



Struggling for Recognition: How Organizations Secure Identity in Marginalized Areas

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Abstract

How do organizations achieve identity recognition from their surrounding communities in a semi-abandoned area? Using recognition theory, we delve into this question using a case study of an independent cultural center in Southern Italy, which faces challenges in establishing its identity within a marginal context. Our abductive analysis examines how an organization acts as a transformative change agent that revitalizes a neglected area into an internationally recognized artistic and socio-cultural center, while simultaneously facing challenges in gaining legitimacy and acceptance. We merge philosophical insights and empirical organizational research to theorize how organizations navigate the quest for recognition, highlighting the resulting tensions and conflicts. Employing a process-based approach, we construct an event timeline to trace the emergence of organizational identity recognition crises and the negotiation strategies employed to garner community support. Acknowledging the intricate relationship between an organization and its surrounding community, we interpret this process as a continuous struggle for recognition. Finally, we present theoretical and managerial implications to balance organizational and societal priorities.

Keywords Recognition · Identity · Marginalized context · Surrounding community · Process model

Introduction

“It is strange how, in some moments, Farm’s state of health is reflected in the optimism or pessimism of Favara and the citizens of Favara; there is a kind of osmosis: if Farm is fine, Favara is fine too; if Farm is in a bit of trouble, Favara is also in trouble.” (Founder#1).

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In 2010, Farm Cultural Park (hereafter ‘Farm’), an independent cultural center, embarked on a mission as a disruptive platform for change and social innovation. It drastically transformed Favara, a small town in Southern Italy (Sicily), which had endured decades of crime, depopulation, unemployment, civic neglect, and socio-economic decline. By 2025, after 15 years of Farm’s presence in Favara, the organization had become an emblematic case of both entrepreneurial passion and mission-driven sustainability, as well as a symbol of societal hope, civic engagement, and community identity reconstruction (Capo et al., 2024). Thus, an ambitious ‘dream’ of Farm’s founders evolved spontaneously and epiphanically (Cardon et al., 2011) into a collective ‘miracle’, which turned a semi-abandoned town associated with mafia activities into one of the most visited artistic and cultural hubs in the country and Europe (The Guardian, 2012, 2026; Vogue Italy, 2022). However, this transformation was marred by severe conflicts and tensions characterizing Farm’s ongoing struggle for identity recognition from the local community. While encountering resistance to change, cultural clashes, and institutional friction, the organization continuously sought legitimacy and support.

Scholars have previously investigated how organizations in abandoned and marginalized spaces (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2018) contribute to restoring territorial identity and resisting dominant cultural narratives (Andrews & Roberts, 2012; Capo et al., 2024; Shortt, 2015). Organizational research has enriched the identity literature by showing how organizational development in such “no man’s lands” (Dale & Burrell, 2008, p. 239) can profoundly shape individual, organizational, and community identities (Andrews & Roberts, 2012; Bamber et al., 2017). These processes may disrupt “one’s internal sense of self or place within a social system” (Noble & Walker, 1997, p. 32) and trigger efforts toward identity and contextual reconstruction (Beech, 2011).

Yet despite these contributions, the relational dynamics between an organization and its surrounding community remain insufficiently explored. In particular, little is known about how these interactions shape—and are shaped by—mutual processes of identity formation and recognition, through which tensions and conflicts are navigated and collectively resolved.

The concept of recognition is particularly rooted in Hegelian philosophy (Hegel, 1977; Ikäheimo et al., 2021). While significant literature highlights the dichotomy between recognition (i.e., mutual harmony between the self and other) and disrespect (i.e., one party’s subjugation of another, leading to conflicts), recognition has also been recognized as an inherently ambivalent phenomenon. Supported by Hegel’s work, this view shifts the attention from an idealized vision of full recognition to struggles that shape recognition dynamics. Recognition is fraught with contradictions and pathologies that present actors with a complex interplay between action and judgment (Canivez, 2019). Indeed, recognition is a “condition that enables and constrains freedom at the same time” (Visser, 2024, p. 226; see also Ikäheimo et al., 2021, p. 6, 8; Klikauer, 2016; Lepold, 2018).

Existing literature offers insightful contributions to the application of recognition theory in organizational studies (Bernacchio, 2023). For instance, Bhatnagar et al. (2024) examine the ethical implications of consumer sovereignty by focusing on the lack of recognition to which service workers are subjected in their interactions with customers. Kristensen and Kristensen (2023) explore the relationship between permanent and temporary workers through different forms of recognition. Mao and Xue’s (2002) reframe dignity at work through the lens of recognition theory, while Tyler and Vachhani (2021) critique how organizations simultaneously pursue over-inclusion and exclusion, thereby reifying differences; further, Hancock (2016) illustrates how the value ascribed to certain forms of emotional and aesthetic labor and the ways in which they are experienced emerge from struggles for recognition. Reciprocal recognition has also been used to analyze the relationship between partnership and places (Ryan et al., 2023) both to provide more

underpinning to stakeholder theory (Crane & Ruebottom, 2011; Kortetmäki et al., 2023) and to explain differences in ethical choices (Helzer et al., 2023) and organizational practices (Islam, 2012). However, to the best of our knowledge, our study is among the first to investigate ambivalent recognition to theorize organization–community identity dynamics and conflicts as a problem of recognizability and normative moral standing, rather than solely as feedback-driven identity negotiation or legitimacy acquisition.

Accordingly, this work attempts to bridge this gap by drawing on Hegel’s recognition theory and Butler’s subsequent interpretation to explore the way an organization struggles in a marginal area for recognition and the challenges it faces. Given the lack of knowledge on, this issue and the need to co-construct the meaning of reciprocal recognition with the involved actors, we take an abductive reasoning strategy in conducting our research (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Based on a participation-observation case study of Farm, we address the following question: “*How do organizations achieve identity recognition from their surrounding communities in a semi-abandoned area?*”.

Prior research in organizational identity has provided important accounts of how organizations negotiate, contest, and adapt identities in relation to external audiences and communities (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 2002), including close analyses of organization–town tensions (Tracey & Phillips, 2016). We build on these insights but advance a distinct emphasis. Rather than focusing primarily on how identities are evaluated and reworked through external audience feedback, we conceptualize identity recognition as a normative and institutional achievement that presupposes recognizability—namely, the conditions under which an organization becomes acknowledgeable as a legitimate moral subject within a community’s normative frames (Visser, 2024). This shift matters because recognition is not purely affirming, but it is structurally ambivalent (Ikäheimo et al., 2021; Schick, 2022), enabling and constraining freedom simultaneously, and thus can generate recurring tensions even when an organization is renowned for revitalizing a community. Put differently, organizational identity helps explain how organizations articulate and negotiate ‘who we are’ (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 2002), whereas recognition helps explain whether and under what normative conditions these identity claims become socially intelligible, institutionally sustainable, and morally legitimate for surrounding communities (Bertram & Celikates, 2015; Wickert et al., 2017). Our case, therefore, illuminates not only identity contestation but also the ethical and normative struggles through which organizations and communities co-constitute each other’s standing and agency in marginal contexts.

Farm was selected as a revelatory case (Siggelkow, 2007; Yin, 2009) that enabled us to examine how recognition

processes between organizations and communities unfold in marginalized contexts. The case incorporates the ambivalent and relational nature of recognition, showing how such processes can become intertwined with tensions, conflicts, and shifting identity expectations. In this sense, Farm is both exceptional—given the transformative scope of its intervention—and representative of broader efforts to rebuild the social fabric of neglected territories through organizational action.

In so doing, this study makes three main contributions. First, drawing on Hegel's recognition theory and Butler's contributions, as developed by Visser (2024), we propose a framework to examine relational dynamics between organizations and communities. We highlight organizations' quest for recognition amid tensions, showing the value of integrating philosophical perspectives into empirical research. Second, we explore how organizations seek recognition in marginalized contexts, revealing evolving interactions and community identity strategies (Beech, 2011; Shortt, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Third, we establish a foundation for applying Farm's process in culturally similar areas, analyzing how organizations and local stakeholders negotiate recognition and how social norms shape these dynamics (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005).

Theoretical Background

Recognition has become increasingly prominent in organizational literature (Kristensen & Kristensen, 2023; Visser, 2024), reflecting a broader shift from static conceptions of organizational identity toward more relational and processual understandings of how identities are constituted and sustained (Visser, 2024). Recognition theory complements organizational identity research by foregrounding the normative conditions of recognizability, that is, the criteria through which an organization becomes socially acknowledgeable and morally entitled within the intersubjective dynamics through which identities are negotiated over time (Bertram & Celikates, 2015; Wickert et al., 2017). Importantly, recognition dynamics are analytically distinct from organizational development processes such as growth, maturation, or strategic reorientation. While developmental accounts emphasize changes in resources, routines, and strategic scope (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005), a recognition lens foregrounds whether organizational identity claims become acknowledgeable as morally legitimate within a community's normative frames of recognizability (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Hence, an organization may grow and expand while still facing persistent controversy if its identity remains not institutionally established. Recognition theory therefore complements organizational identity approaches by explaining not only how identities evolve, but also the

reasons why identity claims can remain unstable despite organizational success (Bernacchio, 2023; Kortetmäki et al., 2023).

In this study, recognition is conceived as an intersubjective and relational process through which organizational actors validate and negotiate each other's self-understanding (Visser, 2024). This differs from organizational identity, which refers to the relatively stable collective self-definition of 'who we are' as an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Although organizational identity and recognition are closely related, they address different analytical questions. Organizational identity concerns how organizations define and revise 'who we are' over time, especially in relation to external images and audience feedback (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Recognition, instead, concerns the normative and relational conditions under which those identity claims become socially intelligible and morally legitimate to others (Visser, 2024). This distinction is important because an organization may develop a strong and coherent identity, and even achieve external visibility and success, while still struggling to be locally recognized as a legitimate moral actor. Recognition thus extends organizational identity scholarship by explaining why identity claims may remain contested despite organizational growth, and why tensions may persist when recognizability is institutionally fragile or normatively unsettled. Building on this distinction, our analysis focuses on how recognition unfolds as a relational and normatively mediated process between the organization and the surrounding community.

Beyond organizational identity, we also consider social or community identity, which captures the collective self-definition of the local community (Cornelissen et al., 2007). Recognition processes unfold not only within the organization but also between the organization and the community, giving rise to tensions when these identities intersect or become misaligned. Understanding these dynamics provides insight into how recognition shapes interactions across different social levels (Wickert et al., 2017). Consistently, our theoretical lens is multilevel: recognition is not merely an interpersonal mechanism but a normative and institutional relation that links individual experiences, organizational identity claims, and community-level normative frames. At the macro level, local norms and institutions define recognizability (Bertram & Celikates, 2015; Wickert et al., 2017). These normative frames shape which organizational purposes, practices, and forms of authority are treated as appropriate or illegitimate for the community, thereby conditioning whether recognition is even possible. At the micro level, organizational and community actors experience recognition or misrecognition through relational dynamics (e.g., autonomy, dignity, affirmation, acceptance) that motivate responses such as defensive moves, justificatory

narratives, or relational repair efforts to restore or negotiate reciprocal recognition (Visser, 2024). At the meso level, these responses translate into shifts in organizational identity articulation—how the organization defines “who we are” and “what we stand for” (Hatch & Schultz, 2002, p. 997; p.1009)—as well as into community identity work that either incorporates or resists the organization’s claims (Bamber et al., 2017; Capo et al., 2024; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Such levels are connected through recursive mechanisms. Macro-level normative frames structure what is recognizable; micro-level experiences of recognition or misrecognition motivate action; meso-level identity mechanisms alter how the organization and community relate. This multilevel lens advances existing organizational identity accounts by explaining not only how identities are (re)negotiated through feedback and image dynamics, but also how conflicts and tensions persist when an organization’s identity claims violate or destabilize prevailing recognizability conditions, making recognition structurally ambivalent even when an organization delivers widely acknowledged benefits to the community (Ikäheimo et al., 2021; Schick, 2022).

Recognition entails a form of social and relational freedom: individuals are free to the extent that others acknowledge their freedom, and vice versa (Lindebaum et al., 2022; Tyler, 2019). Drawing on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977), recognition offers a lens through which to understand the dynamics of identity formation and relational interdependence in organizational and social contexts (Visser, 2024).

Two principal conceptions of recognition have been proposed (Ikäheimo et al., 2021). The first is rooted in Hegel (1977) and later developed by Charles Taylor (1989) and Axel Honneth (1996). This tradition adopts a largely optimistic perspective, viewing recognition as a social process that enables freedom and fosters human flourishing (Bertram & Celikates, 2015). The second conception also traces back to Hegel (1977) but is further elaborated in the work of Judith Butler (2021). This perspective presents recognition as fundamentally ambivalent—a condition that can simultaneously enable and constrain freedom (Ikäheimo et al., 2021; Visser, 2024). This latter stream is central for understanding how histories, social structures, and normative conditions shape ongoing recognition processes (Schick, 2022), and it constitutes the theoretical stance adopted in the present study. From this viewpoint, recognition is a relational process marked by continuous tension between subjects who are themselves incomplete, incoherent, and ambiguous. Such relations are structured by social norms that govern who—or what—is deemed recognizable, thereby shaping experiences of precariousness. Consequently, recognition is potentially liberating yet also inherently oppressive (Butler, 2021).

As per Hegel’s (1977) concept of recognition (*Anerkennung*), self-consciousness can only achieve full realization through mutual recognition. This recognition is a relational dynamic that affirms the autonomy and interdependence of both parties. It is profoundly dialectical and evolves through the stages of tension, conflict, and synthesis. The initial stage is the ‘desire’ in which self-consciousness strives to assert itself by transforming external objects. However, the recognition from objects is insufficient and self-consciousness requires another autonomous subject to validate its identity. Therefore, in the second stage, the meeting of two self-consciousnesses often leads to a ‘struggle for life and death’, as each party seeks to assert independence while demanding recognition from the other. This dynamic introduces asymmetry and lays the groundwork for a relational hierarchy. In the next step, this struggle resolves to form a ‘hierarchical relationship’: one party assumes the role of master and the other servant. While the master derives recognition from the servant’s labor, the servant gains self-awareness and autonomy through the transformation. However, unresolved tensions between autonomy and dependence lead to an ‘unhappy consciousness’, internal conflict, and alienation that requires reflective negotiations to overcome. The ultimate goal is to achieve ‘reciprocal recognition’, in which both parties acknowledge their autonomy and interdependence, thereby enabling a more sustainable and balanced relationship.

Butler’s (1997) interpretation of Hegel’s theory of recognition draws attention to the mediating role of norms in organizational and social life. From this perspective, recognition is shaped by broader social constructs that determine who is eligible to be recognized (Butler, 1997; Visser, 2024). A central claim in Butler’s work is that forms of recognition presuppose recognizability—that is, the socially established criteria that make someone or something intelligible as a subject of recognition (Ikäheimo, 2022). Social norms thus provide the general conditions that govern recognizability, offering the normative frames within which recognition becomes possible (Butler, 2009). Recognizability, in this sense, precedes and conditions reciprocal recognition: actors must first be rendered intelligible within normative structures before recognition can occur. This insight underscores the inherent ambiguity and ongoing precariousness of mutual recognition, as the norms that enable recognizability can also constrain or destabilize it. Hence, asymmetry in recognition can lead to marginalization and alienation, especially in the context of power imbalances between organizations and local communities (Visser, 2024).

The approach followed in this work integrates Hegel and Butler’s insights to examine the relationship between organizations and communities. Hegel’s dialectical framework helps examine the transformation and relational tensions between organizations and the surrounding communities. It

also offers a new perspective to understand the role of social norms in peculiar contexts. In the next section, we analyze Farm's journey to address our research question, while in the discussion, we explore the process from the perspective of reciprocal recognition.

Methods

We adopted an abductive reasoning strategy as the guiding principle of our methodology. Originally conceptualized by Peirce (1998) as a form of inferential reasoning aimed at generating plausible explanations for surprising observations, abduction has more recently been developed in management research as a distinctive approach to theory building that combines empirical grounding with theoretical sensitivity (Vaccaro & Ramus, 2025). Recent contributions further emphasize the iterative and generative nature of abductive inquiry, as well as the need to balance creative insight with methodological rigor (Filatotchev et al., 2025; Fleming & Oswick, 2025; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021).

According to Timmermans and Tavory (2012, p. 167), "Abduction refers to a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence". This yields a recursive research cycle in which data are continuously 'double-fit' to theory and theory to data. Abductive analysis starts with observed 'anomalies'—surprising empirical findings (e.g., the visible urban regeneration brought by Farm in a marginalized and economically depressed area)—and posits a conjecture that would make them 'a matter of course', after which deduction elaborates implications and induction probes them empirically. In sum, abductive analysis replaces inductivist emergence with a methodologically organized search for evidence that produces novel, generalizable theoretical insights grounded in empirical materials (Queiroz & Merrell, 2005; Tavory & Timmermans, 2022).

Examining a single case study is particularly useful when investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, or when organizational processes are at the core of the research, or when a holistic and in-depth investigation is required (Yin, 1981, 2009).

Research Setting

The research was conducted on an independent cultural center in the historical core ('Seven Courtyards') of a semi-abandoned small town in Southern Italy called Favara. The town had been synonymous with the mafia and criminal activities for a prolonged period. The town's aesthetic appeal suffered significantly because of unregulated growth. Unexpectedly, a few years after Farm was launched by a notary and his wife, Favara started garnering national and

international recognition as the epicenter of art and experimentalism—a small hub for urban regeneration. The inception of Farm enriched the town with art installations and initiatives that focused on children, teenagers, and gender equality. Favara became a model for towns seeking to emulate its success (Capo et al., 2024). Globally, Favara and Farm attract 120,000 tourists, architects, and designers annually and provide continuous employment to approximately 150 workers.

Data Collection

From June 2022 to March 2023, data were collected through interviews, documents, media, field notes, and two brief classroom associative exercises with teenagers to hold the perspective of new generations (see Table 1). Preliminary online interviews lasting approximately 90 min each were conducted with Farm's founders. Their personal background and complete knowledge of the story helped us improve the interview protocol. We then conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 21 stakeholders recruited by engaging Farm's founders and then by combining purposive and snowball sampling methods (Morse, 1991; Silverman, 2009). Firstly, we intentionally selected 'information-rich' participants who could provide deep insights into the phenomenon under study (Morse, 1991). Accordingly, our goal was to include individuals who could illuminate different phases of Farm's development and offer complementary viewpoints on the evolving relationship between the organization and the Favara community. This included founders, staff members, residents of the 'Seven Courtyards', local entrepreneurs, teachers, and institutional representatives, each of whom could speak to a specific moment or aspect of Farm's transformation.

To extend the reach of our investigation within this closely interconnected context, we complemented this approach with snowball sampling (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2009). This method relies on participants' social networks to identify other relevant informants who might otherwise be difficult to access. In a small town environment like Favara, where interpersonal trust and reputation are central to social life, this approach was particularly effective in facilitating access to diverse voices and authentic narratives. The combination of purposive and snowball sampling thus enabled us to balance theoretical intent with contextual sensitivity, ensuring both diversity of perspectives and depth of understanding across the organization's developmental trajectory.

This allowed us to capture different perspectives (i.e., old and young Farm members, men and women living in the 'Seven Courtyards', local institutions' employees, and kids participating in Farm's projects). Consistent with the need to allow narratives to emerge, open-ended questions were administered. The questions prompted the participants to

Table 1 Data collection summary

Data type	Quantity	Source
Interviews	23	2 founders 2 staff members 1 innovator 1 researcher 1 entrepreneur 2 B&B owners 1 architect 1 video maker 3 school teachers 1 school principal 1 school for children architects director 2 inhabitants of the 'Seven Courtyards' 1 vice-president of the town council 1 FAI (Fondo Ambiente Italiano) director 1 Pro Loco president 2 start-up owners
Classroom exercise	2	41 teenagers aged from 11 to 13 years
Video	9	2 TED talks 3 videos provided by Farm – internal documents 4 YouTube videos
Press	26	Articles from international, national, and local press
Field notes	-	Daily participant observation during on-site stays

freely express their perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation (e.g., “In your opinion, what are the highlights, both positive and negative, that Farm has experienced so far and that you consider particularly important?”; “How has Farm changed from its inception to today?”). Given their peculiar roles, the interview protocol was adapted to fit founders’ and stakeholders’ positions (see Supplemental File 1). Each interview lasted between 45 min and 1 h, providing sufficient time to explore the phenomenon until the interviewer and the participant felt it had been appropriately covered. The interviews were audio recorded after receiving participant consent. Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively, allowing us to monitor the completeness of the insights obtained. In line with Morse’s (1994, 2000) criteria, we considered data saturation reached when new interviews no longer added substantive information or variation to the emerging themes. In the final stages, recurrent patterns became evident across participants, and subsequent interviews confirmed rather than expanded existing categories, indicating data adequacy and theoretical sufficiency (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pratt, 2009).

To expand the community perspective, we also organized two brief classroom associative exercises involving teenagers from a secondary school in Favara who had recently taken part in a Farm-promoted project. Participants were asked to individually write down the first three words that came to mind when thinking of Farm Cultural Park. The activity, supervised by teachers and researchers, aimed to capture spontaneous associations and was treated as complementary data (Gibson, 2007; Morgan et al., 2002). All

students were explicitly instructed not to modify their words while listening to their classmates’ contributions. At the end of the exercise, they were invited to share any spontaneous comments or reflections if they wished to do so. This procedure ensured that each participant’s associations reflected their immediate, personal perception. Hence, the exercise followed a creative associative approach commonly used in qualitative research to elicit spontaneous, symbolic representations (Kearney & Hyle, 2004). Given the young age of participants (11–13 years old), the activity was conducted within two existing school classes (approximately 20 students each) to preserve a familiar and comfortable setting (Hill, 2006; Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Finally, to ensure data triangulation, interview material was complemented with field notes collected by the first and second authors during several stays at Farm, along with a range of media sources (e.g., press articles and videos) and internal documents. More in detail, two of the authors conducted approximately ten field visits to Favara between 2022 and 2023, with visits ranging from same-day stays to short periods involving overnight presence, for a total of approximately twenty days on site. These visits included attendance at public events organized by Farm, informal interactions with community members (e.g., shared meals), and moments before and after interviews. Field notes consisted of non-systematic observational annotations (approximately twenty pages in total), focusing on relational dynamics, non-verbal communication, emotional reactions, and interactional patterns among different actors. Since the study was not designed as an ethnography, no formal field diary was

maintained; however, consistent with Czarniawska-Joerges' (2007) view of fieldwork as a series of situated encounters that generate cumulative insight, field notes were written daily to record both descriptive observations and reflective interpretations.

Our stance in the field corresponded to that of *observer-as-participant* (Gold, 2017): we interacted openly with organizational members or stakeholders and engaged in everyday conversations and activities, while refraining from taking part in operational decisions. This position allowed us to combine close engagement with reflexive distance, thereby capturing both the lived experience and the interpretive dimensions of Farm's everyday ethical and organizational dynamics.

Data Analysis

Our study adopts a revelatory case study design (Siggelkow, 2007; Stake, 1983; Yin, 1981) informed by an abductive logic of inquiry (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Vaccaro & Ramus, 2025). This design enabled iterative movement between empirical observation and theoretical interpretation, consistent with the interpretivist and processual orientation of organizational research (Hatley, 2004). Thus, rather than imposing Hegelian categories deductively, we engaged in a recursive 'double movement' in which emerging patterns from the data informed theoretical interpretation, while theoretical insights guided further rounds of coding and categorization.

The first step in our analysis was transcribing the interview data using the NVivo software (release 1.7.1). Data were analyzed from the patterns that emerged during data collection. During this step, quotes pointing to topics of interest were coded using descriptive labels and simple phrases derived from the interviewees' language and experiential accounts, including the press materials and the field notes. These codes are referred to as first-order categories. Two of the authors performed the coding procedure, while others acted as challengers. Specifically, 35 first-order categories were identified. Through successive cycles of comparison, aggregation, and abstraction, these categories were progressively refined into second-order themes that captured broader interpretive patterns across the dataset. Therefore, conceptually overlapping categories were consolidated (e.g., cultural provocations and art-based communication were integrated into a single category capturing provocative cultural activation). We then monitored the emerging concepts and themes, analyzed data similarities and patterns, and merged into fewer categories, coming up with a total of 21 s-order themes. Only at this stage were second-order themes abductively interpreted in relation to Hegel's recognition framework, allowing us to connect empirically grounded dynamics to the phases of recognition. This

approach ensured that theoretical categories did not precede the data but emerged through iterative engagement with it, preserving analytic openness while enabling conceptual development. This analytic process strengthened the rigor and transparency of our theorization by making explicit how empirical observations informed the construction of higher-order theoretical insights.

The different data sources served complementary analytical purposes and were systematically compared throughout the research process. Interviews provided participants' perspectives on Farm's ethical and organizational transformation, while direct observation helped frame how these dynamics unfolded in everyday practices. For example, press coverage, documentary sources, and observations were used to verify the timing and public framing of Farm's key milestones (e.g., inauguration, Biennale invitations), which were then compared with participants' retrospective accounts to identify convergences and tensions in recognition narratives. Field notes did not constitute a primary data source and were not coded independently. Rather, they were used analytically to support interpretive sensemaking and triangulation. Specifically, they helped contextualize interview narratives, interpret emotional and relational dynamics surrounding key events, and refine the construction of the process timeline by informing our understanding of transitions across phases. In line with the abductive logic of the study, observational notes thus complemented interview data by sharpening the interpretation of emerging patterns, without serving as a basis for category generation. The combination of cross-source and cross-researcher triangulation strengthened both the credibility and interpretive rigor of the study (Denzin, 2017). The process ended when a clear sense of the relationship between the categories and themes was achieved. We then reviewed the relevant literature on emerging themes and dimensions to avoid a priori confirmation bias.

Findings

Consistent with this study's purpose of investigating how Farm and Favara negotiated their relationships, resolved tensions, and created sustainable futures over time, we first constructed a process database (Langley, 1999) to outline the main developmental stages (see Table 2). Incorporating this information into visual mapping allowed us to effectively organize the collected data and identify a relevant key episode to mark the transition.

Further, we built Table 3 which presents the data structure, including representative excerpts, first-order categories, and second-order themes, and illustrates how empirically grounded patterns were abductively related to phases of Hegel's recognition framework. Additional detail on the

Table 2 Farm's developmental stages

Phase	Description	Time frame	Key episode(s)/Turning point(s)	Data
Embryonic state	Thinking about the idea	2008–2010	Founders' eldest is born; <i>Favara house collapse</i>	"... when our daughter was about to turn three, we had to enroll her in school. We initially chose Sicily because we put various things on the scale, starting from affections, culture, climate, and food. So we have said 'let's try to create the conditions to be able to feel good in Favara.'" (Founder#2) "In 2006, we decided to rent a small house in Paris. Our daughter was born 20 days ago, and we wanted to experience this important moment for our family. [...] She was about to turn three, and we had to decide how to live our life [...] We decided to go back to Favara, making ourselves a promise: we wouldn't complain about what wasn't there or what we didn't like; we wouldn't have waited for someone to change our lives. We would have done everything we could to improve our lives." (Media-Video#4—Founder#1's voice)
Starting the journey	Launching Farm	2010–2012	<i>Favara house collapse</i> ; Farms' opening; <i>Venice Biennale</i>	"Farm was practically launched after a mournful event in Favara because a house in the historic center collapsed and two little girls died. A dilapidated house, a family with big problems of poverty." (ID#9) "At the beginning, many would consider it a huge contemporary art playground where artists allowed you to create that magic linked to art; you could enter the magic world of creativity." (ID#2)
Growth and success	Becoming known nationally and internationally	2012–2017	<i>Venice Biennale</i> ; awards; 'SOU' opening; <i>Municipality's seals</i>	"There was a time, from 2014 to 2018, in which the nightlife was all in Favara; that is, there was no more nightlife in Agrigento. Everyone was in Favara to eat, have fun, visit, and dance. [...] This carried 10,000 people in the evening." (ID#17) "Born in 2016, 'SOU' – from Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto – is the first School of Architecture for children in Italy, but also among the first in the world." (Media-Press#19—Article author's voice)

Table 2 (continued)

Phase	Description	Time frame	Key episode(s)/Turning point(s)	Data
Stop and rethink	Re-evaluating Farm's own identity, stasis	2017–2020	<i>Municipality's seals</i> ; investment fund's withdrawal; 'Prime Minister' opening; Countless Cities' launch; <i>COVID-19 pandemic</i>	"Farm boomed until 2017–2018. From there, it started to decline until the pandemic." (ID#18) "...to an authorization uncertainty, the Municipality has put seals on some installations [...] I think Farm founders had some moments of discouragement. When they put seals on you, they put obstacles on you." (ID#9) "Farm had bad moments when they were thinking about changing course of action and getting support or selling a part of Farm to an investment fund. The denial of this operation, in 2017–2018, created some imbalance for the founders." (ID#17) "'Prime Minister' is a non-partisan association created to promote gender and generational equality. The idea was born in the second half of 2018 [...] and was publicly presented on February 14, 2019." (Media-Press#22–Article author's voice)
Adopting a new approach	Reformulating the strategy and building sustainability	2020 to present	<i>COVID-19 pandemic</i> ; SPAB launch; 'SOU' and 'Prime Minister' expansion; Opening in Mazzarino; New national and international projects	"... through the creation of a SPAB (i.e., good action company), an innovative and creative legal instrument, that is a company where every citizen can invest a piece of their savings in future of their town." (Media-Video#1) "Gradually, Farm took a broader path. Let's say it has begun to spread culture more comprehensively, involving the institutions. [...] So, it evolved." (ID#14) "From my point of view, the important turning point is probably also 2022, the year in which we decided to bring Farm to other territories." (Founder#1) "We are also working on Farm internationalization in Detroit and Melbourne." (Founder#2)

*The pivotal turning point signifying the closure of a phase and the initiation of the subsequent one is indicated in italic font

Table 3 Abductive data structure of the Farm–Favara recognition process

Representative excerpts	First-order categories	Second-order themes	Hegel's recognition phase (Farm's evolution stage)
“So, we said, let's try to create the conditions to be able to feel good in Favara, to be able to feel good in Sicily.” (Founder#1)	1. Responsibility toward daughter's future	a) Identity projection through transformative desire	Desire and birth of self-consciousness (<i>Embryonic state</i>)
“This need moved us.” (Founder#1)	2. Desire to transform living conditions		
“Therefore, we decided to purchase the first properties in Favara” (Founder#2)	3. Material investment in place transformation		
“We are passionate about contemporary art and decided to share our passion...” (Media-Video#1–Founder#1's voice)	4. Diffusion of cultural vision	b) Founder-driven identity construction	
“A mission to reimagine their town...” (Media-Press#1 – Article author's voice)	5. Willingness to reframe the place		
“Favara... a town in a state of decay.” (Media-Press#4–Article author)	6. Portraying territorial marginality	c) Contextual triggers of change desire	
“The municipality has always had problems of financial distress [...]. Shortly afterward, Farm was founded, so we ended up becoming allies with them” (ID#4)	7. Perceived governance absence		
“Posters appeared... ‘Wine shop’, ‘Book shop’ ... Why can't Favara do all this?” (ID#9)	8. Provocative cultural activation	d) Recognition-seeking through cultural activation	The struggle for recognition (<i>Starting the journey</i>)
“The ladies who inhabit the Seven Courtyards... they are our best cultural mediators.” (Media-Video#7–Founder #2's voice)	9. Community bridging practices	e) Embedded legitimacy-building practices	
“The local context provided fertile ground [...] because the inhabitants of Favara are highly proactive and display a strong entrepreneurial spirit”. (Founder#2)	10. Grounding change in local capabilities		
“The art project that saved a town.” (The Guardian)	11. International media validation	f) External recognition consolidation	
“... and when Cucinella, curator at the Venice Biennale, visited the project, he was astonished. I mean, it is tangible the artistic and cultural improvement” (ID#17)	12. Global institutional recognition		
“We have told the beautiful part of a town...” (Founder#2)	13. Narrative re-signification of territory	g) Identity re-signification strategies	
“In this ugliness, I began to see the beautiful...” (ID#19)	14. Experiencing a shift in aesthetic perception	h) Initial affective recognition signals	
“Is the notary crazy?” (ID#7)	15. Legitimacy skepticism	i) Recognition conflict dynamics	
“In reality, people did not understand what was happening and what we wanted to do.” (Media-Video#7–Founder#2's voice)	16. Lack of project intelligibility		
“It is the classic fight of the dinosaur...” (ID#2)	17. Cultural resistance to change		
“10,000 people... Favara could not handle them.” (ID#17)	18. Institutional unpreparedness	j) Structural recognition barriers	

Table 3 (continued)

Representative excerpts	First-order categories	Second-order themes	Hegel's recognition phase (Farm's evolution stage)
"200 B&Bs have sprung up..." (ID#7)	19. Territorial economic regeneration	k) Material dependency dynamics	The master-servant dialectic (<i>Growth and success</i>)
"Farm gave me the possibility of being able to stay here to work." (ID#18)	20. Socio-economic dependency on organizational presence		
"Without Farm... there certainly would not have been this evolution." (ID#7)	21. Symbolic centralization of transformative agency	l) Reinforcement of Farm's central authority	
"They received several prestigious awards [...] These were truly positive moments, particularly when the project reached the Venice Biennale" (ID#7)	22. Accumulation of external recognition capital		
"They were proud to explain what Farm was." (ID#15)	23. Publicly expressing pride in Farm	m) Asymmetric recognition and reflected pride	
"It has never been fully integrated into the town of Favara." (ID#3)	24. Contested legitimacy and asymmetrical recognition	n) Emerging recognition asymmetry and tensions	
"Administration hasn't been close..." (ID#7)	25. Institutional and systemic crisis triggers	o) Institutional recognition breakdown	Unhappy consciousness (<i>Stop and rethink</i>)
"The Favara community did not mobilize with sufficient strength to defend the project" (ID#6)	26. Fragility of community backing	p) Crisis-triggered reflexivity	
"We thought we'd experience a period of closure for Farm..." (Founder#2)	27. Operational slowdown and reflexive pause		
"Everyone expected Andrea to always pull something out of the hat to keep the situation alive." (ID#1)	28. Personalized and escalating recognition expectations	q) Recognition burden dynamics	
"If Farm is fine, Favara is fine too..." (Founder#1)	29. Crisis of interdependent identity alignment		
"Farm is less effective today..." (Founder#2)	30. Misaligned recognition expectations	r) Misalignment of recognition criteria	Perpetual tension in mutual recognition (<i>Adopting a new approach</i>)
"Frustration... unable to make others understand." (Media-Press#10–Founder#1)	31. Recognition intelligibility fatigue		
"By 2030, I would like to open another 10 Farms in Italy and 5 in the world." (Media-Press#8–Founder#1)	32. Strategic reorientation and scaling ambitions	s) Organizational self-redefinition	
"Remember that there is not only Mazzarino." (ID#17)	33. Dependency and abandonment fears	t) Ambivalent interdependence	
"Today there are 18 'SOU' offices throughout Italy, so this event fills us with pride." (ID#11)	34. Symbolic uplift from Farm's success		
"An administrative apparatus... unaware of the damage it was doing." (Founder#2)	35. Institutional resistance to recognition expansion	u) Institutional conditions of recognizability	

First-order categories are grounded in empirical data; second-order themes reflect abductive theoretical aggregation aligned with Hegel's framework

*Due to space constraints, the table includes one representative excerpt per first-order category. Further illustrative quotes are discussed in the Findings section

analytical procedure and abductive iteration process is provided in the Appendix.

Farm's Developmental Stages

Embryonic State

The first phase (2008–2010), the ‘embryonic state’, refers to when Farm’s founders, who were living in Paris and had just had their first daughter, began planning a return to Sicily in order to reconnect with local resources, climate, and family ties. Since they belonged to Favara, they were planning to build their family’s future in that town. However, realizing that Favara was a decaying anonymous village that was mostly known as a mafia territory and had a high criminal density, they promised themselves they would do everything they could to feel good in Favara. This resolve marked the emergence of a transformative intention directed at the territory, also grounded in a perceived parental responsibility:

“Sicily did not offer all the opportunities Paris could offer, all the cultural stimuli. This created a strong sense of responsibility for our daughter. We take this little girl from Paris to Favara: she will hold it against us for the rest of her life. So, we said, let’s try to create the conditions to be able to feel good in Favara, to be able to feel good in Sicily [...]. So, we didn’t overthink about it; this need moved us.” (Founder#1)

Being passionate about architecture and contemporary art, they began purchasing their first properties in Favara between 2008 and 2009 with the aim of creating a stimulating cultural space. Empirically, these early material investments constituted the first concrete enactment of what, in Hegelian terms, can be read as the movement of desire toward an external object. In line with Hegel’s idea underlying the ‘desire and birth of self-consciousness’, they sought to employ art and creativity to give the town a renewed image and a better future, sharing their passion and purpose with the local community. Here, desire operates as the generative force of an emerging organizational self-consciousness: it signals the impulse toward something external that is to be transformed, appropriated, or redefined. Accordingly, the following excerpts illustrate how Favara itself was discursively constructed as the object through which this desire could be realized:

“It is the project of a visionary family, Andrea Bartoli and Florinda Saieva, on a mission to reimagine their town and its future through the lenses of contemporary art, architecture and community building.” (Media-Press#1–Article author’s voice)

“We are passionate about contemporary art and decided to share our passion, our knowledge, and

everything we had with our community.” (Media-Video#1–Founder#1)

These narratives frame the town not yet as a reciprocal partner but primarily as the terrain upon which an identity project could unfold.

This phase was also characterized by Favara’s community needing a radical change. The town lacked a local strategic plan and effective public resources management. The town had been mistreated for too long, with trees being cut down, parks paved over, and houses constructed without roots. This state led the town to become increasingly associated with the mafia and criminality, and the historic center fell apart.

“The story of Favara begins in 2010. Favara, until that moment, is one of the many Italian towns in a state of decay, home to old buildings, ruins in a state of almost abandonment, and an increasingly small population.” (Media-Press#4–Article author’s voice)

From an abductive reading, the convergence between founders’ transformative desire and the town’s condition of abandonment created the socio-material ground upon which the recognition process would later unfold.

Even though Farm was not yet a concrete project, its founders and Favara’s community appeared to share overlapping aspirations and needs, thus prefiguring an initial—albeit still latent and asymmetrical—alignment structured around a common desire for change.

“Actually, I was part of an association together with other young people. We wanted to do something for Favara. We didn’t know that Farm was coming into being, and at the same time we had organized some initiatives to make the city a bit more lively [...]. The municipality has always had problems of financial distress, and we had the idea of no longer organizing the traditional patron-saint festivals. Shortly afterward, Farm was founded, so we ended up becoming allies with them”. (ID#4)

Starting the Journey

On January 23, 2010, a run-down building in the town’s center collapsed, leading to the death of two young sisters. The tragedy significantly affected the mood of the community and marked a moment of immense collective pain. The Municipality began razing the historic center to the ground to minimize the risk of further house collapses. This critical event constituted a socio-emotional turning point that accelerated both the urgency and the legitimacy of transformative interventions in the area.

The climate of terror and despair accelerated the project implementation, enabling the opening of the second stage, ‘starting the journey’ (2010–2012). In March 2010,

Farm's founders began gradual renovation and redevelopment of some properties of the town's center, called the 'Seven Courtyards'. A few months later, on June 25, Farm Cultural Park was inaugurated.

In doing so, Farm helped Favara become a cultural and tourist attraction. People who had previously avoided visiting Favara started coming to the 'Seven Courtyards' to attend events and art exhibitions. Empirically, this marked the first visible moment in which Farm's identity project entered the public sphere and began actively seeking recognition from the surrounding community.

Farm started transmitting its mission as an agent of change through symbolic and provocative cultural interventions aimed at eliciting acknowledgment, engagement, and reaction:

"There was a day when, in the windows of the closed shops in Favara, many posters appeared with the words 'Wine shop,' 'Book shop,' and 'Souvenirs.' I remember asking ourselves, 'Who made this provocation?'. A good provocation. Farm had done it by saying, 'Why can't Favara do all this?'" (ID#9)

Such initiatives functioned as recognition claims: performative acts through which Farm attempted to redefine the town's identity while simultaneously demanding validation for its transformative vision.

Since the beginning, Farm seemed to pay attention to get Favara's support by valuing and grounding on local resources (e.g., Favara citizens' entrepreneurial orientation, ideas from Favara citizens, and Aunt Mary as a local mediator):

"And then you find them: the ladies who inhabit the Seven Courtyards. I assure you that they are our best cultural mediators. [...] Once a Korean architect has just arrived in Farm. A very composed, shy boy, as a very polite Asian person [...] Aunt Maria looked at him and said, 'Ah, very happy!' She [...] hugged and kissed him as if he was her nephew" (Media-Video#7)

These interactions illustrate early forms of relational embedding, where recognition began to be negotiated through everyday social encounters rather than solely through artistic production.

Farm's success was soon recognized nationally and internationally: in 2012, its founders were invited to the Venice Biennale, one of the longest-running and most prestigious global cultural festivals. In the same year, the Guardian wrote about Farm as "The art project that saved a town". A few local entrepreneurial initiatives opened, and several partnerships with universities were created so that Farm could be legitimized among the local community and beyond Favara's borders. Farm's search for recognition also developed thanks

to the storytelling they continuously engaged in to emphasize the possibilities that Favara could offer:

"We live in contexts where [...] we are told that Sicily is a land we must leave; in Sicily, young people have no opportunities [...]. We have done the opposite: we have told the beautiful part of a town, how the town could transform itself, how the town could become." (Founder#2)

Here, recognition was pursued discursively, by attempting to reshape both internal and external perceptions of the territory.

Farm's opening contributed to Favara's symbolic redemption, improving living conditions and fostering renewed senses of belonging and possibility:

"In this ugliness, I began to see the beautiful. Beauty is not only what you see but also relationships, humanity, that sense of family, the sense of being able to make so many acquaintances." (ID#19)

"Farm had the merit of regenerating a completely degraded place." (ID#11)

Positive evaluations such as these represent moments of granted recognition, where community members began acknowledging Farm's transformative agency.

We further distinguished the main community reactions to Farm's inauguration as surprise, curiosity, and hope, welcoming Farm's initiatives. Echoing some informants' responses:

"...a certain incredulity, they said 'but is the notary crazy?'" (ID#7)

"Meanwhile, in Favara, the tourists are starting to arrive, and you know all those people who didn't understand at first, or in any case, many of them, began to love us and realized that things could be done in Favara." (Media-Video#7–Founder#2' voice)

These ambivalent responses signal the emergence of bilateral awareness: Farm sought recognition, while the community gradually interpreted, evaluated, and positioned the initiative. However, consistent with Hegel's second stage 'the struggle for recognition', the encounter between two self-conscious actors did not unfold harmoniously. While some reactions were positive, others were marked by skepticism and resistance:

"Some resistance came from people who, such as some historians, for example, even some architects, who have not understood the importance of a modern recovery of something dilapidated." (ID#3)

"In reality, people did not understand what was happening and what we wanted to do with the Seven Courtyards. Perhaps we wanted to rule the town, but

that was not the case.” (Media-Video#7–Founder#2’s voice)

Locally embedded narratives highlight mistrust as a deeply sedimented cultural trait that shaped the early resistance to Farm’s disruptive identity.

“At the beginning, they encountered many difficulties, especially with local inhabitants, because people did not really believe in the project. They thought the founders wanted to speculate on the territory. [...]. Sicilians have a great deal of mistrust [...], distrust is part of our DNA. And in the early days, there was a great deal of suspicion—something very typical of us Sicilians.” (ID#5)

These narratives illustrate denial or withholding of recognition, revealing how Farm’s identity claims were contested rather than universally accepted. Indeed, cultural resistance also emerged from entrenched local norms:

“It is the classic fight of the dinosaur, of those who want the status quo to be maintained and make everything difficult and then say ‘we did it in Milan because they understood us there.’” (ID#2)

Here, resistance functioned as a defensive recognition struggle, where segments of the community sought to preserve symbolic and socio-cultural authority.

Further tensions arose with local institutions, which struggled to manage the consequences of Farm’s growing visibility:

“One evening, 10,000 people and Favara could not handle them [...] a public order problem remained with us. There were people with disabilities.” (ID#17)

Institutional strain thus became another arena in which recognition was negotiated, exposing asymmetries between grassroots innovation and administrative capacity.

Overall, this phase reveals recognition as an emergent, conflictual, and relational process: Farm advanced identity claims through symbolic action, while the community and institutions variably granted, contested, or resisted these claims, thereby enacting the dialectical struggle central to Hegel’s framework.

Growth and Success

Approximately two years after Farm’s inception, a third phase (2012–2017) emerged: ‘growth and success’. Farm’s initiatives gained widespread recognition nationally and internationally, thus reaching its peak. The support from the community became clearer and stronger: many entrepreneurial activities were launched, such as B&B, hotels, restaurants, bars, luxury tailor’s shops, further

art galleries, and social initiatives created by young Favara citizens, all evidently stimulated and supported by the ‘seed of possibilities’ that Farm had planted in the community.

From an abductive reading informed by Hegel’s master–servant dialectic, this proliferation of local initiatives signaled an asymmetric yet productive interdependence between the organization and the territory. In particular, the community’s economic and symbolic revitalization appeared strongly anchored to Farm’s catalytic role:

“In Favara, after Farm was born, 200 B&Bs have sprung up. Many activities have sprung up to support this flow of tourists, such as pizzerias and restaurants. So, Favara has changed a lot concerning what it was before. [...] Without Farm, there certainly would not have been this evolution, both in terms of mentality and at an economic level.” (ID#7)

Such narratives frame Farm as the primary agent of transformation, while positioning the community in a role of structural reliance—an empirical configuration resonant with the early asymmetry of the master–servant relation.

These were the years when Favara exploded on weekends, something that had never happened. Artists, designers, architects, and photographers visited Farm, personally contributed to their projects, and participated in events. Partnerships with national and international universities expanded Farm’s global visibility.

In 2016, a second invitation to Farm came from the Venice Biennale; ‘SOU’ was launched; the first School of Architecture for children in Italy was established; Mario Cucinella (a famous Italian architect known for his research into the environmental sustainability of buildings) participated in a Farm’s event in 2017. The same year, it received the Curry Stone Design Prize, for being among the most successful experiences in the world that, over the last ten years, has produced the greatest social impact for the territories of reference. Farm’s other achievements during this period included partnerships with the University of Tokyo, Paris, Turin, Milan; and several festivals and events organized in the ‘Seven Courtyards’, with thousands of visitors spending time in Favara (see Supplemental file 2 to appreciate the change brought by Farm in the town). Recalling a founder’s reflection:

“And it’s funny because if, in 2010, when we opened our doors, no one had any expectations of Farm, over a very few years and gradually growing, we are above all our expectations, those of always growing and being able to be contemporary with the themes that global society poses to us, to do things in Favara but which have an international dimension.” (Founder#2)

These accounts illustrate Farm's progressive consolidation of symbolic authority and cultural leadership within and beyond the local field.

This consolidation reinforced Farm's enactment of what can be analytically interpreted as a 'master' position: investing in culture to reshape mental models, fostering learning communities, and advancing a transformative mission. However, rather than imposing domination, this position was enacted through generative leadership and cultural production. Relying on Favara's participation to materialize its projects, Farm simultaneously accumulated influence and legitimacy—mirroring the relational asymmetry of the master–servant dialectic. We found evidence of this during this phase.

"We were all involved, we were part of it all." (Classroom exercise#2)

"Farm has given me perhaps one thing that all artists have: this dream of a community, of doing, finding a team to do things together." (ID#10)

"Farm has contributed to an investment of 20 million euros in the town. Restaurants, B&Bs, and entrepreneurial initiatives of this type of investment have emerged. It could be seen over the years." (ID#17)

These excerpts highlight how community members' labor, participation, and entrepreneurial activation contributed to objectifying Farm's vision in the social and material fabric of the town.

By still being strongly rooted in the founders' values, Farm's identity expressed itself during this phase via its strong determination and transparency in setting goals and carrying on its activities. Its global recognition helped share its tale. Thanks to Farm, many young Favara citizens decided to remain in town instead of moving to Northern Italy, as most of them were used to doing, especially after graduation. This suggests the relationship of dependence that the community had developed toward Farm's activities:

"In short, it has been a crescendo up until today. So, I decided to stay [...] (if Farm had never existed) I definitely wouldn't be here." (ID#4)

"Farm gave me the possibility of being able to stay here to work." (ID#18)

Here, dependency extended beyond economic revitalization to include existential and life-course trajectories, reinforcing Farm's structuring role in shaping community futures. This dynamic also reinforced collective pride:

"When every Favara's citizen hosted someone from outside and came here, they were proud to explain what Farm was." (ID#15)

"There is nothing like Farm in any other place [...] My father painted the elephant at the entrance of the Seven Courtyards." (Classroom exercise#1)

Recognition thus flowed upward toward Farm, consolidating its symbolic centrality within the community.

Nevertheless, whereas community understanding was mostly in favor of Farm, still a minority perceived it to be too focused on contemporary art, not being able to make a difference in the town or respond to the real needs of the community:

"The novelty was initially well accepted, but from my point of view, it has never been fully integrated into the town of Favara." (ID#3)

"Many people come from outside, but not a significant number, because you can't believe that the participation of insiders is significant, no [...] Compared to what happened out there with the Farm, because it had a major impact, it had a much smaller impact on the town." (ID#3)

Such accounts signal the early emergence of reflexive distancing, where segments of the community began re-evaluating the relational balance.

Institutional tensions further destabilized the relationship. Bureaucratic frictions culminated in the Municipality placing seals on authorized installations:

"There was a moment of great friction with the Municipality of Favara. Few knew it, but in reality, it was a great political attack behind that seizure order, which was then resolved in a few days with the Public Prosecutor's Office saying, 'Liberate Farm' and ordering the traffic police who had placed the seals to remove them and allow us to carry on with normal activities." (Founder#1)

"A Municipality should open the doors to such a phenomenon; instead, there was always an obstacle." (ID#16)

These institutional conflicts disrupted the apparent stability of the asymmetrical order, exposing the fragility of recognition when mediated by political and administrative structures.

Overall, this phase reflects Hegel's master–servant dialectic: the servant initially appears dependent on the master, yet through labor and participation transforms reality, objectifies consciousness in material outcomes, and gradually develops awareness of its own agency. In the Farm–Favara case, community engagement both reinforced Farm's leadership and laid the groundwork for future renegotiations of recognition.

Stop and Rethink

Despite five years of intense activity, a severe clash with local institutions, together with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, ushered in a new phase—‘stop and rethink’ (2017–2020)—marked by a growing misalignment between Farm’s identity and expectations and those of the Favara community. Empirically, this phase signaled the interruption of the previously expanding recognition dynamic, giving rise to what, drawing on Hegel, we interpret as a condition akin to unhappy consciousness.

This phase was characterized by several destabilizing events, including municipal seals placed on installations, the withdrawal of a nearly finalized investment fund, and the disruption generated by the pandemic. Collectively, these developments generated a sense of discouragement, uncertainty, and disorientation within the organization, marking the first time since its launch that Farm’s trajectory appeared fragile and contested.

Rather than suggesting a fully developed existential anguish in the strict Hegelian sense, our data point to an emergent condition of reflexive tension, in which Farm began to confront the limits of its autonomy and the fragility of its institutional and relational recognition.

Indeed, the sealing episode, which marked the transition from the phase of ‘growth and success’ to the period of ‘stop and rethink’, revealed not only a misalignment between Farm and the municipal administration, but also the limits of collective community support at a critical moment.

“A negative turning point was the moment when the municipal administration placed the seals. It was negative for two reasons: it confirmed the difficulty of compatibility between the Farm project and public administration, and it showed that the Favara community did not mobilize with sufficient strength to defend the project. [...] This episode revealed several critical issues within the project.” (ID#6)

In Hegelian terms, this episode crystallized an unhappy consciousness in which Farm, while remaining the central organizing actor, became reflexively aware of the limits of its autonomy and of a recognition that was not always actively sustained by the community.

In this sense, the crisis was not only operational but also identity-laden, as the organization faced the dissonance between its transformative aspirations and the constraints of its socio-institutional embeddedness. This affective and organizational destabilization is reflected in the following excerpts:

“That year was strange because we thought we’d experience a period of closure for Farm [...] We never said

it because COVID has arrived [...] It was certainly a moment of discouragement.” (Founder#2)

“However, this situation has declined because the administration hasn’t been close to it. And that all things cannot be done at the expense of our pockets [...] Because the Municipality was absent.” (ID#7)

“In a moment when resources and institutional support are extremely hard to find [...] Waiting for someone else to improve our territory is utopia.” (Media-Press#1–Founder#1’s voice)

These accounts illustrate not only material constraints but also a deeper process of reflexive questioning regarding Farm’s role, sustainability, and relationship with the territory—dynamics that resonate with Hegel’s notion of a consciousness divided between aspiration to autonomy and recognition of dependency.

This phase of reconsideration suggested that Farm was slowing down its engagement in social and cultural activities and entering stagnation. Such perceived stagnation functioned as an experiential marker of recognition disruption, as the organization’s capacity to act as an uncontested agent of transformation became uncertain.

Many in Favara experienced this phase as an apparent stasis, expecting increasingly more from Farm to keep the town alive, showing overtrust in its activity. Here, unhappy consciousness did not take the form of a simple withdrawal of recognition, but of a relational impasse. Following the institutional crisis, Farm became reflexively aware of being simultaneously questioned and relied upon: its authority was destabilized, yet the community continued to depend on it to the point of personalizing responsibility and concentrating expectations onto the founder. This dynamic echoes Hegel’s unhappy consciousness as a divided condition in which roles are neither overturned nor reconciled, but remain suspended between dependence and autonomy, simultaneously self-doubting and internally divided. We found this relational ambivalence to emerge in the following excerpts:

“A few years ago, some researchers, interviewing people in the area, realized that today, the expectations of local stakeholders toward Farm are higher than those they have toward the Sicily Region. [...] It is strange how, in some moments, Farm’s state of health is reflected in the optimism or pessimism of Favara and the citizens of Favara; there is a kind of osmosis: if Farm is fine, Favara is fine too; if Farm is in a bit of trouble, Favara is also in trouble.” (Founder#1)

“Everyone expected Andrea to always pull something out of the hat to keep the situation alive.” (ID#1)

These narratives reveal how Farm became both the bearer of collective hope and the container of collective anxiety,

reinforcing the dual and tension-laden structure characteristic of unhappy consciousness.

Adopting a New Approach

The current phase, started in 2020, showcases Farm's expansion, with conflicts persistently arising with the community, as reflected in Hegel's last phase 'perpetual tension in mutual recognition'. Rather than signaling resolution, this phase reveals the stabilization of recognition as an ongoing, negotiated, and inherently unstable process. Reciprocal recognition between Farm and Favara thus unfolds as a cyclical dynamic, in which the desire for recognition remains continuously contested, never fully settled.

This phase marked a significant reorientation in Farm's trajectory: the focus of its activities became less oriented toward public and organizing recreational events and more concerned with making a social and cultural contribution to the territory. This strategic recalibration can be interpreted as an identity redefinition emerging from the reflexive crisis of the previous phase.

"Another thing that has changed a lot, in my opinion, is the perception because many probably think that Farm is less effective today than it was at the beginning. Because at the beginning, to create our recognition and to be attractive, we created many more playful-artistic events." (Founder#2)

This excerpt illustrates the perceptual gap between Farm's evolving mission and the community's historically sedimented expectations.

Further, during this phase, Farm started being particularly concerned with its own sustainability:

"By 2030, I would like to open another 10 Farms in Italy and 5 in the world" [...], Furthermore, I would like to build a school for the 'grown-ups' and dialogue more with the municipal and regional administrations." (Media-Press#8–Founder#1's voice)
 "Farm has created a sort of link, a connection, because many people who come here, other mayors from other countries or people who belong to administrations of other countries ask us 'Is it possible to open a Farm in my country?'" (ID#16)

These ambitions reflect Farm's attempt to reposition itself within a broader translocal recognition arena, expanding beyond the territorial confines of Favara.

However, as Farm articulated this renewed identity, the community's understanding appeared partially misaligned, highlighting the persistence of recognition struggles:

"I'm sorry that Farm has remained a niche project." (ID#14)

"Is there modern art in Favara? No. Art is something else, which must also arouse something negatively, but it must arouse something in you." (ID#3)

"In my opinion, sometimes you should prepare the territory before having the thing created." (ID#7)

"Farm has certainly brought benefits to the Sicilian territory also nationally in some respects, but significant movements, significant I mean of masses of change, no." (ID#3)

These narratives indicate not a withdrawal of recognition per se, but its conditionality—granted in some domains while withheld in others.

From the perspective of the community, whereas the majority of the community supported Farm's new initiatives (e.g., SPAB creation¹), a widespread attitude was still a high expectation toward Farm's ability to bring back public events and vivacity in the town, a sort of passive posture:

"In these post-pandemic months and years, there is the feeling that everything depends on Farm." (ID#18)
 "I believe that on the shopkeepers' level, there is a very great fault since they enjoyed it a lot and did not give back to Farm what they could have given." (ID#6)

Such accounts reveal a paradoxical configuration of dependency and entitlement, where recognition of Farm's value coexisted with expectations of continued provision.

Confirming the dependency that the community had developed toward Farm is the fear of being abandoned, which we captured in the data. This is mainly derived from Farm's opening of a new branch in Mazzarino, a project that naturally required Farm to be particularly busy in the town.

"...even those people who magically entered these pizzerias have disappeared, and therefore this has been perceived by some Favara citizen as 'Farm doesn't do anything anymore!'" (ID#6)

"...people saying 'ok, but you should come to Favara every now and then. Remember that there is not only Mazzarino.'" (ID#17)

Here, the expansion of Farm's recognition horizon was interpreted locally as a displacement of attention, reactivating anxieties of marginalization.

Therefore, while hope remained relatively stable, overtrust and fear of abandonment persisted, alongside a strengthening sense of pride:

"Today there are 18 'SOU' offices throughout Italy, so this event fills us with pride." (ID#11)

"And when you tell other people not only the reality of Farm, but also the path that Farm has followed, the ideas they help blossom, the constellation of activities they contributed to create... it is as if you are going to represent your family outside of here and you are

proud of what it has managed to do for the area, but above all for the single people who have found their dimension and you have seen them grow.” (ID#2)

“Farm hasn’t collapsed at all. But it resists because two or three people are holding it up.” (ID#9)

Pride and fragility thus coexisted, reinforcing the ambivalent emotional texture of mutual recognition.

A key issue emerging in this phase is the institution’s resistance to the Farm. Indeed, the Mazzarino project aimed to open a private building to the public that had been closed for 25 years, Palazzo Tortorici, without asking for any public funds, rather than being financed by Farm’s founders and private actors. Once the building was recovered, furnished, and ready to host cultural activities, the project was blocked by the local superintendence.

“The bad thing was being faced with an administrative apparatus completely ignorant and simultaneously partially unaware of the damage it was doing to its town.” (Founder#2)

“If we had to wait for institutions to make Farm, maybe we would have had to wait 400 years.” (Media-Video#8)

“If we talk about urban regeneration, we need more liquid regulations, which allow them to be more welcoming based on what they want to do.” (ID#2)

Institutional gatekeeping therefore continued to mediate recognizability, constraining the translation of Farm’s identity claims into territorially sanctioned legitimacy.

Finally, generational and cultural distance further complicated recognition processes:

“If we go around and do a small survey with even a non-significant sample, we would realize that most Favara citizens do not know what modern art or shades of colors mean.” (ID#3)

“Some things Farm does are very difficult for the older generations to understand, who don’t even try to get close.” (ID#6)

“Now and then, we experience that sense of frustration of being unable to make colleagues, other professionals, and entrepreneurs understand how much you get back when you’re willing to give.” (Media-Press#10—Founder#1’s voice)

These excerpts reveal enduring limits to cultural recognizability, suggesting that full mutual intelligibility remained aspirational rather than achieved.

In line with Hegel’s framework, this final phase suggests that self-consciousness can only be achieved through a process of mutual recognition. Yet, empirically, such recognition appears perpetually deferred—structured by asymmetries of power, expectations, and interpretive frames.

Consequently, the recognition process between Farm and Favara emerges as highly complex, dynamic, and open-ended—less a resolved synthesis than an ongoing dialectical negotiation.

Taken together, these five phases illuminate the evolving and dialectical nature of recognition between Farm and the Favara community. Rather than unfolding as a linear trajectory, recognition emerged as a recursive and tension-laden process, marked by shifting asymmetries, reflexive crises, and ongoing renegotiations of identity and legitimacy. By tracing how empirical episodes map onto successive moments of Hegel’s phenomenological framework—from desire and objectification to mutual yet unstable recognition—our analysis reveals the relational and processual constitution of organizational identity within territorially embedded contexts. The following section builds on these findings to further theorize the implications of recognition dynamics, engaging more deeply with Hegelian and post-Hegelian perspectives to articulate the study’s broader theoretical contributions.

Discussion

The data analysis revealed both converging and diverging trajectories in the identity evolution of two entities. The first is the organization (i.e., Farm), born from the entrepreneurial vision of two passionate founders, which significantly enhanced the economic and cultural profile of the community. The second is the community itself (i.e., Favara), a previously marginalized and semi-abandoned town that, within a decade, was transformed into what *The Guardian* (2012) described as the ‘island’s capital of cool’, attracting tourists, designers, and artists from around the world.

Viewed through the lens of reciprocal recognition, the developmental phases outlined above shed light on the complex relational dynamics underpinning these identity transformations, revealing recognition not as a linear achievement but as a recursive, tension-laden process unfolding across shifting relational configurations. Several alternative interpretations could explain the shifts observed in Farm’s trajectory, including organizational change, growth, maturation, or crisis-driven adaptation (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). From this perspective, changes in practices, structures, and self-descriptions might be read as typical features of organizational development, whereby an organization expands, learns, and reorients its strategy in response to evolving conditions. While we do not deny that such developmental dynamics were present, they do not fully account for one of the main objectives of this study: understanding why tensions and conflicts over organizational identity persist over time, even when the organization becomes effective and widely acknowledged in revitalizing the local context.

We theorize these dynamics as fundamentally rooted in recognition relations, not merely in organizational evolution. Drawing on Hegel and Butler, we show that the trajectory focuses on whether Farm's identity claims become socially acknowledgeable and morally entitled within Favara's normative frames of recognizability (Visser, 2024). Recognition is therefore not an outcome that follows success, but an ambivalent, norm-governed and institutional process that conditions which identities can be sustained or contested. This lens explains why identity work does not simply stabilize with growth: conflicts endure when identity claims remain not fully institutionalized within local norms, even as organizational performance improves (Ikäheimo et al., 2021; Schick, 2022).

In the first phase, the Hegelian concepts of 'desire' and the 'birth of self-consciousness' are particularly salient. In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977), desire (*Begierde*) drives self-consciousness to engage with the external world in order to construct and affirm itself. Desire, in this sense, transforms objects through negation, seeking affirmation. However, for self-consciousness to be fully realized, it requires recognition from another autonomous subject. In this early phase, Farm emerged as a project closely tied to the founders' personal values, with Favara positioned as an 'object' to be transformed. Identity was developed unilaterally, with the local community treated as passive rather than active—a configuration in which recognition was sought but not yet relationally negotiated.

In the second phase, the 'struggle for recognition' begins. Farm's desire evolved into a need to be recognized by the local community, reflecting the idea that self-consciousness cannot exist in solipsistic isolation. Consistent with Hegel's framework, the two self-consciousnesses enter into a confrontation to assert their autonomy. As Hegel writes, "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another" (Hegel, 1977, p. 178). However, this struggle is inherently asymmetrical: each subject seeks independent recognition while simultaneously depending on the other for its realization. During this phase, Farm actively implemented cultural and artistic initiatives to reshape Favara's image and attract external validation. Yet the local community was only partially engaged and remained on the margins of the transformation. Farm continued to act as the primary agent of change, shaping the relationship on its own terms, while community responses oscillated between endorsement, ambivalence, and resistance—signaling the bilateral emergence of recognition claims and their contestation.

The third phase reflects Hegel's 'master–servant dialectic'. The struggle for recognition results in a hierarchy where one consciousness becomes dominant (the master) and the other subordinate (the servant). The master seeks to affirm independence through domination, while the servant, though

subjugated, gains awareness and self-understanding through labor. Applied to our case, Farm assumed the role of the master, directing the town's social and cultural transformation. The community, as servant, contributed materially and symbolically through its engagement, gradually developing a stronger sense of identity and agency. Importantly, this asymmetry did not manifest as coercive domination but as catalytic leadership, in which community participation objectified Farm's vision in material and symbolic outcomes. This asymmetry created tensions between Farm's increasingly global identity and Favara's local roots, raising questions about the sustainability of their relationship.

In the fourth phase, 'unhappy consciousness' emerges. This concept refers to a state in which the subject recognizes its dependence on the other but struggles to reconcile this with its desire for autonomy. This inner conflict fosters tension, self-reflection, and the potential for transformation. In the case of Farm and Favara, this phase marked a turning point. The community began to resist the erosion of its identity, while Farm acknowledged the need to renegotiate its role and the nature of its relationship with the territory. What emerged was not only an organizational crisis but also a relational fracture, in which both actors confronted the fragility of previously stabilized recognition dynamics. A mutual crisis of recognition unfolded, challenging both parties to rethink their positions.

The final phase points to the 'perpetual tension of mutual recognition'. Here, we draw on Hegel's notion of *social freedom*—the culmination of recognition processes in which individuals or entities collaborate within a system of reciprocal recognition to co-create shared freedom (Hegel, 1977). Yet, as Butler (2018) reminds us, mutual recognition is never fully symmetrical: it is always mediated by social norms that determine who is recognizable and under what conditions. Recognition, therefore, does not culminate in stable balance, but in an ongoing tension between symmetry and asymmetry. In Hegelian terms, this corresponds to the system of *Sittlichkeit*, or ethical life, where recognition is embedded in socially established customs. Butler (2009) further emphasizes that recognizability—shaped by such norms—precedes actual recognition. In this final phase, Farm and Favara attempted to build a more sustainable future by aligning the organization's global identity with the community's local needs and values (as exemplified by the SPAB initiative). Rather than resolving prior tensions, these efforts revealed the conditional and negotiated character of mutual recognition. For example, the opening of a new site in Mazzarino may reinforce Favara's perception of being displaced or replaced—the 'other' once again—while the absence of major events may contribute to a sense of neglect. Likewise, Farm itself experiences a form of negation, as it struggles to be fully recognized for its original purpose and evolving identity. Recognition thus appears perpetually

deferred—granted in some domains while withheld in others—confirming its inherently unstable and processual nature.

The stages discussed above are summarized in Fig. 1.

To summarize, our findings suggest that the dynamics shaping Farm's identity have fostered strong cohesion among key internal and external stakeholders, while simultaneously exposing persistent challenges in how the organization is understood by the community. We observed that Farm's survival depended on its ability to maintain an equilibrium between the stability of its core values and beliefs and the evolution of how these were communicated to the community. Over time, the complexity of Farm's organizational identity increased. Our analysis supports Hegel's (1977) assertion that the central issue in recognition lies in the intricate relationship between action and judgment (Canivez, 2019). Judging someone's achievements implies granting or withholding recognition, which becomes a mechanism of self-assertion (Honneth, 1996). However, the boundary between recognition and imposition is porous: the two are inevitably intertwined, with imposition often permeating recognition efforts.

Hence, in our case, we observed a constant tension between Farm and Favara, in which attempts to recognize and be recognized frequently became intertwined with attempts to impose their respective identities. This dynamic overshadowed the potential for reciprocal recognition. Echoing Hegel (1977, p. 112), recognition in the strictest sense requires that "I recognize the other as someone who recognizes me while they recognize me as someone who recognizes them" (Canivez, 2019, p. 65). The parties have not yet achieved such mutual recognition, leaving both opportunities and tensions unresolved. One contributing factor may lie in the idea that recognition is "not only a cure for social pathologies, but it is also a process that generates its own pathologies" (Canivez, 2019, p. 76). Power relations are inherently embedded in the search for and granting of recognition (Hegel, 1977), and although these dynamics can be mitigated, they cannot be entirely eliminated. Our case study illustrates precisely this constraint.

This study also incorporates Butler's concept of *recognizability*, which situates recognition within a system of social norms governing who or what can be perceived as recognizable (Butler, 2009). Recognizability serves as a precondition for reciprocal recognition: organizations must first align their identity with prevailing norms to become legible to the community. For disruptive organizations such as Farm, operating outside these norms generates precarity, as their identity may initially appear incoherent, ambiguous, or illegible to local audiences. This precarity highlights the ambivalence of recognition. Butler's insights further reveal the instrumental nature of recognition: it operates within normative structures that may validate but also constrain organizational agency.

Disruptive organizations must navigate this ambivalence by reframing their identity from 'what are you?' to 'who are you?', emphasizing their unique value while contesting limiting norms. To reduce precarity, organizations must make their purposes and processes legible to the community, balancing global visibility with local embeddedness. Recognition thus becomes both a tool for legitimacy and a site of contestation, reflecting the tension between organizational innovation and adherence to established norms. By addressing these dynamics, organizations can position themselves as partners in shared transformation rather than external forces imposed upon the social fabric, thereby negotiating the systemic conditions that frame recognition processes.

The case study therefore highlights the intricate interplay between organizations and communities, whose relationship constitutes a dynamic process of negotiation and identity transformation. Hegel's theory of recognition underscores that identity formation is relational and shaped through tension and conflict. The master–servant dialectic illustrates how such tensions can generate alienation and identity crises while also opening possibilities for transformation. Indeed, these crises compel organizations and communities to engage in reflective dialogue, deepening their awareness of interdependence and laying the groundwork for more balanced relationships. As our study shows, identity crises can catalyze transformation when organizations confront the ambiguity and instrumentality of recognition, reframing their identity in ways that align with community values while challenging restrictive norms. Through such processes, organizations reposition themselves as co-creators of a shared cultural and social legacy. Drawing from both Hegel and Butler, we argue that identity crises constitute pivotal opportunities for reshaping relationships and fostering inclusive, sustainable innovation.

This study also underscores the mutual dependency between organizations and communities, challenging simplistic moral narratives that portray one as 'good' and the other as 'bad'. Hegel's master–servant framework helps illuminate this dynamic, showing that organizations and communities often enter asymmetric relationships. Organizations such as Farm may initially impose their vision, assuming the role of the master by directing transformation, while overlooking their reliance on the community for legitimacy, resources, and sustained impact. Conversely, communities may underestimate the organization's contributions, perceiving it as an external imposition rather than a partner in co-creation. Yet the master–servant dynamic is not static: it also creates avenues for transformation. Organizations must eventually acknowledge their dependence on the community, while communities may come to recognize their own agency and the potential benefits of engaging with the organization. Although fraught with conflict, this dialectical tension creates opportunities for renegotiation and reciprocal

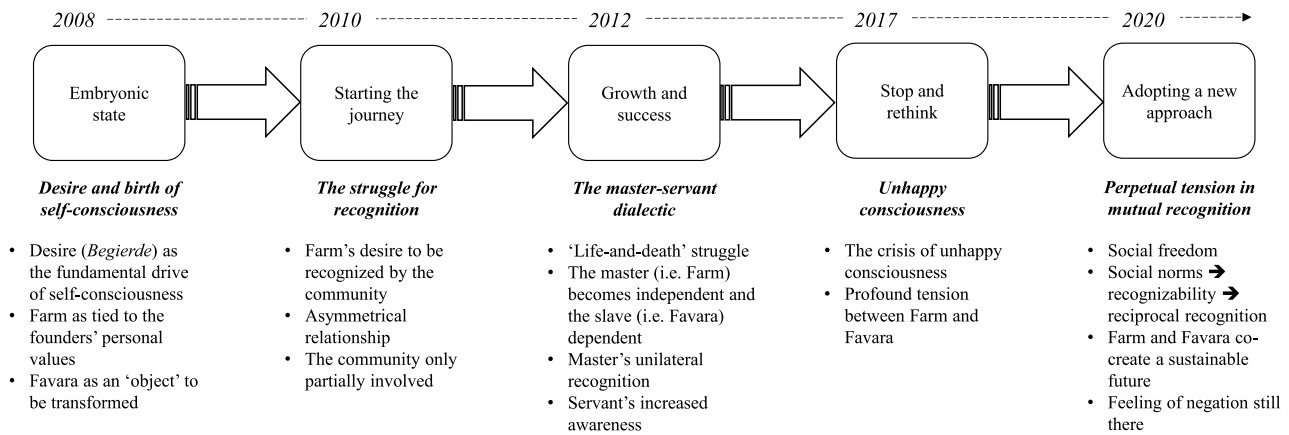


Fig. 1 The process model through the mutual recognition lens

recognition. By confronting these dynamics, organizations can move beyond imposition to foster genuine partnerships, while communities can recognize the organization's capacity to act as a catalyst for shared growth. This study therefore highlights that sustainable relationships emerge from an equilibrium of mutual respect and interdependence, in which both parties acknowledge their essential roles in shaping a collective future.

Theoretical Implications

This study emphasizes the critical importance of integrating philosophical perspectives – specifically, Hegel's recognition theory and Butler's concept of precarity and recognizability – into organizational studies. By reframing organizational identity as a relational process shaped by struggles for recognition, this work demonstrates how philosophical frameworks better explain organizations' recognition processes.

More specifically, by applying Hegel's dialectic of desire, master–servant asymmetry, and reciprocal recognition, it suggests that organizations build their identity by seeking recognition from their surrounding communities while simultaneously navigating tensions, crises, and renegotiations. This idea, therefore, hints at the central role of external actors in shaping organizational identity and legitimacy (Klikauer, 2016).

The analysis incorporates Butler's (2021) concept of precarity, emphasizing how disruptive organizations operating outside established social norms struggle to achieve recognition. The shift from asking, 'what are you?'—implying a knowable and fixed identity—to 'who are you?'—acknowledging uniqueness that is never fully knowable—becomes essential for organizations to reposition their identity and gain community recognition. However, this shift raises questions about the potential depth of reciprocal recognition (Canivez,

2019). In addition, this study illustrates how identity crises, which are often caused by asymmetrical relationships or community alienation, drive transformation. By engaging in reflective dialogue and fostering participatory practices, organizations can overcome alienation and achieve reciprocal recognition, aligning global aspirations with local legitimacy.

Furthermore, in light of the importance of bridging the gap between different fields of study, our findings can be interpreted from other related philosophical perspectives for possible further research. For instance, Honneth's (1996) framework can also draw a reconciliatory perspective, according to which recognition operates across the domains of rights, solidarity, and mutual respect, emphasizing the relational foundations of identity formation. Following his view, crises of recognition can catalyze transformation by highlighting these tensions, enabling renegotiation of relationships and fostering greater interdependence. As Canivez (2019) suggests, achieving intersubjective recognition requires participants to engage not only in a shared process but also construct meaning within a broader value community. Recognition, in this sense, is a dynamic process of negotiation, bridging the organization's objectives with the community's cultural and historical identities. This interplay is fraught with ambivalence, as power dynamics and reification tendencies can distort recognition into an instrumentalized process, reducing the relationship with utility rather than mutual respect. Thus, integrating Honneth's framework could encourage a shift toward non-instrumental, reciprocal recognition. Honneth's insights could also offer valuable future directions for understanding how organizations and communities can transcend conflicts and power imbalances and foster collaborative relationships rooted in mutual respect and solidarity.

Finally, our data could be interpreted via the lens of the identity resurrection literature (Howard-Grenville et al.,

2013), which recalls that community identities are normally highly persistent and “resistant to purposeful change” (Marquis & Davis, 2008, p. 462). Thus, instead of evolving, the members of certain communities tend to protect and perpetuate their identities over time. Specifically, Farm case study shows that during the initial phases, the community’s desire for change and Farm founders’ vision are strongly aligned. However, soon the community’s resistance to change emerges; the strong cultural legacy highlights the community’s tension between embracing innovation and preserving identity. Over the more recent phases, we observe ‘identity drift’ (Albert & Whetten, 1985), with community identity changing and gradually showing an increasing misalignment with traditional norms and beliefs.

Finally, this work bridges gaps in the organizational literature by showing how recognition struggles mediate relationships between organizations and their environments. It thus provides a deeper understanding of the dynamics that enable organizations to navigate complexity, resolve conflicts, and create sustainable shared identities with the local community.

Practical Implications

The evidence emerging from this case study offers critical insights into the dynamics of recognition between the organization and surrounding communities in particular contexts, which is helpful for practitioners.

Organizations often have a vision during the initial phase of their entrepreneurial journey and do not actively engage with the local community. This approach may create latent tensions because the community may perceive the organization as an external force that ignores its autonomy. Drawing from Hegel’s concept of desire for recognition, organizations must recognize that transformation processes are relational and require the acknowledgment of the community as an active subject. Early dialogue and engagement are essential to avoid conflicts that emerge as the process evolves.

The second phase underscores the tension between an organization’s external vision and the need for local legitimacy. Butler’s (2021) insights into precarity suggest that novel and disruptive initiatives often exist outside established social norms, making them ‘unrecognizable’ before their formal recognition. Again, organizations must anticipate this challenge by shifting the focus from ‘what are you?’—imposing pre-existing frames—to ‘who are you?’. This emphasizes the uniqueness of the initiative. This reframing facilitates reciprocal recognition and bridges the gap between an organization’s identity and the community’s expectations.

The third phase reflects the emergence of power asymmetries in organization–community relationships as Hegel’s master–servant dialectic describes. Organizations unintentionally dominate the process by treating the community as a passive contributor rather than an active agent. This imbalance can cause stakeholder alienation and organizational identity crises. Organizations must engage in reflective dialogue to reconfigure power dynamics and create shared meanings. Organizations can foster more equitable relationships by recognizing the interdependence between global aspirations and local realities.

In the later stages, organizations must adopt participatory and inclusive approaches to achieve reciprocal recognition. This requires viewing the community as beneficiaries and partners with unique contributions to the organizational process. Participatory governance practices such as collaborative decision-making, open communication channels, and shared value creation – are critical to consolidate trust and building sustainable relationships. Butler’s concept of precarity suggests that disruptive organizations challenge pre-existing social norms of recognizability. Organizations must proactively address this precarity by making their purposes, processes, and identities legible to communities. Achieving recognition requires organizations to navigate the tension between global visibility and local embeddedness, positioning themselves as catalysts for shared transformation rather than imposing impositions on the existing social fabric.

Conclusion

This study applies Hegel’s (1977) theory of recognition to explore the relational dynamics between an independent cultural center, Farm, and its surrounding community, Favara, to illustrate how organizational recognition evolves through conflicts and tensions to achieve a sustainable relationship. Butler’s (2021) perspective on the ambiguity of recognition highlights the inherent precariousness of this process and offers insights into anticipating and addressing conflicts. These findings emphasize the importance of inclusion, dialogue, and mutual respect in achieving shared success, underscoring that identity recognition is a continuous process of negotiation, loss, and recovery. Echoing Erikson (1956, p. 74): “a sense of identity is never gained nor maintained once and for all. Like a good conscience, it is constantly lost and regained.”

This work has certainly some limitations, including the retrospective nature of the interviews, which may shape

responses from an a posteriori perspective. Future research should adopt longitudinal or ethnographic approaches to provide real-time insights. Additionally, as a single-site exploratory study, the findings are context-bound, and comparative studies across multiple contexts would strengthen the generalizability of these results.

Notes

¹In Italian, SPAB stands for ‘Società per Azioni Buone’, which means ‘Good Action Company’. As reported in Media-Press#26 (Founder#1’s voice), “SPAB is [...] the natural tool of capitalism with the word ‘good’; it is bent and adapted to a new vision of a more aware, inclusive and committed society to improve its town and the lives of citizens.” By participating in the SPAB, every citizen can be a shareholder, and therefore, the owner of a small piece of the town.

Appendix

This study followed an abductive analytical strategy characterized by an iterative movement between empirical observations and theoretical interpretation (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Rather than applying Hegel’s framework deductively, we allowed patterns to emerge inductively from the data and only subsequently interpreted them through the lens of recognition theory Tables 4 and 5.

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Data availability statement The data that support the findings of this study consist of qualitative interview materials, field notes, and documentary sources collected during the research. Due to confidentiality commitments made to participants and the potentially identifiable nature of some of the materials, the data are not publicly available. Anonymized excerpts supporting the findings are included in the article. Additional information may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest to disclose.

Ethical Approval This study is based on qualitative research involving semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders of a single organization. As the research did not involve vulnerable individuals, sensitive personal data, or invasive procedures, formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the study was conducted in accordance with recognized ethical standards in social science and organizational research, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and responsible data management. Prior to each interview, participants were fully

Table 4 Analytical procedure and abductive iteration

	Phase	Analytical activity	Outputs	Theoretical engagement
1	Familiarization	Repeated reading of interviews, field notes, documents	Initial memos	No theory applied
2	Open coding	Line-by-line coding grounded in participants’ language	First-order codes	Inductive
3	Code comparison	Iterative clustering and refinement	First-order categories	Emerging sensitization to recognition dynamics
4	Theme development	Aggregation into second-order themes	Interpretive patterns	Abductive linking to recognition processes
5	Theoretical interpretation	Mapping themes onto Hegelian phases	Recognition framework alignment	Explicit theoretical integration

Table 5 Example of coding progression

Representative excerpts	First-order categories	Second-order themes	Recognition phase
“Administration hasn’t been close...” (ID#7)	Institutional and systemic crisis triggers	Institutional recognition breakdown	Unhappy consciousness (<i>Stop and rethink</i>)
“If Farm is fine, Favara is fine too...” (Founder#1)	Crisis of interdependent identity alignment	Recognition burden dynamics	

informed about the purpose of the research, the intended use of the data, and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. Explicit verbal consent was obtained for both participation and audio recording of the interviews. A signed confidentiality agreement with the organization confirms permission to disclose its real name for academic publication purposes; this agreement can be provided upon request.

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