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Beyond Economic Earnings: The Holistic Meaning of Success for Women in Agritourism

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Abstract: Women’s predominant role in agritourism expands their also significant involvement in agriculture and rural development. Yet, when measured in economic terms, women in agritourism appear to be less successful than men. We argue that economic earnings are a limited measure of success, as women value their accomplishments in a comprehensive and distinctive sense. To better understand women’s success in agritourism, we conducted a study addressing limitations in methodologies and scope of the existing scholarship. Framed within feminist and emic approaches, we used a combination of qualitative methods of inquiry (open-ended interviews, mini focus groups, nominal group exercises) to generate data from 20 female agritourism entrepreneurs in North Carolina (USA). Findings show women in agritourism define success through nine distinct themes, four of which are newly emerging (ensuring customer satisfaction, being constantly on the move, pursuing happiness, perpetuating the family farm). Participants also identified seven opportunities that they perceive contribute to their self-defined success. Our study adds to the scholarship and practice of gender in agritourism by expanding the economic definition of entrepreneurial success. In doing so, we provide managerial and policy intelligence that can be used to stimulate rural development.

Keywords: agritourism; business opportunities; entrepreneur; farm tourism; farming; gender; rural development; subjective success

1. Introduction

The constant socio-economic change of the agricultural landscape is compelling farmers to modify their traditional production practices and seek alternative incomes by incorporating non-agricultural activities into their farms or seeking off-farm employment. Agritourism, defined as educational or recreational activities carried out on working agricultural settings [1], continues to grow as an alternative source of income for farm households [2]. In addition to generating income, agritourism brings a number of other benefits, such as supporting rural lifestyles [3], creating employment [4], and preserving heritage [5], which altogether foster rural development. These benefits have encouraged farmers to increasingly integrate agritourism activities in the United States of America (USA).

Women’s major involvement in agritourism is consistent with their historic involvement in agriculture, in which they have actively participated in planting, weeding, post-harvesting, and value-added processing for both market sales and family consumption [6,7]. Similarly, women play an indispensable role in developing, maintaining, and innovating agritourism enterprises [3,8,9]. Despite women’s strong involvement in agricultural production and entrepreneurship, evidence indicates a significant gender inequality in accessing agricultural resources (e.g., land, technology, inputs), social and human capitals, property rights, and decision-making power [6,7]. As a result,

the economic performance (e.g., income, business turnover) of female-owned rural enterprises tends to be lower than male-owned ones [8]. Specifically related to agritourism, Barbieri and Mshenga [10] found that women-operated farms in the USA earn on average \$35,000 less as compared to those operated by men.

A clear understanding of the gender gap in entrepreneurial performance is lacking due to several research methodological and theoretical shortcomings [11,12], which this study seeks to address. The first major shortcoming relates to articulating success from the viewpoint of female entrepreneurs, as success is typically operationalized based on pre-conceived male-dominant indicators that focus on business “hard measures” such as large revenue generation [13–15]. Thus, our first study question is: “How do female agritourism entrepreneurs (hereafter, “agripreneurs”) define success?” Secondly, the assessment of success tends to systematically exclude influential factors, such as internal (e.g., farm resources) and external (e.g., social trends) opportunities on which women can capitalize to grow and thrive in their entrepreneurial venture [16]. Accordingly, the second question driving this study is: “What opportunities do female agripreneurs find conducive to achieving their self-defined success?”

In responding the aforementioned questions, this study follows an emic approach to break the dominant economic focus prevalent in women’s entrepreneurship studies [17]. An emic approach uses the language expressions and values of the study participants [18] to define their own successes and opportunities. Utilizing an emic approach to understand the nuances behind women’s entrepreneurial underperformance is critical, as it may be associated with the myopic economic lenses used in their evaluation [8,12] or the distinct entrepreneurial drivers and notions of success among women agripreneurs [9,17]. Study findings can also serve to harness the potential of agritourism as a rural development tool, taking into consideration that the number of women farm operators and the number of agritourism farms is on the rise in the USA and worldwide.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Entrepreneurial Success within Gendered Perspectives

The meaning of success has evolved over time and varies across societies. The historical centrality of men as the providers for the family has resulted in the masculinization of many aspects of daily life [19,20]. Such focus on men as breadwinners has shaped a masculine definition of success revolving around the provision of material goods; the more goods a man accumulates, the more successful he is [20,21]. In contrast, women have historically faced a different set of expectations, mainly as caregivers whose success is judged by their achievements in the private realm [21,22]. Although women have gradually emerged outside the private realm and into professional careers, the expectations of society at large have not evolved with their new roles; they are still expected to fulfill their care-giving duties, even if undertaking public responsibilities, oftentimes resulting in choosing less financially rewarding—but more flexible—careers [23,24].

Evidence indicates that traditional values associated with the construct of career success are male-dominated, thus usually measuring success in economic terms [11,19,21,25,26]. However, the gender difference does not end at the mere construct of success, as some scholars have suggested; while women’s career development path may not necessarily be different to men’s, it is more complicated owing to the challenges imposed by gendered social contexts [27]. More recently, entrepreneurial studies have stated that success is a broad and multi-dimensional construct [28] and, thus, call for incorporating internal or subjective indicators based on individuals’ own criteria [21,29]. Such a call is especially important to respond to in gender-related studies, since significantly more women, as compared to men, consider their ability to reject the traditional notion of success as an important aspect of their own success [30].

2.2. The Multifaceted Composition of Women's Success

A mosaic of personal and professional aspects intertwines in the construction of women's success. Two personal aspects define women's success. Achieving work-life balance is one of the most dominant themes in the literature, materialized as the intrinsic reward (e.g., happiness) resulting from being able to reconcile their workload with personal priorities and family life [31–33]. Work-life balance closely relates to women's career choice because it is a function of job flexibility [29]. Women also refer to family support when defining their success because it is critical to accommodate work demands. Such support usually entails emotional assistance needed to negotiate stress and the provision of information required to forge their careers [29].

Professional aspects, while interconnected with personal values, also shape women's identification with their career path [32]. Three professional aspects are salient in the literature as descriptors of women's success. Women value recognition and peer respect because they indicate a good reputation and reflect their sense of responsibility and dedication [29,31]. While some women seek interpersonal recognition by helping others professionally, others aim for a broader professional recognition of their efforts [21]. Pursuing upward mobility by advancing in the hierarchy of their professions [32,34] and financial gain are also important components of women's professional success [31]. Although women's professional aspects of success are similar to men's, Sturge [33] states that there is an important nuance in that women value these aspects by placing their professional achievements within the larger context of their holistic personal success.

The synergies between personal and professional values creates four mixed aspects included in women's notion of success. Sense of achievement, related to women's desire for constant learning and growing [32,34], is reinforced by succeeding at challenging tasks, undertaking pioneering initiatives, and working on something about which they are passionate [29,33]. Nourishing contentment, which refers to women's personal and professional commitments, also contributes to women's success, because it ultimately leads to their personal growth, individual skills improvement, and professional development [31,34]. Women also perceive success when they have the opportunity to create a broad impact either by contributing in ways that bear long-term positive outcomes to their organization or to the wider society [32,33]. Establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships, at both professional and personal/family levels, are major components of women's success [29,30]. Further, having strong professional relationships with peers and subordinates is more meaningful for women than their individual careers' accomplishments [21].

2.3. Entrepreneurial Pursuit of Opportunities: A Framework

Entrepreneurs have the ability to identify and pursue certain opportunities that may lead to creating new goods, services, or organizations. Although it seems like a simple idea, entrepreneurial pursuit is an interactive process in which personal assets (e.g., entrepreneurial alertness, access to information, social networks, personal traits) are used to overcome challenges and maximize external factors towards specific opportunities [35,36]. To understand this process, Shane and Venkataraman [36] proposed an integrated framework that breaks the utilization of opportunities into various phases (existence of opportunity, discovery of opportunity, decision to pursue an entrepreneurial opportunity, modes of exploitation), each of which have a given set of intervening factors. Any given opportunity goes through the four stages to materialize as a business venture.

The entrepreneurial process starts with the "existence" step, defined by a pool of existing resources that have the capacity to be transformed into new goods, services, or organization methods through a means-ends entrepreneurial relationship [37]. The next step involves an actual discovery, because it does not suffice for the opportunity to exist but individuals have to act upon them to turn them into an enterprise. Two factors intervene in this step: possessing the information to identify the opportunity (usually not readily accessible to the wider population) and recognizing the means-end value of this opportunity [38]. Shane and Venkataraman [36] explained that the last two steps demark the actual entrepreneurial activity. The decision to pursue the entrepreneurial opportunity

depends on how meaningful the opportunity is for the entrepreneur (personal value) and the cost of developing the alternative business venture (economic value). Ultimately, it is the mode of exploitation, defined by the macro-economic environment composed by existing policies (e.g., industry regulations), market conditions (e.g., existing competition), and other factors, that either fosters or hinders the entrepreneurial fruition.

In brief, the extant literature calls for a deeper examination of women's notion of entrepreneurial success, as societies' predominant masculine worldview resulting from the historic breadwinning role of men has led to a masculine definition of success with a strong emphasis on external indicators, usually monetary. Yet, the increased involvement of women in entrepreneurship, and specifically in agritourism, supports developing more holistic assessments of success where a mosaic of personal (e.g., happiness), family (e.g., emotional assistance), and professional (e.g., pursuing upward mobility) pursuits that women seek are considered. The literature also supports identifying opportunities in a given entrepreneurial venture, as these are key to overcome challenges and maximize external factors towards success. Although opportunities may abound, it is critical that entrepreneurs identify and use those opportunities to their advantage to create new goods or services, such as developing innovative agritourism offerings.

3. Research Methods

We conducted this qualitative study in North Carolina (NC, USA), because the region is showing a steady and robust growth in agritourism activity. Furthermore, it is expected that the NC agritourism impetus will hold in the future because of a renewed interest in local food production and consumption [39,40], which contributes to the increase of interest in agritourism [41]. We purposively drew our study sample to comprise a heterogeneous group of female agripreneurs, following a two-step procedure. We first developed a list of 75 potential participants in collaboration with key state stakeholders working in agritourism, namely agritourism associations, NC Cooperative Extension, and public universities. We then conducted a pre-screening during short phone interviews to capture the geographic, economic, and agricultural diversity of the state, as well as different types of agritourism experiences and personal backgrounds; collectively, these selection criteria can affect sentiments related to agritourism [1,42] and, consequently, enhance richness of discussion and data generation [43].

Twenty female agripreneurs from 16 counties dispersed across the Mountain (5), Piedmont (8), and Coastal Plain (7) regions of NC formed our final sample. As purposefully sought, our participants (referred through aliases) had different levels of agritourism experience, with one-half being involved in agritourism for at least 10 years and open to the public at least six months a year. Their agritourism offerings (encompassing recreational, educational, and hospitality activities) and agricultural production (e.g., poultry, small and large livestock, vegetables and specialty crops, traditional row crops) were also varied. Finally, the sample was composed of women with a diverse demographic profile in terms of age, family life cycle in terms of having children in various age groups, and occupational background (Table 1).

Data Generation and Analysis

We generated data for this study at the end of 2015 using qualitative methods of inquiry to understand the intricate social context where agripreneurs' life and business intersect, that situates women' self-conceptualization of their success and the set of opportunities for achieving success. We used a combination of mini focus groups, nominal group exercises, and semi-structured open-ended interviews for data generation to enable methodological triangulation that would provide a deeper understanding of the constructs (success and opportunities) explored [43]. We used mini focus groups to foster interaction and insight-sharing among agripreneurs [44], which helped us to capture the context of entrepreneurial success. During the focus groups, we used nominal group exercises to ensure a broad discussion based on the generation and ranking of ideas [45,46]. We used semi-structured

individual interviews to elicit insights from participants whose extensive experience might require more time to share [47]. We conducted interviews until we reached data saturation [43].

Table 1. Participants' demographic indicators.

Alias	Age	Life-Cycle Indicator	Primary Occupation
Abby	Early 30s	Infant child	Off-farm full-time job
Charlotte	Early 40s	Teenage child	Farming
Amelia	Mid 60s	Adult children	Farming after retired
Olivia	Mid 60s	Adult children	Farming after retired
Alice	Early 70s	Adult children	Farming after retired
Emma	Late 30s	Pre-teen and teen children	Farming
Violet	Early 60s	Adult children	Farming
Elizabeth	Early 40s	Single without children	Farming
Lucy	Early 50s	Adult children	Farming
Scarlett	Mid 20s	Single without children	Off-farm part-time job
Claire	Late 50s	Married without children	Farming after retired
Rose	Early 60s	Adult child	Off-farm full-time job
Ivy	Late 50s	Adult child	Off-farm part time job; farming after retired
Luna	Early 50s	Teen and young adult children	Farming
Nora	Late 40s	Teenage child	Farming
Anna	Late 50s	Adult child	Farming
Emily	Early 60s	Adult children	Off-farm full-time job
Sophia	Mid 50s	Young adult children	Farming
Ruby	Early 70s	Adult children	Farming after retired
Julia	Early 60s	Married without children	Farming after retired

We audio-recorded all discussions and interviews (totaling 750 min). After names and any other forms of identification were removed and replaced with aliases, recordings were transcribed verbatim. We combined all data generated (transcriptions, memos, and word clouds) to delineate a complete picture of female agripreneurs' successes and opportunities. We used a coding frame, derived from the literature review, to develop initial themes related to success and opportunities [43]. After organizing our textual data within our initial coding frame, we started thematic coding [43], adding emerging (novel) themes to expand our coding frame. Once we coded all text and identified a number of substantive categories, we refined and differentiated between previously identified and emerging categories to find relationships among central categories and subcategories using constant comparison [43].

We employed rigorous measures to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of data generated, as well as the transferability and confirmability of data interpretation. We ensured trustworthiness by maintaining an audit trail of changes made to protocols and creating detailed memos to reflect our biases and note observations, ensuring that themes reflected participants' ideas [48]. We maintained credibility by keeping notes and memos during the entire research process and using peer debriefing after the conclusion of focus groups and periodically during the interviewing timeframe [48]. To address transferability, we employed a constant comparison method to ensure that hypotheses could be developed for future investigation [43]. We pursued confirmability by triangulating the data from verbatim transcriptions with observational notes and researchers' memos, and by reaching consensus when contrasting emerging themes and central categories arose between the two independent coders [49].

4. Study Findings

4.1. Women's Meaning of Agritourism Success

Nine themes constituting women's self-definition of success related to agritourism emerged (Table 2): being constantly on the move (166 occurrences), ensuring customer satisfaction (114 occurrences), having

family support (105 occurrences), creating broad impact (95 occurrences), gaining recognition and respect (75 occurrences), securing financial sustainability (75 occurrences), pursuing happiness (68 occurrences), debating the work-life balance (26 occurrences), and perpetuating the family farm (20 occurrences). All themes emerged from participants across the various life-cycle stages except for perpetuating the farm, which did not emerge among young participants (20s–30s age group).

Table 2. Study themes related to women’s meaning of agritourism success.

Themes Related to Success	Number of Occurrences	Brief Description
Being constantly on the move	166	Having an energized lifestyle and choosing the pace of their business growth
Ensuring customer satisfaction	114	Seeking to build long-lasting customer relationships
Having family support	105	Division of farm work among the household members and recognition of women’s work in the farm
Creating broad impact	95	Impacting society beyond the farm business and family (e.g., mentoring youth, educating the public)
Gaining recognition and respect	75	Enhancing personal and farm reputation
Securing financial sustainability	75	Being profitable by covering expenses, avoiding debt and diversifying the farm revenue streams
Pursuing happiness	68	Remaining happy through farming
Debating the work-life balance	26	Either actively pursuing or rejecting the work-life balance notion
Perpetuating the family farm	20	Emphasis of keeping the property as a working farm

The most prominent aspect of the success of women in agritourism was “being constantly on the move”, which entailed their choice to have an energized lifestyle and their freedom to regulate the pace of their business growth. Choosing to stay busy held two different meanings depending on the participants’ family life cycle. Those who were around retirement age, such as Claire, viewed their pursuit of agritourism as a way to stay engaged, “With our situation we do this as something to keep us active in retirement. I don’t want to, you know, we don’t want to just sit and rot way.” For younger farmers, instead, choosing to stay busy was a way of living a fulfilling life: “I love to be busy. I don’t like downtime. So, having lots of customers, having a lot to do (. . .) If I’ve been busy and I’ve had good customer interaction for the day, then I’ve had a happy day—happy, successful day” (Emma).

Women’s definition of success in terms of being constantly on the move also reflected their quest to grow their operations, as Julia explained: “Forward momentum. It’s never standing still in the moment, always looking forward to what can you do better, how do you improve—what’s next? How do you grow?” However, when prompted as to whether growing their farm implied moving up in the farming and agritourism ladder, most women rejected the notion, as they feel that they already have enough responsibilities. Rather, they emphasized having control over the growth of their business, such as Anna, who explained prioritizing quality over quantity in her goat-dairy agritourism operation: “When you get bigger you lose control. And it’s like with the cheese, everything is really handmade. I have custom-made commercial equipment, but it’s small. I pasteurize my cheese in 15-gallon batches. You can control the quality.”.

Women stated that “ensuring customer satisfaction” was an important element of agritourism success, because it led to building long-lasting customer relationships. Rose described her success with her high-quality craft cheese: “I feel most successful when people taste my cheese and like go crazy about it. I just really like it. It makes all that other hard work worthwhile. I think that’s more than anything.” However, participants explained that such satisfaction entailed more than an immediate reward, as it was the basis for building long-term relationships with customers, including

retailers. Ivy explained that customer satisfaction allowed them to access wholesale markets: “If it’s the wholesalers, they talk. If you have a good reputation with other growers, if they don’t have what somebody’s looking for they’re going to recommend you.”.

Study participants placed emphasis on “having family support” as part of their self-defined success, which entailed the actual division of farm work among household members and their family’s recognition of women’s work on the farm. Luna described how she and her husband divide the agritourism and agricultural tasks of their farm: “I’ve handled the business side of it and mostly all the agritourism side of it. [Name removed] orchestrates all the crops, manages the workers. I manage the corn maize and pumpkin patch staff and the produce staff in the spring, but it’s a team effort.” Worth noting, participants discussed receiving support from family members who are both actively involved in the farming operation and those who are not. For example, Scarlett, whose farm is located far away from where her family resides, mentioned, “I’m pretty lucky to have the support of family, they are not able to support me financially that much, which is fine, they’ll even come up sometimes and help me—I mean they’re obviously kind of far in Raleigh.” The indirect support these women received from their family also defined their success. Olivia, whose adult children live in another state, described:

I’m happy—my children say they’re proud of me. My family likes what I’m doing, [they] think it’s good that I’m doing something I like. They come and visit every couple of months (. . .) I think, especially for my son and daughter, as long as I’m happy, they’re happy.

Creating a broad impact beyond the realm of their operation was an important aspect of women’s success. Some emphasized their success as being able to educate the public about farming, which emerged from the nature of agritourism (sharing their farms with visitors): “To me being successful—our mission—is to share our farm with other people, like families with kids who’ve never been on a farm. We have school groups come in (. . .) Like last night we were leaving the guest house and the people in there [said]—oh this is so nice, this is really nice” (Olivia). Others, like Luna, who runs her agritourism operation on a centennial farm, emphasized giving back to society: “So being involved in the business community no matter what county you’re in . . . And only by being involved in supporting your local YMCA or supporting your local Boys and Girls Club does your business grow.”.

As mothers and women in agriculture, creating a broad impact in society was for many participants to inspire youth, other women, and especially young girls: “The kids in my CFA know that I’m a woman and that they can become farmers if they’re little girls. (. . .) I like that the girls know that their farmer is a female” (Elizabeth). Abby emphasized her role model for the future generation of female farmers: “A big thing with creating more young farmers and women farmers. Right now, we have more women farmers coming up (. . .). And I love it! And they’re actually the ones out there, milking the cow, raising the goats and the rabbits.” Others expressed their success as sowing the future of their young employees:

I feel that I’m successful because we’re training kids and most of the time, they go on to college. (. . .) That just makes us feel good that we’ve trained these kids and we’ve had a hand in their education and they’re going on to do bigger and brighter things (Emma).

“Gaining recognition and respect” as a farmer was important for women to attain success in agritourism. Many defined their success as being an expert in their respective fields. Charlotte, although young in age and new to small-stock farming, shared her pride: “Already I have people call me that want to start up their own meat business or whatever, or just have meat for the family, but they will call me and ask me (. . .) So just having that reputation. And if a chef out there needs meat they go, oh call.” Gaining recognition also entailed branding their farm and products (“If people know your name, even if it’s just regionally, if people recognize your name when they go to a restaurant that buys your food,” Scarlett) as well as earning the respect of other farmers and community members (“Having the respect of other farmers (. . .) If you work your butt off they acknowledge that. I enjoy that children [in my community] recognize me,” Elizabeth).

Participating women also conceptualized their agritourism success as securing the financial sustainability of the farm. Amelia, a retired school teacher, stated: “Can we start January 1 next year or is it going to be folded? And wanting to make the farm to be sustainable within itself, not that we’re having to supplement constantly.” Such financial stability meant not only to pay hired staff but also to cover their own earnings, as Abby who currently sustained her farm through her day-job: “To me [the farm] is my full-time job. I want to see a salary and I have no health insurance. I would like to see that business come up to be a full business and sustain my family, myself, and whoever I hire.” To achieve such financial stability, participants emphasized the importance of (1) avoiding debt: “We’ve always just paid for everything. We kind of like to not owe money to begin with, so we’ve paid for everything. What we’ve done is we upgrade as we have money,” (Anna) and (2) diversifying their revenue streams:

Multiple revenue streams is so huge for a farmer. (. . .) So, if I lose the peaches, I still have my berry season. I’m going to have apples, I’m going to have grapes (. . .) Then, in addition, you have the group tours that come through and my different events (. . .) our bakery is another revenue stream. My apple cider is its own revenue stream here. So, we try as many as we can so the impact of loss of one is not a huge impact for the organization (Sophia).

Pursuing happiness through their farm responsibilities was an important element of women’s self-defined success, even when farm work is more demanding than other responsibilities. Charlotte, a mother of two boys, described how she enjoyed farming despite the challenges this profession entails:

I got laid off five years ago and I decided I wanted to do something I want to do. This makes me happy to do. It’s not always happy. That’s when it’s flooding outside with rain. But it’s something I enjoy doing and I’ve had so many people ask me, why don’t you quit? (. . .) But I enjoy it. The happiness part of that is—I guess I should have put that on my success because—it makes me happy to do this. And I get satisfaction. I enjoy it even though it’s hard work.

Debating the work-life balance was a major focus during the participants’ discussions, although this paradigm took different directions. For some, work-life balance was important, so they explained the many strategies they were implementing to pursue it, such as outsourcing farm work (e.g., “I outsource my payroll. Anything I can outsource I do. But there’s certain things you are not able to outsource”, Luna) or seeking reliable people to help out at home (e.g., “I hope to be able to have someone more able to take care of him—find someone more dependable . . . and maybe be here more often”, Emma). However, others were very vocal about resisting the pressure to perfectly keep-up with competing work and home responsibilities: “The hardest part for me is getting the house cleaned up and all that stuff, and I’ve to quit trying to expect myself to do that. Yeah, just as little as I can do it, but that’s the last thing that gets attention” (Abby).

Perpetuating the farm was another aspect of women’s success, irrespective of being multi-generational or first-generation farmers. Abby, who farms with her husband on his seventh-generation family farm after it was left un-farmed by the previous generation, discussed the importance of keeping the property as a working farm:

One of my things is we’re saving farmland that’s been in the family since 1790s (. . .) We’ve watched all the farms around us become developments. We’re the only one right now in this area with a dairy so it’s horrible to see that. And we want our son, we want other people to come on the farm and say hey, ‘farming is hard work but it becomes a passion’. I love getting eggs every day.

In brief, findings indicate that female agripreneurs crafted their success as a complex construct in which personal and family aspirations intersect with business and farming goals in an effort to secure the interest of family and community members in farming.

4.2. Opportunities for Women in Agritourism Success

Study participants were cognizant of an array of opportunities that are available to them because of their involvement in farming and agritourism. Based on current market trends, institutional focus, and available technology, the study participants outlined the following opportunities (Table 3): embracing the value of agritourism (175 occurrences), opening windows of collaboration (115 occurrences), responding to public interest to learn (95 occurrences), getting institutional support (94 occurrences), celebrating local roots (82 occurrences), using social media (80 occurrences), and repurposing resources (49 occurrences).

Table 3. Study themes related to opportunities for women in agritourism success.

Themes Related to Opportunities	Number of Occurrences	Brief Description
Embracing the value of agritourism	175	Mix of tangible and inspirational agritourism benefits
Opening windows of collaboration	115	Ability to develop business partnerships with peer farmers and other businesses
Responding to public interest to learn	95	Upward trend in people's desire to learn about local agricultural (food and farm) systems
Getting institutional support	94	Support from public, private, and non-for-profit agencies
Celebrating local roots	82	Market momentum to position local products
Using social media	80	Possibility to reach customers difficult to capture with traditional media
Repurposing resources	49	Being innovative and opportunities to give different uses to existing farm resources

Embracing the value of agritourism, which recognizes a manifold of tangible (e.g., financial, marketing) and inspirational (e.g., demonstrating women's contribution, influencing future generations) values, was the most prominent opportunity that women in agritourism identified. Most frequently, women recognized agritourism as a diversification strategy that enables farmers to capitalize on their existing assets while providing financial security. Julia, who runs a private campground in her diversified farm, explained:

Diversify is very important. We've watched so many people fail in this economy (. . .) We'll be the only trout pond. So, what we're going to be is the entertainment factor, come catch your dinner. We'll have three [goats] in milk so the next project is learning to make soap and of course with the beeswax I'm going to make some lotions and balms and things like that. So production because once the pond is up and running, the blue building out there, one end of it is going to be a farm store . . . Selling our produce, and the eggs and mushrooms.

Women also mentioned the marketing value of agritourism, as the activities they offer serve to brand the uniqueness of their farms and products. Rose, whose dairy farm is located away from any major urban area, stated: "We are overwhelmed with people who want to come to the farm and visit and see. They want to learn about goats. We have no problem selling our kids [goats] in the spring. (. . .) To me, [agritourism] is also a marketing tool." Many mentioned that agritourism helps them to recruit extra labor during peak seasons because of the additional income generated. Participants also discussed two other intangible values that carry long-term implications for female farmers and agritourism. Some discussed how agritourism was a good channel to infuse innovation in the mind-set of young farmers, while others viewed agritourism as a way to show society that women can do more than only household chores. Alice explained with passion, "When we are there telling the story about the farm when these people come, you know, then they see that we know. We know what's going on. We're not just doing the cooking and the cleaning and the bookkeeping."

Women also believe that agritourism is a means for “opening windows of collaboration”, especially to foster business partnerships with peer farmers and other businesses. Claire described how her small farm, specializing in animal fiber production, benefits from her partnership with a neighbor that hosts an annual wine festival featuring local vendors: “Virtually 100 percent of our sales are from the farm not too far down the road (. . .) And they always invite us, and we take everything, it’s just down the road, it’s easy.” Women stated that collaborations are win-win situations because they facilitate knowledge-sharing among peers and create a sense of community, which strengthens the industry as a whole. For example, Ivy commented about the cut-your-own Christmas trees growers, “If we see something on the horizon then we’re going to share that information (. . .) So there’s a lot of camaraderie in the industry.” Furthermore, these women detailed how collaborations are helpful to complement strengths and compensate their own weaknesses. Scarlett, who is thinking to expand her farm operations, explained:

It’s strengthening connections because we all have different skills (. . .) Like one person I’m bringing on is not necessarily a farmer, but he is a web designer and marketer and he’s like: ‘I want to be a person that goes and talks to restaurants, like I love talking to people’. So I’m like cool because I’m really introverted. I don’t want to do that.

Given the upward trend in people’s desire to learn about local agricultural (food and farm) systems, “responding to public interest to learn” was another opportunity for agripreneurs to enhance their success. As the public’s interest in food sources is increasing, farmers are also viewing it as important for society. Ruby, a retired schoolteacher who offers school tours, emphasized the educational aspects of agritourism: “People are realizing, ‘hey, this is important and I want my children to learn about this’.” To such an end, participants were very enthusiastic in sharing their farm and their knowledge about farming and food, even if visitors were driven by nostalgia. Luna explained: “I think the public is more interested in visiting farms. Especially families that (. . .) are looking to make memories and do things with their families on a farm. Maybe they have some type of memory of their grandparents’ farm.”

Many women voiced that “getting institutional support” from a variety of agencies, such as farmers’ associations, NC Cooperative Extension, and overall governmental offices, enhanced their ability to grow and develop their agritourism endeavors. In Claire’s view, her relevant regional affiliate was providing a lot of important support: “Our regional affiliate—oh it’s fantastic. I mean our website is really through them (. . .) We’re piggybacking, it’s a marketing website, but still that’s what we use for our website right now because I don’t have the time or the expense.” Women often mentioned NC Cooperative Extension as a primary source of assistance. Sophia, who is the second generation running an apple orchard, compared her situation versus her parents when they first started out: “We’ve been blessed. And my parents said at the beginning it was hard (. . .) But once they kind of got in with a couple [of] apple growers, North Carolina Department of Ag (. . .) and NC State have just been huge resources to us.” Many also mentioned NC government’s impetus to promote agritourism within the state and referred to various programs they see materializing in the near future. Luna, who is actively involved in various agritourism associations, put her optimism succinctly, “You’re going to see grants available through the USDA. You’re going to see maybe some grant money available through your local Department of Agriculture. There’s a lot of opportunities there if the type of venture fits the farm, every agritourism farm is different.” Having talked about the resources and support available to them, women also recognized the effort they need to put in for availing and capitalizing on these resources.

Women recognize the momentum of agritourism as a means of “celebrating local roots” among people who seek locally crafted/grown products. As such, agritourism was an opportunity to increase their market share by branding and promoting their products as local and authentic. Abby viewed this phenomenon as: “Everyone is becoming more interesting in farming and purchasing local and all natural right now so that’s a plus. (. . .) That’s a big one for us as a growing market.” Women even recognized the effort of large corporations to promote local products, although they agreed that big corporations’ definition of local might be debatable. Luna, who sells a variety of vegetables and fruits year-round, stated: “You have Lowe’s Foods and Food Lion and Wal-Mart doing huge campaigns of

locally grown products. [But] Define local. The way I see the positive effect of that would be people at least becoming aware of [local products]”.

The widespread trend in “using social media for promotion” was another opportunity agripreneurs recognized, especially because it is free and has a high market reach. Emily, who runs a family farm with her husband and two sons, mentioned, “Our eldest son, [Name removed], is the social media guru. He keeps all of that going almost on a daily basis. He posts things. (. . .) And I just share everything he puts out, but he’s the one posting and I’m sharing. It’s free. You just can’t not do it.” Social media also brought the possibility of reaching markets and that would be difficult to capture with more traditional media. Ruby explained how they used social media to promote the family farm, which ultimately was recognized among the top 10 orchards by USA Today:

This year we were nominated by USA Today (. . .) What you had to do was get people to go to their website, USA Today, and vote and you want them to vote every day (. . .) And I even boost the post. You know, you can boost it on Facebook. And that was a big help. So we got in the top 10.

Participating women, who are inherently entrepreneurial in their approach, mentioned “repurposing resources in new ways” as another opportunity for their agritourism success. This in turn entailed being innovative and opportune at the same time. Olivia explained: “Our property had two houses (. . .) We didn’t want full-time tenants so we started using it as a guest house and the first couple years we may have one person every month or so. (. . .) [Now] our income it’s unreal. We may have one week a month that’s vacant.” For some, innovation meant re-purposing tools and equipment to serve some unmet needs. Amelia described how they repurposed an old wood boiler to heat their greenhouse for growing herbs year-round:

We found a wood boiler stove that someone had in the community (. . .). We got it for little or nothing and my husband’s a great ‘make it work’ kind of guy (. . .) and [it] heats the greenhouse. We can actually pump heat in there now if we need to, especially in the spring for us when we’ve got lots of plants and we can get a freeze late.

In short, findings indicate that female agripreneurs perceived that agritourism was a suitable mechanism to seek innovative ways to easily and cheaply enhance the value of the farm enterprise. Furthermore, they outlined that this was good timing for developing or expanding agritourism offerings in NC, given the avid desire for local goods among the public, coupled with the available support from different institutions across the state.

5. Discussion

This emic evaluation of the meaning of success by women in agritourism confirmed the relevance of factors previously identified in the literature (having family support, creating broad impact, gaining recognition and respect, securing financial sustainability, debating the work-life balance) to women’s entrepreneurial success. Also—and more importantly—this study contributes to the understanding of agritourism by adding four new aspects (ensuring customer satisfaction, being constantly on the move, pursuing happiness, perpetuating the family farm) that delineate women’s notion of success in agritourism. While discussing their meaning of success, participants also expanded our knowledge of their desire to create a broad impact on society and having family support, while resisting pressures to keep up with both work and home duties. In women’s narratives, our study also paved the path to identify opportunities for further success. Most salient, participants stressed the value of agritourism to create more business opportunities, which is important given the capacity of agritourism to stimulate rural development, and especially timely because of the growing interest in the public to reconnect with their roots and to learn about local food and farming systems. In the next sub-sections, we use two quotes from our study participants to cohesively discuss the study findings.

5.1. Agritourism Success: “Our Balance is Horrible. We Work Full-time. We’re Fed. We’re Happy” (Abby)

Abby’s words reflect two main takeaways from this study regarding success. While women in agritourism reject the panacea of achieving a work-life balance, they reaffirm that success has complex meanings that integrate personal and professional aspects of their lives. Upfront, most participants rejected the notion of pursuing work-life balance, a statement of success that is widely praised in the extant entrepreneurial literature [29,32,33], which confirms women’s ability to reject traditional notions if they do not resonate with their personal beliefs [21,30]. This outright rejection further speaks to the fact that they have a realistic view of what they consider as achievable, thus forgoing certain tasks (e.g., house cleaning) or outsourcing help related to their personal or farm responsibilities (e.g., childcare, accounting).

At the same time, the three new mixed aspects (being constantly on the move, pursuing happiness, and perpetuating the family farm) that emerged in this study validated that women’s success is defined by more than a cumulative checklist of indicators. Furthermore, the notion of success among women in agritourism projects is an amalgam beyond the personal-professional aspects that entrepreneurs often incorporate as one [32], since this notion also merges agriculture-tourism and individual-society aspects (Table 4). Such a mix is in tune with the complex inter-dependency of different responsibilities (e.g., agriculture tasks, family accountability, off-farm employment) that all family members undertake, seeking the welfare of the farm-household [50,51]. For example, when female agripreneurs talked about happiness as an aspect of their success, it entailed more than the notion of contentment the literature portrays [21,31,33,34], as their happiness implied the prioritization of farming and agritourism activities over household chores. Likewise, family support not only emerged as caring for the emotional realm of women as professionals [29], but also by actually assisting them in farm work.

Table 4. Study themes related to women’s success in agritourism in view of the literature.

Themes in Women’s Success	Professional	Personal	Society	Farming	Tourism
Emerging Aspects					
Ensuring customers’ satisfaction	√			√	√
Being constantly on the move	√	√			
Pursuing happiness	√	√		√	√
Perpetuating the family farm		√		√	
Confirming Aspects					
Gaining recognition and respect	√	√	√		
Securing financial sustainability	√			√	√
Expanding Aspects					
Creating broad impact		√	√	√	√
Having family support	√			√	
Opposing Aspect					
Debating the work-life balance	√	√			

In such a holistic understanding of success, women also recognize that their personal success was tied to the broad impact agritourism creates in society, which elucidated its very vague and idealistic notion in the extant literature [29,32,33]. This finding suggests that women agripreneurs should be encouraged to be key actors in rural development. Women felt successful because their agritourism activities were conducive to charitable causes, mentoring youth, inspiring future female farmers, and educating the public, which calls for contemplating the well-being of surrounding communities as important of agripreneurship performance. As such, it is important to elevate women agripreneurs’ role as agents of change in their communities. We did not find direct support for establishing meaningful relationships as a distinct element of women’s success [21,29,30], which could be the result of changing agricultural contexts. As such, the notion of establishing meaningful relationships was embedded in the long-term relationships female agripreneurs develop with customers, as well as the recognition and

respect they yearn to attain from their community and peer farmers. Finally, women constituted their success as reaching their farming and tourism aspirations, which ultimately reinforces that agritourism is a component of the farm system and should not be examined in isolation [52]. As such, the growth of their agritourism activities was dependent on maintaining the quality of their farm products, while the desires of farm visitors directed the diversification path of their agricultural production.

5.2. Agritourism Opportunities: “I Think It’s Limitless as Long as You Have a Creative Mind” (Nora)

Nora succinctly summarized the breadth of opportunities that women perceive are contributing to the success of agritourism ventures. Not surprisingly, given the vast evidence in the literature, participants’ decision to pursue agritourism was mainly rooted in economic considerations, such as capitalizing on new market trends and developing strategic partnerships [36,53]. Even the marketing opportunity they see in the wide use of social media stems from a purely capitalistic mindset, driven by its free access and high return on time investment. Study findings also confirm that as women evolved in their entrepreneurial ventures in terms of expanding their business and networks, they kept furthering opportunities for their agritourism operations [36,54]. This, in turn, reinforces the important role that access to information and cognition play in the decision-making processes behind entrepreneurial development [35].

The external business environment appeared to play an important role in the types of opportunities on which the agripreneurs were capitalizing. Participating women were cognizant of and capitalizing on increased interest in learning about farming and increased desire to purchase locally-produced foods in the public, a consumer preference shift reported globally and notably in NC [40,55]. However, as Shane and Venkatarman [36] pointed out, having an opportunity is not enough unless it is exploited. We found that our participants are doing just that, as they were actively pursuing social media to create awareness, increase customers, and enhance the reach of their business [56], which can create a snowball effect. In brief, female agripreneurs—at least those in NC who participated in this study—have gone through the whole opportunity pursuing process, from discovering to exploiting opportunities, to benefit their businesses.

5.3. Limitations and Further Research

We designed this study to generate an emic definition of agritourism success to delineate a more encompassing construct beyond standard economic measurements. With such an aim, we limited our sample to women actively involved in agritourism in NC, which carries two main limitations. First, findings may be only valid to female agripreneurs and not to male agritourism providers. Given that agriculture and entrepreneurship are still male-dominated economic activities, male farmers involved in agritourism may conceptualize success in different ways. Second, agritourism in NC is going through a growth momentum fed by the rise of a local food movement that has increased an interest in reconnecting with local farmers [40]. It is important to recognize that agroecological attributes of a given region shape their agritourism offerings [42], which is especially pertinent in NC, given its strong agricultural relevance [1]. Thus, we suggest caution in transferring study findings to other regions with different levels of connectivity to local foods or agroecological attributes. We also recognize that although the age-composition of the study sample reflects the aging population of farmers, insights that the three young participants provided might not be comprehensive for women in the 20s-30s age group. As such, we suggest that future research consider quantitative methods of inquiry with a broader sample in terms of gender composition and geographic reach, to enable comparisons within and between groups that can help to round out the meaning of agritourism success and the opportunities favoring its development. Future research can also consider qualitative methods with young farmers involved in agritourism.

6. Conclusions

This pioneer study on women's subjective meanings of agritourism success responds to the need for more encompassing approaches on entrepreneurial success that include a broad set of expectations beyond economic measurements [11,17]. In doing so, this study advanced the scholarship on agritourism by identifying a suite of aspects that fulfill female agripreneurs in their combined personal and professional realms. We conclude that it is necessary to include both non-economic and economic indicators when measuring agritourism success, to capture the complexity of women's experience and understanding. Failing to do so is likely to produce results that, while capturing objective measurements of success, undermine the socio-economic contributions of agritourism businesses driven by women, especially when contrasted with their male counterparts [57]. Additionally, we suggest that supporting agencies and organizations (e.g., Cooperative Extension, farming associations) can help increase the likelihood of success for women in agritourism by working with them to capitalize on internal (e.g., ability to repurpose) and external (e.g., consumer trends) business factors. This can boost the agritourism industry as a whole and increase entrepreneurial success in a comprehensive and distinctive way that contributes to individuals' growth, both professionally and personally, as well as to rural development.

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