, expected a higher level of cooperation, and its subsequent lack caused disappointment and dissatisfaction:

'But we would like here, you know,... to benefit more: to have this pool much cheaper for us, to have a price that shocks, right? Well, we cannot get this "wow effect" from Hotel [X – name] and this is a bit of a problem. I don't know how many times I will have to make an approach there... because it's not easy .. We met twice, we got something, but it's not what we want, right? (...). This cooperation started a few years before the establishment of Hotel [X – name], because people who built that hotel [X] were staying here [in our guest house], and [the name of the owner] visited us, so ... [laugh] in such a situation later you would expect more, you know' (Interviewee no. 17).

The research also showed that social relationships between actors facilitated the spread of negative opinions about cooperation, which lowered its value. An example is a statement by the owner of one of the agritourist businesses, who belonged to the Wisła Tourist Organization. At the same time, the person was a member of the Agrogościna association (agritourist businesses partnership) and maintained close relationships with its other members also participating in the Wisła Tourist Organization. The interviewee assessed the Wisła Tourist Organization negatively through the opinions of those friends associated in Agrogościna:

Researcher: 'Do you think that thanks to belonging to the Wisła Tourist Organization there is a higher level of individual benefits for its members?'

Interviewer: 'I would not say so because some of them in the Wisła Tourist Organization were from Agrogościna and they just resigned' (Interviewee no. 9).

Discouragement from cooperation also resulted from the fact that socially not embedded entities had to devote a lot of resources – for example time, energy or capital – to 'buy in' the favors of local, native Wisła entrepreneurs. Such high costs connected to the development and maintenance of social relationships were also stressed by other authors, such as, for example, [Jack et al., 2008](#); [Obukhova & Zhang, 2017](#), thus the empirical results are in line with those works.

Accusations of nepotism in cooperative relations

Another problem associated with maintaining personal relationships between entrepreneurs can be the occurrence of negative phenomena such as nepotism in decisions and activities which should have economic reasons (not the desire to meet other entity expectations) ([Jack et al., 2008](#)).

This problem appeared in Wisła and was noticeable in the selection of partners for cooperation. According to some partners, this limited the willingness to cooperate or reduced its value. For example, many interviewees considered that Wisła Tourist Organization board members who maintained close, friendly relationships, made decisions regarding the organization, mainly to care for their own individual and mutual interests:

'I once said that this is a mutual adoration company (...). And some meetings there take place from time to time, however these are meetings in a narrow group, which not always, maybe sometimes, bring good results, but not many'. (Interviewee no. 18).

Among the barriers preventing them from establishing cooperation with other entities, other entrepreneurs indicated the fact that these entities cooperate with their friends and are closed to 'outside' enterprises. This meant that they often regretfully spoke about the impossibility of cooperation, even when they believed it was very necessary:

'The marketing [in potential cooperator company] was taken by [name of competitor X] for events, because I know that [name competitor X] was there, and now I see that they are there too. Well, that's it – these are friends with friends and that's the way it is (...). Because my husband was there and wanted to enter into cooperation with them, but somehow it was immediately "good-bye" [laugh]. Nothing at all. Zero' (Interviewee no. 36).

Interpersonal conflicts between partners

Previous literature suggests also interpersonal conflicts between entities as a dark side of social embeddedness ([Uzzi, 1997](#); [Waluszewski & Håkansson, 2006](#)). This can be a result of better knowledge about the partner, her/his personal features and too long acquaintance causing some fatigue with the relationship ([Anderson & Jap, 2005](#); [Tähtinen & Blois, 2011](#)).

As the research has shown, the social embeddedness of the interviewed entities caused the occurrence of various interpersonal conflicts between them, as well as between them and socially not embedded entities, thus negatively affecting cooperation. Research has shown that better knowledge about a partner, thanks to maintaining personal relationships, was the cause of quarrels and negative emotions. For example, the research showed that it was close, long-term cooperation within the Wisła Tourist Organization that led one of the entrepreneurs to get to know another board member better and to take the decision to loosen business cooperation with him:

'With [company name] – here the Wisła Tourist Organization may have caused more tension. I got to know him better and it caused a certain reluctance. Because [the name of the entrepreneur] did the website for the organization and published a folder, first one and then another. Later, this cooperation with him in the organization became tense and it distanced me, you know' (Interviewee no. 17).

The research also showed that overembeddedness of native Wisła entrepreneurs was associated with a very strong feeling of local

Table 3
Overembeddedness consequences for tourist business cooperation.

1.	Limiting the innovativeness of cooperative activities – reducing cooperation innovativeness due to the closing up of socially embedded actors towards external entities and their resources (information, capital, financial resources, etc.)
1.1.	Reduction in the inflow and use of new ideas resulting from the difficult entry into cooperation of actors from the outside
1.2.	Closing up towards unknown, alternative ways of acting, causing passivity of local entities and lack or limitation of the possibility of learning from external actors (e.g. attitudes and activities conducive to cooperation)
1.3.	Lack of diversity and a ‘fresh view’ – ‘collective blindness’ negatively affecting cooperation with socially not embedded actors, and discouraging innovative activities
2.	Less adaptive abilities of partners and partner organizations – reduction of adaptation abilities of the company and/or partner organizations caused by adjusting to known partners, and as a result – problems with continuing existing cooperation, including costs of breaking existing strong ties (negative “domino effects”)
3.	Limiting economic rationality of partners’ decisions – replacing economic rationality with loyalty – willingness to fulfill expectations or follow hidden rules
3.1.	Limiting the economic effectiveness of cooperative promotional activities and other partner activities in a given area
3.2.	Too strong a commitment to cooperation at the expense of one’s own company, leading to cooperation discouragement
3.3.	Too high expectations resulting from social relationships, negatively affecting the individual assessment of cooperation, as well as its effectiveness
3.4.	Doubts about sense of cooperation spreading among actors linked by social relationships, discouraging cooperation and lowering its value
3.5.	Bearing costs (time, energy, etc.) for ‘getting into’ the local community by socially not embedded actors, or for maintaining strong ties, leading to discouragement from cooperation
4.	Accusations of nepotism in cooperative relations – preferential treatment of specific partners – nepotism, e.g. in the selection of partners – limiting the willingness to cooperate and/or lowering its value
5.	Interpersonal conflicts among partners
5.1.	Quarrels or negative emotions (e.g. anger, grievances, etc.) between partners caused by better knowledge about the partner and his/her negative character traits, thus negatively affecting cooperation
5.2.	Conflicts on the line: socially embedded entrepreneur-socially not embedded (external) entrepreneur, discouraging external entities from cooperating and causing divisions in the local community, in particular: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - interpersonal conflicts resulting from outsiders’ different view on the development of tourism in the municipality, including cooperation; - resistance resulting from the negative perception of the local community (as hermetic) by outsiders; - accusations directed towards external actors (by socially embedded ones) regarding a lack of knowledge about local conditions and rules, and accusations regarding improper market activities that harm the tourism development on a local level; - resistance of socially embedded actors towards external actors resulting from unfounded accusations of discriminating people from the outside; - perception of entities from the outside as competition; - rapid spread of negative and untrue information about external entities between socially embedded actors, negatively affecting cooperation with them.
5.3.	Closing up of some entrepreneurs towards cooperation with others due to the continuation of old animosities or conflicts in the local community
6.	Being vulnerable to a partner’s opportunist behavior – ties based on trust increasing the susceptibility of entities to opportunistic activities, e.g. in situations based only on oral agreements

Source: own elaboration.

identity. This meant that any conflicts between actors socially embedded in the local community and entrepreneurs from the outside perpetuated, and even intensified the divisions in the local community, which hampered cooperation. This is confirmed by the words of one of the owners of private accommodation in Wisła:

Interviewee: ‘For me, it is the person – a human being – that counts. That’s the way it is. A reliable, recommended person. And this is not whether the person is from here [Wisła] or not. But here, you know... a sort of clan has been created’.

Researcher: ‘Of the people from here?’

Interlocutor: ‘Yes, those from here. I encourage you to go to the [name of an entrepreneur located nearby] at the ranch (...). He is from Bielsko [name of different municipality](...). He will tell you exactly what it is like here. That there is simply a clan here’ (Interviewee no. 41).

Conflicts in Wisła had also different origins (presented broadly in Table 3, in point 5. Interpersonal conflicts among partners). For instance, entrepreneurs who were socially embedded accused those not embedded of lack of knowledge of local conditions and rules of functioning in the local community, as well as undertaking improper market activities which in their opinion harmed the tourism industry and the development of the municipality:

‘People who are not from here are very demanding, they cannot get along as we do, they are so ... I don’t know ... they have too many fancy ideas maybe [laughs]’ (Interviewee no. 12)

The effect was the exclusion from cooperation of some entrepreneurs by actors socially embedded in the local community.

On the other hand, the lack of knowledge about past conflicts between local entrepreneurs facilitated the business operations of actors socially not embedded in the local community. This also resulted in them not excluding other entrepreneurs from cooperation. Frequent gossip, which often hinders cooperation, has been noticed by the owner of one of the restaurants who has been living in Wisła for several years (although she was not originally a Wisła resident):

Interviewee: ‘I think this cooperation works even better when you’re from the outside ... I think so, at least personally’

Researcher: 'Why better?'

Interviewee: 'I don't know the life stories of individual people here which makes my life easier. It's very important to me personally, because I'm not interested in any old rumors from the past, because we live here and now. That's what I'm interested in (...) Later someone says something critical about someone else, but then it turns out, for example, that when it comes to my cooperation with this person, it proves to work very well and I have no complaints' (Interviewee no. 2).

Being vulnerable to a partner's opportunist activities

The research also showed that entrepreneurs with personal relationships were often more susceptible to the opportunist activities of their partners. This is in line with some previous works where the authors stressed that too much trust in a partner can put a person out of vigilance (Chowdhury et al., 2016; Granovetter, 1973).

The interviewees claimed that often, when establishing cooperation, they relied mainly on oral agreements and trust, which could be used by the partner and therefore discouraged future cooperation. One interesting story surfaced about how the trust of a native Wisła resident (the owner of a transport company) towards other entrepreneurs from Wisła, transferred to trust towards outside entrepreneur and resulted in the owner suffering a financial loss, because her client abused her trust and did not fulfill an oral contract:

'However, you know, unfortunately, it is characterized by the fact that they [people not from Wisła] think that if it [agreement] is not on paper, then you never know and will be deceived (...). And in fact, this relationship goes the other way, that unfortunately, the ones who are deceived are us [local entrepreneurs]. And I will also tell you an example from the last six months. There is a guesthouse in Czarne [a Wisła district] (...). The owners are probably somewhere from Warsaw. And the owner called me because he had used my services once and asked me to take a group from a restaurant back to his guesthouse (...). I will tell you that the effect of this whole case was tragic and is still unresolved until today, because I don't have time now, sorry for the word, to get on with the bastard. In any case, I haven't received payment for the service until today' (Interviewee no. 42).

The above-mentioned negative consequences of social embeddedness led to various types of problems and costs. They resulted from the fact that it was difficult for socially not embedded actors to establish cooperation, or the cooperation was dropped or discouraged. The effect of the research is the classification and description of the negative consequences of social embeddedness for tourist business cooperation, presented in Table 3.

Discussion and conclusions

The research allowed several conclusions to be formulated that constitute contribution to the current knowledge about the possible negative role of social embeddedness (i.e. overembeddedness effect) on business activity (cooperation), thus helping to develop current knowledge in this area.

First of all, the results support the statement that when making decisions concerning business cooperation, economic entities do not operate on the basis of the model of economic rationality compliant with the *homo oeconomicus* model. The decisions and activities of the tourist entrepreneurs took into account a whole range of non-economic factors, including social norms and values, but in particular social ties with other entities. In this context, the research has confirmed what Granovetter (2005) and other authors (Jack et al., 2008; Uzzi, 1997) have already claimed, i.e. that business and social relationships are mixed and influence each other.

Secondly, the research has confirmed that social embeddedness can have not only positive, but also negative effect on economic activity. The research has identified 6 broad groups of negative consequences of social embeddedness for business cooperation in the tourist destination (Table 3). Some of these negative consequences had already been identified in the literature (see conceptual framework – Table 1), but they were neither referred to cooperation itself nor to such a specific sector as tourism. Thus, the present research extends the existing knowledge on the role of social embeddedness in tourist business cooperation. Most often – taking into account the frequency of codes in the coded material – the interviewees emphasized the limitation of innovativeness in cooperative activities (77 codes). Interpersonal conflicts were also frequently mentioned – mainly between socially embedded entities and external ones (64 codes). In addition, the research identified other possible negative consequences of social embeddedness for cooperation, such as: lower adaptation abilities caused by adjusting to known partners; replacing economic rationality with loyalty (a desire to fulfill expectations); accusations of nepotism in cooperative relations (e.g. in the selection of partners), limiting the willingness to cooperate; and susceptibility to the opportunistic activities of a partner.

Thirdly, the research detailed and demonstrated that the identified negative consequences of social embeddedness are interrelated – there are feedbacks between them, and often the occurrence of some of them is conditioned by the existence of others. For example, conflicts between socially embedded and not embedded entrepreneurs resulted in both groups becoming unwilling to cooperate, which subsequently hampered access to new resources and lowered business innovativeness. Moreover, bad experiences from such cooperation became widely known in the local community, thus also hampering future cooperation (the 'domino effect').

Fourthly, because the research presented in the study allowed also to identify the benefits of social embeddedness (Czernek-Marszałek, 2020) (although their presentation was not the aim of the paper) the results showed that some of the negative consequences of social embeddedness occurred concurrently with the positive ones. For example, social embeddedness could lead to higher innovativeness in cooperation (thanks to a favorable atmosphere of kindness and freedom in relations between partners), but at the same time it could limit this innovativeness by hindering access to cooperation for socially not embedded entities. This

confirms that the development of enterprises on the market depends on the existence of both types of relationships – social and market – and more specifically on a specific combination of strong and weak ties, which means that there exists an optimal proportion of combined strong and weak relationships. Researchers of this subject argued that building both types of relationships is interchangeable and is not mutually exclusive. Poppo and Zenger (2002) argue that social and market (formal) relationships perform different functions in an enterprise and it is a mistake to treat them as substitutable. It is emphasized, for example, that combining socially embedded and market relationships ensures the survival of an enterprise, facilitates access to capital and reduces costs, e.g. costs of lawyers (Jack, 2005; Krippner & Alvarez, 2007; Uzzi, 1997; Uzzi & Lancaster, 2004). This paper is therefore in line with those works and a statement that both types of relationship are necessary in order to find optimal solutions for an enterprise (Birley, 1985; Granovetter, 1973, 2005; Jack, 2005). Neither overembeddedness nor so-called underembeddedness is beneficial for a company. The question of what the optimal combination of strong and weak ties is, however, is still open. At the same time it seems that Jack et al. (2008) are right in acknowledging that the balance between the two types of relationships may vary depending on the region, sector, type of business, etc.

On the basis of the research, it is also possible to formulate some recommendations for tourism entrepreneurs and entities managing tourism development in a given area. Taking into account the dark sides of social embeddedness for cooperation, it is necessary to avoid situations leading to such negative consequences – for example, marginalization of entities from the outside or hindering their access to cooperation. As the research has shown, this limits the innovativeness of cooperation and causes ‘collective blindness’, when decisions are made based on undefined (‘old’) resources (knowledge, experience, etc.), which often lead to unsatisfactory results. Partners bound by social relations should also be aware of the ‘dark side’ of these ties – that they can lead to numerous negative consequences even outweighing the benefits. Such awareness can be built on the basis of training or workshops, in particular by showing positive examples of cooperation with previously unknown partners bringing a ‘fresh look’ and new resources into the cooperation, to partners' mutual success.

In this context, some recommendations can be formulated regarding future empirical research. It can be said that an interesting line of enquiry would be to compare the negative consequences of social embeddedness for cooperation both in terms of time and of space – i.e. in relation to other Polish as well as foreign tourist destinations. For example, in the coastal areas one summer tourist season mainly dominates, hence relatively more often (than in mountain destinations as Wisła) entrepreneurs may be not permanently associated with a given place, and hence not socially embedded in the local community. Lack of social embeddedness or its completely different picture could be also found in large cities, in particular urban locations where larger enterprises and hotel chains or travel agency consortia operate. Therefore, of great use would be research on a larger and more diversified sample of tourism enterprises, including analysis of their cultural, economic and political differences, which would certainly influence the social embeddedness of tourism entrepreneurs as well as business cooperation. Further research should also be conducted to answer the question how an enterprise should build a portfolio of ties (strong and weak ones) in order to serve the development of the company in the best possible way. Finally, it would also be worth deepening the research by a quantitative one in order to look at the statistical significance of the identified negative consequences of social embeddedness.

The research, however, has some limitations. The first is the use of the case study method and the study of only one organization which does not allow for generalizations. Secondly, the municipality included in the study – Wisła – is quite specific (relatively small, with a dominance of micro and small enterprises, and without major corporations, especially hotel chains, office consortia, etc.). However, it must be stated many of identified dark sides definitely exist also in other tourist destinations and may affect cooperation processes taking place there. This is due to the fact that tourism develops mainly at the local level, and the tourism sector is dominated by micro and small enterprises, whose owners are often located in close neighborhood, usually know each other personally and often use these relationships to create a complex tourist offer. This cooperation is, in turn, necessary from the point of view of the numerous and diverse needs of tourists and the complex character of an area tourist product. Therefore, it should be stated that at least some of the identified dark sides of social embeddedness will also occur in other tourist destinations, especially small towns, where local businesses are run by local residents. The list of identified and characterized negative consequences of social embeddedness can be extended and refined, of course taking into account other social or economic contexts of other places in the world. Although the context is different, the behavior of entrepreneurs is often quite similar. Thus, the author believes that the research may be a good starting point for broader future analyses on the role of actors' social embeddedness in tourist destinations. Finally, identifying these negative consequences has made it possible to formulate some practical recommendations on what can be done to counteract them. These recommendations should also be useful for other tourist destinations in which social overembeddedness effects occur.

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