From venture to ecosystem legitimacy:

a proximity perspective

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Abstract:

Over the past twenty years, there has been a rise of interest in the concept of ecosystems, first as a new way to depict the competitive environment but also as strategy to offer new perspectives on business and innovation. This however raises new questions on legitimacy. As proximity appears to be a way of understanding the interplay between an organization and its environment, we draw on previous works on these two notions to work on a longitudinal case study and show that proximity and legitimacy are closely intertwined. We contribute to the literature on both legitimacy and proximity, by positioning proximities as antecedent to legitimacy, but also as an interface with different audiences. We consider legitimacy in its three, complementary, perspectives – legitimacy-as-property, legitimacy-as-process and legitimacy-as-perception. By building on proximity through discursive and performative processes, actors are able to build the identity and value proposition of the ecosystem.

Keywords: Legitimacy, Legitimation, Proximity, Ecosystem

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INTRODUCTION

Facing a growing number of constraints and expectations of different natures - social, environmental, financial – but also at different levels – local, regional, national or global, organizations are meant to transform their business models and their ways of interacting with their environment to create and share value in sustainable ways (Demil et al, 2018). To face these challenges, scholars and practitioners must work on and implement new concepts and practices. Over the past twenty years, there has been a rise of interest in the concept of ecosystems, first as a new way to depict the competitive environment (Moore, 1993; Adner, 2017), but also as a new organizational form to foster entrepreneurship (e.g. Spigel, 2017), innovation (Thomas and Autio, 2020) or to face social and environmental challenges towards sustainability (Volkmann et al., 2021). Ecosystems can be defined as "communities of hierarchically independent yet interdependent heterogeneous participants who collectively generate an ecosystem value proposition" (Thomas and Autio, 2020, p. 16). By delivering a shared value proposition, ecosystem participants collectively deliver an output greater than any single participant could deliver alone (Adner, 2017; Jacobides et al., 2018). As an organizational form based on collective action, ecosystems offer new perspectives on business and innovation, but raise new questions on legitimacy (Thomas and Ritala, 2022). Institutional theory highlights the pivotal role of legitimacy in social interaction and organizational developments (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Legitimacy is usually defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). While extant research has focused on organizational legitimacy, highlighting its dynamics (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002) and evolution over time (Fisher et al., 2016), few authors have considered legitimacy for the ecosystem itself (Thomas and Ritala, 2022). Organizational legitimacy mainly falls in three categories (Suchman, 1995): pragmatic legitimacy is based on audience self-interest; moral legitimacy is based on normative approval (e.g., compliance to ethics codes or contribution to societal welfare); cognitive

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legitimacy is based on comprehensibility (actions and behaviors of the organization or its members), and in some cases on taken-for-grantedness (alternatives are unthinkable). Research work on legitimacy have mainly focused on one organization or on the role of the ecosystem orchestrator (e.g., Ansari et al., 2016; Snihur et al., 2018; Uzunca et al., 2018), but it leaves questions unanswered regarding the role and contribution of different actors to the legitimacy construction, within an ecosystem and for the ecosystem.

Drawing on previous work, building on legitimacy as a result of social and cognitive processes (Bitektine, 2011), we propose to use the frame of proximity alongside legitimacy, showing that the two are closely intertwined. If research on proximity has long been focused on the spatial proximity between actors, it is now clear that other forms of proximities favor the understanding of interorganizational, but also interpersonal, relations and exchanges (Boschma, 2005; Torre and Rallet, 2005). Non spatial proximities are socially constructed (Torre and Rallet, 2005) and can be of different natures: social in the first place, through interpersonal links between actors, but also cognitive, highlighting the role of common knowledge bases, organizational when the actors belong to the same organization or work on shared projects, and institutional when it comes to values and norms (Boschma, 2005). If most ecosystem are not geographically bounded, working on these all five dimensions is still interesting to address the complexity of ecosystems.

Therefore, in this paper we intend to use the proximity framework (Boschma, 2005) to study the legitimation processes during the emergence and development phases of a venture in context, building its ecosystem. Our aim is to show how an organization can rely on and manage the proximities to gain legitimacy to bring actors and resources into the project, building an ecosystem that also requires its own legitimacy. Our research focuses on both the contents (static) and the processes (dynamic) in order to gain a deep understanding of the studied phenomenon (Pettigrew et al., 2001).

This research is based on a longitudinal, exploratory, case study (Yin, 2014) of an event called the Festival des Templiers[1] (FDT) and its associated activities. The FDT has become one of the most prestigious trail running events in France, gathering, in 2021, 13 000 runners of 38 nationalities. Located in Millau (Aveyron, South of France) and created in 1995, it offers a

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[1] The « Festival des Templiers » refers to the order of the Knights Templar, which was present in the region in the Middle Ages

range of nature races in a national natural park, in mid-mountains. Initially very informal, this event has quickly been organized by an association, Templiers Events, developing related activities such as a trade fair, a consulting activity, and more recently an e-commerce platform for local products. Our research was built by successive stages between field and literature, guided by the following research question: "What is the role of proximity in the legitimation processes of a venture and of its ecosystem?"

Through this research, we contribute (1) to the literature on legitimacy by proposing a process model integrating proximities to better understand the acquisition of legitimacy but also legitimation processes of a venture and of its ecosystem; (2) to the literature on proximity in strategy, by clarifying the relationships between proximity and legitimacy. On the empirical level, the choice of a longitudinal approach and of a pioneer organization in a remote area makes it possible to document a singular situation of venture and ecosystem legitimization, in their emergence and development phases. Finally, our contributions are also promising for managers and decision-makers to better understand the drivers of legitimacy and develop activities in remote or specific places or contexts.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we review the convergent points in the wide literature on organizational legitimacy to set a clear perspective (1.1), we then draw on existing research to present our view of ecosystem legitimacy, legitimating actors and processes (1.2). We complete the theoretical background by introducing the proximity perspective as a way to address the relationships between actors of an ecosystem and ecosystem legitimating actors (1.3). The second section details the case study and methodology (2). The final sections present our analysis and findings (3), to eventually discuss our contributions, and underline the implications for practitioners and decisionmakers (4).

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. LEGITIMACY: BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL AND STRATEGIC DYNAMICS

In the search to understand the creation, survival, and growth of new ventures, legitimacy plays a key role, allowing to overcome the "liability of newness" that contributes to a high rate of failure (Stinchcombe, 1965). Legitimacy enables organizations to access required resources to grow, and may even be considered as a resource itself, as important as capital, technology, personnel, customer goodwill, and networks (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). At the heart of the

concept of legitimacy lies the tension between two perspectives. The early institutional school adopted the viewpoint of society and suggested that organizations "received" legitimacy mainly by conforming to norms, beliefs, and rules (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). But little work was done on how to acquire this legitimacy. Adopting the viewpoint of managers, strategic theorists suggested that organizations can exercise strategic choice to alter the type and amount of legitimacy they possess (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990; Scott, 1995; Suchman, 1995).

As organizations face both strategic operational challenges and institutional constitutive pressures, we draw on the work of Suchman (1995), taking a middle course between these two perspectives. In-between agency and cultural embeddedness, we take into consideration three main types of organizational legitimacy – pragmatic, moral and cognitive – and within each of them, a number of subtypes to gain a better understanding of each (Table 1).

Table 1. Legitimacy Typologies in the Extant Literature (based on Suchman, 1995)

Pragmatic legitimacy	**Based on self-interested calculations**
Exchange legitimacy	Direct favorable exchanges between organization and audience (often materialistic)
Influence legitimacy	Constituents support the organization because they see it as being responsive to their larger interests
Dispositional legitimacy	Perception of organizations as autonomous, coherent, and morally responsible actors
Moral legitimacy	**Based on normative approval**
Consequential legitimacy	Evaluation of outcomes
Procedural legitimacy	Soundness of procedures
Personal legitimacy	Charisma of leaders
Structural legitimacy	Evaluation of the organization's structure
Cognitive legitimacy	**Based on cultural models and cognition**
Comprehensibility	Predictability of actions and plausibility of the organization
Taken-for-grantedness	Inevitability of actions and permanence

Pragmatic legitimacy is based on the self-interested calculations of an organization's most immediate audiences, usually involving direct exchanges (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975). It can also involve broader political, economic, or social interdependencies, the organization displaying responsiveness to larger interests, and be termed influence legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). A third variant, dispositional legitimacy, extrapolates positive evaluations of specific

organizational acts into generalized perceptions of organizational legitimacy, treating organizations as autonomous, coherent, and morally responsible actors (Zucker, 1986).

Moral legitimacy rests on a positive normative evaluation of the organization and its activities, and unlike pragmatic legitimacy, favors judgments about whether the activity is "right", rather than benefits to the evaluator. The evaluation may be based on various criteria such as the evaluation of outcomes (consequential), the soundness of procedures (procedural), charisma of leaders (personal) and the organization's structure (structural) (Suchman, 1995). Moral legitimacy has also been termed normative (Scott, 1995) or sociopolitical (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994) to highlight its normative and institutional dimensions.

Cognitive legitimation refers to the spread of knowledge about an organization or a new venture and is based on cognition rather than on interest or evaluation (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). Legitimacy, according to this view, stems mainly from two cognitive dynamics: comprehensibility, based on cultural models that furnish plausible explanations for the organization and its endeavors, and taken-for-grantedness, as a more lasting form of cognitive support, the environment offering no real alternative.

Organizations seek several types of legitimacy simultaneously, using different legitimation strategies, operating on different logics (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). They take actions of at least two kinds: (1) attempts to change themselves, such as by creating a new structure, activity, and/or business model, and (2) attempts to change their environments and other organizations operating within their environments, such as lobbying for change in regulations (Suchman, 1995).

Like most cultural processes, legitimacy management rests heavily on communication – in this case, communication between the organization and its various audiences (Fisher et al., 2017). But legitimation processes are complex, as evaluators make their judgments under conditions of bounded rationality, cognitive and social factors influencing the processes (Bitektine, 2011). Based on prior literature, Fisher et al. (2017) have identified three main legitimation mechanisms: (1) identity mechanisms, such as storytelling, sensegiving, analogies and arguments or collective framing; (2) associative mechanisms, such as organizational ties, top management ties or individual ties, and (3) organizational mechanism, such as Internal milestones or structures, leaders background or external validation. Legitimation-as-process also raises the question of the temporal perspective on the interactions among identity,

organizational legitimacy, institutional environments, and resource acquisition: ventures may confront multiple legitimacy thresholds as they evolve and grow (Fisher et al., 2016).

As previously described, full understanding of legitimacy processes requires to address three different perspectives (Suddaby et al., 2017) : legitimacy-as-property, considering it as a property, resource or a capacity of an entity, legitimacy-as-process, often termed legitimation, and legitimacy-as-perception as a form of socio-cognitive perception by audiences or evaluators. The complexity of legitimacy lies in the combination of these perspectives, as each organization and each audience has its own expectations, and logics of legitimacy.

1.2. FROM VENTURE TO ECOSYSTEM LEGITIMACY

Facing a growing number of constraints and challenges of various natures - social, environmental, financial – but also at different levels – local, regional, national or global, firms and organizations increasingly choose an ecosystem strategy over alternative arrangements to drive value co-creation, co-production, and capture (Autio, 2022; Dattee et al., 2018; Hannah and Eisenhardt, 2018). Ecosystem strategy may be opposed to market- and industry-based ones, where 'command and control' sets the roles of actors in a supply chain configuration (Adner, 2017; Autio, 2022). Rather, in ecosystems actors depend on one another to provide assets and resources to collectively create value for consumers. As compared to industries, networks, and supply chains, participant heterogeneity in ecosystems is broader, can span multiple industries and transcends the boundary between public and private sectors. Ecosystems feature a combination of technological, economic, and cognitive interdependencies that enable a shared value proposition.

Complex coordination is required, referred to as orchestration, in order to establish a desired architecture of actors' roles and value-creating interactions (Autio and Thomas, 2020), and align the "structure of the multilateral set of partners that need to interact in order for a focal value proposition to materialize" (Adner, 2017, p. 42). This alignment is usually provided by a specific coordination structure (e.g., a platform or an organization providing a set of shared technical or relational standards), to strike a balance between generativity and coherence in ecosystem outputs (Autio, 2022; Jacobides et al., 2018). In ecosystems, governance through one-to-one contracts is replaced by less hierarchical arrangements, such as one-to-many licensing, agreed role definitions, non-formal conflict resolution mechanisms, network effects, and ecosystem structural properties (Autio, 2022). Usually a keystone or focal actor is referred

as the ecosystem orchestrator (Iansiti and Levien, 2004), advocating the ecosystem value proposition to other actors both inside and outside the ecosystem, although this may not be without conflicts to take on the roles of leader and followers (Adner, 2017).

In order to convince actors to align and behave in a way to offer a coherent and co-constructed value proposition, legitimacy is crucial to the orchestrator, but also among actors in the ecosystem and relating to the ecosystem. While the role of ecosystem orchestrator has already been addressed in previous research (e.g. Autio, 2022; Dattee et al., 2018), understanding how complementors, users, and other actors contribute to legitimacy construction has been left aside (Thomas and Ritala, 2022). For instance, ecosystem value proposition is highly dependent on the number, nature, and relationships of the complementors (Adner, 2017; Jacobides et al., 2018), where users are crucial to the success, through value creation (Cennamo, 2021; Dedehayir et al., 2018). Other actors, such as regulators, media, and experts, have, on their side, a key role in facilitating ecosystem legitimacy construction through support (Dedehayir et al., 2018; Snihur et al., 2018).

To study ecosystem legitimacy-as-process, but also address legitimacy-as-property, and as-perception (Suddaby et al., 2017), we draw on Thomas and Ritala (2022) previous work. We consider users and various audiences external to the ecosystem, such as regulators and the media, as ecosystem-legitimating actors, beside the orchestrator and the complementors. Two main legitimation processes are examined: (a) the discursive legitimation process drives cognitive legitimacy (Golant and Sillince, 2007) by giving the ecosystem meaning through processes such as framing, sensemaking, positioning, and recognition, and (b) the performative legitimation process drives pragmatic and moral legitimacy by proving the viability and performance of the ecosystem through processes such as strategic action, value realization (Autio and Thomas, 2018), adoption of the ecosystem by all the actors, and external intervention (e.g. providing resources). However, we posit that ecosystem identity construction is an outcome of discursive and performative legitimation processes.

1.3. ECOSYSTEM LEGITIMACY: A PROXIMITY PERSPECTIVE

The adoption of the legitimacy-as-perception perspective calls for an explicit recognition of the critical role of social and cognitive processes legitimation processes (Bitektine, 2011). Suchman (1995) also claims that legitimacy represents a relationship with an audience, rather than being

a possession of the organization. More broadly, working on ecosystem legitimacy calls for studying the relationships between actors of an ecosystem and ecosystem legitimating actors.

In the literature in innovation management, the frame of proximity is used to gain a better understanding of interorganizational, but also interpersonal, relations and exchanges (Boschma, 2005; Torre and Rallet, 2005). We believe this perspective is of great interest in our context to improve our understanding of legitimation processes, but also of organizational legitimacy itself.

The French school of proximity, initiated by economic and geographer scholars in the 1990s, provides various ways of understanding proximity (Torre and Rallet, 2005). Authors make a distinction between geographical proximity, which refers to physical distances and takes into account various parameters that put it into perspective (morphology of spaces, availability of infrastructures, etc.), and other forms of proximity that sometimes complement it, or even replace it. The Dutch school, led by Ron Boschma (2005), distinguishes four other forms of proximity. Organizational proximity involves the sharing of rules and norms (internal to an organization or between organizations) and introduces similarities in routines, constraints or objectives that make the actors' behavior more predictable. Institutional proximity is linked to the existence of a common institutional framework, or shared values, which will promote interactions. Cognitive proximity refers to the sharing of a cognitive framework, consisting of common knowledge, expertise and references. It reinforces the exchange of knowledge. Finally, social proximity integrates economic relations into social relations (Granovetter, 2005), as well as an interpersonal dimension. These different categories influence each other: thus, geographical proximity can favor social proximity. In this paper, we have retained the typology of Boschma (2005), which allows us to render the framework of proximities operational at a satisfying level of detail.

Table 2. Proximity as a facilitator of legitimacy

Proximity as a facilitator of legitimacy	Legitimacy-as-property Type of legitimacy (Based on Suchman, 1995)	Legitimacy-as-process Legitimation mechanisms (Based on Fisher et al., 2017)	Legitimacy-as-perception Social judgment formation (Based on Bitektine, 2011 and Thomas and Ritala, 2022)
Geographic	Pragmatic legitimacy: Easier to check local impacts for audience self-interest Cognitive legitimacy: Easier to know an organization based in the same area	Favors associative mechanisms (such as organizational ties, top management ties or individual ties)	Favors evaluator's judgment on performative criteria
Social	Pragmatic legitimacy: Trust Improves taken-for-grantedness	Favors associative mechanisms (such as organizational ties, top management ties or individual ties)	Favors evaluator's judgment on discursive criteria
Institutional (societal)	Moral legitimacy: Shared norms, values and beliefs	Favors organizational mechanism (such as internal milestones or structures, leaders background or external validation)	Favors evaluator's judgment on both performative and discursive criteria
Cognitive	Cognitive legitimacy: Based on cultural models and cognition Shared base of knowledge	Favors identity mechanisms (such as storytelling, sensegiving, analogies and arguments or collective framing)	Favors evaluator's judgment on both performative and discursive criteria
Organizational	Pragmatic legitimacy: shared projects Cognitive legitimacy: shared base of knowledge	Favors associative mechanisms (such as organizational ties)	Favors evaluator's judgment on performative criteria

Finally, proximity and legitimacy share several core notions, the most obvious being cognition. Drawing on proximity dimensions and all three perspectives on legitimacy, it is possible to establish close connections between proximity and legitimacy as presented in table 2: each proximity dimension favors legitimacy, whatever the perspective.

2. CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

Our work is based on a qualitative, longitudinal single-case study for in depth investigation (Yin, 2014). Focusing on a single case allowed us to conduct a longitudinal approach, exploring context, content and processes, and their interactions (Pettigrew et al., 2001). We selected the case of the Templars'Festival (Festival des Templiers, noted FDT), as it has become one of the most prestigious trail running events in France and developed related activities, thus forming a real ecosystem.

2.1. CONTEXT AND CASE STUDY

Gilles Bertrand, a sports photographer, specialized in athletics and running, and Odile Baudrier, his partner, launched a magazine, "VO2", specialized in running in 1989 and organized the first edition of the "Templiers race" in 1995, the first trail running event in France. Having experienced in the United States a race practiced in full nature, Gilles formed the project to export it to France, close to his own living place, a remote area in mid-mountains in the South of France. The surrounding nature, the difficulties of the courses proved to be real assets for this type of practice. The site of the race is in the "Grands Causses"[2] (Aveyron). It benefits from a preserved nature and exceptional landscapes, protected through a Regional Park status, as well as an inscription on the World Heritage List (UNESCO) for its agropastoral cultural landscapes. The climate is quite mild during the summer period but harsh in winter, which limits the tourist season to a few months.

At the time of our research, the FDT is organized by an association, Templiers Events, in the natural parks surrounding the small city of Millau, from where the departures are organized. A board at the entrance of the town of Millau, claims it to be the "world capital of outdoor sports". The FDT employs 2 salaried persons, in addition to the two volunteer[3] founding members. The FDT is the most important trail race in France (number of runners). In 25 editions, it has gone from a single race to more than ten races of various formats and from 500 to 13 000 runners of 38 different nationalities (2021). The race has become a festival, an event that now lasts 3 days and takes place in October, a period during which the weather conditions are quite uncertain, but outside the summer peak of activity. A trail fair with over 100 exhibitors is set up in the heart of Millau, hosting various professionals and local actors to exhibit and sell running and hiking equipment, or local specialties.

Various partners, mostly local, participate in the organization at different levels. The FDT also recruits more than 800 volunteers each year to carry out operational tasks: distribution of race numbers, food and refreshments supply, logistics... These volunteers are recruited locally - one in 20 people from Millau participate in the event - and mostly from local associations (80%). The organizers have set up an original system of grants to associations, based on the hours worked by the volunteers. This system, which is a valuable aid for the associations, contributes

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[2] The term "causses" refers to a set of limestone plateaus, valleys and gorges and correspond to a medium mountain stage.
[3] The term "volunteer" refers in our study to someone performing an activity voluntarily, without being paid.

to the local integration of the FDT. Millau has a prestigious industrial past (glove industry) but the area has experienced a massive exodus. This small town of 20,000 residents faces high unemployment and an aging population. However, Millau benefits from a rich sporting, historical and cultural heritage, notably medieval, and from a real dynamism of associations (athletics, 100km of Millau for example).

Gilles, Odile and their son Kevin, who has been working for the FDT for many years and is now taking over from his parents, are attached to their place and have always been keen to develop the local activity. Over the years, this has resulted in the development of an ecosystem around the "Templiers" brand and the racing activity. While several projects are under development, at least four new activities have emerged in addition to the FDT fair (Figure 1).

The first one is the development of new events to overcome the space constraint limiting the number of registrants to 13 000 for the October edition, also allowing to vary the offer and to retain the runners. In 2017, the winter edition of the Templiers was born[4]. The races start from the famous place of Roquefort, in December, when it is often already very cold, and snow can also be present. This event welcomed around 2000 runners in December 2021 and is supported by top tier private and public partners (e.g. Roquefort city and Roquefort company, Saint Yorre (waters), Aveyron regional government). In 2022, a few kilometers away the Tarn Valley Trail[5] launched its first edition, this time in late winter, in March.

The other activities, however, are real diversifications. Thus, a local beer, "La Templière" is developed in partnership with a small local brewery. The first productions are available to runners in 2019. Faced with the success of this product, a lemonade and a cola from Aveyron are proposed. "La Templière" beer is later sold online, as well as distributed in cafés, hotels and restaurants in the larger area, via a historical partner. To increase production, it is now produced in a larger brewery, long established in Aveyron and brewing its own products.

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[4] https://www.hivernaledestempliers.com/
[5] https://www.tarnvalleytrail.com/

Figure 1. Chronology of the FDT: major events and number of runners.
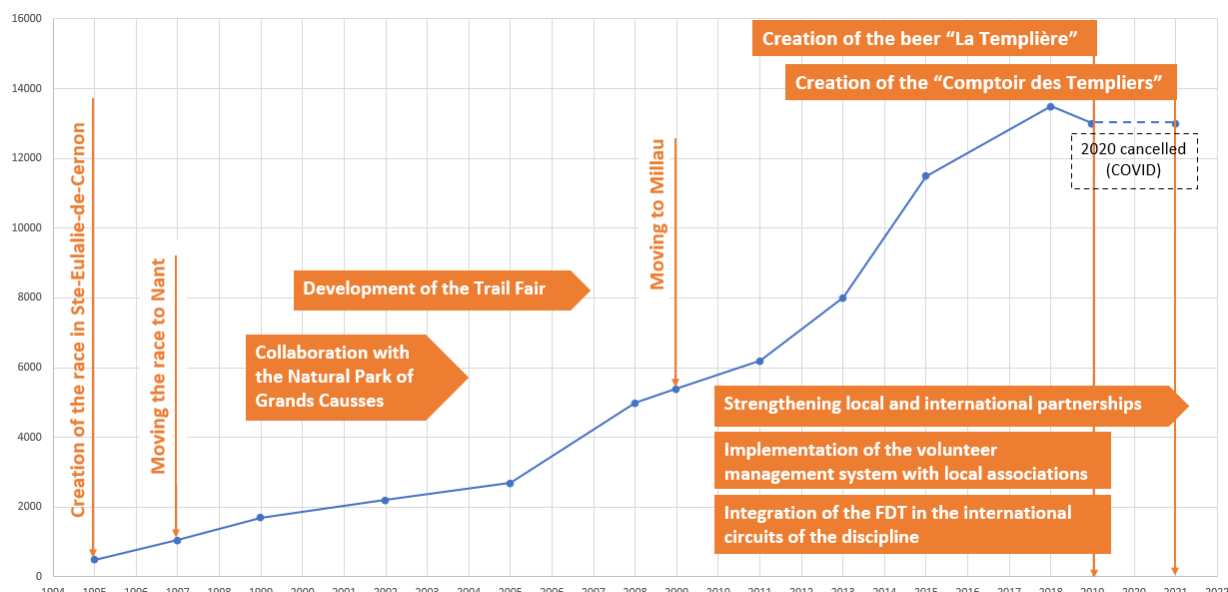
In 2020, the lockdowns related to the Covid-19 pandemic do not allow the holding of the FDT, which is cancelled. During this difficult year for many commercial activities, Kevin has created an online sales site using his network. The "Comptoir des Templiers"[6] was thus born, both an official store for "Templiers" products (T-shirts, etc.) and a local platform offering products from Aveyron (food and gifts), either retail or in boxes. The producers are either historical partners of the FDT, or new contacts coming from different networks and connections, always on a regional scale. On a more occasional basis, the site served as a relay, during the pandemic, for "click & collect" initiatives by local shops and restaurants. Special operations were set up to promote regional products during several important times of the year, such as Christmas, New Year's Eve and Valentine's Day. The large community[7] and the active presence of FDT on social networks have allowed the site, which delivers its products throughout France, to quickly gain visibility.

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[6] https://www.comptoirdestempliers.com/
[7] 58 476 followers on Facebook (consulted on January 21, 2023)

2.2. DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

Our approach involves the collection of primary and secondary data from 2017 to 2020, coupled with triangulation of the collected data (Miles et al., 2019).

Our data collection was organized as follows (Table 3). In a first phase of discovery and characterization of the event (2017) we identified through free interviews with the founders, secondary data, and participant observation, the originality of the event, its scale, and its local embeddedness.

In a second step, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with local institutions, event partners, and volunteers, stakeholders of the event. The founders and the director of partnerships of the FDT were also solicited during this second phase in order to explain the choices and objectives of the organization. Further participant observations were conducted during 2018 and 2019.

Table 3. Data collection

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Secondary Data Content analysis	External: Local and specialized press; Institutional websites (Millau, association of local authorities, tourist office); CCI impact studies 2017, 2018, 2019 Internal: FDT website and social networks; Commercial brochure; Press kit					
Primary data	2017	2018	2019	2020		
Open interviews: founders	F1 à F4				F6	F7
Semi-structured interviews: founders and organization (1)		F8 - F9	F10 - F11	F12 - F13		F14
Informal exchanges for clarification and validation		E1	E2	E3	E4-E6	E7
Semi-structured interviews: partners (2)			P1- P7			
Semi-structured interviews: institutional (3)			T1 - T2	T3 - T4		
Semi-structured interviews: volunteers		V1 - V10	V11-V14	V15-V16		
Participating Observations	O1	O2	O3			

(1) Founders (Gilles Bertrand, Odile Baudrier), Director of partnerships (Kevin Bertrand)

(2) FDT partner companies: e.g. Jasse Larzou, Ergysport, Face-to-face during the "partners' days", 2019

(3) Tourist Office (OT), Association of local authorities, Tourism Officer, Bird protection league Grands-Causses

Because an event is in essence ephemeral, even if it is recurring, we chose to use a longitudinal approach. The interviews conducted at different periods, followed and treated in a chronological and comparative manner, as well as the multiplication of participant observation approaches,

allowed us to determine the key elements to be taken into account in order to trace the evolution of the FDT (Pettigrew et al., 2001) and its legitimacy, as much concerning the types of legitimacy as the strategies deployed and the processes.

The longitudinal approach also gave us the opportunity to collect data not only during the four days of the event, but also during the phases of preparation, assessment, and projection on the following editions. Finally, this approach allows us to go beyond individual postures and feelings to confirm the key elements of the research over a long period of time.

Regarding the processing and analysis of our data, we proceeded in stages. First, the perception of the event by the different stakeholders of its ecosystem was explored through an analysis of primary and secondary data. As our data collection approach was developed over a long period of time, these data were regularly condensed. We proceeded to a first coding of the collected data by keywords and distinguished five phases: (Phase 1) Venture emergence (liability of newness), (Phase 2) Venture development (proof of concept), (Phase 3) Ecosystem strategy (Phase 4) Development of the ecosystem, with a focus on trail running (Phase 5) Ecosystem enlargement, with a focus on local development. We compared these coded data with our theoretical approaches in order to qualify the existing proximities and the perceived legitimacy of the event for each stakeholder.

3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

3.1. PROXIMITY AS ANTECEDENT OF LEGITIMACY

Our results highlight the role of proximity as antecedent of legitimacy from the emergence of the event, through its development, and the construction of its ecosystem. In the table 3, actions, proximity and legitimacy are presented in a chronology, to point out the existence of proximity to create legitimacy, but also the fact that new proximities may stem from acquired legitimacy. It also presents proximity and legitimacy across time, with the FDT and the ecosystem crossing thresholds, seeking to retain some specific resources while acquiring new ones. The relationships we found between proximities and legitimacy are explained in more detail in this section.

In the first phase of the FDT's development, the founders relied on many existing proximities. Cognitive proximity, in particular, which stems from the local population's enthusiasm for

endurance sports and its favorable attitude towards new events. Cognitive proximity, first of all, thanks to the precedent created by the existence of the 100k km of Millau, allowed the FDT to find cognitive legitimacy with many stakeholders from the start. They understand the project well and willingly join in. "[...] in terms of running, there is a big history, not only in Millau but also in the region. Before the Templars were in Nant, but Millau and Nant are the same area. But yes, it's a big running spot" (OT) The geographical proximity makes the results of the event quickly perceptible for the local population, and the additional economic activity that it brings to the region in the off-season allows it to acquire a new form of legitimacy, this time pragmatic. "The race is good for the city and even for the surroundings. It makes for animation; we see lots of people. Even foreigners!"

These proximities and legitimacies will persist and strengthen over time, as the event grows. The latter implies the search for new resources, beyond the perpetuation of those already exploited. To do this, the organization will seek to create new proximities with different actors. These relationships are established through direct contacts, often favored by pre-existing geographical or social relationships, and/or the growing reputation of the race (cognitive proximity), or through contacts with other actors in the ecosystem, or even external actors.

For example, the various steps taken by the organization to create new relationships with the inhabitants, but also with "non-local" runners, will gradually allow the FDT to find legitimacy in the sports world, even before the recognition of this type of event by the sports federation. Thus, the participation of high-level runners who share with the organization an appetite for difficult courses and endurance events will create new proximities with the world of endurance runners who will in turn legitimize the event and include it in their race calendars.

Facing a growing need for volunteers, the founders approached local sports organizations and proposed to subsidize their activities in proportion to the number of volunteer hours provided. This will give the organization a pragmatic legitimacy, but also a cognitive legitimacy with the users of these associations. Beyond that, it also provides moral legitimacy with a population that appreciates this sharing approach. The population will thus be inclined to accept the constraints of a growing event: *"[...] the fact that you have 50, 100, 300 volunteers on an event is as many ambassadors, spokespersons in the city, in the town, who will reduce conflicts of use."* (T1) *"Here we are a poor country, the City Council has no money to give. So, we have to get by, and the Templars give us a chance to bail out a little. People don't have any money, so*

the contributions at 170 € per year, don't dream, we couldn't pay them. We give a little of our time, but it allows the association to survive without increasing its prices. Because we could not pay." (V12)

In order to preserve the essential resource of access to the natural space of the Grands-Causses, the founders spontaneously contacted the Regional Natural Park at the time of its creation to present their project and to co-construct with the park the operational rules. This gave the FDT a pragmatic and moral legitimacy that allowed it to perpetuate the event.

The cognitive proximity between the FDT and the equipment manufacturers, which is reflected in the knowledge of this type of sporting event, results in the pragmatic legitimacy of the organization, which provides companies with an opportunity to present their products and innovations to a large and passionate public. With the growth and reputation of the event, other proximities will gradually be established which will be validated by the legitimacy of the organization with different audiences. The city of Millau gains legitimacy as a city of outdoor sports from the world-renowned event that takes place there. The tourism sector benefits from this reputation and will work with the founders to perpetuate the effects of this event by creating a "trail destination" that will attract sports tourism. The equipment manufacturers will also get closer to the event to benefit from its legitimacy.

Table 3. Festival des Templiers: A chronology using the legitimacy and proximity perspectives [Extracts]

Phase Period	Actions taken by the Orchestrator (FDT)	Legitimating actors / Audience	G	S	I	C	O	Outputs / Outcomes	Legitimacy Type	Comments / Verbatim
1 1995	Organizing the first edition of the "Trail des Templiers"	Runners, partners, local institutions, local population	G	S	I	C		Authentic trail running in Middle Mountains / Basic value proposition 500 runners / Proof of concept	Pragmatic and cognitive	The "Grande Course des Templiers" is the first trail race in France. The name "Templiers" is adapted to the first place of departure of the race, an old Templar commandery. Local identity; forging a narrative between authenticity and history, bravery and adventure, myth and reality
2 1997	Moving to the neighboring town of Nant (3rd edition)	Runners, Partners	G	S	I	C	O	From 1997 to 2009 the number of runners increase from 1050 to 5400	Pragmatic and moral	The town council of Sainte-Eulalie-de-Cernon considers that the flow of runners is detrimental to the preservation of the historical heritage of the city (F1)
2 1997	Launching the Trail Fair for partners to promote and/or sell their products.	Runners, partners, local institutions	G	S	I	C	O	17 exhibitors in 1997, 120 in 2022 The FDT rapidly grows to become the second trail event in France	Pragmatic and moral	The most important brands participate as well as local craftsmen who offer local products. " […], the FDT brings us quite a lot of traffic in terms of people. Kevin has done a great job over the last few years to set up the exhibitor village." (P3)
2 2000's	Close collaboration with the Natural Park of Grands-Causses	Local institutions, Regional and national parks	G		I	C	O	The FDT is considered a responsible organization / The organization is allowed to continue its growth	Pragmatic and moral	« These events take place in the heart of the Park with which a close collaboration is carried out to sensitize the runners to the preservation of the environment and limit the impact of the race on the ecosystems. »[8]
3 2009	Moving to Millau	Runners, volunteers, partners, local inst.	G		I		O	High commitment of Millau's population to the organization of the FDT; support of the city council	Pragmatic and moral	This innovation meets the spirit of Millau's population - "The first long distance race, the 100 km of Millau, the first trail, a big race, well before it was called trail, the word did not exist yet in 1995, indeed there is a history. » (T1)
3 2010	Developing new trails	Runners and their families	G		I	C		Various courses adapted to high performing runners but also to family or amateur runners. First official "lady trail": La Templière.	Pragmatic and moral	The FDT launches new races, shorter or of lesser height. The number of races offered during the FDT gradually increases from 1 to 15 events. The FDT counts over 5000 runners.
3 2010's	Inviting international elite runners to run the "flagship" events	Runners, Partners			I	C		High number of runners and elite competition, giving a good and large audience to the event	Pragmatic and cognitive	The number of Elite runners increases considerably and makes this event a high-level race.[9] « Surely one of the great and beautiful classics of the Trail in France, the Grand Trail des Templiers (78km / 3 640 m D+) is placed each year as a race impossible to circumvent in the French calendar. »[10]
3 Since early 2010s	Developing the network of local partners; the FDT offers to runners high quality local products	Partners, Volunteers, Population, Local institutions	G		I		O	The FDT is considered a local event and well accepted by most stakeholders.	Pragmatic and cognitive	"The FDT is part of our heritage now. And it's a benefit to our region. So, we give back a little, we give a few hours, and we carry around a few bottles of water, it's the least we can do, don't you think?" (V11) "All the same, it's a bit our race, it's the race of Millau. Like the 100 km, it's the race of a city." (V14)
3 Since early 2010s	Finding local, national or international partners to support the event.	Partners, Volunteers, Local institutions			I		O	The FDT is positioned as an international event in Millau.	Pragmatic and moral	Major national (e.g. Roquefort Company) and international (e.g. Hoka) brands become partners of the FDT. Many major equipment manufacturers take advantage of the FDT to exhibit their new products. (OP)

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[8] Website of the Natural Park of Grands-Causses : https://www.parc-grands-causses.fr/tous-les-evenements-du-parc-naturel-des-grands-causses/festival-des-templiers-trail-2022 (Accessed 2023-01)
[9] « Return on the Great Templars Race in 10 figures » ; Trails, 2011-10 (accessed 2023-01) https://www.trails-endurance.com/actualites-courses-trail-running/retour-sur-la-grande-course-des-templiers-en-10-chiffres
[10] "Templiers 2019, favorites, outsiders and forfeits", Trails, 2019-10 (accessed 2023-01) : https://www.trails-endurance.com/actualites-courses-trail-running/templiers-2019-favoris-outsiders-et-forfaits

# / Year	Action	Stakeholders	G	S	I	C	O	Effect	Legitimacy	Quote
3 2010's	The FDT relieves volunteer positions of the most strenuous work.	Local population, Volunteers		S	I		O	Most volunteers are involved and come back each year, know their positions, train each other.	Pragmatic and moral	"It's also an advantage to keep the same volunteers each year, the same teams. When you know them, it's easier, people are autonomous." (V4) "It is an event perceived by the population as being first and foremost their own. And people take ownership of it, make it their own." (F1)
3 2013	Registering the major races of the FDT with the ITRA[4]	Elite runners, Sport partners, Regulators				C	O	4 of the FDT's races allow ITRA points	Pragmatic	The major races of the FDT are registered with the ITRA. ITRA races can earn qualifying points. These qualification points are then used to gain access to other events.[11]
4 2013	The City Council entrusts the FDT with the creation of training trails	Runners, Population, City of Millau	G	S	I	C	O	Millau has become a real destination for trail runners looking for a variety of courses, in a preserved and impressive landscape.	Pragmatic and moral	Millau Espace Trail counts 270 km of marked trails starting from Millau and its community of communes[12].
4 2017	Developing new races, at other times and on other sites	Runners, Partners		S	I		O	Creation of the Templiers winter race (2017) and the Tarn Valley Trail (2022)	Pragmatic and moral	The reputation and image of the FDT are the basis for launching new races.
4 2019	Due to bad weather, the most difficult races were cancelled: revenues for the FDT were only partial but all grants were distributed to the associations	Volunteers, Local population		S	I		C	The FDT organization is praised for its sense of responsibility (Specialized press)	Pragmatic and moral	"We have paid the grants to the associations. We know that it is important for them." (F3) - "100% support to the organization. People don't know much about the power and randomness of a Cevenol episode. If Gilles Bertrand cancelled it is because he had to. To know how to cancel is to show great lucidity and professionalism and clearly to ensure the safety of the runners because we are talking about 2700 people who could be at the mercy of the elements". (Facebook FDT, oct 2019)
5 2019	Creation of a beer "La Templière" which will be sold during the FDT	Runners	G	S	I			Development of "La Templière" beer with local breweries. 8000 beers sold on the FDT in 2021.	Pragmatic and moral	"Our event changes from year to year. Like the society. Beer is a good example, but everything is going in that direction. We try to make our own products, with local producers... Local, local, local." (F5)
5 2020	Developing an e-commerce platform to market regional products during the pandemic	Local organizations and craftsmen	G	S	I		O	Creation of "Le Comptoir des Templiers"; Distance selling for local partners; click and collect for restaurants during holidays	Pragmatic and moral	Local media hails FDT's initiative to assist local artisans during the Covid pandemic19.[13]
5 2020's	The courses are assessed each year in terms of biodiversity. If necessary, the race courses are modified according to the recommendations of the competent authorities.	Parks and local population	G		I		O	Considered as an expert, the FDT is associated with the Park's reflections and the elaboration of its charter.	Pragmatic and moral	"This Wednesday, 11 experts involved in the environment, biodiversity, management of national and regional parks, were present in southern Aveyron to validate the next charter of the regional natural park of the "Grands Causses", setting the guidelines for actions to be carried out over the period 2022-2037. The Templiers were invited to recall the history of the trail, the creation of this event in 1995, the starting point of a great adventure for this new discipline, its controlled development and its integration into the Grands Causses area in direct collaboration with the PNR des Grands Causses." (FDT, Facebook, July 9, 2021)

[11] FDT presentation page on ITRA (Internation Trail Running Assosciation) website (accessed 2023-01) : https://itra.run/Races/RaceDetails/Festival.Des.Templiers.Marathon.Des.Causses/2013/6220
[12] Millau sports nature website (accessed 2023-01) : https://www.millau-sports-nature.fr/trail/parcours-de-trail
[13] "FDT is racing as a team "(local media) https://www.media12.fr/les-templiers-font-la-course-en-equipe/?fbclid=IwAR31wfZfjBjj59k28aJaIASSswSA6CYdqEnpWUfzY-sjcllG1FliPMC56C4

If the following pattern seems to be true: proximity > legitimacy > resources and/or new proximities > new forms of legitimacy > etc., on the other hand, we have not been able to establish a direct link between the type of proximity and the type of legitimacy. This would mean that proximity is "neutral", its nature is not affecting the kind of legitimacy created. Proximities are given situations, where legitimacy is a judgment. However, our longitudinal study shows a predominance of pragmatic (audience self-interest) and moral (normative approval) forms of legitimacy, cognitive legitimacy being more present at the start of the activity (predictability of actions and plausibility of the organization). On the other hand, concerning proximities, the geographical dimension is separate from the other dimensions, being a stable and unconstructed data, it is not concerned by the dynamics mentioned above.

3.2. PROXIMITY, LEGITIMATION PROCESSES AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

In this section, we present our results to show the evolution of the legitimation processes over time and the nature of the main proximities created. Our first result highlights the differences and complementarities between discursive and performative legitimation.

During the emergence phase of the FDT, the founders mainly used discursive processes to build their identity. Their communication was mainly based on symbols and collective framings, through the references to the Templar's history and their logo showing a vulture[14], forging a narrative between authenticity and history, bravery and adventure, myth and reality. The storytelling around nature trail running across preserved landscapes and mountains, but also the challenge of this kind of races, resulted in a first edition with 500 runners, enough to prove that it was worth developing the event. The created proximity is mainly institutional, referring to the values and beliefs of the audiences. It may also be cognitive, while informing and creating shared knowledge.

Legitimation processes are then turning to a performative dimension, for example to prove to existing and potential partners that it is worth supporting and participating to the event. Performative processes, through value realization are particularly represented: presence of elite runners, success of the trail fair (120 exhibitors in 2022), economic impact on restaurants, hotels and various hosting sites, that especially reopen for the FDT weekend (off-season).

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[14] The vulture is one of the emblematic animals of the Grands-Causses

Our results also allow us to establish that one and the same approach can have a discursive or performative character depending on the audience that perceives it. Thus, in the case studied, the environmental preservation measures put in place by the organization will be perceived in a performative way by the park managers, whereas they will remain rather discursive in the eyes of the runners, the ecological awareness generally present among the participants of nature races making them sensitive to these actions.

Table 4. FDT: A chronology showing legitimation processes, created proximities and identity construction [Extracts]

P	Action	Legitimation Process	Audience	Created proximity	Comment
1	Adoption of a local identity (name, logo).	Discursive	Local population and local authorities	Instit	Fosters local adoption of the new event
			Runners	Cog	The name "Templiers" is widely known
> Identity construction: Innovative running event					
2	Creation of the trail running exhibition.	Performative	Sport partners	Org	The FDT appears to be a good way to promote the equipment of major brands and innovations because of the concentration of runners in this new discipline
		Performative	Local artisans and merchants	Org	The trail show is an opportunity to reach a new audience and to make sales to tourists in the off season
		Performative	Local authorities	Instit	The trail show promotes regional products to potential tourists
		Discursive	Local population	Instit	The FDT has become a "big event" sharing its growth with the city and its region
	Contact with the newly created nature park and adoption of measures to limit the impact of the race.	Performative	Natural Park	Org	The organization and the park are considering measures to limit the impact of the race on the natural environment. The authorizations are granted.
		Discursive	Millau's population Runners	Instit	The organization appears to be respectful of its environment
> Identity construction: Major trail running festival					
3	The FDT moves to the city of Millau	Performative Performative	Runners	Cog	The reception conditions are improved, and the races offer more bibs
			Partners	Org	The trail show is growing and welcoming more runners. This increases the effectiveness of the show.
	The volunteer organization is improved for more comfort and efficiency.	Performative	Local sports and schools' associations	Org	The FDT funds end-of-year field trips for local schools and helps sports associations finance their activities.
		Discursive	Millau's population	Instit	The FDT appears to be a supportive organization
		Performative	Volunteers	Org	Volunteers renew their commitment year after year and manage to master the organizational routines of the FDT
> Identity construction: Embedded but international sporting event					
4	FDT founder collaborates with Millau City Council to create a trail destination	Discursive	City council	Org	The FDT supports the development policy of the region.
		Performative	Local artisans and merchants	Cog	The FDT supports the development of sports tourism and increases the number of visitors to the city.
> Identity construction: Embedded ecosystem orchestrated by the FDT					

5	Creation of an e-commerce site "Comptoir des Templiers" and beer "La Templière"	Performative	Local partners and producers	Org	The FDT, by its attendance and its notoriety allows the creation of new outlets
		Discursive	Local population	Instit	The FDT supports local employment and gives systematic preference to local actors.
> Identity construction: Responsible embedded ecosystem (Templiers)					

Finally, in terms of identity construction, even though it is dynamic, evolving over the course of the actions put in place and the discourse developed, we consider it to be a result rather than a separate process. Indeed, concrete elements, discursive or performative, will help establish it: for example, the choice of name and visual elements (logo), the setting up of a trail fair, or the development of regular relations with the park's managers from the outset. The latest actions that stand out for the population and local actors are the creation of an e-commerce platform during the covid pandemic, as well as the implementation of a click-and-collect service for local restaurant owners during periods that usually generate a lot of activity, such as holidays. This allows the FDT to fully take its place as an orchestrator of a responsible ecosystem, strongly embedded in the area and in the Aveyron region.

3.3. PROXIMITY AS INTERFACE

The analysis of the ecosystem orchestrated by the FDT reveals two distinct groups that have developed important proximities, but of different natures. First, a "local" group that is distinguished by an important geographical proximity. The inhabitants of Millau, the volunteers who represent one in twenty inhabitants of the city, the local authorities, especially those in charge of tourism, the shopkeepers and craftsmen as well as the natural park form this first group. Geographical proximity is the main one, completed by other secondary forms, such as organizational and institutional proximity. The second group is made up of the professionals of this sport: the regulatory authorities (ITRA) and the sports equipment manufacturers who have joined the event, but also the community of trail runners, regardless of their level of practice. This group is characterized by a solid shared knowledge of the conditions of this type of event and its requirements. Cognitive proximity is therefore the main one, secondary proximity being essentially organizational and institutional (Table 5).

The FDT, which benefits from geographical and cognitive proximities, positions itself as an intermediary between these two groups, with proximities becoming interfaces, qualifying the nature of the dominant relationship in the construction of the relationship and legitimacy. The

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development of the activity and the established relationships give each the opportunity to create new proximities while allowing them to achieve their own goals. For the local group, the event is a way to develop sports tourism that will benefit the actors of the area. For the professional group, the FDT is a major event that gives visibility to a growing sport.

Table 5. Proximities and legitimacy at the ecosystem level

Actors (acting and legitimating)	Role	Initial proximities	Created /reinforced proximities with FDT	FDT legitimacy	Audience: created /reinforced proximities intragroup	Intragroup legitimacy	Audience: created /reinforced proximities external	External legitimacy
Local group of actors (strong geographical proximity) – Local audience								
Volunteers (V)	Complementors	FDT: *G, S, I* V: *G, S, I* Pop: *G, S, I*	*I, C, O*	Pragmatic	V: *S*	Moral	R: *C*	Cognitive
Hosting & Catering partners (H&CP)	Complementors	FDT: *G* Pop: *G, S* TO: *G, C* CoM: G, C	*O*	Pragmatic	FDT: *O*	Pragmatic	R: *C*	Pragmatic
City of Millau (CoM)	Complementors	FDT: *G, C* H&CP: *G, C* TO: *G, C, O* RP: *G, C, O*	*O*	Pragmatic	*RP: O* *CoM: O*	Pragmatic	R: *C*	Cognitive
Tourist office (TO)	External actors	FDT: *G, C* H&CP: *G, C* *CoM: G, C, O* RP: *G, C, O* OTS: *G, C*	*O*	Pragmatic	RP: *O* CoM: *O*	Pragmatic	R: *C*	Pragmatic
Millau Population (Pop)	External actors	FDT: *G, I* V: *G, S, I* H&CP: *G, S*	*C, O, I*	Pragmatic moral	Pop: S	None	None	None
Regional Natural Park (RP)	External actors	FDT: *G* CoM: *G, C, O* TO: *G, C, O*	*C, O*	Pragmatic	TO: *O* CoM: *O*	Pragmatic	R: C	Cognitive
Other touristic sites (OTS)	External actors	FDT: *G* TO: *G, C*	C	Pragmatic	R: C	Cognitive	R: C	Cognitive
Specialized group of actors (strong cognitive proximity) – Sport audience								
Regulators (Reg)	External actors	FDT: C	*O*	Cognitive/ Pragmatic	None	None	None	None
Sport partners (SP)	Complementors	FDT: *C* SpM: *C* R: *C*	*O*	Pragmatic	R: *C*	Cognitive	None	None
Specialized media (SpM)	Complementors	SP: *C*	*C, O*	Pragmatic	None	None	SP: *C, O*	Pragmatic
Runners (R)	Users	FDT: *C* SpM: *C* SP : *C*	I	Moral	SP: C	Cognitive	CoM: C TO: C H&CP: C V: C	Pragmatic

G: Geographic proximity, S: Social proximity, I: Institutional proximity, C: Cognitive proximity, O: Organizational proximity

The different actors and beneficiaries of the ecosystem will thus reinforce or create new proximities, not only with the orchestrator but also among themselves. We have retained in our results the proximities that seemed most important for the functioning of the ecosystem. For

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example, the development of a large-scale race has led the Tourist Office and the Community of Communes to take charge of a new sporting clientele, which implies reinforced proximities with the Natural Park. The volunteers have learned to know the races, the requirements of their positions but also the community of runners and their specific needs, thus developing a cognitive proximity with them. "*This is also the advantage of keeping the same volunteers every year, the same teams. When you know them, it's easier, people are autonomous.*" (V9) The runners for their part will develop their knowledge of available equipment, brands, and their innovations. "*The FDT is an opportunity for us to make our products known to an informed public. The product endowment is very important to us because the most important thing for us is to let people taste our products. [...] For us, it is crucial because we have extraordinary feedback from people who have tried our products at the Templars [...].*" (P6)

In this section, we have therefore established that proximities are antecedents of legitimacy, which is necessary but not sufficient to build the legitimacy of a project and its ecosystem. This construction is based on two major processes, one discursive and the other performative, which contribute to creating and affirming the identity and value proposition of the ecosystem. Finally, playing the role of interface between actors, proximities allow to qualify, at least in part, the nature of the relationships between actors and to facilitate the identification of different audiences and their evolution over time.


4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We have presented our research and results on the analysis of proximity in the construction of legitimacy of an ecosystem, to explain how an ecosystem, the orchestrator and other actors acquire or build legitimacy through proximities. We contribute to the literature on both legitimacy and proximity, by positioning proximities as antecedent to legitimacy, but also as an interface with different audiences. By building on proximity through discursive and performative processes, actors are able to build the identity and value proposition of the ecosystem. In this paper, we consider legitimacy in its three, complementary, perspectives: legitimacy-as-property, legitimacy-as-process and legitimacy-as-perception (Suddaby et al., 2017) and will present our contributions according to these perspectives as we argue this is particularly relevant when considering ecosystem legitimacy.

Referring to legitimacy-as-property, our main contribution is to posit proximity as an antecedent of legitimacy. Before "owning" legitimacy, taking it as a resource or an asset (Suchman, 1995), the actors need to activate or create proximities with evaluators, so that legitimacy can take form, becoming pragmatic, moral and/or cognitive, giving access to resources. The nature of the legitimacy created or acquired is strongly linked to audience expectations, and proximity will determine how the venture's results and narrative are understood. This means that proximity is essential to make the fit between attributes of an organization and social values in the external environment. In an ecosystem strategy, the orchestrator will be able to share or transfer its legitimacy to partners, as the recognition of the orchestrator already gives cognitive and moral legitimacy to a new partner. Should the partner fail, it would lose its legitimacy and leave the ecosystem. Drawing on Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) legitimacy process model, "activating proximities" would be a preceding step to strategies on the environment, leading to conformance, selection, manipulation or creation strategies (Suchman, 1995) (Figure 2).

Legitimacy-as-process is probably the most congruent perspective with the ecosystem literature (Thomas and Ritala, 2022). Constructed by those seeking social change in an institutional field, proximity will be an antecedent not only to legitimacy, but also to the identity and the value proposition of the ecosystem. Based on discursive and performative processes (Thomas and Ritala, 2022), socially constructed, legitimation takes various forms, grounded into proximities. On the discursive side, processes such as framing, sensemaking or positioning are based on cognitive or institutional proximities, whereas on the performative side, strategic processes and value realization – allowing the value proposition of the ecosystem to materialize – will be favored by cognitive and organizational proximities. Our results also highlight that geographical and social proximities are slightly different as they may not be essential for a given process but will favor or reinforce the other kinds of proximities.

Figure 2. A Legitimacy Process Model through Proximities
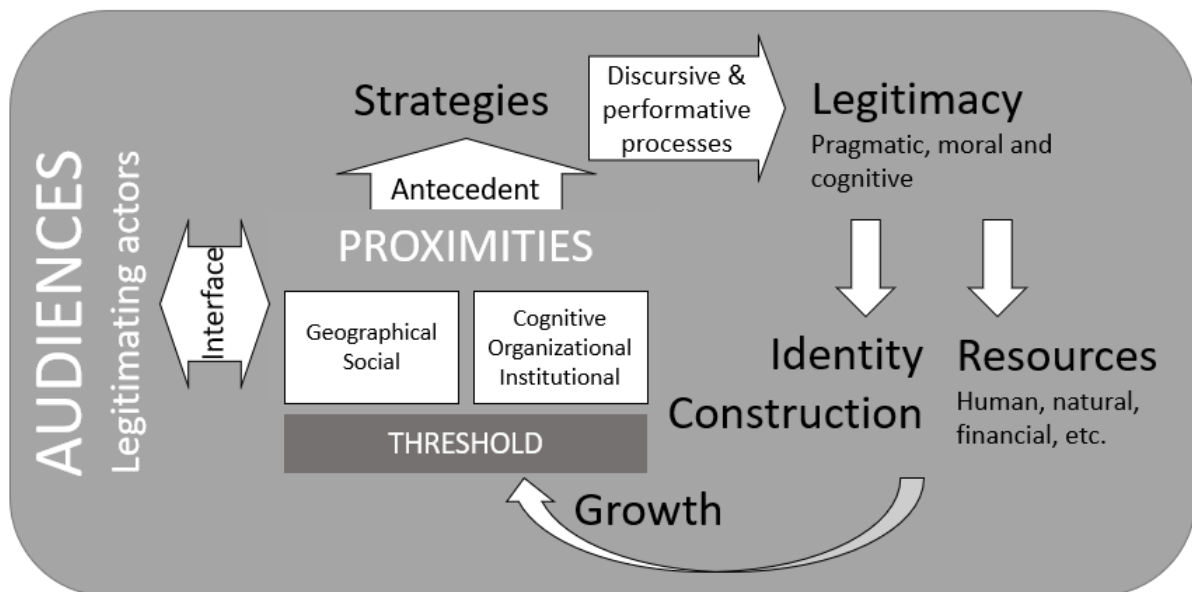
Finally, referring to legitimacy-as-perception, i.e., a socio-cognitive co-construction or an institutionalized judgement (Suddaby et al., 2017), proximities could enrich existing typified patterns of perceptions, judgments, and behaviors between evaluator and beneficiary such as the process models proposed by Bitektine (2011). Multiple/cross levels of interaction are also to be taken into account, as audiences are heterogenous. This heterogeneity can also be framed through proximities, through the identification of dominant proximity dimensions to address the evaluators, proximities standing here as an interface (Figure 2).

From a managerial point of view, our results are of interest not only to entrepreneurs and managers, but also to the organizations that support them and to the institutional actors involved in local development policies. They highlight the importance of proximity in the construction and development of legitimacy and, for example, the importance of local culture and the convergence of objectives between the organization and its location in the success of an ecosystem strategy. The local area must be thought here not as a simple location, but as a "constructed territory" as presented by Del Biaggio (2015). Moreover, the current context puts a growing pressure on social and environmental issues, and if the aim is to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, the dominantly symbolic legitimation processes usually undertaken are insufficient (Silva, 2021) calling for a shift in the type of legitimacy to

be acquired and of the proximity to be developed, with transitions and sustainability gaining a prominent position on the priorities of policymakers and managing boards.

Finally, if this research demonstrates the role of proximity to better understand legitimacy acquisition or construction, legitimation processes and their socio-cognitive embeddedness, in terms of limitations, it is based on a unique case study. The results should be completed and refined, taking into account other kinds of ventures and ecosystems, especially for-profit and non-geographically bounded ones, to be able to further develop and generalize our findings.

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