The relevance of relational capabilities in collaborative decisions

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to focus on inter-firm collaboration, exploring the main capabilities that can make a business more or less open to collaboration; it also considers the role of both firm-specific and relationship-specific capabilities. The paper proposes a model that can be used to study how the combination of the two categories of capabilities determines a firm's approach to collaboration.

Design/methodology/approach – Through a survey of high-end hotels in tourist destinations in Italy and the USA, this paper tests variable connected with firm-specific and relationship-specific aspects, using confirmatory factor analysis.

Findings – Firms with greater capabilities are less open to cooperation; weaker firms with fewer resources appear to be more inclined to cooperate, probably to gain access to resources and competencies they do not possess.

Research limitations/implications – From a scientific perspective, this paper suggests an analysis based on both individual and relational capabilities when deciding whether to collaborate, while most studies based on a relational view just consider relational capabilities. The study could be enlarged to other countries and contexts.

Practical implications – From a practical perspective, it indicates the importance of accounting for different and sometimes diverging aspects when deciding to cooperate.

Social implications – In terms of social implications, it shows that, apart from the relational capabilities they have, potential partners can decide not to collaborate.

Originality/value – The paper suggests a method of analyzing both individual and relational capabilities when deciding whether to engage in a collaboration. It shows that firms' behavior does not necessarily depend on the firm's relational capabilities.

Keywords Cooperation, Hospitality industry, Relational capabilities, Individual capabilities

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

The literature on inter-firm collaboration in the tourism industry has always focused on the main reasons for the success or failure of business relationships (Zaheer and Bell, 2005) rather than on the role of network governance in this process (Nooteboom *et al.*, 1997). The businesses studied were destination management firms; also studied were destination management organizations (Khalilzadeh and Wang, 2018). Specifically, scholars have stressed destination management organizations' role in stimulating networking (Cooper, 2006). Sheehan *et al.* (2016) refer to destination management organizations as "intelligent agents" in establishing knowledge sharing and learning routines. Accordingly, due to the common understanding of a destination as a tourism system, several scholars increasingly have underlined the importance of applying a network perspective to the different fields of tourism research (Aubke, 2014; Merinero-Rodríguez and Pulido-Fernández, 2016). Most studies on tourism networks in the context of the tourism and hospitality industry are either driven by the question of network antecedents or concentrated on defining the effects of collaboration (Binder, 2019). In some cases, the issue of distrust/trust in relationship management has been taken into account (Damayanti *et al.*, 2017; Della Corte and Aria, 2014). Building relational capital requires firms to create relationships that are nurtured through mutual respect, trust, reciprocity and personal friendship (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2019).

Little work has been done on the antecedents of the main motivation for firms to collaborate. In fact, most of the papers focus on network effects on knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer, while studies focusing on the antecedents that lead a firm to engage in a network are rare (Binder, 2019). Therefore, the original contributions of this paper are twofold: We explore the main capabilities that can make a firm more or less open to collaboration and we consider the role of both firm- and relationship-specific capabilities in inter-firm collaboration. In exploring these capabilities, the useful relationship to analyze is the link between firm-specific and relationship-specific capabilities. While relational capabilities have gained academic attention (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Argyres *et al.*, 2020), less interest has been shown to individual capabilities and to the tie between them (Jarzabkowski and Bednarek, 2018; Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez, 2006).

Drawing insights from resource-based theory (Barney, 1991, 2001), individual capabilities refer to the internal bundle of owned, available and useful capabilities acting as an antecedent of firm performance (Barney, 1991; Wade and Hulland, 2004). Adopting this theory, it is possible to know the precise mechanisms for improving performance (Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown, 2019). Individual capabilities are those that enable firms to manage, in a strategic way, their value-chain activities (Zulu-Chisanga *et al.*, 2020) and their resources. These are firm-specific capabilities that are leveraging firm-specific assets and they are more difficult to directly observe (Chen and Miller, 2015) by competitors and/or the potential actors of a future collaboration. Relational capabilities refer to firm-level competencies useful in engaging in relationships, carrying out collaborative activities and/or strategies with competitors or other actors of the referring ecosystem. Through the deployment of relational capabilities, a firm can decide to broaden its vision of relationships to improve its competitive position in the market (Lambert *et al.*, 1996; Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez, 2006).

In the literature, it is common for relational capabilities to be confused with the relationship itself. Apart from this aspect, which deserves to be the subject of specific research, the relational approach shows that these capabilities can generate, by themselves, a competitive advantage, without considering the interactions with the individual capabilities. Of course, every relationship generates specific capabilities, but each firm

involved in a collaboration uses and develops them in a totally different way, according to its overall endowment of resources. The term "inter-firm collaboration" indicates any cooperation between firms at the vertical, horizontal or local level. While vertical relationships are more widespread in practice and studies on them are abundant in the relevant literature, less information exists on the dynamics of horizontal and transversal relationships not characterized by a supply chain link (Keskin and Ucal, 2021).

To explore this aspect in more depth, this paper is structured in the following sections. First, the paper explores the theoretical background, recalling the main strategic management theories and views based on inter-firm relationships. Second, the paper develops the research methodology, describing how semi-structured interviews have been developed and how the main sub-constructs sustain both individual and relational capabilities. Third, the paper shows the main results of semi-structured interviews on four- and five-star hotels in tourist destinations in Italy and the USA, proposing a model that studies how the combination of the two categories of capabilities determines a firm's approach to collaboration. Finally, conclusions emphasize the main discovered aspects on the role of both individual and relational capabilities, shedding light on the theoretical and managerial insights.

2. Literature review on main theories of inter-firm collaboration

The topic of inter-firm collaboration is covered extensively in the literature, with studies exploring different theories and approaches. The current study is based on different theories and views (resource dependence theory and resource complementary theory) that explain why and how dynamic-capability-view firms collaborate, how mechanisms support the creation and the management of relationships (governance of inter-firm collaboration) and how the benefits emerge from collaboration in terms of relational rents (relational view). Therefore, we will single out specific aspects of these theories connected with the topic for a complete overview, even though our main concern is with the relational view.

Some past studies have been developed within resource dependence theory, which examines efforts to gain external resources through inter-organizational relationships (Pfeffer, 1987). Resource dependence in the tourism industry refers to the fact that:

- the local resources, external to firms, are often the main attractions and amenities of the destination; and
- actors are dependent on each other for complementary services (Ha *et al.*, 2014) they provide, as well as for the diverse resource endowment connected with the different experiences they offer (thus generating the so-called "power-dependence relation;" Kim *et al.*, 2004).

This aspect recalls the resource complementarity theory, asserting that there is a higher likelihood of cooperation when firms operate in complementary markets (Gimeno, 2004) and when their resources are compatible. Resource complementarity refers (Alvarez and Barney, 2007; Lin *et al.*, 2009) to the addition of resources and competencies to other resources and competencies because of a collaboration relationship, thus completing the bundle of necessary resources and reaching a complementary equilibrium.

Resource complementarity can be related to the capabilities of exploiting opportunities in dynamic environments (here including dynamic capabilities; Teece, 1986) or to the interaction between tourist firms and local attractions. Capron *et al.* (2007, p. 39) state that the dynamic capability view refers to "the capacity of the firm to purposefully create, extend or modify the firm's augmented resource base, which includes the resources of partners." In tourism-management literature, the dynamic-capability approach often has been adopted as

a way to study innovation (Nieves and Haller, 2014). Still, recent studies have specifically underlined how dynamic capabilities contribute to sustainable competitive advantages in inter-firm collaboration. The dynamic-capabilities theory contributes to a better understanding of how resources can be deployed to rapidly respond to market volatility, realize service and process innovation and establish strategic cooperation between partners (Jiang and McCabe, 2021).

In analyzing such interactions, many studies concentrate on contexts in which one of the partners owns high capabilities (more competitive firms; Hamel, 1991) and is a leading firm and the other partners are subsidiaries/suppliers/weaker firms. Some contributions to the literature concentrate on the returns derived from carrying out activities or on the advantages generated by economies of scope in terms of both cost reduction and governance opportunities (Teece, 1986). Much of this work has focused on how capability complementarities across firms can create incentives for firms to collaborate as a necessary precondition for inter-firm cooperation (Madhok and Phene, 2001). Dussauge *et al.* (2000) indicate that inter-firm collaboration appears to be particularly effective when referred to resources highly exposed to knowledge-based market failure or to firms with similar knowledge (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) or when they are competitors with a close and shared dominant logic (Bettis and Prahalad, 1995). Research on the governance of inter-firm collaboration (Williamson, 1985) suggests that firms must focus on erecting governance mechanisms that facilitate value creation while protecting from opportunism. The substantial empirical literature has examined both the capabilities' complementarity and the governance arguments (Buonincontri *et al.*, 2017). Alternatively, more recent studies indicate that firms engage in collaboration when they need specific resources to accomplish diverse tasks (Soda and Furlotti, 2017). In the tourism industry, governance in inter-firm collaboration seeks to "select an optimum set of policy actions and their associated implementation" (Hall, 2011, p. 649).

The governance of relationships is an important process in the formation and evolution of inter-firm collaboration. Even if a governance structure will evolve as the relationship matures, it reflects the relationship between partnering firms. Bakay Ergene and Karadeniz (2021) study suggested the lack of a direct relationship between value and governance. During the formation phase, firms are more skeptical of their partners due to opportunism risk. Therefore, a more formal governance structure is chosen. As the relationship matures and trust between firms develops, informal modes of governance are sought to reduce administration costs and speed up decision-making. Concentrating particularly on relations, the relational view mainly studies the relational rents generated by inter-firm collaboration (Dyer and Singh, 1998), which also are seen as a way to gain access to critical network resources. The two aspects – knowledge and relationships – also are studied with specific reference to innovation capabilities and, in particular, to the ability of managers/entrepreneurs to orchestrate internal assets and to enter into partnerships with other firms (Fitjar *et al.*, 2014). Studies on the "dark side" of inter-firm relationships focus on the problems of opportunistic behavior (focal firms' "Trojan horse" strategies; Mitrega *et al.*, 2012) or on inter-organizational conflicts, which always entail ongoing relationships.

Although the tourism industry appears to be consistent with almost all of the approaches examined here, there is a theoretical limitation in that these studies do not focus on individual behavior in cooperation, distinguishing between new relationships and the management of already existing ones. As explored in the academic literature, collaboration (relational) capabilities lie at the individual, organizational and inter-organizational (i.e. dyadic or network) levels of analysis (Zollo and Singh, 2004). As supply-chain relationships have already been studied with specific reference to the tourism industry (Keskin and Ucal,

2021), we decided to focus on how firms that are not in a supply-chain relationship – but rather in horizontal or local relationships – are open to collaboration. One objection may be that the intensity of collaboration may reduce the need and, therefore, the willingness to cooperate, but this is less true in destinations mainly comprising small and medium enterprises, which often cooperate at different levels (vertical, horizontal and with firms of different sectors) to better promote the destination as a whole. Furthermore, studies in the tourism industry have focused on behavioral antecedents (Tsanos and Zografos, 2016) such as trust, commitment, the relationship between trust and commitment, mutuality/reciprocity and past experience, rather than on individual and relational capabilities and necessities.

Several studies draw attention to the concepts of collaborative entrepreneurship (Bercovitz *et al.*, 2006) and managerial ambidexterity (Atuahene-Gima and Murray, 2007) as antecedents of inter-firm collaboration. While collaborative entrepreneurship refers to "the firm's ability to build collaborative behavior through strong relationships, managing and negotiating inter-firm linkages properly" (Pardo-del-Val, 2010, p. 486), managerial ambidexterity favors collaborative behavior, as it can pursue the exploration-exploitation paradigm through collaboration. Accordingly, as Pardo-del-Val (2010) highlights in his paper, "it is not the human capital that is most important to success because it is not the human, *per se*, that is the real asset but the relationships humans develop that are the most inimitable and important capital." This means that those firms that can go beyond human capital and build high-value relational capital will be more successful. Moreover, the need to overcome operational weaknesses, obtain lower transaction costs, reduce competitive risks and enhance offers to customers (Bercovitz *et al.*, 2006) can lead a firm to cooperate. Among others, these issues can be considered the main antecedents to collaboration at the organizational level. While these studies focus on the motivation behind and the advantages of collaboration, if we try to explain the antecedents with reference to the firm's overall endowment of resources, from a resource-based perspective they lead us to consider not only the relationship *per se* but rather the firm's resources and the role of the latter in deciding whether to engage in collaboration.

The above-mentioned theoretical lens is, in more open terms, also bound to a perspective that differs from coopetition (Della Corte and Aria, 2016; Della Corte *et al.*, 2018), as this one refers to competitive and collaborative dynamics between competitors that can create overall value. Previous research on coopetitive relationships has focused on relationships between heterogeneous firms operating in different sectors, with resources and capabilities that are non-redundant, while it is interesting to understand how coopetitive relationships have developed between horizontal suppliers and their relationships with other levels of suppliers in the tourism supply chain (Fong *et al.*, 2021).

The assumption is that coopetitive decisions depend on a firm's resources. This does not mean that we do not consider the possibility for competing firms to collaborate. We focus our analysis on the impact of both relational and individual capabilities when firms decide to collaborate. In the literature, it is common for relational capabilities to be confused with the relationship itself.

According to resource-based theory (Barney, 1991), both the relational view and the dynamic capability view can explain the strategic sources of competitive advantages (Barney *et al.*, 2011). A central point of these perspectives is that the firm can modify its resource base through collective learning to both respond to and provoke change. Although several studies have underlined the importance of an overlapping perspective for inter-firm collaboration in the tourism sector (Marasco *et al.*, 2018; Czakon and Czernek-Marszałek, 2020), few studies have adopted an integrated approach that considers how the dynamic-capability view and the relational view can interplay and, specifically, the role of both

relational and individual capabilities in a firm's decision to engage in cooperation. The specific literature is highly conceptual in the strategic-management area and this represents our challenge: to consider the importance of relational and individual capabilities in a firm's decision to cooperate.

As the choice of appropriate partners and the management of partnerships are central points, a firm with low relational capabilities cannot possess these specific competencies to support creating a strategic partnership, even if the individual resource endowment is high. Hence, some inhibitors connected with relational capital can include a lack of expertise or training in tourism planning, a lack of consensus (Ladkin and Bertramini, 2002) or a lack of collaborative culture due to entrepreneurial myopia, which can influence the level of relational abilities. Accordingly, our first hypothesis emerges:

H1. A firm endowed with low relational capabilities and high individual capabilities is likely to decide not to cooperate.

The classic case of a firm lacking internal resources and capabilities drives the decision of inter-firm collaboration. Indeed, the bundle of resources is the precise level of analysis for the collaboration, as the search for complementarity with other resources (Barney, 1991) encourages firms to collaborate.

Moreover, a low level of relational capabilities means that the resulting network productivity is simply the aggregate (collected work) of individual partners. In this case, a firm is prone to collaborate due to its bundle of low individual capabilities and the connected necessity to capture value from the partnership. This aligns with the resource dependence theory (Ha *et al.*, 2014), which considers the opportunity to exploit resources outside the firm through inter-organizational relationships.

From these observations, our second hypothesis emerges:

H2. A firm with low relational capabilities and low individual capabilities is likely to cooperate

Another critical issue within strategic management is "who collaborates with whom" or, in other words, "whom to ally with" (Mindruta *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, some of the main risks that can lead to failure and alliance underperformance are connected with opportunism and free riding. There are factors such as the credibility of the partner and organizational autonomy, that can dissuade a firm from the collaboration. Partner credibility is a construct shaped by the perception of the partner's knowledge base (realism), which can produce a specific collaboration through a potential partner showing a clear logic in its method, the comprehensiveness of a partner's knowledge and the demonstrated validity of the common project. Moreover, a high level of individual capabilities, as well as a high position in organizational autonomy, allows firms' managers to maintain autonomous strategic decisions and independently reach strategic goals. Thus, does our third hypothesis arise:

H3. A firm with high relational capabilities and high individual capabilities is less likely to cooperate.

To test these hypotheses, the next section will deal with the research methodology used. This is to show all the steps that led us to the construction of a theoretical model that assumes the existence of a dependency relationship between the individual capability and the relational capability dimensions in inter-firm collaboration. In the literature, individual resources and relational resources have always been studied separately and most of the literature on relational views is concentrated on the study of the relational capabilities

behind the success or the failure of inter-firm collaboration. From this gap in the analysis, we reached our research hypotheses, which consider what happens not when the relationship is going on but before the collaboration is entered into. Therefore, we considered all the possible combinations of resources that can favor or hinder the propensity to collaborate.

3. Research methodology

To answer our research hypotheses, we decided to support our theoretical considerations with a survey consisting of structured interviews with a representative sample of hotels located in attractive destinations in the USA, FL and California and in Italy, the Sorrento Peninsula and the island of Capri. The current study included a sample of 332 firms that concentrated on hotels and not on other operators in the tourism industry because the objective of the analysis was to focus deeply on the firms' resources, both individual and relational, to study their propensity to cooperate. We surveyed 332 firms in the two countries. We used a questionnaire that aimed to identify the whole set of capabilities that the firms have at different levels of their management (strategy, marketing and organization), distinguishing between individual and relational ones. We defined the latter as those capabilities required in both starting and managing relationships. In a specific section of the questionnaire, we verified:

- whether firms had already engaged in inter-firm collaboration and
- what was the decision-makers' approach to the idea of collaboration.

The task of the analysis was to verify the plausibility of a theoretical model that assumes the existence of a dependency relationship within the dimensions of individual capability and the relational capability in inter-firm collaboration.

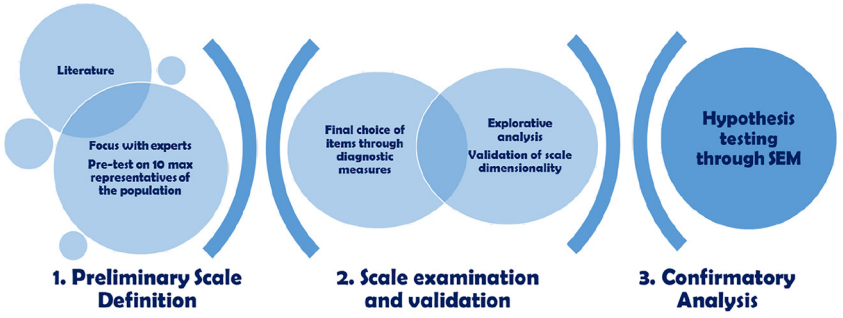
The procedure implemented entailed three phases (Figure 1):

(1) Creation of a scale for each of the three dimensions analyzed (scaling);

(2) Validation of the scales related to each dimension analyzed;

(3) Validation of research hypotheses through confirmatory analysis.

In the first stage, we prepared a preliminary scale, taking the main contributions in literature into account, which led us to the first list of 42 items to connect with either individual or relational capabilities. In this list, we identified the more ambiguous or



Source: Our Elaboration

Figure 1.
Research methods

confusing items, those that were redundant and those that could not be rated in the chosen dimensions. Using multiple items helps to average out errors, leading to increased reliability and to construct validity (DeVellis, 2003). In this context, the selected items have a common core that increases reliability and also contributes some unique variance that is not tapped by other items (Churchill and Peter, 1984). We proceeded with a pre-test with 10 of the firms most representative of the population, obtained a final list and subdivided the dimensions identified into two main segments: independent constructs (individual and relational capabilities), with 22 items and dependent constructs (collaboration), with two items. We identified in the questionnaire those questions that referred to items that could be considered proxies of both individual and relational capabilities. In Table 3, the scales 0–1 refer to yes/no answers, 1–5 are the evaluations within a Likert scale and the others depend on the number of answers that are checked as existing.

In identifying the independent constructs, we considered some basic constructs developed in the literature. These were split into different possible items that could be useful in using the related capabilities, both individual and relational. This process was difficult because, as always underlined in resource-based theory studies (Barney *et al.*, 2011), how resources and capabilities are used is still an open issue. According to resource-based theory and the relational-capability view, the latter's evaluation can be done using specific proxies (Barney, 1995). Since, however, the literature is split into two main streams: resources and capabilities as the bases of a single firm's competitive advantage on one side and relational capabilities on the other, we gathered the information, grouped it in clusters according to the main area of management on which it is concentrated and picked up the main variables and dummies. This is what happens in management studies when trying to measure intangible aspects such as capabilities and this always has been the approach in resource-based theory (Miller and Shamsie, 1996; Barney, 2001; Lee *et al.*, 2001).

This aspect always raises the issue of the difficulty of measuring firm resources and capabilities. This is the reason why proxies need to be used (Barney, 1995). On this basis, we decided to consider the main items in the literature rather than refer to either of the constructs. In this area, however, the only way to establish the real contributions of resources to specific business behavior (competitive advantage rather than collaboration) was to discover some proxies that could more or less directly help measure the tangible contribution of the resource or capability of that specific result from a scientific perspective.

The current study considered two main sub-constructs: strategic human resource management and customer-experience-based management concerning individual capabilities. These appear to be the key issues developed in the literature on this topic. Information and communication technology and related competencies are not considered distinctive competencies in this specific context but rather transversal items. Guchait and Cho (2010) mentioned that human-resource-management practices have additive, positive relationships with employees' feelings of job satisfaction, trust in management and psychological identification with their organizations. Moreover, other studies have found that employees' positive psychological capital (measured as hope, self-efficacy, resilience and optimism) significantly affects job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior (Jung and Yoon, 2015).

Based on the above-mentioned considerations resulting from considerable research of strategic human-resource management in the tourism industry, it appears clear that investments in specific and highly skilled human resources in the firm's crucial functions represent the level at which the firm tends to invest in highly skilled workers. This is also the expression of the commitment to workers' skills (Chambel *et al.*, 2015) and aligns with the literature on the topic in strategic management (Barney, 1991) and human-resource

management (Lepak *et al.*, 2006). The presence of specific personnel training programs oriented to the condition and personnel quality monitoring systems are the expressions of human resource management capability (Tews and Noe, 2017), referring to the introduction of training policies and productivity and performance measures. The first construct can also be associated with the constant training and development of employees (Barney, 1991), while the second can be connected to performance monitoring.

Regarding the individual capabilities in customer-experience-based management, the first two items (specific criteria to evaluate hotel service quality and continuous quality improvement in the offered services) are related to both the induced and organic level (Kranzbühler *et al.*, 2018; Erkmen and Hancer, 2019). The former aims to attract customers and induce them to choose a specific offer. It generally coincides with traditional marketing practices (the 4Ps). The organic level regard marketing activities as the service is provided and involves the atmosphere, quality of the service and personnel productivity. They include procedures and both tangible and intangible aspects to ensure quality services for customers (e.g. quality control procedures, customer feedback and handling customer complaints) and also are consistent with studies on services (Lovelock, 1992) and hospitality management (Della Corte *et al.*, 2013).

The use of advanced toolsets to measure and increase customer satisfaction and to evaluate and strengthen customer retention is considered the expression of customer orientation capability, as underlined by Cronin *et al.* (2000). The related literature on customer satisfaction (Chu, 2002) regard frequently measured customer satisfaction and the level of commitment in serving customers' needs. Customer retention, on the other hand, mainly refers to actions intended to establish and sustain relationships with customers (Peterson and Crittenden, 2020). The implementation of marketing policies aimed at service personalization as a key for customer satisfaction in the organic phase refers to the personalization and trust-building with customers (Iglesias *et al.*, 2019). The presence of an advanced department for complaints management and problem-solving planning and its implementation concerning customer complaints are ways to use complaints management capabilities in terms of the capacity to resolve guests' complaints and manage them professionally and promptly, even trying to convert a threat into an opportunity, in line with previous studies on the topic (Peterson and Crittenden, 2020). Atmosphere (ambiance) research and planning relates to the servicescape linked to external marketing activities (Della Corte and Micera, 2011). The term atmosphere assumes the capacity to create it as it is considered an individual capability.

Atmosphere values furniture, style, music, lights and scents, all elements that define the way customers feel about their surroundings, in line with other studies (Lashley *et al.*, 2005) that highlight the importance of the setting or physical environment in providing emotional dimensions to the service experience. About relational capabilities, we considered both relational customer-oriented capabilities and networking capabilities. The former refers to a firm's capability to improve relationships with customers in an experience-based logic through inter-firm collaboration; the latter is more specifically linked to inter-firm management's systemic capabilities. Specific ongoing activities to increase customer satisfaction with the entire destination use the relationship between its capabilities and its partners' value-proposition capabilities. They include shared procedures to ensure quality services for customers (quality control procedures enable customer feedback to be obtained and customer complaints to be handled (Lavie *et al.*, 2012; Smirnova, *et al.*, 2011). Minimizing customer complaints and reducing employees' response time through inter-firm, programmed action are expressions of the relational development capability and the organizational responsiveness capability (Lavie *et al.*, 2012; Mitrega *et al.*, 2012), as handling

complaints positively affects perceived justice, satisfaction and loyalty in business relationships. In some studies, this variable is defined as an expression of collaboration performance. Here, however, we consider the potential of these activities to become capabilities, which can generate a competitive advantage.

In product policy at the systemic level, co-joint proposals toward the different market targets refer to managing the relationship with suppliers, according to which firms combine external sources with their own activities to obtain products differentiated from their competitors; this concept is underlined by Hervas-Oliver and Albors-Garrigos (2009) and the related literature (Wilke *et al.*, 2019).

The nature of complementary services (and connected capabilities) activated through inter-firm collaboration is the way to use the joint activities that firms can establish to improve clients' overall perception of the destination's services. Moreover, this feature is an expression of complementary resources, as the success of the entire destination depends on the efficient coordination and the integration of individual companies' resources, products and services (Beritelli, *et al.*, 2007).

The implementation of technologies by third parties to improve internal marketing toward employees relates to the commitment to the alliance's performance. Regarding the use of networking capabilities, an extranet made it possible to transfer information, which is consistent with previous studies (Granovetter, 1983). We considered the amount of time spent as a member of such extranet networks and the number of relationships within the ordinary activity network (more than 80%). The number of projects and initiatives set in place by the firm through inter-firm collaborations is an expression of the engagement in joint field activities and of good ongoing relationships and, therefore, of embedded relationships, as underlined in Lavie *et al.* (2012) and the related literature (Dyer and Singh, 1998).

Knowledge sharing is an expression of strategic fit and alliance complexity (Lavie *et al.*, 2012). These items refer to compatible technologies, platforms, complementary skills and capabilities which, together, can create more value as they share a similar vision of industry trends (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Jacob, 2006). These things are also an expression of interactive learning, considering knowledge development as a significant vehicle to increase the firm's attractiveness to partners and to speed in innovation and synergies and efficiencies generated by such interactions (Lavie *et al.*, 2012). The number and type of interactive business-to-business programs are the expression of the inter-functional coordination with other parties to better serve the target market's needs, in line with several studies (Smirnova *et al.*, 2011). The awareness and use of interactive technology solutions such as the destination management system refer to the strategic fit and expertise compatible with other technologies, platforms or products (Lavie *et al.*, 2012; Lewis *et al.*, 2019; Soteriades, 2012).

According to suggestions from the experts and after the experimental interviews, other selected items were incorporated into wider categories or eliminated. For example, the designation of a public pivotal actor able to favor network development as an expression of management capability, as underlined in Hervas-Oliver and Albors-Garrigos (2009), requires clear recognized leaders and this was not the case in the areas examined. The engagement of qualified people in the marketing field as a way to implement marketing capability (Hervas-Oliver and Albors-Garrigos, 2009) was incorporated in other variables. It was applied to the presence of experience-based managerial skills related to knowledge codification capabilities, as highlighted by several authors (Zollo and Singh, 2004). The cost advantages linked to the size of the network (economies of scale and scope) as an expression of marketing routine capabilities (Lavie *et al.*, 2012) are considered to be mainly for the focal firm and this was not the case. The competitors' insight and responsiveness to competitive

actions are the expression of competition dynamics, rather than orientation capability, studied by various scholars (Smirnova *et al.*, 2011). The partners' awareness of establishing a long-term relationship, which refers to the continuity capability, was incorporated in other items.

The dependent variable of this study is the intensity of propension to collaboration prior to the performance. Collaboration advantage, also called joint competitive advantage, has been used in the literature, connected with the concept of relational rent generated by inter-firm collaboration (Dyer and Singh, 1998) and corresponds to the value created in dyadic relationships. Collaborative advantage implies a positive-sum game for all parties involved, even if to different degrees and therefore is connected with the value created through collaboration in terms of cost-saving (by transferring best practices, flexibility, increased revenues through resource synergy, innovation and "cross-pollination of ideas"; Cao and Zhang, 2011, p. 167). Considering Cao and Zhang's identification of items in supply-chain management, here we concentrate on increasing revenues and reputation through business synergy, innovation and perceived quality. In this paper, we identify two main sub-constructs: level/intensity and efficacy of collaboration. For the former, the intensity of coordination is measured by the following item: Commitment to drawing up long-term commercial agreements and co-marketing initiatives with other actors in the tourism system during the past three years. The assessment has been linked in the literature (Simatupang and Sridharan, 2004) to the degree of decision synchronization in terms of coordinating planning and co-joint activities over time, with a continuous interchange both socially (meetings and relationships) and virtually (online).

The effectiveness of the openness to collaboration has been measured by the degree of stability of decisions between members. This is measured by the following item: "the belonging to more consolidated forms of networks with good market positioning (consortia, other), in the past three years" (Lavie *et al.*, 2012). The existence of a high level of trustworthiness among the involved actors, with the consequent reduction of performance risks, relates to the concept of mutual trust, as defined by Lavie *et al.* (2012). The network partners' mutual understanding and knowledge related to the concept of familiarity, analyzed by Schilke and Cook (2015), is not relevant, as all partners had in-depth knowledge of each other in both areas. As a further step, item-scale correlation and coefficient alpha (Cronbach, 1951) have been calculated. The validation of the scale aligned with different scholars, subjected to confirmatory factor analysis. Indeed, each variable is exclusively connected with specific items that constitute the indicator (Danneels, 2016).

As regard the control variables, we selected two main dimensions: the firm's size and the location (type of destination). The firm size (Danneels, 2016) is operationalized by organizational size similarity, in line with studies (Lavie *et al.*, 2012) that associate size differences with power struggles, which may affect the stability of the alliance or with the level of networking linkages among firms (Erkuş-Öztürk, 2009) and the spatially embedded relational behavior. Firm size as a control variable also is in line with previous studies (Sardana *et al.*, 2020; Lee and Xiao, 2011). The locations item is related to the country effect perspective studied by Camisón and Forés (2015), which underlines that the international competitiveness of a tourism firm is the overall effect of the attractiveness of the general and regional environment in which it is located (Kogut and Zander, 1993; Rodríguez-Victoria *et al.*, 2017). It is also consistent with Novelli *et al.* (2006), who consider tourism clusters as the result of the co-location of complementary firms, in a fruitful combination of local resources and their location's uniqueness. It must be considered as a business-related input factor of competitiveness and attractiveness (Enright and Newton, 2004). Location is a dichotomous variable (like male/female). To include such types of predictors in a regression

model, the variable is transformed into a dummy variable (0/1) where one of the two categories plays the role of reference category (assuming the value 1). However, the variable retains a discrete scale. The regression coefficient will measure the additional main effect on the response for the observations that assume the target category in relation to the observations, not assuming it. This is a standard approach to include dichotomous categorical variables in all parametric and non-parametric regression models.

To verify the presence of a co-founding effect between the location and the firm size, we estimated the model by inserting one control variable at a time and verified its statistical significance. The firm size never showed significant coefficients for links with the propensity to collaboration and for relational capability. We proceeded to scale validation through factor analysis, with the specific approach called nonlinear principal component analysis (Meulman *et al.*, 2004). This method is the nonlinear equivalent of standard principal component analysis (PCA) and it reduces the observed variables to several uncorrelated principal components. The most important advantages of nonlinear over linear PCA are that it incorporates nominal and ordinal variables and can handle and discover nonlinear relationships between variables. Furthermore, nonlinear PCA can address variables at their appropriate measurement level.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) allows the statistical testing of a hypothesized factor structure. Confirmatory factor analysis would be used to indicate how well a set of data fits the hypothesized structure. With CFA, the structure is hypothesized in advance and the data are fit to it. A well-known approach to conducting a CFA is the structural equations model (SEM) implementing the estimation procedure of partial least square path modeling (PLS-PM). This, in comparison with the classical covariance-based confirmatory approach, does not require distributional assumptions on the data and delivers more accurate results when operating on non-cardinal items. We, therefore, estimated the SEM model with the PLS-PM procedure. A partial least square is a family of alternating least-squares algorithms that extend principal-component and canonical-correlation analysis. The method was designed by Wold (1974) to analyze high-dimensional data. To conduct the CFA, we define a conceptual model M, explaining the relationship among the collaboration (CL) and the individual (IC) and relational capability (RC) dimensions (or factors):

$$\mathrm{CL} = \mathrm{f}\big(\mathrm{h}(\mathrm{IC}), \mathrm{g}(\mathrm{RC})\big)$$

Each dimension is measured by a set of items validated by the factorial explorative analysis. The g and h are the functions, which express the measurement models for factors of relational and individual capabilities, while f is the function expressing the conditional relationship between the capabilities and inter-firm collaboration. Following our research hypotheses, we verified a negative causal relationship between IC and CL and between RC and CL. The interaction between IC and RC has been measured testing the mutual linear correlation between the two construct scores. P-value has been calculated through the bootstrap procedure. Finally, we performed a necessary condition analysis (NCA) (Dul, 2016) on PLS-SEM constructs scores as proposed in Richter *et al.* (2020). A necessary condition can be considered a critical factor of a response variable. The NCA highlights the existence of necessary conditions in the causal structure among the analyzed constructs and guides the researchers to identify necessary and sufficient roles in research hypotheses.

4. Results

In Tables 1 and 2, we describe the main characteristics of our sample. As shown in Table 1, we collected information about 332 hotel firms, 284 (85%) from the USA and 48 (15%) from

Firm characteristics	Frequency	(%)
Nbs of rooms		
- 25 or less	205	61.8
-26–50	62	18.7
-51–100	29	8.7
-101–150	22	6.6
- 151 or more	14	4.2
Nbs of beds		
- 100 or less	266	80.1
-101–200	35	10.5
-201–300	13	3.9
- 301 or more	18	5.4
Area		
- Italy	48	14.5
- USA	284	85.5
Respondent characteristics		
Role		
- Entrepreneur	65	19.6
- General manager	48	14.5
- Marketing manager	14	4.2
- Booking manager	205	61.7

Table 1.
Firm and respondent characteristics

Location			Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Italy	Size	Rooms	11.0	377	76.7	69.0
		Beds	22.0	760	160.4	139.9
USA	Size	Rooms	2	555	35.5	68.4
		Beds	2	1,000	60.9	130.9
Overall	Size	Rooms	2	555	41.5	69.8
		Beds	2	1,000	75.3	136.6

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics of control variables

Italy. The proportion between the two strata reflects the population (number of hotel firms) ratio between the two countries. Respondents had high levels of expertise: Almost 62% of respondents were booking managers, 20% were entrepreneurs and 15% were general managers. To reduce method bias, we have statistically controlled the obtained data, explaining in the introduction of the survey why the questions are important and laboriously reviewing the survey procedures (MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012).

According to Table 2, hotels have an average size of 41.5 rooms and 75.3 beds. The firm size is quite different between the two locations. Italian hotels are more than double the size of American companies in terms of both rooms and beds.

The results of the exploratory analysis indicate the existence of three dimensions; for each, only the items with significant loadings have been selected. In Table 3, the list of the selected items that were significant is reported for each dimension. Combined explained variability is obtained by ordinal principal component analysis and alpha indicates Cronbach's alpha index. Values in columns two and three indicate item-scale correlations. This is the reason why we chose to estimate the SEM through the PLS approach.

These data show interesting results as the variables with a higher score are the investments in talents (4 as a median); problem-solving capabilities (5) and digital tools and

Table 3.
Scaling analysis

Variables	Scale	Median	Individual capability *alpha 0.73*	Relational capability *alpha 0.72*	Collaboration level *alpha 0.71*
			Combined explained variability 71.93		
Strategic human resource management					
Investments in specific and highly skilled human resources in the crucial functions of the firm	0–5	4	0.408		
Presence of specific personnel training programs oriented to quality	0–1	1	0.572		
Presence of personnel quality monitoring systems	0–1	1	0.624		
Strategic identification of the elements characterizing the atmosphere of the structure	0–5	4	0.609		
Customer experience-based management					
Specific criteria to evaluate hotel service quality	0–5	4	0.746		
Continuous quality improvement actions in the offered services	0–8	4	0.857		
Advanced toolsets to measure customer satisfaction	0–5	3	0.822		
Marketing policies in the organic phase aimed at personalization as key for customer satisfaction	0–5	4	0.680		
Presence of an advanced department in "complaints management"	0–1	1	0.372		
Problem-solving planning and implementation with reference to customer complaints	0–6	5	0.398		
Specific criteria developed to evaluate customer retention	0–1	1	0.389		
Atmosphere (ambiance) researched planning	0–1	1	0.509		
Networking:					
Use of advanced GDS and extranet programs in the field of hotel firms relational marketing	0–5	4		0.487	
Number of projects and initiatives through inter-firm collaborations	0–5	3		0.629	
Specific ongoing inter-firm activities to increase customer satisfaction toward the destination	0–1	1		0.593	
Actions of knowledge sharing	0–2	1		0.710	
Awareness and use of interactive technology solutions like the destination management system	0–2	1		0.573	
Number and types of interactive business-to-business programs	0–3	2		0.581	
Typologies of complementary services (and connected capabilities) to activate through inter-firm collaboration to improve the client overall perception of the provided services in the destination	0–5	3		0.548	

(*continued*)

Variables	Scale	Median	Combined explained variability 71.93 **Individual capability** *alpha 0.73*	**Relational capability** *alpha 0.72*	**Collaboration level** *alpha 0.71*
Customers complaints minimization and reduction of employees' response time to collaboration through inter-firm programmed interactions	0–5	4		0.630	
In the product policy at the systemic level, co-joint proposals toward the different market targets	0–1	1		0.698	
Implementation of technologies with third parties to improve the internal marketing addressed to the employees	0–1	1		0.569	
Intensity of propension to collaboration:					
Being member of more consolidated forms of networks with a good market positioning (consortia, other)	0–1	1			0.869
Commitment in drawing up successful commercial agreements and co-marketing initiatives with other actors in the tourism system	0–1	1			0.848

Source: Our elaboration

Table 3.

competencies (4). This confirms that the firms' competitiveness in this sector faces a double challenge: competencies in digitalization and high attention to service quality. For each variable, we report the item-scale correlations, showing high values for the majority of them and, in any event, values never lower than 0.3. The consistency of the three scales is also confirmed by Cronbach's alpha values (all superior to 0.7). In Figure 2, the path diagram of Model M is shown, summarizing the causal relationships between IC, RC and CL and the mutual relationship between IC and RC. The model also includes the effect of the control variables of firm size and location. Values close to the arrows are the regression coefficients and p-values (in brackets). A p-value < 0.05 indicates a significant correlation. Classical circles represent the model dimensions, while dashed circles represent control variables.

The estimates of average variance extracted (AVE), for the three factors are 0.573, 0.566 and 0.731, respectively – greater than the critical value of 0.50. These results, considering the Cronbach alpha, provide evidence of good reliability for each factor (Table 4). To assess validity, two related perspectives are considered: convergent validity and discriminant validity. The convergent validity implies that a set of measured items represents a unidimensional construct. Fornell and Larcker (1981) propose that an AVE value $\geq$ of 0.5 measures an acceptable convergent validity. The results in Table 4 confirm a good

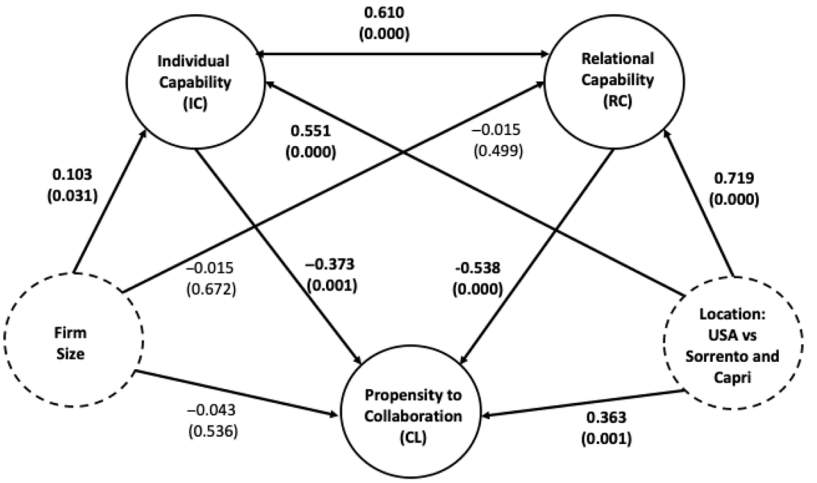


Figure 2.
Path diagram of capabilities – collaboration model with control variables

Notes: Significant coefficients are in bold font. dashed circles indicate control variables

Source: Our elaboration

Table 4.
AVE and squared correlations among constructs (Fornell-Larker criterion)

Scale	AVE	Collaboration	Individual capability	FL crit.
Propoensity to collaborate (CL)	0.731			***Satisfied***
Individual capability (IC)	0.573	0.013		***Satisfied***
Relational capability (RC)	0.566	0.197	0.381	***Satisfied***

Source: Our elaboration

convergent validity, with values all higher than 0.5. Similar results are obtained using the alternative approach by Henseler *et al.* (2015), Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). For the sake of simplicity, we decided not to report HTMT results.

The model highlights the existence of a negative significant causal effect of IC on CL (interfactor correlations $\beta_{IC,CL} = -0.373$, p-value = 0.001) and a negative significant causal effect of RC on CL ($\beta_{RC,CL} = -0.538$, p-value = 0.000; Table 5). Considering that the correlation between IC and CL is negative and between RC and CL also is negative, firms endowed with high relational and/or individual capabilities are less likely to cooperate than firms with lower levels of these capabilities. These results partially confirm *H1*, according to which a firm endowed with low relational capabilities and high individual capabilities is unlikely to decide to cooperate.

They completely confirm *H2*: A firm with low relational capabilities and low individual capabilities is likely to cooperate. The essential criterion for the model assessment is the coefficient of determination, R^2, of the endogenous latent variables. Chin (1998) describes R^2 values of 0.67, 0.33 and 0.19 in PLS path models as substantial, moderate and weak, respectively. If certain inner-path model structures explain an endogenous latent variable using only a few (e.g. one or two) exogenous latent variables, a moderate R^2 value may be acceptable. The R^2 value, reported in Table 5, shows a substantial value ($R^2 = 0.416$).

The analysis of control variables shows a significant increase in openness to collaboration in the American hotels compared with the Italian ones ($\beta = 0.363$, p-value = 0.001) associated also with significantly higher levels of individual ($\beta = 0.551$ p-value = 0.000) and relational capabilities ($\beta = 0.719$, p-value = 0.000). On the contrary, the firm size effect is not significant ($\beta = -0.043$, p-value = 0.536) for the propensity to collaboration and for relational capability ($\beta = -0.015$, p-value = 0.672), while it shows a moderately significant positive relationship with individual capability ($\beta = 0.103$, p-value = 0.031). To verify the presence of a co-founding effect between the location and the firm size, we estimated the model by inserting one control variable at a time and verified its statistical

Structural model	Beta	p-value	R^2	Strength
Individual capability → propensity to collaboration level	−0.373	0.001**	0.416	*Substantial*
Relational capability → propensity to collaboration level	−0.538	0.000**		
Firm size → propensity to collaboration level	−0.043	0.536		
Firm size → individual capability	0.103	0.031*		
Firm size → relational capability	−0.015	0.672		
Location in USA → propensity to collaboration level	0.363	0.001**		
Location in USA → individual capability	0.551	0.000**		
Location in USA → relational capability	0.719	0.000**		
Goodness of fit measures	**Value**	**Bootstrap confidence interval acceptance limit at 99%**		
SRMR – the standardized root mean squared residual	0.072	0.136		
d_{ULS} – the unweighted least squares discrepancy	7.192	7.854		
d_G – the geodesic discrepancy	6.341	117.546		
Necessary condition analysis construct		**Effect size (CE-FDH)**	**p-value**	
Individual capability		0.091	0.064	
Relational capability		0.294	0.000**	

Notes: Significant at $p < 0.05$; ** Significant at $p < 0.01$
Source: Our elaboration

Table 5. Regression coefficients and goodness of fit of structural models

significance. The firm size always showed insignificant coefficients for links with the propensity to collaboration and for relational capability. These findings show that cooperation does not change according to size. Indeed, a firm owning a specific set of resources and organizational autonomy can decide not to collaborate even if the partner has high credibility and its resources and competencies are complementary (Barney, 1991). This confirms *H3*: A firm with high relational capabilities and high individual capabilities is not necessarily likely to cooperate.

In the lower part of Table 5, we report the assessment of the overall fit and the NCA. For the overall assessment, three measures are provided: the standardized root mean squared residual, the least-squares discrepancy (d_{ULS}) and the geodesic distance (d_G). All three measures evaluate the discrepancy between the empirical correlation matrix and the implied correlation matrix. The lower the measure, the better the fit of the theoretical model (Dijkstra and Henseler, 2015). The last column reports the bootstrap-based 99% (based on data resampling) confidence levels, showing that the model can be considered acceptable (Streukens and Leroi-Werelds, 2016). Regarding values in the table, the model achieves the satisfactory quality of fitness levels for all indices. The results of NCA identify the individual capability as a necessary condition for propensity to collaboration. Its effect size is greater than 0.1 and shows a significant *p*-value (effect size 0.294, *p*-value = 0.000). This means that, although the propensity to collaborate depends on both individual and relational capability, the latter dimension is a necessary condition for the firms to manifest a propensity to undertake collaborations.

5. Conclusions

This research investigates inter-firm collaboration and, specifically, the role of both firms and relationship-specific capabilities that can make a firm more or less open to collaboration. Past research mainly focused on relational capabilities (Dyer and Singh, 1998) and scholars need to understand more about how individual capabilities affect inter-firm collaboration. The paper proposes a conceptual model that will allow us to study how combining the above-mentioned two categories of capabilities determines a firm's approach to collaboration. What emerges from the empirical analysis is that firms with high relational capabilities do not necessarily engage in collaboration; weaker firms with fewer strategic resources appear to be more inclined to cooperate, probably to gain access to resources and competencies they do not possess.

The results partially confirm *H1*: *a firm endowed with low relational capabilities and high individual capabilities is likely to decide not to cooperate*. Accordingly, firms endowed with high individual capabilities may decide not to cooperate in the function of their individual capabilities, let alone their low relational capabilities that, in this circumstance, become irrelevant. As individual capabilities positively impact performance (Saunila *et al.*, 2014; Pucci *et al.*, 2017), firms do not have the capacity to search for external opportunities and, consequently, cannot develop relational capabilities to collaborate. As our results show, this hypothesis is partially confirmed as it depends on the analyzed industry. This is in line with relevant literature showing that firms can collaborate according to the nature and purpose of collaboration even if they own a strategic bundle of individual resources (Della Corte and Aria, 2016).

The empirical analysis confirms *H2: a firm with low relational capabilities and low individual capabilities is likely to cooperate*. This means that it is much easier to predict a strong propensity for low-capability firms to collaborate. Moreover, they have nothing to lose. These firms can count on more flexibility in organizational structures and are more active and free from hierarchical structures (Majid *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, for hospitality firms,

this flexibility comes from individual characteristics (Anning-Dorson and Nyamekye, 2020). Consequently, firms with flexible structures are more adaptive and inclined to take an opportunity to exploit resources outside the firm through inter-organizational relationships. In this circumstance, a low capability firm is willing to collaborate due to its bundle of low individual capabilities and the related necessity to gain as much value as possible from the partnership (Ha *et al.*, 2014).

These results are not in agreement with part of the literature, according to which a firm that builds high-value relational capital will be more successful (Pardo-del-Val, 2010). Then, finally, the empirical part of our study confirms *H3*: *a firm with high relational capabilities and high individual capabilities is not necessarily likely to cooperate.* Results prove that even firms with high relational and high individual capabilities may decide not to cooperate, as they may think of losing the control/management of their own individual capabilities. This hypothesis can be supported by literature claiming that a firm with high individual and relational capabilities could be tempted to use it internally and not to build relationships and share its strategic capabilities (Jap, 2001; Thomson and Perry, 2006). Therefore, it is essential to consider both the benefits and the disadvantages before engaging in cooperation. This also explains why numerous partnerships start in this industry but have a short and limited lifecycle, due to the asymmetric advantage that firms glean from the cooperation. This, of course, does not mean that firms with high capabilities should not cooperate but that, in practice, they are less interested in collaborating unless they can obtain a specific and direct advantage.

6. Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, as already mentioned, this paper represents a step forward in the study of inter-firm collaboration – a practice commonly found in the tourism industry – focusing specifically on contexts characterized by small and medium enterprises without a focal firm. This is common in several EU countries that have a high percentage of family firms, including micro-firms. Our results show that both high individual and relational capabilities can be negatively correlated to collaboration. Similarly, other studies claim that a complimentary resource endowment and the ability to collaborate (Hamel, 1991) can encourage the decision to collaborate if these resources are protected (even if the firm accepts some spillover) and the expected value is high (Dyer and Singh, 1998).

Moreover, our study sheds light on the individual capabilities and the specific relation between these and the relational capabilities, adding a new contribution to the existing literature. In fact, other conceptual models focused their attention on the study of both individual and relational capabilities' antecedents such as governance mechanisms, trust, knowledge transfer (Martinkenaite, 2011) and specific resource characteristics to share (complementarity or entrepreneurial attitudes) (Rezazadeh and Nobari, 2018). Specifically, the existing literature considers either the individual capabilities or the relational ones, but it does not consider the specific relation between them. The operationalization must be based on past behavior as it aims to single out both individual and relational capabilities the firm has acquired over time and retains. Such endowment represents the background and, therefore, the overall set of resources for a firm that can determine its propensity to cooperate. This aspect has already been dealt with in the literature (Seppänen *et al.*, 2007; Hosseini *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, we underline the focus on the *ex-ante* approach of the firm to collaborate, owing to the resources it has acquired. This explains why the results and implications interpret the findings as explanations of how firms will decide and behave in the future.

7. Managerial implications

In terms of managerial implications, the message is clear and strong: When a firm has a great bundle of capabilities, individual or relational, it might decide not to cooperate with other organizations. From a social perspective, firms may decide not to cooperate and interact even though they have relational capabilities. The benefits of networking are not obvious, even if it is essential in the tourism sector. Although general managerial practice and prior research in the hospitality industry urge firms to collaborate, this study demonstrates that a decision to collaborate might not be the expected and immediate outcome. This result should help managers to change their reasoning from being based on their bundle of resources and competencies to the economic and commercial results they can achieve through collaboration.

8. Limitations and future research

Although we paid considerable attention to the design and execution of this paper, we acknowledge some limitations. A longitudinal analysis could show developments in inter-firm cooperation and examine the influence of both individual and relational capabilities on the decision to cooperate over a period of time. This paper's originality is that we consider the antecedents of collaboration, despite the approaches in the literature that usually regard ex-post analyzes of either successful or unsuccessful initiatives. In resource-based theory (Barney, 1991), operationalizing a firm's resources and capabilities, as well as their contribution to specific results, both in terms of competitive advantage and collaboration, has been a problem. Moreover, there still is no way to quantify a capability. Therefore, the attempt is to discover some proxies that directly reflect the use/application of a specific resource or capability. This is what we did in this paper.

However, the building of the proposed model can be applied to other geographical areas and other (even related) sectors, thus widening the spectrum of the results' validity. This is an ongoing subject of research on inter-firm collaboration that has led to intermediate results and we will continue in this direction for future studies. The difficulty of collecting longitudinal data on partnerships in the hotel sector pushed us to test the actual situation model. We know that this is a limitation of this research, which we accepted because the topic is quite new.

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Further reading

Della Corte, V. (2018), "Innovation through coopetition: Future directions and new challenges", *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, Vol. 4 No. 4, pp. 1-13.

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