

The role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement: A multi-case study

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Explores social interactions and relationships that lead to trust in rural networks.
- Mutual benefit is at the core of social exchange and trust is an evolving asset.
- Personal relationships and geographic proximity shape a separatist rural identity.
- Network chair dependency for bridging and linking relationships.
- Enhances understanding of how trust is built in rural micro tourism networks.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 August 2017

Received in revised form

18 February 2018

Accepted 21 February 2018

Available online 3 March 2018

Keywords:

Trust

Micro firm

Rural tourism networks

Social exchange theory

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement in three case environments in Ireland, Canada and the USA. Researchers have rarely addressed the role of trust in tourism business relationships beyond acknowledging that it is a critical factor in network relationships/exchanges. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by exploring the content of member interactions and relationships that lead to trust in rural micro firm tourism networks using a relationship lens underpinned by social exchange theory. Applying a longitudinal interpretivist lens in each case, findings suggest that bonding, bridging and linking interactions have profound implications for rural tourism micro firms who may not have access to a larger social system of stakeholder relationships due to their relatively isolated location. The resultant framework offers insight into the generation of trust as an evolving asset in a rural tourism micro firm network setting.

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1. Introduction

This multi-case study examines the role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement. A review of the literature reveals that there is no universally accepted definition of either the concept or the measurement of trust (Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman, & Soutter, 2000; Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillepsie, 2006; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). It is, however, helpful to comprehend the researchers' perspective in a particular study. In this paper, trust is seen as an interpersonal phenomenon (Blomqvist, 1997) where one party is willing to be placed in a

potentially vulnerable position relative to another, while possessing some knowledge of the other party that inspires trust in that individual (Luhmann, 1979). Under this mantle, trust is defined as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner (Rousseau et al., 1998) in whom one has confidence based on their words, actions, intentions, attitude, capabilities, decisions and behavior (Glaeser et al., 2000; McAllister, 1995; Morrow Jr., Hansen, & Pearson, 2004). While there are numerous perspectives, and little agreement as to what constitutes a network, Hoang and Antoncic (2003: 167) broadly define a network as 'a set of actors with some set of relationships linking them', a baseline from which this study is borne. Scott, Baggio and Cooper (2008) acknowledge tourism as an ideal context for the study of networks as they 'provide a means of conceptualizing, visualizing, and analyzing [tourism's] complex sets of relationships' (p. 3), a view that complements Hoang and Antoncic's baseline. Leveraging the relational perspective, networks are seen as social

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structures that enable tourism micro firms to build the trust required to develop a local tourism product (Lynch & Morrison, 2007, p. 43).

Linking trust and network engagement, the prevailing literature suggests that individuals enter into a network relationship based on mutual exchange to achieve benefits for unspecified obligations and that over time trust develops (Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis, & Winograd, 2000). The assumption has been that by placing rural tourism micro firms in a network, the owner-manager (OM) will willingly engage with their community, peers and professional advisers to exchange resources including advice (Ahmad, 2005; Jaouen & Lasch, 2015; van der Zee & Vanneste, 2015) in pursuit of mutual benefits. However, researchers have rarely addressed the role of trust in tourism business relationships (Czernek & Czakon, 2016), and while trust is recognized as a crucial ingredient in tourism network success (Michael, 2007), the content of interactions and relationships that lead to trust in rural tourism networks are not fully understood (Galunic, Ertug, & Gargiulo, 2012; Pesamaa & Hair Jr., 2008; Saxena, 2005, 2006). Furthermore, there is little evidence that mutual trusting relationships exist between network members, even over time (Reinl & Kelliher, 2014). While the relational element of rural micro firm network engagement has been researched in the past (for example, Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Gibson & Lynch, 2007; Hite & Hesterly, 2001; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Kelliher, Aylward, & Lynch, 2014; Lynch & Morrison, 2007), the interactions that build and strengthen trust within rural tourism network relationships have not been studied to date.

For the purposes of this study, a rural location is defined as a sparsely populated geographic area (of less than 1000 inhabitants) that is situated outside cities and towns interspersed by small settlements, with a tendency toward specialist economic bases (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). Many countries are predominantly rural in nature and are reliant on tourism micro firms, in the main, to facilitate economic growth, competitiveness and employment (OECD, 2006). Taking the European comparative base of no more than 10 full-time employees (EC, 2014), thereby encompassing USA and Canadian definitions (USSBA, 2015; Industry Canada, 2013), micro firms are the predominant providers of tourism services in rural regions in Ireland (Fáilte Ireland, 2015)¹, the USA (USSBA, 2015) and Canada (RFC, 2016); the three case locations under study.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the authors review relevant trust, tourism micro firm and rural network literature, leading to the research question 'what is the role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement?' The paper goes on to discuss the applied interpretive case method in three locations (Ireland, USA, Canada) and presents findings based on the extracted data. The resultant framework offers insight into the generation of trust as an evolving asset in rural tourism micro firm networks, thereby extending trust and network theory and providing a visual tool of engagement to those involved in practice.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

This study takes a social exchange perspective (Blau, 1968), assuming that successful exchanges gradually build up trust on both sides (Luo, 2005). The expectation is that positive interactions build trust (Lewicki et al., 2006; Malewicki, 2005), while in the case of distrust, interactions result in negative expectations regarding another's conduct, particularly if these actions are perceived to take the form of opportunistic behavior. Trust can therefore change over

time based on past behavior – developing, building, declining and even resurfacing in long-standing relationships (Lyon, Møllering, & Saunders, 2015; Rousseau et al., 1998). This perspective corresponds with the classification proposed by Luhmann (1979) – that there is a micro-level of trust, based on the emotional bond between individuals, which is more characteristic of primary and small group relationships, such as that evidenced in rural micro firm networks. Trust can exist at both cognitive and affective levels, which can affect an individual's propensity to trust (McAllister, 1995; Morrow Jr. et al., 2004). Cognitive trust is primarily based on what an individual perceives to be a good reason to trust others (McAllister, 1995). This includes personal knowledge of the other party (Blomqvist, 1997) and an analysis of a social exchange partner's intentions, motives, capabilities and predisposition towards others (Czernek & Czakon, 2016). Affective trust is more subjective and is based on emotional bonds and attachments that an individual holds for another over time (Davidsson & Honig, 2003; Rousseau et al., 1998).

2.1. The role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement

In a rural micro firm setting, social assets rooted in the OM's network relationships include trust (Irvine & Anderson, 2004; McAreevey & McDonagh, 2011; Saxena, 2006), which forms the basis of flourishing business relationships, as well as reinforcing social norms (Townsend, Wallace, Smart, & Norman, 2016). Here, trust is regarded as a property of individuals or a characteristic of interpersonal relationships (Beugelsdijk, 2006, p. 374), while the adjectives used in context often refer to the source of trust. While trust is a critical factor in the success of small firm tourism networks (Lynch & Morrison, 2007), it is not a given in this environment and the social relations that underpin trust must be constructed through economic and cultural investment strategies oriented to the institutionalization of group relations (Portes, 1998). The assumption is that the development of trust is a process of mutual learning, exploration, testing and some negotiation (Gabarro, 1978, p. 301) that occurs over time (Morrow Jr. et al., 2004; Gulati, 1995) based on repeated interaction. Trust acts as a governance mechanism (Czernek & Czakon, 2016), and as such it is both an outcome of, and an antecedent to, successful collective action. The presence of trust does not eliminate conflict between tourism providers (Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Merinero-Rodriguez & Pulido-Fernandez, 2016), rather it increases the likelihood that members will discuss problems openly without fear of any malevolent consequences to ensure that network relationships are conducive to doing business (Heidari, Najafipour, Farzan, & Parvaresh, 2014). Furthermore, it is often under conditions of high risk and uncertainty that trust emerges, for example when an opportunity to exploit another partner's vulnerability is not acted upon (Rousseau et al., 1998).

Currall and Judge (1995) suggest that it is the level of trust between individuals that provide the linking mechanism across organizational boundaries, namely boundary role persons (Fuller-Love & Thomas, 2004). This approach is consistent with interaction models including social exchange theory where collaboration is studied in the context of a specific relationship (Currall & Judge, 1995), such as that which may exist between tourism business owners in a rural setting. Thus, the role of trust is important in this environment as relationships are influenced by the embedded understandings and practices of the OM (Kelliher et al., 2014). By considering the role of trust in building rural tourism network engagement, we are acknowledging the reality that it is not the rural networks themselves that are important but the objects and relations that flow through them (Murdoch, 2000). This notion of a

¹ Fáilte Ireland is the national tourism development authority of Ireland, whose role is to support the tourism industry.

Table 1
Role of trust in building rural tourism network engagement.

Criteria	Perspectives	Literary support
Propensity to trust	Emotional bonds exist between individuals at a cognitive and affective level, which affects an individual's propensity to trust; cognitive trust is rooted in reasoning while affective trust is based on emotional bonds enhanced or diminished over time.	Blau, 1968; Davidsson & Honig, 2003; Heidari et al., 2014; Jaouen & Lasch, 2015; McAllister, 1995
Expectation as a bedrock of future interaction	Repeated positive interactions create positive expectations regarding another's conduct, particularly in times of need. These positive experiences enhance the likelihood of future interactions.	Lewicki et al., 2006; Malewicki, 2005; Rousseau et al., 1998; Saxena, 2005, 2006
Evidence of mutual benefit derives network confidence	Words, actions, intentions, capabilities, motives, decisions, behavior, sincerity of relationship partner generate belief that one person will not exploit or harm another. Past mutual benefits result in a greater willingness to engage with the network.	Ahmad, 2005; Blomqvist, 1997; Davidsson & Honig, 2003; Kelliher et al., 2014; McAllister, 1995
Network as a social system	Rural micro firms are embedded in the social context of the rural community where repeated positive interactions lead to a cyclical process of mutual learning, exploration, testing and negotiation.	Alder & Kwon, 2002; Chell & Baines, 2000; Coleman, 1988; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Irvine & Anderson, 2004; McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011; Murdoch, 2000; van der Zee & Vanneste, 2015
Trust as an evolving asset	Trust is an individual's property, used as a governance mechanism in pursuit of mutual benefit; the evolution catalyst is the repeated positive interaction that results in embedded understandings and practices.	Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Gabarro, 1978; Heidari et al., 2014; Irvine & Anderson, 2004; McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011; Merinero-Rodriguez & Pulido-Fernandez, 2016

network as a social system (Chell & Baines, 2000; McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011), which can generate social capital (Alder & Kwon, 2002; Coleman, 1988) manifests as interactions between members, as exhibited in Table 1.

If we assume, as displayed in Table 1, that a network consists of a set of individuals with relational ties that keep them together (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003), then it is these ties that are key to the realization of the network's potential. In a rural setting, social systems are smaller with fewer stakeholder relationships, reinforcing the value of layered connectivity in this environment so that 'the fabric of social relations can be mobilised as a resource' (Alder & Kwon, 2002, p. 17) to facilitate action (Coleman, 1988). Recent findings suggest that rural micro firm OMs actively strive to develop social assets through networking (Townsend et al., 2016), wherein social relations are assumed to be both glue, which forms the structure of the network, and lubricant, which facilitates its operation (Anderson & Jack, 2002). To examine these relationships fully, it is important to study each level of the rural tourism network's social relations process—specifically, bonding, bridging and linking activities (Jóhannesson, Skaptadóttir, & Benediktsson, 2003; O'Brien, Phillips, & Patsiorkovsky, 2005).

2.2. Relational activities in a network - bonding, bridging and linking

Bonding, bridging and linking activities are the processes of practicing social relations in the rural tourism network environment (Jóhannesson et al., 2003). Bonding gives way to close-knit relationships and builds a sense of solidarity among rural network members (O'Brien et al., 2005). Bridging facilitates a go-between position that cuts across social groups within the rural network (Jóhannesson et al., 2003) and offers access to important information and knowledge at the appropriate time to otherwise unconnected people (Luo, 2005). Linking brings individuals together and provides an interface for member and non-member exchanges to take place. Bonding, primarily with family and friends, requires frequent interaction occurring at least twice a week and offers active encouragement to the OM. Consequently, personal contact allows trust to evolve between bonded network members (Fuller-Love & Thomas, 2004) through sharing information, and/or gathering new skills or joining together to solve a common problem (Kelliher et al., 2014). This trust forms a bond that holds closely-knit organizations together (Davidsson & Honig, 2003, p. 310), such as businesses located in rural communities. Bridging contacts, which can be as infrequent as once a year, act as a

source of new or novel information as these individuals move in social circles different to our own (Davidsson & Honig, 2003; Luo, 2005). Links are those individuals who may be beyond the periphery of the network but offer access to other information and resources through their external ties (Heidari et al., 2014).

Bonding, bridging and linking have profound implications for individuals that do not have access to a larger social system of relationships, such as those who reside in rural areas with lower populations in relatively isolated locations (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). Ideally, information and communication technology (ICT) advancements should offer a means to bridge physical remoteness and facilitate access to wider markets and supply chains (Townsend et al., 2016). However, there are persistent and growing differences in data infrastructure quality between urban and rural areas in advanced nations (Townsend et al., 2016), creating a paradox where the rural communities most in need of improved digital connectivity to compensate for their remoteness are least connected (Salemink, Strijker, & Bosworth, 2015). These challenges are compounded by the reality that some rural OMs have less skills or confidence with digital tools and are less likely than others to adopt digital technologies in their business practices (Jones, Simmons, Packham, & Beynon-Davies, 2014; Townsend et al., 2016). Notably, ICT as a social exchange tool is seen as an unsuitable context for building the trust needed to gain tangible benefits for rural micro firms (Townsend et al., 2016). Therefore, while online networking is particularly useful in developing bridging and linking activities, it may be impeded in a rural environment. Thus, rural tourism micro firms are, for the most part, dependent on close others in their community. In a rural context, bonded relationships may provide the community with an identity and a common vision (Heidari et al., 2014) whilst conversely they may also become the basis for the pursuit of narrow sectarian interests or present an inflexible and rigid outlook when linking diverse social groups who are perceived to be 'outsiders' (Kelliher et al., 2014; O'Brien et al., 2005). Therefore, no one tie is more important than the other and each should be present in a network as they affect the structure and function of networks in different ways. Adopting all three can facilitate a greater number of choices on ways to link the unique properties of a rural network bond with bridging and linking processes (O'Brien et al., 2005). The literature review highlights the interplay between key trust criteria in a rural tourism micro firm network (Table 1) and the underlying need for bonding, bridging and linking social activities to sustain network engagement. These criteria form the basis of analysis in this research study.

3. Method

Based on the preceding review, the research question asks: what is the role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement? Assuming the tourism OM is the micro firm representative in a rural network, the research objectives are to: RO1: Identify the nature and content of social exchange in a rural tourism network environment; RO2: Investigate the factors that affect trust in these social exchanges and how they shape bonding, bridging and linking relationships; RO3: Propose a framework exhibiting the role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement.

3.1. Interpretive case approach

This study employs an interpretive case approach to explore the role of trust building within rural tourism networks (Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005; Lyon et al., 2015; Saxena, 2005). Applying social exchange theory (Blau, 1968), trust is viewed as an outcome of repeated positive interactions in which trust relationships develop gradually between network members (Luo, 2005; Rousseau et al., 1998). This approach assumes interdependent dyadic relations where trust in one member affects the trust held by the other party (Lyon et al., 2015; Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000). As network members may ascribe various meanings and contents to trust and trust may be both context- and situation-specific (Blomqvist, 1997, p. 284), a micro firm OM's willingness to engage in trusting behavior (Currall & Judge, 1995, p. 152; Glaeser et al., 2000; Saxena, 2005) with others in the rural network is the lens through which measurement is addressed. Taking account of Currall and Judge's (1995) approach to trust measurement, interview and discussion group templates sought to determine the OM's attitude toward trust within the network and perceived norms for same (Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000), thereby focusing on 'particularistic' rather than general trust (Luo, 2005). The interview questions ask for specific instances of past behavior (Glaeser et al., 2000, p. 840) as an indication of levels of trust achieved in network relationships and prompt a variety of exchanges (e.g. those relating to bonded, bridged and linked relationships). At a dyad-level, the perceived strength of the relationship and whether conflict is successfully managed if it arises (Czernek & Czakon, 2016) are included as exploratory interview/discussion themes. The use of qualitative methods allows respondents to define what they mean by trust such that we do not leap to conclusions in our framework (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005; Lyon et al., 2015).

3.2. Case selection

Our goal was to contemplate context- and situation- specific trust criteria through the application of a multi-case rural network study. By applying a time sensitive case method to social exchange analysis, we took account of the evolutionary processes and dynamic nature of each studied network (Reinl & Kelliher, 2014) to allow for cross-case comparison. The case selection was purposeful with Irish, US and Canadian cases selected based on proportional rural population percentages and tourism contribution. Each case location has both historical and outdoor pursuits within its vicinity and has a trail offering, supported by semi-state agencies, government advisors and local community stakeholders. Emulating von Friedrichs Grängsjö's (2003) rural criteria, each network predominantly serves their rural community of less than 1000 permanent residents and is within a 20-mile radius of an urban center of greater than 20,000 inhabitants (Table 2).

In all three case sites, micro firm OMs were selected based on

the following criteria; at least five years in business and member of a rural tourism network. In Ireland, respondents operate a rural café, a bike rental store, a tour center, a bed and breakfast and a specialty retro store. The US micro firms include a restaurant, a high-end household retailer, a bookstore, an activity center and a retro general store. The Canadian micro firms include a cidery, an agricultural and educational based u-pick farm, a restaurant, a specialty food shop and café, and a winery. All are members of networks; the greenway network (Ireland) has been in operation since 2010; the local merchants association (USA) has been in operation since the 1980s, and the observed culinary network (Canada) was founded in 2008 by a resident/marketing executive at a local resort.

3.3. Data collection approach

The primary data collection period spanned between six and 14 months in each location incorporating a series of in situ face-to-face OM, expert and stakeholder interviews (each time listed after the interviewee codes in Table 3 refers to the duration of distinct interviews), roundtable discussions, observations, and reflections to facilitate an in-depth examination of the bonding, bridging and linking relationships evidenced in network interactions (Table 3).

Our approach to data collection was as follows. Initial contact was facilitated through an introduction to the wider network by a trusted network member. Once identified and contacted, the project and consent form was discussed and signatures were sought after a seven-day time lapse to allow individuals time to consider participation. All initial contacts participated in the study. From this point forward, the snowball technique was followed where initial participants were asked to indicate other potential interviewees. It is noteworthy that access would have been problematic without these introductions, however the authors acknowledge that trust may already exist between the initial interviewee and recommended participants, thereby influencing perspectives on bonding, bridging and linking activities. These challenges are somewhat alleviated by the rural context, wherein tighter bonds are likely among all members based on their remote location (Townsend et al., 2016). We sought advice from rural experts and supporting stakeholders to balance the participant perspective in each case environment (see Table 3). There were no refusals to participate in Ireland, one in Canada (no response from one OM to researcher communications) and two OM refusals in the US (both cited a lack of time).

Thirty-five interviews were recorded with 15 micro tourism OMs, six network chairs (one past and one present chair in each location, all of whom were micro firm OMs), nine supporting stakeholders and five local rural experts. Stakeholder and expert conversations with local and regional education providers, government-funded network facilitators, and relevant government agencies offered a greater appreciation of the network structures and supports available, and alleviated the potential of gathering a narrow perspective of trust through the eyes of interviewed OMs. While the micro firm sample size is relatively small, seven OM interviewees out of a possible 20–40 network members (Table 2) equated to a significant portion of the membership pool in each studied network. Using the interview template as a guide, we explored the interviewee's attitude toward trust incorporating social exchange examples, direct or indirect knowledge of the other party, past experience, approach to conflict management within the network and how long the parties had known each other. In addition, we facilitated a round-table discussion involving core network members in the Irish and US cases to tease out the behavioral themes and topics gleaned from the interviews. In Canada, a network AGM afforded us the opportunity to observe a

Table 2
Case study selection criteria.

Case Criteria	Ireland	Missouri USA	Ontario Canada
Rural population	4.7m residents; 38% rural	6m residents; 38.7% rural	13.6m residents; 14% rural; 13 tourism regions; R7 (studied region) - 50% rural
Tourism contribution (p.a.)	EUR7.7bn; employs approx. 220,000 people (Fáilte Ireland, 2015)	US\$7.4bn; employs 280,000 people (MDT, 2015)	CAN\$1.3bn; employs 359,000 people (OMTCS, 2016)
Tourism trail network activities	42 km off-road walking and cycling trail along the Atlantic coast, labeled 'greenways' in Ireland	Recreational rail trail- 240 miles of former Missouri –Kansas–Texas Railroad	Culinary/agricultural based tourism trail spanning several municipalities located close to Georgian Bay
Observed network engagement	20+ tourism businesses; greenway a catalyst for reinvigorated network engagement	25 tourism businesses; OM members of Merchants Association and affiliate to the rail trail community	40+ tourism businesses; OM members of the culinary trail network
Observed tourism communities	Rural community of <1000 inhabitants located < 20 miles from an urban centre of >20,000 people. Each case site has both historical and outdoor pursuits within its vicinity and each has a developed tourist trail.		

Table 3
Case study data collection summary.

Interviewee	Ireland	Missouri USA	Ontario Canada
Micro firm OM	I1: 34, 21 min I2: 51, 12 min I3: 10, 13, 22 min I4: 12, 47 min I5: 56, 11 min	US1: 110, 68 min US2: 20, 62, 10 min US3: 30, 56, 12, 15 min US4: 120, 90 min US5: 33, 28 min	C1: 57, 44 min C2: 48, 33 min C3: 48, 34 min C4: 65, 42 min C5: 47, 32 min
Network chairs	I6: 61, 12 min I7: 48, 26, 11 min	US6: 19, 42, 17, 21 min US7: 24, 11 min	C6: 60, 47 min C7: 60, 40 min
Supporting stakeholders	I8: 35 min I9: 44, 12 min I10: 51 min	US8: 65, 35 min US9: 60 min US10: 75 min	C8: 25, 46 min C9: 45, 37 min C10: 33 min
Rural experts	I11: 88 min	US11: 75 min US12: 120 min USR1: 45 min	C11 - 13: 120 min C14: 60 min CR1: 120 min
Roundtable discussions	IR1: 38 min	948 m/15.8 h	1143 m/19 h
Total Observation	725 m/12.1 h Observed location, in situ tourist attractions (4), festivals (1), completed trail	Observed location, in situ tourist attractions (2), festivals (3), completed trail	Observed location, in situ tourist attractions (5), festivals (1), completed trail
Total	21 h	25 h	20 h

two-hour round table discussion involving core members.

In each case, we reviewed public, government agency and network documents and observed tourist and network events (Table 2), which enhanced our immersion in the rural case communities. Each observation was conducted by the researcher and involved attending tourist and network events and recording observations in a notebook directly after the event to limit any discomfort associated with being observed. These observations helped us to see how members engage with each other in practice, offering further insight into their social exchange experience versus their articulation of how it occurs during interview. We also maintained a reflective log to challenge bias that may occur in research of this nature and to contemplate self- other relations and our impact on these relations as researchers. By examining respondent perspectives in depth and over an extended period, the unique aspect of this research is that it investigated what actually occurs in and between the OM relationships in a rural tourism network that may build or indeed impede trust.

3.4. Data analysis

Analysis of the interview transcripts, round-table discussions, observation field notes, documentary evidence and our reflective diaries was evolutionary as we managed, shaped and made sense of the data. Evidence is presented in narrative form in order to relay what occurs when OMs engage in a rural micro firm network

setting (Chell & Baines, 2000; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005; Reinl & Kelliher, 2014). Firstly each case was analyzed in isolation to try to understand the participants' intentions as articulated by their words (interviews, round-table discussions) and actions (observations). Over time, we extracted themes from the data, guided by Dey's (1993) circular process of categorizing, connecting, corroborating and classifying. Subsequent cross-case comparison facilitated identification and analysis of both similarities and differences between the cases. This was a complex process due to the volume of data; partly alleviated by having native researchers from each country on the team (Bartel & Garud, 2003) which aided our comprehension of cultural nuances, such as localized phrases, metaphors and communal gestures. This stage took a period of six months during which time data, themes and connections were extracted, classified and reclassified resulting in seven iterations of Dey's process. Over time, we identified OM network exchanges that connected portions of description, verified through field notes, allowing us to extract 'essences' from the text. Rigor was enhanced by the adopted interpretive case study approach, design and enactment, strengthened through the multi-firm and cross-case comparison (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). A sector (tourism) and context (rural networks) specific study afforded the depth needed to assess the role of trust within a rural tourism network, facilitating the development of a framework specifically designed for the rural tourism micro firm (Fig. 1).

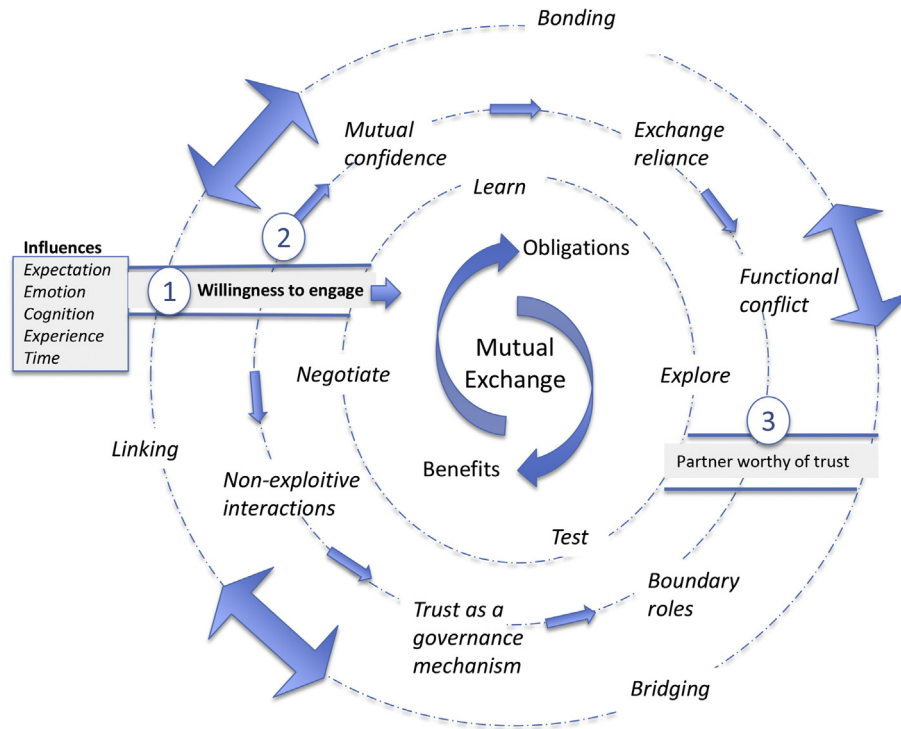


Fig. 1. Role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement.
Source: Authors own.

4. Findings

To establish the context and situation specific to each case, we first sought to explore the respondents' reasons for living, and creating a tourism business, in a rural location. In the Canadian case, none of the OMs were from the area but all were amenity migrants, drawn there to pursue lifestyle and business goals, 'we originally bought the property as a recreational property ... we just came up here to enjoy skiing and enjoy nature' (C4). Similarly, most US respondents had moved into the location, 'there are very few here from the start... I came in the 80s and I am one of the longest here' (US2). This was somewhat different in Ireland, where a number of businesses are second generation OMs, 'this was my Dad's place' (I1). Many felt fortunate to be located in a rural setting due to the natural aesthetic; 'We have the water, the ski hills, the mountain, the hiking and trails, we have food and farming' (C1), 'it's spectacular here, even in the winter' (I3). Respondents also spoke of the value of 'community' and 'being with people who really know you, and care what happens to you' (I2), where 'we watch out for each other' (US1).

While it was a 'lifestyle choice' (I1) to live in rural settings, many pursued opportunities in tourism due to an evident gap in the market; '...there wasn't anything like this in [this municipality which] has a demographic that is very used to this type of shop and used to getting these types of products' (C2). For others, '...the kids are grown up and moved on, so we were looking for something to hold our interest here' (C4). Tourism was a 'logical choice' as 'there weren't many other opportunities here... there isn't much industry so my options were limited' (I3); and there were no evident barriers to market entry, 'Anybody can open a business ... It's a \$30 fee. The whole town is zoned for business' (US1).

4.1. Propensity to trust versus willingness to engage

The studied networks were diverse and complex: the Canadian trail 'spans three counties' (C14), in the US, there were 'nine (counties) on the (rail) trail' (US12), and while the Irish case was in a single county, it was part of a wider tourism initiative which covers the entire western seaboard. In each case location, tourism was 'growing really strong' (C5) partially leveraged by the respective trails and related network activities, 'we're gaining from the [greenway]. They [greenway users] need a rest after a few miles and stop for a break' (I4), 'It's a social trail, they stop for refreshments' (US3).

Respondents displayed a willingness to engage with their local network to enhance their business potential rather than an automatic propensity to trust network members at the start; 'I was committed [to the network] before I even opened the business ... certainly collaboration is a key to creating a successful business in this little town and driving traffic to your door' (C2); 'Ireland's really about who you know, so [the network] gave me that scope' (I2). However, once within the network, relational activities began to materialise between network members.

4.2. Bonding, bridging and linking relational activities

The business generation challenges of a rural location were discussed as a catalyst for bonded engagement, 'we have to stick together, we're small, we're off the beaten track, how else will we be visible to the tourist?' (I4). Respondents also referred to the social benefits of bonding (US6);

'We're here for the common purpose, which is, we like living here, that's the main thing, everybody wants to live here and so having a business here is just an added perk. So that's why it was an easy thing to do to get organized and it gave us a monthly get

together and that was, you know, very advantageous just to get together once a month just to see each other and talk and see how people were doing. So it started out more social than anything and then it just evolved and about two or three years later we got our by-laws together. It took a while, because we didn't want to be a chamber of commerce, we didn't have the money or the funds to do anything. We started out paying about I think 25 or 30 dollars. Dues are up to 150 to join now so you know it was a work in progress'.

These networks offered the micro firms the potential to develop valuable business connections and close-knit relationships with other OMs; 'so it makes sense ... [to] make those strong links' (C4); 'I don't want to be outside the fold' (I4); 'cross county work makes sense' (US12). These benefits expanded into bridging activities as members began sharing ideas; '... having a wealth of other people's ideas coming in ... I can't pay enough for it' (C2); 'You know, I don't know everything but the network helps me find who knows what I don't know' (I5). These experiences gave members confidence in the network; 'They could see it [greenway] rejuvenating the area, this gave momentum' (I11); 'I think it had to be the winery that was the start of it ... we could see the benefits of working together' (US1).

When contemplating network engagement, respondents spoke of the challenges associated with sustaining relational activities in a network as 'everybody's got an idea but nobody wants to do it' (US2) and 'some do nothing' (C5) so the workload 'rests on a few shoulders' (I2) while 'the rest of 'em just kind of enjoy the benefits of it, and they complain ... [which] gets frustrating when we don't get that participation because we feel like they are just taking' (C6). Some case participants explained that networks 'do not always work together' (US10), or over-rely on tradition, 'there were a lot of big ideas but ... some were like 'no we're going to do it the way we have always done it' [sigh]' (US1), which means some members 'fade away' (I5) or 'basically dropped out because they just didn't get their way' (US6). There were also success stories where the stakeholders 'weren't talking' and the 'chambers weren't in the mix at all ... and we [rural government support agency] brought them together' (US11), suggesting that relationship building was dependent on conscious action by boundary persons at specific junctures in the network evolution.

Respondents differentiated between local bonding network activities 'amongst our own' (I3) and bridging activities orchestrated by government support agencies, where interactions created a perceived barrier to building a trusting relationship. A number of respondents spoke of discomfort with 'forced networking' (US2) which 'just feels awkward, some of those organized events...' (I1) pointing to member discomfort with formal collective engagement with individuals beyond the network core. While network chairs facilitated member exchange interfaces to link stakeholders at network meetings, the sense was that rural micro firms do not always value the input of these support actors (including government agents);

'It's interesting. They [networks] are very happy to pay ridiculous amounts to a consultant to come up with a strategy. The advice is often what I could have told them for free... we're going to start charging for the service' (US11, government agent/rural support expert).

Those in network linking roles also believed that the various government agencies were 'taking different paths to the same place' (US11), and the underlying belief by the OMs was that a rural tourism community must be 'ready' for support (I4) for it to be of

value. Notably, there was a general sense that some business support organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce (Ireland) and the regional planning commission (US) were 'not prepared to help us [rural micro firms]' (I3), while the Canadian view tended to be one of disinterest, 'I just leave them [government] to do their thing and I run my business' (C3). This perspective may be well founded in the US, as the commission has only recently hired its first 'rural service coordinator [state wide role]' (US11), and following a fresh political cycle in Canada, both support stakeholders involved in the study were relatively new to their roles (CS1 and CS2). In Ireland, the Wild Atlantic Way² and the observed greenway were in their infancy and there was a historic absence of bridging and linking ties between rural micro firms and regional/urban stakeholders, 'They [regional stakeholders] don't fully get our challenges, they're in cities and big towns so they've the comfort of everything being nearby, we don't have that' (I5); 'we're a bit far away from the decision makers here ... and out of sight, out of mind' (I6), a finding emulated in the US, 'we're seen as country bumpkins' (US4) and Canada, 'The city is a much better place in terms of getting advice ... there's a lot of proximity to people, services. There are lots of people that you can bounce ideas off' (C3). Interestingly, one of the support stakeholders interviewed (US10) was 'not a big advocate of tourism as an economic development tool in rural locations', stating that 'the preservation of very small rural towns' is 'institutionalized in the US' and that some of these communities were 'rural ghettos ... they lack the capacity to make communal decisions despite rich endowments of resources'.

4.3. Network as a social system

Mutuality was raised in all three cases regarding local networks, for example in the Canadian network, 'we link in this area a lot ... I work with [C3], we partner with [C5], we carry their products ... send people back and forth too' [C1], 'so it kind of happens in this area' (C2). '[I] try to be involved in [those events] because it's a connect with other members of the trail and you are reaching a wider audience than just your own' (C3). The need for mutual benefit to sustain network engagement was also borne out in the case findings: 'it's a lot of work but I just believe in the [network] organization so I do the work' (US6); 'you have to turn up, otherwise resentment can start to take hold. We all benefit from organized events' (I3); 'the network chairs 'have been very fair ... we have given them whatever they need, because for me we all grow together' (C1).

The social aspect of the network was also evident; 'super involved with all that, which is really cool' (US2); 'I love to go and see [local micro business owner and trail member], she doesn't mind sharing her stories ... a wealth of knowledge and she's not scared to ... share it' (C1). As a social system, the network was supported by close (bonded) others. The majority of close ties were outside the network; 'My husband is the unsung hero, he does a lot of the background stuff' (C2); 'My dad' (I1). In the Canadian case, the vast majority of close ties were socially proximate but geographically distant, 'my sister (based in Toronto) is in the corporate world so we bounce ideas' (C3). These also included non-familial ties with previous colleagues in professional groups, 'There is an old employee ... she helps with ad work and ... photographs' (C5). There is a sense that being known locally is a benefit 'It boils down to who you know' (I4) as one 'use[s] that [local] credibility a

² The Wild Atlantic Way is Ireland's first long-distance touring route, stretching 2,500 km along the Atlantic coast from Donegal (North West tip) to West Cork (South West tip). The overall aim of the project is to achieve greater visibility for the west coast of Ireland in overseas tourist markets.

lot' although 'that [credibility] also comes with responsibility to do the right thing' (US9).

The network chairs were proactive in their pursuit of enhanced connectivity through social interaction and organized familiarization trips where members got 'to learn a lot about people, their stories and their businesses ... in turn that connected us' (C5); 'I [network chair] wanted to get everyone involved, not just the usual suspects' (I7). Respondents acknowledged that the network chairs 'have got us to here' (US2), however a strong chair can create challenges, particularly if they 'don't step outside the box... [of] drawing inspiration from the same people that you've been working with for 20 or 30 years' (C5). When probed on this challenge, respondents suggested that 'it boils down to who's in charge' (I11); '[the] number one issue is [network] leadership' ... a lack of, or [a] traditional leadership style, which results in very controlling leaders' (US11) suggesting a hierarchical network in these cases. C1 offered insight into why this insider perspective might occur;

'It's really good to be finding new people to talk to and drawing on ... [and that] these guys have a wealth of knowledge, their business is tourism, ... none are the same as the [culinary network] because that is a bunch of us working solely together for the betterment of this area'.

In the Canadian network, micro firms affiliated to a larger municipality spoke of 'this old network' (C3, C5) and familiarity was perceived to determine inclusion in local projects and developments, leaving newcomers or those outside this inner circle with the feeling that there was 'little support ... but I think it might be changing' (C3). Respondents also perceived that 'the external opportunities to interact with others were harder to come by in these [rural] communities' (US10), as 'they won't make the journey and we don't have time. The road runs both ways you know, but they don't see that' (I1). There is a sense that 'the insider-outsider dynamic is very prevalent' (US9) and that 'if you're not known locally you could struggle as a new start-up' (I9). Interviewees believed that this 'closed-mindedness' (I6) was curtailing rural tourism network potential and 'limiting who we speak to ... it's like a club, which means we don't hear other perspectives as often as we should' (US6).

4.4. Evidence of trust in social exchange

Respondents told stories to exemplify how trust builds through repeated social exchange,

'When we first started we had no money. We had no money at all and actually we had been working at [local restaurant] for 3 years. And actually we had some clients that we knew from up there. Well when we were going to open up a restaurant down here, we had two different sets of customers gave [sic] us 10 thousand dollars ... just gave it to us ... that's how we got started. I wouldn't say they're our mentors but supporters' (US2).

This view was echoed by various respondents in each studied country, 'I have a couple of mentors that I chat with' (US4); 'I worked in a large hotel, I still bounce off my old manager' (I4); 'we also look regionally with our partners' (CS1). As networks evolved, members believed that they 'all sort of feel a kinship' (C4) where you 'know everybody's business' (US2) and 'you're in touch with the local firms' (I5). Through cumulative interactions, a system of self-governance appears to have emerged in each case and trust is leveraged as a micro firm asset in some cases, 'There is a bunch of

[businesses] that I go to ... I will call them all the time and say what is your price base for this?' (C1), 'I talk almost daily with [C6] in terms of what's going on [in the region]' (C9). In other cases, interaction hadn't evolved past superficial exchange; '... we don't really talk about, you know, how business is and what we can do to help each other' (US2), and some believe 'there is a big split [in the community], the long-time residents and the newcomers don't always see eye to eye as they [the newcomers], some wanted to tell us what to do' (US7). Of note is a general view amongst US OMs that there was less rapport between them and local government agencies despite 'reaching out a couple of different times' (US2).

Trust was also less evolved between geographical locations, 'it doesn't happen from here to [neighbouring municipalities on the trail] yet' (C5); 'County lines are important to some people ... others work together ...' (US12). A perceived urban/rural division was noted as discussed above. In Ireland, Gaelic football and hurling (national sports played at county level) were considered the 'life-blood of rural communities ... it brings the community closer together' (I9). In contrast, in the USA, 'It's high school sports that people are tied to rather than county. It can cause problems. If you want two communities to work together, it can be difficult if they are on different teams at Friday night football. It means they compete by community' (US11). Despite having a strong hockey and baseball culture, there was no mention of community or county sport as having an influence on inter-community collaboration in the Canadian case.

4.5. Trust as an evolving asset

While network participants perceived there to be no more than minor tensions between the micro firm network members, supporting stakeholders believed that these tensions were deeper than portrayed 'small towns are always nice to each other on the surface, but it doesn't always connect' (US8); 'there's a bit of sniping ... one-upmanship' (I8), 'It's a small community, you can't really say what you think, it'll be held against you' (I7), 'they all argue with each other ... all the time' (US5). There were concerns expressed about the impact on network engagement if relationships remain superficial over time;

'They are sometimes *careful* with each other, don't speak their mind even when they don't agree and then complain amongst themselves after the meeting. But that's no use as they mightn't fight for the network or walk away after one misdemeanor, as they haven't fully invested in it [the relationship] up to that point. I think this is the crux of it and the more they know each other, and bat things out honestly over time, the more likely they'll say 'you know, he's mostly been ok, this isn't like him so let's shake hands and move on' (I9).

Respondents believed that network chairs should police network integrity by 'getting rid of the members that aren't playing their part' (C5) or 'aren't pulling their weight' (I1) or 'taking without giving anything back' (I4) but were less willing to challenge these members' behavior face-to-face, 'it's a small place, it's a huge risk to fall out with someone, we all know each other' (I3). In contrast, functional conflict did exist between the network chairs and local/regional support stakeholders, 'There is a big chunk of this trail that is in [a particular region] and [the municipalities] should be promoting it, but it's always [the network chair] reminding them 'hey, we're part of your county, we're part of the counties that are working together as part of our RTO [regional tourism organization]' (C6), while for regional support agents, 'you've to tread carefully, it's their (OM) network at the end of the day' (I11), 'The problem is ... to be able to capture the essence of each one of the

regions that lies ... within RTO7, therein lies the challenge' (C9). There were other examples of functional conflict that served to strengthen the business relationship between the chair and support stakeholders: 'I am certainly a supporter of the culinary trail network' (C10, C9); 'debate is helpful, most of the solutions come from initial disagreement' (I7).

5. Discussion

The case findings demonstrate that initial willingness to engage with the network is primarily propelled by potential tourism micro firm markets or monetary gains rather than an underlying propensity to trust in this setting. Specifically, bonding ties between the studied micro firms have a strong commercial rationale with opportunities to bridge to a broader customer and tourist base actively pursued.

5.1. The role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement

The expectation that positive interactions alone can build trust (Glaeser et al., 2000; Lewicki et al., 2006) is somewhat naive as emotion, cognition, past and current experience and time all influence an individual's 'willingness to engage' (Tables 3 and 4) based on the case findings. The social process of mutual exchange with underlying obligations and benefits lead to a 'process of mutual learning, exploration, testing and some negotiation' (Gabarro, 1978, p. 301) that occurs over time (Gulati, 1995; Morrow Jr. et al., 2004) based on repeated positive interactions coupled with the member's willingness to engage. The findings exhibit the emergence of a mutual confidence in network members and periphery partners based on experience gathered through iterative bonding, bridging and linking activities, wherein trust acts as a governance tool.

Bridging ties with those beyond the rural tourism communities afford additional value to the network, in the form of tourism expertise, access to markets and potential funding opportunities. Boundary role persons (Currall & Judge, 1995; Fuller-Love & Thomas, 2004) such as network chairs (inside-out) and regional support agents (outside-in) in this study should offer capacity to engage with the various ties (bonding, bridging, linking) so that

network engagement is optimized over time. Of note is that in each of the cases, the network chairs were instrumental in facilitating initial exchanges with external stakeholders; however, they have yet to afford full organic evolution of trust within their respective networks in interaction with regional stakeholders. The case data suggest the decision to focus on local rural contacts is partly based on positive past interactions (Glaeser et al., 2000), but leaves chairs vulnerable to the promotion of sectarian interests in their rural network (Kelliher et al., 2014; O'Brien et al., 2005). Thus, potential reluctance to trust those unknown to the rural tourism network, particularly if the boundary person is in the chair role over a prolonged period, can reinforce barriers to bridging and linking exchanges. This may also manifest in constrained bridging and linking relationships beyond the immediate network (including chamber of commerce, business associations, culinary and tourism trails and other micro firms) within the local community/municipality.

Contemplating the building of trust over time, there was no evidence of mistrust in the studied networks; however, there was an absence of many of the behaviors reported to signify the existence of affective trust, including the ability to challenge member perspectives (e.g. functional conflict). Thus, the bonding relationships between the observed micro firm OMs and network chairs appear to be shaped by cognitive trust (Jaouen & Lasch, 2015; McAllister, 1995). Accumulated affective trust (Davidsson & Honig, 2003; Rousseau et al., 1998) was less evident as problems based on inadequate member participation and/or unacceptable member behavior was rarely discussed at network meetings for fear of negative consequences. Notably, this perceived need for (only) positive interactions leaves rural network members vulnerable to a lack of debate within the network (e.g. functional conflict), resulting in a stunted evolution of trusting relationships. Reticence to challenge perspective in this way may also result in narrow sectarian interests between the network and others (Kelliher et al., 2014; O'Brien et al., 2005) to the detriment of optimized engagement. Thus, case findings concur that operationalizing interpersonal and inter-firm trust requires a focus on the level of trust within and between the various layers of network and boundary engagement.

A summary of the key research findings point to reverberation of literature-led criteria coupled with emergent themes as exhibited in the findings (Table 4).

Table 4
Role of Trust in Building Rural Micro firm Network Engagement - Key Findings.

Criteria (Table 1)	Emerging themes as exhibited in the findings
Propensity to trust	- OM exhibited willingness to engage in the network is based on potential access to market or monetary gain rather than an underlying propensity to trust
Expectation	- Expectation is influenced by emotion, cognition, experience and the passing of time;
Mutual benefit	- Members may expect only positive interaction/exchange to the detriment of open communication - Mutual exchange is built on a cyclical process of fulfilling obligations and receiving benefits; - Requires member willingness to explore, test, negotiate and ultimately learn within the network (linked to expectation); - Open communication within the network facilitates debate/functional conflict, contributing to deeper trust; - Familiarity/protectionism/rural lens may be a barrier to new member inclusion by curtailing bonding, bridging and linking activities
Network as a social system	- Social system includes insider and outsider perspectives drawn from networks and close others; - Need for internal support/boundary role balance and rotation to optimize mutual engagement; - Mutual confidence enhances exchange reliance over time based on obligation: benefit balance; - Evidence of insider barriers that negatively impact external engagement; - Restrictions noted due to geographical location and propensity to only trust those known personally may reduce the number of those partners "worthy of trust"
Trust as an evolving asset	- Evidence points to the building of cognitive rather than affective trust in the studied cases; - Propels non-exploitative interactions with trust as a governance mechanism; - Less strength in rural/regional ties beyond the network; - Local loyalties diminish or reinforce trust as an evolving community asset; - Open debate/functional conflict acts as a catalyst to continue to learn, explore, test and negotiate within the network aiding the development of trust as an evolving asset

Source: Authors own.

Based on the preceding discussion, we assembled a framework of the role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement which exhibits an environment that can support the generation of trust as an evolving asset (Fig. 1).

A member's willingness to engage (point 1) is a positive starting point but is one that should be thought of as a catalyst to enter a probationary engagement period at the center of Fig. 1, in which members engage initially in collective action with preconceived expectations about their interactions with others in the network (see influences, Fig. 1). During this period, network members learn, explore, negotiate and test as they weigh up the benefits they believe those interactions should yield, and measure them against the obligations that come with engagement. Over time and through a series of social interactions, members develop mutual confidence in each other's intent (point 2). From here, exchange reliance evolves balanced by non-exploitative interactions wherein trust acts as an exchange governance mechanism. The existence of functional conflict acts as a means through which members can discuss problems openly without fear of any malevolent consequences to ensure that network relationships are conducive to doing business, while boundary roles enhance the balance of bonding, bridging and linking activities (point 3) in order to ensure sustained network engagement. The cyclical nature of rural micro firm network engagement is echoed in Fig. 1, as the outer coils exhibit the concepts of non-exploitative interactions leading to trust as a governance mechanism within the network and in interaction with various boundary roles, ultimately leading to the perception that a partner is worthy of trust. Mutual confidence gives way to exchange reliance over time, within which dynamic functional conflict acts as a catalyst to continue to learn, explore, test and negotiate aiding the development of trust as an evolving asset. Avenues for network members to negotiate the obligation/benefit balance of network engagement are crucial to underpin *mutual* confidence and *mutual* exchange behaviors. The framework pulses from inner to outer to inner circle illustrating that trust becomes a continuously evolving micro firm asset, through which the benefits and opportunities affiliated with bonding, linking and bridging can occur.

6. Conclusions

This research contributes to a better understanding of how trust is built in a rural micro tourism network by addressing the called for study of interactions and relationships that lead to trust (Galunic et al., 2012; Pesamaa & Hair Jr., 2008; Saxena, 2005). Taking a social exchange perspective (Blau, 1968), we explored whether social exchange builds trust on both sides (Luo, 2005) based on past behavior (Lyon et al., 2015; Rousseau et al., 1998). Findings point to a partial reverberation of the literature-led criteria of the network as a social system with mutual benefit at the core of social exchange and trust as an evolving asset. An OM's willingness to engage with the local network was initially driven by potential business gains or valuable business connections and only over time did propensity to trust build, based on repeated positive interactions and the building of mutual gains.

The paper makes several noteworthy contributions. The social aspect of the network is of particular importance in building trust in a rural setting. Despite the expectation that trust can provide a linking mechanism across organizational and network boundaries (Currall & Judge, 1995; Fuller-Love & Thomas, 2004), cognitive trust, based on personal knowledge of the other party, was most prevalent in the observed rural networks. This manifested in social interactions based on relational and geographic proximity, as OMs relied heavily on bonding relationships with family and local OMs, in the main, for advice and guidance on business activities. OMs rarely pursued bridging and linking relationships beyond this

cohort, instead relying on the network chair to facilitate non-exploitative interactions between the network and socially and geographically distant others. This approach exhibits a separatist rural identity, with members believing they needed to 'stick together', and curtailed bridging and linking relationship building beyond the network core, particularly in relation to government support agencies and urban stakeholders who, based on the research findings, were primarily seen as 'outsiders'. This familiarity preference also appeared to curtail new member recruitment and inclusion. Of note is that affiliation to community sports influenced cross community collaboration and propensity to trust in the Irish and USA cases, while this was not a mitigating factor in the Canadian case findings. In situations where support agencies and urban stakeholders arranged formal bridging and linking activities, these were perceived to be 'awkward' by micro firm members suggesting that current stakeholder engagement policies may not be appropriate in rural network environments. Contemplation of alternative, less formal approaches to bridging and linking activities between these exchange partners are worthy of consideration in light of these findings.

A perceived need for (only) positive interactions meant that despite challenges relating to varying levels of network participation, problems were rarely discussed at network meetings for fear of negative consequences. Supporting stakeholders believed these tensions were deeper than portrayed by network members, as a rural setting amplified the perceived need for harmony, at least on the surface. This led to an absence of many of the behaviors reported to signify the existence of affective trust, including the ability to challenge member behavior in a functional manner without fear of any malevolent consequences (Heidari et al., 2014). Left unchecked, social exchange would likely remain shallow, stunting the evolution of trust in the relationship. There was a general sense that without strong leadership from the network chair, this challenge would be insurmountable. However, chair strength needs to be tempered with willingness to hear and see other perspectives both within the network and beyond its periphery. Without this openness, Gabarro's (1978) trust process of mutual learning, exploration, testing and negotiation is curtailed, to the detriment of long-term network relationships. Fig. 1 presents the complexity of the role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement in diagrammatic form and attempts to exhibit the layers of bonding, bridging and linking activities that can occur in a fully functioning rural tourism micro firm network. Considering the pivotal nature of the chair and boundary roles in rural networks, the provision of focused/one-to-one management training and development by support agencies may be appropriate given the case findings.

As with all studies, this research has certain limitations, and as such, its findings present avenues for future research. Recommendations for further research are offered with an underlying goal of transferability of the findings to other cases with similar characteristics. A review of country specific development policies was not the aim of this research but would offer a valuable extension, specifically building trust between often urban-based government support agencies and the rural communities that their development policies target and impact. Fig. 1 may offer a good starting point for further research on the role of trust in rural tourism micro firm network engagement. Measures to overcome the identified barriers to building trust within and beyond the rural tourism network environment could include the use of network surveys and an open/transparent application process for membership.

Acknowledgement

Fulbright Foundation, Irish Research Council Marie Skłodowska-Curie Cofund.

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