

## Article

# Addressing Tensions and Paradoxes in Sustainable Wine Industry: The Case of the Association “Le Donne Del Vino”

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**Abstract:** Practising sustainable business in the wine industry requires addressing social, economic and environmental goals. This paper focuses on the process of addressing tensions and paradoxes amongst these goals at the different levels of the service ecosystem in the Italian sustainable wine industry and on the platformisation role at the meso level. The study adopts a qualitative approach based on 23 in-depth interviews with associates of Le Donne del Vino. The collected data were triangulated with those derived from participatory observations and the analysis of secondary data. The study’s findings reveal that the presence of an organisation at the meso level activates the harmonisation of value co-creation within the service ecosystem. This is achieved by intervening in the four different paradoxes, namely, belonging, learning, organising and performing, which emerge from the adoption of a sustainable approach.

**Keywords:** tensions; paradoxes; sustainability; wine industry; service ecosystem



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## 1. Introduction

In the wine business, sustainability issues are gaining momentum and are being increasingly recognised as a source of competitive advantage in terms of brand image and profit for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) [1]. Consumers are highly interested in having a quality product with sustainable characteristics; they are also willing to pay a higher price for a bottle of wine that respects these traits [2–4].

Until the 1980s, the main actors of the wine industry worldwide were Italy, France, Spain and Portugal, and the agricultural sector was the basis of the economies of these countries. Later in the 1990s, new countries entered the wine market: The USA and Australia were the first to join the wine industry, followed by Chile and South Africa. Then, Argentina and New Zealand gained market shares, and the Asian market broke down old barriers and entered this industry [5].

The wine sector is one of the most representative economic activities in Italy, and it is mainly composed of SMEs, as in the other ‘old countries’ [3,5,6]. The Italian wine industry is mainly characterised by the presence of family businesses linked to the tradition of long-standing family companies [1].

Sustainability is a hot topic in the wine industry nowadays; however, implementing sustainable business practices requires addressing economic, social and environmental goals [7] that often show paradoxes and tensions [8]. For example, investing in social and environmental goals could divert attention from economic objectives [9].

Dealing with sustainability issues in the wine industry results in a complex multi-actor ecosystem made up of different elements, behaviours and interactions. In the current paper, the wine industry is considered, according to the Service Dominant (S-D) logic, as a service ecosystem in which actors interact at the micro, meso and macro levels [10].

As mentioned earlier, practising sustainable business in the wine industry requires addressing multiple social, economic and environmental goals at different levels of the service ecosystem. Until now, research has focused on individual reactions to tensions

and paradoxes amongst these different goals [9,11–14]. In the current paper, we focus on the process of addressing such tensions and paradoxes amongst economic, environmental and social goals at the different levels of the service ecosystem. Moreover, we examine the platformisation role of the meso level in addressing paradoxes at the micro and macro levels. For this reason, we selected the associates of Le Donne del Vino as key informants. This is an organisation founded in Italy in the late 1980s with the aim of promoting the culture and knowledge of Italian wine and the role of women in the business community.

The study adopted a qualitative approach based on 23 in-depth interviews with fellows of Le Donne del Vino. The collected interview data were triangulated with those derived from participatory observations and from the analysis of secondary data. The data were collected in parallel, and all the results were interpreted simultaneously to draw valid conclusions to answer the research questions.

Our article contributes to both theory and practice. At the theoretical level, this work contributes to the development of a research stream that applies S-D logic and the service ecosystem perspective to studies on sustainability in the wine industry and the management of tensions and paradoxes within it. At the managerial level, our study can serve as a reference to managers, as it explores the process of navigating conflicts and tensions whilst pursuing different sustainable goals.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature regarding the evolution of the wine industry as a service ecosystem. Section 3 discusses how tensions and paradoxes could be addressed whilst considering sustainability issues. The next section describes the methodology of the study, followed by a discussion of the findings from the qualitative research. The final section presents the conclusions and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Service Ecosystem in the Wine Industry

In recent years, the wine industry has become very important in Italy, the biggest wine producer in the world. This industry is one of the most significant businesses in the country [15]. In the last 15 years, enhanced relations between wineries and the environment and consumers have served as the pillars of growth in this business. The environment has to be considered at two different levels: The first related to ecology and green strategy, and the second to a network of firms belonging to the same region or territory that co-create value and share knowledge, resources and information [16]. The evolution of the wine industry emphasises the importance of sustainability throughout the entire supply chain [15], and the whole ecosystem. Moreover, the dynamic nature of this sector has generated increasing interest in the concept of sustainability [1]. The wine industry is strictly linked to environmental conditions and influences the physical setting in which it operates [15,17,18]. Consumers recognise the efforts provided by wine businesses to practice sustainability: When consumers buy a sustainable bottle of wine, they expect not only a quality product, but they also want to find the values of the sustainability approach [19,20]. Furthermore, wine industries are implementing a sustainable supply chain, looking at and carrying out sustainable practices also during production and distribution. Given all these considerations, research today is focusing not only on the sustainable practices that the wine industry practices at all levels of the supply chain, but also on how the wine industry focuses on climate change issues, producing high-quality products, while impacting as little as possible negatively on the surrounding environment [1,15].

Moreover, sustainable agriculture addresses sustainability challenges and has the potential to revitalise rural and urban landscapes, reinforce employment and achieve inclusive national growth [21]. The wine industry involves a complex and multi-actor system constituted by different elements, behaviours and interactions that, together, pursue sustainability issues. According to S-D logic, a service ecosystem is created by interconnected actors who interact directly and indirectly at different levels. A service ecosystem provides the unit of analysis for activities of value co-creation amongst different actors; it also integrates resources in dynamic networks and is enabled by institutional activities [22].

Service ecosystem is self-adjusting, defining, and redefining actors' roles based on resource integration and the common purpose of value co-creation [23]. The service ecosystem perspective also provides a structural analysis that considers actors' activities at the micro level, which are embedded and are influenced by what happens at the meso and macro levels [23,24]. This multi-level approach is useful in representing the actors, the interdependence amongst them, and the resource integration that occurs within the wine industry especially considering the integration role at the meso level. In service ecosystems, value co-creation is a collaborative process that occurs in the context of a single set of different relations amongst heterogeneous actors [10]. In the wine industry, these actors include consumers, employees, stakeholders, suppliers to cooperatives, certifying authorities, the European Commission and so on. These are organised into three levels, namely, micro, meso and macro, which are described below.

- Micro level: Individual actors (consumers, entrepreneurs, opinion leaders, employees, stakeholders, suppliers, distributors and so on)
- Meso level: Intra-organisation actors (associations, trade associations, networks, business groups, cooperatives, wine cellars and so on)
- Macro-level: Government actors (Ministry of Agriculture, certifying authorities, European Commission, International Trade Institute and so on).

The emergence of the service ecosystem, like a natural ecosystem, is beyond the full control of any individual actor [25]. Its evolution may be influenced, at least partially, by actors' intended activities and practices [26,27]. Thus, a service ecosystem should adapt over time to changes in resource integration, shared worldviews and desired outcomes [28,29]. However, in a service ecosystem, evolution sometimes creates tensions arising from different perspectives amongst actors [30,31], and such an ecosystem needs to manage these tensions and potential conflicts to survive [28]. Tensions are unavoidable and embedded in social interactions; however, they do not always have negative implications. In fact, innovation, change and transformation may also emerge from conflicting value co-creation strategies [28,32]. To date, only a few studies have been conducted on how and why tensions emerge and on how actors manage conflicts in a service ecosystem in a positive and constructive way [28,30,33].

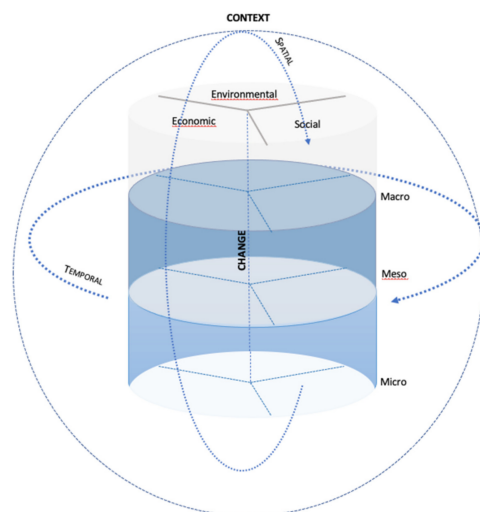
Given the specificities and the relevance of sustainability in the wine industry, it has become an important context in which to investigate tensions and paradoxes at different levels of a service ecosystem, as well as the role of the meso level in addressing paradoxes at the micro and macro levels. This study also focuses on the interactions amongst multi-actor relationships that expand the service provider–customer dyadic relationship.

### 3. Corporate Sustainability: Tensions and Paradoxes

Sustainability has become a fundamental issue in today's business world: More firms today integrate sustainability into their business activities, which entails addressing economic, environmental and social outcomes simultaneously [34–36]. Corporate sustainability requires firms to address various requests to reach societal objectives that are connected and interdependent [7,35]. Thus, corporate sustainability addresses a series of connected and interdependent economic, environmental and social issues at different levels of the service ecosystem, which must be considered simultaneously, thus generating paradoxes and tensions [37]. Previous studies have given little attention to tensions and conflicts in managing corporate sustainability, but recently, scholars have applied a paradox lens to this issue [35,38,39]. This paradox approach recognises the existence of interdependent and sometimes conflicting objectives and admits tensions to host economic, environmental and social issues at different levels, often emerging in diverse time frames and spatial dimensions [39].

Economic, social and environmental dimensions are traditionally considered the triad at the base of corporate sustainability, and tensions that concern these three issues inhabit different levels of the service ecosystem, require change processes and work in a conflicting context [35]. In line with the interpretative framework proposed by Hahn et al. (2015),

Figure 1 aims to describe the tensions in sustainability in the wine industry. It is important to consider three additional dimensions: Service ecosystem levels (micro, meso and macro levels), change and context.



**Figure 1.** A systematic framework for the analysis of tensions in wine industry sustainability.

Corporate sustainability is a multi-level notion [35], and has different shapes at the micro, meso and macro levels. Economic, environmental and social issues could be conceptually different across different levels of analysis [40], and what could be the right answer to sustainability issues at the micro level may not be seen as a proper response at the meso or macro levels.

Whilst dealing with the change dimension, corporate sustainability is considered a dynamic process of continuing transformations and route, that generates more sustainable practices in which tensions are embedded [35]. The change process could be a creative destructor or a dialectical process wherein the previous organisational forms change and become the basis for new sustainable practices [41].

The contextual dimension could also allow the growth of tensions: The time dimension focuses on the intergenerational equity characteristics of environmental and social topics, thus creating tension between the long-term implications created by the present behaviour and the typical short-term corporate decision-making focus [42]. Tensions arise when firms do not take into account the long-term outcomes regarding economic, social and environmental issues [35]. The space dimension embraces tensions belonging to intragenerational equity concerns and equitable development opportunities amongst different regions.

Adopting a paradox perspective entails recognising the value of tensions. It does not propose an integration or resolution of the intrinsic tensions amongst social, environmental and economic issues [9,12,43], but enables more widespread answers to sustainable challenges [9]. The paradoxical lens is useful in recognising and accepting differences amongst conflicting elements and in generating innovative approaches to sustainability goals [9,38,44,45].

From these considerations, the subsequent questions, on which our study focuses, emerge: What are the sustainability paradoxes and tensions at different levels of the service ecosystem in the Italian wine industry? What is the role of the meso level in addressing tensions and paradoxes at the micro and macro levels?

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Setting

Given the complexity of the issue, we decided to adopt a qualitative method to pursue the purpose of the research, with the aims of studying the occurrences under various conditions and providing a contextual and holistic explanation for different situations [46–49].

In this paper, we study Le Donne del Vino, an organisation founded in 1988 by 20 women who wanted to promote the knowledge and culture of Italian wines and the role of women in the Italian business community. The organisation was officially presented during Vinitaly 1988. At present, it comprises 900 associates from all over Italy who work in the wine sector as producers, restaurateurs, wine shop owners, journalists, enologists, bloggers or sommeliers, making it the largest association of women in the wine industry in the world. The creation of this group of women was inspired by the starting point for the evolution of the female presence in this industry. One of the organisation's main objectives is to educate and enhance the value of women working in the wine and enotourism sectors. The organisation also aims to transmit the knowledge of its associates to others in the wine ecosystem.

In 2019, the association launched the 'FUTURE' project, which is an initiative providing free education for women under thirty years old working in the wine sector. Through this project, all 900 associates of the organisation (wine producers, wine shop owners, restaurateurs, sommeliers, journalists and experts of the sector) offered scholarships, webinars, internships and laboratories inside their firms or where they work. This program is considered an important way to transmit the interdisciplinary competencies required by this sector. The members also offer online English courses, seminars, online tutorials, webinars about digital communication and advice for the creation of enotourist experiences. The organisation also promotes national and regional initiatives, guided by the aim of promoting and enhancing different regions and the peculiarities of every single Italian area. These activities have had a positive impact not only on the wineries of the associates, but also on the Italian wine sector as a whole. Moreover, the association, through the voice of its president, recently held a dialogue with the Italian government at the Italian chamber to contribute to the recovery fund that Italy would receive from the European Union to fight the COVID-19 crisis.

Studying the activities of Le Donne del Vino allowed us to generate theoretical insights about how an organisation supports the different actors as they work through paradoxes at different levels of the service ecosystem, focusing on the integration role at the meso level [9,50]. In this study, we have collected multiple forms of qualitative data on the actions of the organisation, its members and the Italian wine industry as a whole. The data gathered included in-depth interviews, participant observations and secondary data.

The use of a multiple method approach with a variety of qualitative data sources allowed us to generate more robust findings and avoid single-method bias [42].

#### *4.2. Data Collection*

The explorative data collection, which occurred from May 2019 to February 2021, have included participant observations, in-depth interviews, archival data, news and social media campaigns. One of the three researchers has been a participant observer and has interacted with associates of Le Donne del Vino; she also attended meetings, workshops, online workshops, social media events and other events. She collected observational data and developed a deep understanding of the dynamics of the organisation, as well as the stories and challenges faced by the wine entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, we conducted 23 face-to-face interviews, via phone or Teams (Table 1), with associates of Le Donne del Vino coming from different Italian regions. We ensured the heterogeneity of the sample to gain a multi-sided perspective of observations and generate a context-specific understanding of the phenomena. The in-depth interviews lasted an average of 1.20 h and were carried out by one researcher. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to obtain as much data as possible from the interviewees. In the end, we generated a total of 357 pages of single-spaced transcribed text.

An interview protocol, with 20 questions, based on the literature was developed to gather data about the management of paradoxes in sustainable wine industry, the characteristics of the actors involved, the role of the meso level, the importance of being part of the association, of having a certain type of certification and the present and future

sustainable activities. We used semi-structured questions to allow the interviewees to answer as completely as possible. Moreover, subsequent discussions were informal and were facilitated by supporting questions.

**Table 1.** Study interviews.

# Interview	Italian Region	Type of Certification	Number of Years Inside the Organisation
1	Abruzzo	Organic	5–10
2	Friuli Venezia Giulia	Sustainable No-Certification	>20
3	Lombardia	Sustainable No-Certification	>20
4	Veneto	Organic Sustainable Protocol	15–20
5	Piemonte	Ecofriendly Protocol	5–10
6	Piemonte	Organic	10–15
7	Marche	Certification of low environmental impact Organic	0–5
8	Trentino Alto Agide	Sustainable, No-certification	15–20
9	Valle D’aosta	No-certification, sustainable	10–20
10	Piemonte	Sustainable, No-certification	>20
11	Sicilia	Organic	>20
12	Toscana	Sustainable No-Certification	15–20
13	Emilia Romagna	Organic	10–15
14	Marche	Organic	10–15
15	Veneto	Organic, Biodynamic	>20
16	Veneto	Sustainable protocol	0–5
17	Emilia Romagna	Sustainable protocol	10–15
18	Trentino Alto Adige	No-Certification	5–10
19	Lazio	Organic Sustainable Protocol	15–20
20	Toscana	No-Certification	>20
21	Sicilia	Sustainable Protocol	15–20
22	Sardegna	Sustainable Protocol	10–15
23	Puglia	Organic	10–15

#### 4.3. Data Analysis

The study adopted an abductive approach, a non-linear research process that continuously compares reality and theory. Here, the theory and data are matched, and the



theoretical framework is modified based on empirical findings derived from participant observations and interviews, after which the new framework becomes a useful guide for data analysis [51]. Semi-structured interviews were videotaped by the researcher who conducted the interviews. These were then transcribed and analysed through a coding process and content analysis [52] performed by the three researchers involved in the coding and interpretation process.

Each interview was compared continuously with other interviews and with the other data to develop consistent themes and findings and to consider other perspectives or new information [53]. Then, the differences between the two interpretations were discussed by the researchers [54]. The multiple data sources and the triangulation between the two researchers strongly support the validity of the research findings [55].

After data reduction and classification, we followed Smith and Lewis (2011) and sorted the codes into four main paradoxes based on how the different codes were related [56,57]: The paradoxes of belonging, learning, organising and performing.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Paradoxes and Tensions in the Wine Industry Service Ecosystem

Starting from our research questions, what are the sustainability paradoxes and tensions at different levels of the service ecosystem in the Italian wine industry? What is the role of the meso level in addressing tensions and paradoxes at the micro and macro levels? In this paragraph, we discuss and answer them considering the literature on paradoxes.

The findings were organised and analysed following the four types of paradoxes mentioned above: Belonging, learning, organising and performing [8]. We organised the results as follows: We highlighted the micro, meso and macro levels when presenting each paradox, referring to the systematic framework that we considered for the theoretical analysis [35]. In particular, we paid greater attention to the meso level. As the literature has mainly analysed paradoxes through leaders' and managers' perspectives, a multi-level approach is needed [11,12,14]. Starting from the theorisation of Hahn et al. (2018) regarding how organisations and their members deal with tensions connected to sustainability paradoxes, the structure of the findings was organised to underline the critical and fundamental impacts of Le Donne del Vino's multi-level approach to handling paradoxes [43,58].

One of the interviewees was a founding member of the organisation, who shared that when the organisation was born, there were only a few women in the wine sector. Thus, they decided to get together to share problems and achievements and create friendly relations amongst themselves.

Table 2 summarises and highlights the most important quotes and sustainable practices that emerged from the data collection and analysis.

Table 2. Findings.

Quotes	Sustainable Practices	Paradox
I believe in the power of sharing, in the organisation I have found a lot of friends very knowledgeable and I've learned a lot (Interviewee 21)	Shared values between the associates and the organisation	Paradox of Belonging
Our winery is located in the south of the Marche region. It is called 'Hidden Marche' or 'New Tuscany', and people love to come to our area, because everything is uncontaminated and unpolluted. All of our territories adopt sustainable practices. For us, it is important that not only our winery, but all the areas follow this mindset. (Interviewee 7)	Ecosystem approach to sustainability and enhancement of all the territory Discovery of uncontaminated Italian Areas	

Table 2. Cont.

Quotes	Sustainable Practices	Paradox
We participated in the green barrel initiative. We painted a barrel in green, because this is the colour of nature and because it is actually the original colour of the barrel. Green is also the colour of equilibrium. So this was a way to communicate our attention to the environment and our integration with nature itself. (Interviewee 12)	The organisation initiatives as a way for its members to have visibility and to communicate sustainable values to consumers and wine lovers	
It is a process that we started some years ago, and we have never stopped learning and exploring. We have introduced several practices and technologies. (Interviewee 19)	Implementation of new technologies and innovative techniques to preserve and respect their place and environment Continuous learning	
Le Donne del Vino organise several webinars and online conferences in order to provide its associates free education and training. The knowledge is shared by the associates and in this way it becomes an heritage for all the community (Interviewee 16)	Shared knowledge between the members of the community Continues training for the associates and the wine actors	Paradox of learning
For me, social media has a lot of potential in spreading sustainable values because where there is the possibility to share and discuss, it is always better. It is better to have many voices than just one. For me social media is more useful than a journal because with the first one you can share your opinion and the information is created from the bottom up and not from the top down. (Interviewee 17)	Social media as a tool to communicate and spread sustainability values	
The world “sustainability” can have different meaning and interpretations. We implement sustainable practices regarding environmental, social and economic dimensions but it is difficult to communicate them without certifications. There are several certifications and we have both a certification for low environmental impact and the organic one. Nevertheless, I think that the most important thing is that consumers have faith in the winery and in how it works. (Interviewee 7)	Different sustainable certifications and protocols and no unitarity between them Difficulties in the communication of sustainable values without the certificate on the label, such as in the organic agriculture	
There are some markets, for example, in Northern Europe, wherein you have a better chance to enter into the monopoly and sell the wines in their markets when you have the organic certificate on your labels, because for the [consumers], the environment is a priority. (Interviewee 4)	Different attention to sustainability and organic agriculture in different areas of the world	Paradox of organising
In recent years, people have started to pay more attention to what they eat and drink, and this has enhanced the intrinsic value of our bottles. With the pandemic, this trend is growing even faster. During summer 2020, a lot of our clients asked us if they could go directly to the vineyards to drink a glass of wine and have direct contact with nature. (Interviewee 11)	Increasing attention to healthy life style and nature Discovery of the countryside and contact with nature as a consequence of the pandemic	



Table 2. Cont.

Quotes	Sustainable Practices	Paradox
For us sustainability is the respect for nature, for people that work with us and that come from our territory and for all the ecosystem (Interviewee 13)	Respect for all the ecosystem as a fundamental attributes for sustainability	
For us, sustainability is the preservation of our place for future generations. We must provide them a better place to live. (Interviewee 14)	Preservation of the place for future generation as a shared value between the interviewee	
For us, sustainability is a fundamental part of our work, both in terms of agriculture and philosophy and mindset. When my grandfather started the winery, he didn't use chemical products in the vineyards, and he took care of nature and our place. We are the third generation and we just want to continue what our grandfather have started. (Interviewee 11)	Generational transition of values and sustainable approaches	Paradox of performing

### 5.2. Paradox of Belonging

According to Smith and Lewis (2011), the paradox of belonging refers to tensions in sustainability involving different values and roles. These tensions can be overcome thanks to a unified approach to sustainability, which aligns personal values and identities with organisational ones [59]. We have identified this approach through the members' (female winery owners) answers regarding their participation in Le Donne del Vino during the interviews. Indeed, the answers to the question 'Why have you decided to be part of Le Donne del Vino?' follow a coherent pattern. The deep values include respect for others, nature and the place where they were born; the enhancement of the figure and the rights of women; and the creation of a community where the associates can share information, knowledge, problems and solutions. As one interviewee shared:

I'm one of the founders of the association Le Donne del Vino. We were a few women when we decided to found it. We were at Vinitaly 1988, and we met each other. We looked at our faces and said to each other, 'we are young, women, what do we want to do? Can we do it? What are our problems?' Personally, I remember that I looked at my hands; they were not perfect, and I looked at the hands of my colleagues. I immediately saw that the other women around me also have the hands of someone who worked, and so we told each other: 'Is it our destiny to work and to conduct a life full of sacrifices or do we deserve a life full of satisfaction where we can emerge?' In a few months, we founded the association. We were just 20 associates, and now we reached 900. This association did come from the top levels but was born from the bottom lines; it was born from our needs and it had never betrayed us.

(Interviewee 3)

This vision is shared by the members of Le Donne del Vino. These women entered the organisation and actively participated in the initiatives with the aims of promoting beautiful Italian places, sustaining the activities and the voices of women in the wine sector, sharing the values and the attention of the associates towards nature and the environment and supporting the local communities of every Italian region. According to one interviewee:

Organisations are always a way to help one another, especially for small wineries. I've decided to take part in this organisation, because I agree with their cultural and value bases and also because, since 1988, they have been helping women gain visibility in a men's world.

(Interviewee 16)

The associates can find in this organisation a place where they can exchange advice, experiences, solutions to problems and various knowledge, and this represents an enrichment not only for themselves or their wineries, but also for the entire Italian wine sector as well. The education of the community has been a priority of the organisation for years, and in 2020, it organised online classes revolving around several themes to transmit members' knowledge to the community. Moreover, each region regularly offers several courses to its associates and to online communities about hot topics in the sector.

For me, sustainability is 'woman', because men are very good in business but their priority is the goal and the final scope, and maybe during the journey, they forget the details. These details are picked up by women, because [doing so] is part of their nature. I always say that men are macroscopic and women are microscopic and so we need to work together in order to have complementarity, the same [is true] for sustainability. In this way, we can be sustainable together. Moreover, when I started to work in this sector, I was 19 years old, and I was looking for people who could teach me and help me. Le Donne del Vino is a place where you can ask for advice, learn, grow and speak a common language: the language of women.

(Interviewee 12)

During the past year, the association launched several initiatives through which they can share with the community their values and their attachment to the place, the territory and the single special region of Italy. For example, in order to attract tourists to visit the Italian regions and see the unique beauty of each territory, the organisation launched a social media-based program called the #winewindow. Each associate was asked to share an image of her winery from a window perspective to show, with a simple act, the beautiful and natural attractions of the different areas. Both the organisation of online courses and classes for the education of the community and the launch of initiatives, to let people discover the different territories and areas where the wineries of the associates are located, are two examples of the importance of the meso level.

We have interviewed members from wineries in very popular and well-known areas for enotourism activities, such as Piemonte, Toscana and Veneto. We also interviewed associates from other regions, such as Friuli, Marche and Abruzzo, highlighting the fact that they participated in these initiatives because they wanted to promote not only their wineries, but all the territories as well. They want people to discover lesser-known places like the Hidden Marche, which is close to Toscana, but not less beautiful than the other places. Considering this type of paradox, Le Donne del Vino plays a central role as a platform at the meso level. Indeed, the differences in sustainability practices, protocols and ideas are overcome by the shared values of the organisation's members [43,58].

Our winery is located in the south of the Marche region. It is called 'Hidden Marche' or 'New Tuscany', and people love to come to our area, because everything is uncontaminated and unpolluted. All of our territories adopt sustainable practices. For us, it is important that not only our winery, but all the areas follow this mindset.

(Interviewee 7)

One of the initiatives proposed by the association with the collaboration of the Touring Club Italiano was the 'Donne del Vino Camper Friendly'. This initiative was proposed to develop enotourism and itinerant travelling through the discovery of Italian wineries owned by associates of Le Donne del Vino. Traditionally, these types of travellers look for memorable experiences that allow them to be close to nature, territories and people. During the past year, wineries welcomed camper travellers into their firm to stay for one night at no cost. They were offered picnics in the vineyards, wine tastings in natural surroundings and trekking in the vineyards. This project with the Touring Club Italiano has been promoted through websites, social media and in digital and traditional press from

both organisations. The aims of this collaboration at an ‘intra-meso level’ were to amplify the effects of platformisation and to generate a positive impact not only for the wineries involved, but also for the ecosystem of each area. Indeed, this initiative has an impact both at the micro level, because it allows single wineries that participate in welcoming tourists and showing them activities that allow direct contact with nature, and at the meso level because, thanks to the collaboration with the Touring Club, it acquires more visibility and relevance.

We have participated in the eco-tourism initiative; it is interesting to open our doors to new ways of travelling. We welcome in our winery not only campers but also tents and traditional b&b reservations.

(Interviewee 21)

Another initiative proposed by the organisation to spread the commitment of the associates to sustainability values was to paint green an old barrel and then take photographs with it. Every woman of the association was asked to promote a sustainable message as an accompaniment to the photo to flood social media with photos that represent respect for nature, people and communities.

We participated in the green barrel initiative. We painted a barrel green, because this is the colour of nature and because it is actually the original colour of the barrel. Green is also the colour of equilibrium. So this was a way to communicate our attention to the environment and our integration with nature itself.

(Interviewee 12)

### 5.3. Paradox of Learning

The paradox of learning refers to the tensions faced by an organisation during the innovation process and the resulting trade-off between existing and novel activities [8]. During the interviews, we found that, even if the associates took for granted respect for their soil, place and community, several wineries were implementing new technologies and innovative practices to constantly improve the environment and the community. These represent the firms’ ambidexterity or the ability to adopt both explorative and exploitative activities to implement sustainable innovations [60]. According to the literature, organisations that deal with this paradox are more inclined to enhance creativity and innovation [61]. Thus, although wineries find their roots in their places and traditions, they are open to implementing new technologies and instruments to better protect their places and the environment.

It is a process that we started some years ago, and we have never stopped learning and exploring. We have introduced several practices and technologies.

(Interviewee 19)

We are the first in Abruzzo to implement the use of solar panels for the production of energy for the winery, and we also have an innovative system for the recycling of the stalks.

(Interviewee 1)

One of the most cited threats by the interviewees is that consumers worldwide generally know little about these themes; thus, more information and communication may be needed.

We should work on the micro level and teach children the basic concept of respect for the environment, which starts with their daily routine.

(Interviewee 12)

The interviewees agreed that social media, such as Instagram and Facebook, can be effective in spreading sustainability values. Through these platforms, people can share millions of photos, comments and information every minute, making it possible to share free knowledge.

For me, social media has a lot of potential in spreading sustainable values because where there is the possibility to share and discuss, it is always better. It is better to have many voices than just one. For me social media is more useful than a journal because with the first one you can share your opinion and the information is created from the bottom up and not from the top down.

(Interviewee 17)

We need to testify through social media our commitment to the soil and our place.

(Interviewee 23)

Moreover, we found that online courses and activities organised by Le Donne del Vino on social platforms and meeting apps are free tools allowing the associates to learn how to use these devices and to understand the best way to share contents, photos and information. The knowledge and abilities of the associates is a shared heritage amongst the members of the community and for the Italian wine sector as well. The interviews revealed that, especially in this moment of the pandemic, the organisation promotes and organises several conferences for the members. An associate from the Veneto region shared that there are free ongoing seminars for the community of Le Donne del Vino, which facilitate free knowledge sharing and allow members to receive updated news. These results are consistent with the literature about paradox and organisation, which mainly argues that these communities play important roles in connecting members not only within the network, but also with other external actors and in providing them with expertise, learning opportunities and resources [62,63].

The European Union also plays a role in spreading awareness about sustainability themes, enables SMEs to invest in new structures and facilities and gives them a wide range of resources, incentives and support for promoting, restructuring and converting vineyards, green harvesting, mutual funds, harvest insurance, investments and innovations in the wine sector (EU, 2016). The European Union works at a macro level to help and support wineries to implement sustainable practices, and from the interviews, we found that these measures to support investments have had a huge impact on wine producers' decision to implement and invest in technologies for the preservation of the environment. For example, a winemaker in Abruzzo shared that their neighbours had converted their production into a organic based one. They have applied solar panels for renewable energy and have made investments in vineyards to yield products of higher quality with less waste.

I have a organic certification from ICEA, and the European Union has played a central role in the transition to sustainable agriculture. Indeed, a lot of wineries from my area in the Abruzzo region have implemented sustainable practices, because they have received a lot of incentives from the EU. We are part of the same ecosystem, so it is important that your neighbours also pay attention to the environment.

(Interviewee 1)

#### 5.4. Paradox of Organising

This paradox refers to the ongoing debate about the organisation of the sustainability practices and protocols by firms and their impacts on the business activity. Indeed, organisations have to decide between, including these practices in their business logics or adopting them beyond the market perspective [8,64–67].

During data collection, we found that there were several sustainability-related protocols adopted, but there was no alignment between them. Different entities that certify sustainability practices have emerged in Italy and the rest of Europe. Moreover, wineries can be certified as 'organic agriculture' and have its symbol included in their bottle labels; in this way, they are internationally recognised as sustainable producers of higher quality wines. Simultaneously, some wineries implement several sustainable initiatives that are not recognised simply because they do not have a logo on their labels. In order to help its associates, the organisation has adopted a sustainable approach to communicating

such information and sharing it with tourists and online users from all over the world. It has also launched several initiatives in recent years. One such initiative was launched on 8 March 2021 for International Women's Day. It involved painting the first pole of the nearest vineyard to the entrance of the winery with a green colour to 'announce' that the winery implements sustainability practices. This was a good message to convey to tourists who come for visits and wine tastings and to the rest of the wine community throughout the world (through social media posts).

We are certified eco-friendly, because we don't use chemical products in the vineyards and we use only natural products. For some years, we no longer performed weeding, even if the protocol allowed it. We don't want our eco-friendly certification to be confused with the organic certification, because we don't trust it. We just take care of our vineyards in the most natural and respectful way possible. We use a national certification for eco-friendly products.

(Interviewee 5)

Considering different geographical areas, the interviews revealed that the levels of attention given to sustainable agriculture vary. If we consider North European countries, where the monopoly buys wine and spirits, organic products are preferred over those that come from conventional agriculture systems. Moreover, the organic certificate on the label is considered a symbol of quality. Wine Intelligence has published the Global SOLA 2021 (Opportunities for Sustainable and Organic Wine 2021), a report that summarises the collected data from 15 different markets around the world (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, UK and US). It is reported that consumers are always more worried about climate change and want to minimise their impact on the environment with their choices. Referring to the wine sector, the research has highlighted that consumers preferred wines with a sustainable certificate on the label. Furthermore, when a producer disseminates information about its sustainable practices, this often has an impact on the final selling of the wine.

There are some markets, for example, in Northern Europe, wherein you have a better chance to enter into the monopoly and sell the wines in their markets when you have the organic certificate on your labels, because for the [consumers], the environment is a priority.

(Interviewee 4)

In Northern Europe, the United States and Canada, if you have an organic product, you have more clients.

(Interviewee 6)

Interviewees have also underlined the fact that the higher attention given by stakeholders and tourists to sustainability, nature and organic products intensified in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Especially during the past summer, tourists preferred the countryside and contact with nature. The associates of the organisation registered an increase in bookings of visits and tastings. Those who have accommodation facilities also noticed a preference for an overnight stay (or longer) in a countryside place, surrounded by nature, vineyards and mountains. For these reasons, the associates have organised some picnic events and trekking activities in their vineyards linked to the enotourism initiative 'Camper Friendly' mentioned previously.

The attention given by consumers to nature, environment and local products has increased after the pandemic. People now look for contact with nature, healthy food and wine, and they want to come to the winery to live the eno-tourist experience.

(Interviewee 1)

This also reflects what the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) has reported as a major trend for tourism in 2020, at the macro level. It stated that rural

development had been the central theme for the past year and that wine and gastronomy, in particular, have played a fundamental role in this development. The annual report on eco and gastronomic tourism (2020) collected data in collaboration with ENIT-Agenzia Italiana del Turismo, Federculture, ISMEA and Fondazione Qualivita e Touring Club Italiano, with support from UniCredit and PromoFriuliFVG. The first section of the report presents an overview of the international context and trends in the medium period. In the second section, the Italian landscape is analysed, and this is an important tool employed by regions and institutions to develop local activities. Finally, the third section, developed in collaboration with the 'Food Travel Monitor 2020' (World Food Travel Association), gives an overview of the international tourism context with special insights into different countries around the world, including France, the UK, the US, Canada, Mexico and China. The data collected in this report revealed that, regarding Italian tourism in 2020, people became more fascinated with cultural locations and naturalistic ones. In particular, 71% of the travellers wanted to live enotourist experiences, and 59% thought that food and wine allowed us to have a multisensorial experience.

In recent years, people have started to pay more attention to what they eat and drink, and this has enhanced the intrinsic value of our bottles. With the pandemic, this trend is growing even faster. During summer 2020, a lot of our clients asked us if they could go directly to the vineyards to drink a glass of wine and have direct contact with nature.

(Interviewee 11)

### 5.5. Paradox of Performing

The paradox of performing refers to the fact that companies need to face tensions related to stakeholders' different values, goals and demands [8]. These tensions can be solved and used as strengths by the Italian wineries at the micro level. In the wine sector, sustainability is the focal and initial point to produce and compete in the market and not the outcome. In most other sectors, sustainable practices are not a priority amongst organisations, which tend to favour financial outcomes [68]. From our interviews, we found that for many winery owners, respect for the place, nature, and the people are the starting points for their business. Everything is done according to the principle of respecting and preserving the place for future generations. As one interviewee stated:

There will never be an economic reason more important than living and working in a place that you respect.

(Interviewee 6)

Nature is considered by the interviewees as a gift, and if they don't respect the place where they live, it would be impossible to produce high-quality wines. Safeguarding their local varieties provides richness to their wines and represents a connection to a specific region and soil. According to one interviewee:

What we produced is no more than what mother nature every year gifted us.

(Interviewee 18)

'Respect' is a word that is often used by the associates. These wineries have a great social impact on their respective areas. They sustain local workers and their stakeholders, even if this entails higher costs. The interviewees reiterated that their priority was to enhance the communities, at the meso level, within their territories through the activities they undertake in their wineries.

For us, sustainability is the preservation of our place for the future generations. We must provide them with a better place to live.

(Interviewee 14)

Moreover, these are considered the fundamental values upheld by wineries for generations. This process started with their father or great-grandfather when technologies and modern techniques were not yet available.



We are a historical family winery, and our property is linked to where our winery originated. We have adopted organic agriculture, even if we were not certified yet, since my great-grand father generation. We have just continued with his work and show respect for our place, people and community.

(Interviewee 1)

For us, sustainability is a fundamental part of our work, both in terms of agriculture and philosophy and mindset. When my grandfather started the winery, he didn't use chemical products in the vineyards, and he took care of nature and our place. We are the third generation and we just want to continue what our grandfather have started.

(Interviewee 11)

Even owners of wineries that implement organic agriculture agree that it is not fair that an ecological product costs more because its production respects the environment. It should be normal to respect the place and not to waste resources. One of the interviewees shared that even if they have done the conversion to organic agriculture, they have kept the same prices as before, because respect for the natural course and the implementation of sustainable and ethical practices should be the starting point. Consequently, if consumers have to pay more for something sustainable, it means that sustainable and organic agriculture no longer represents the fundamentals of wine production, but has become a market choice.

Considering that we have decided to convert our production from conventional to organic with zero cost for the final consumers, the price of each bottle has remained the same, because for us, it is an ethical choice to preserve our place and future generations.

(Interviewee 9)

For Italian SMEs in this sector, having a small size is not a constraint, but a kind of strength. Some interviewees underlined the fact that their commitment to the place and their origin is part of their strategy, which they want to preserve.

Since we founded the winery, we have produced our wines using 100% of our own grapes, and we use the traditional varieties of our area. For us, respect for the place and the maintenance of the traditions are the most important thing. We are proud to be like that; in our world, small is beautiful.

(Interviewee 7)

## 6. Conclusions

Sustainability is currently acquiring greater importance in the wine industry worldwide, and it is increasingly acknowledged as a source of competitive advantage related to brand image and profit [1]. Nevertheless, dealing with sustainable issues involves considering social, environmental and economic objectives, which can lead to paradoxes and tensions [7,8]. Sustainability in the wine industry has resulted in a multi-actor service ecosystem characterised by different elements, behaviours and interactions.

In this paper, we focus on the importance of exploring sustainability in the wine industry service ecosystem using the S-D logic lens to better understand the dynamics amongst different actors in terms of resource integration and value co-creation and the role at the meso level. Previous studies on service ecosystems have focused on the micro and macro levels. In the current study, we explored the role of platformisation through the role of *Le Donne del Vino* (at the meso level) in addressing tensions and paradoxes between the different levels. The adoption of a paradox perspective has been useful in identifying and acknowledging differences amongst conflicting elements and in generating innovative and creative approaches to economic, social and environmental sustainability goals [9].

The study has shown the opportunities of the four paradoxes: belonging, learning organising and performing [8]. The data revealed that there is great interest in the first

two paradoxes, whilst there is additional scope for action concerning the organising and performing paradoxes.

Tensions related to the paradox of belonging could be overcome through a unified approach to sustainability—one that aligns personal values and identities with the organisational ones. For example, even if Le Donne del Vino applies different protocols and initiatives to support sustainability, these are driven by the shared common values of the organisation's members. Regarding the paradox of learning, our study shows that some issues, such as respect for the terroir and the importance of the community, are taken for granted and that there is a current surge of great interest in the implementation of new technologies and new innovative practices in the wineries. Meanwhile, the paradox of organising shows that there is no uniformity amongst the different protocols adopted by the wineries and that the levels of attention given to sustainable agriculture vary around the world.

Furthermore, the data reveal that there are plenty of interventions, due to the higher attention given by stakeholders and tourists to sustainability, nature and organic products. This has especially increased in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding the paradox of performing, our research shows that associates prioritise the enhancement of the communities within their territories through various activities and their respect for their terroir, nature and people, which are the base of their business.

Moreover, these results work in the direction of the SDGs, of the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development. In particular, the association Le Donne del Vino, through the organisation of different activities, aims to reduce the inequalities, tenth goal “Reduced inequalities”, between different areas of the Italian territory. Indeed, the camper friendly initiative has allowed wineries from less known Italian region to let people discover the entire areas, and in this way, has had an impact on the territory as a whole. Moreover, the sustainable practices, implemented by the members of the association act in a virtuous way for all the territory, and this is related to the eleventh goal, “sustainable cities and communities”. Actually, findings have underlined that for interviewees, it is important that all the wineries from a production area apply sustainable practices and respect their place, nature and ecosystem. Another important SDGs goal, the twelfth “Ensure Sustainable consumption and production patterns”, are both related to the implementation of new facilities for renewable energies and to the development of sustainable tourism from the wineries of our sample. In particular from our findings has emerged that the interviewees have developed systems for the use of renewable energy, such as solar panel and that they implement practices to reduce waste and pollution. Moreover, both the interviewees that participated in the camper friendly initiatives and the ones that offer activities with direct contact with nature, such as trekking in the vineyards and wine tasting outdoor, work in the direction of the development of sustainable tourism offering.

The paper contributes to the development of research streams on service ecosystems and the management of tensions and paradoxes in sustainability, revealing that an organisation at the meso level activates the harmonisation of value co-creation in the wine industry service ecosystem. This is achieved by addressing the paradoxes that emerge from the adoption of a sustainable approach.

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