

SPECIAL ISSUE:
**“Research Areas and Emerging Challenges
in Small and Medium Tourism Enterprises”**

Guest Editors:

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EDITORIAL

Tourism, with its related subsectors, is a highly fragmented sector with most tourism organizations being SMEs (e.g. Dredge, 2006). Small Tourism Businesses are the backbone of the economy of many countries around the world (e.g. Avcikurt, Altay & Ilban, 2011; Coles, Dinan & Warren, 2016), and Italy is certainly not an exception. Considering their varied activities, specialized services, and integration in the society, SMEs are certainly the economic lifeblood of the tourism sector (Morrison, Carlsen & Weber, 2010), especially in developing countries, rural and remote/unprivileged areas (Fotiadis, Yeh & Huan; Jacobsen, 2016; Yeh & Fotiadis, 2014). In fact, they have been recognized as being major job creators, important contributors to the development of local communities, supporters of destination image and infrastructure in many tourism destinations (e.g. McLarty, 1998; Peters & Buhalis, 2013; Wanhill, 2000; Thomas, Shaw & Page, 2011). Recent studies (e.g. Hallak, Assker & O'Connor, 2013) also profiled SMEs according to their level of support to the local communities to investigate the relationship between such support and the organizations performance, and identified two segments, namely “reluctants” and “community advocates” with the latter reporting greater level of performance.

The aforementioned considerations contribute to explain why SMEs literature have been attracting huge attention from academics working in several disciplines such as business and management, marketing, sociology, anthropology and politics (Thomas, Shaw & Page, 2011). Furthermore, they also explain why several studies have been recently starting to analyze how specific aspects of tourism policy might have an impact in entrepreneurship and SMEs development (Hall, 2009). Even though in the last few decades the SMEs related literature has advanced significantly, further advancing the knowledge about the heuristic processes could help to fill the gap between marketing theory and practice (e.g. Guercini, 2012). Despite this, the engagement by academicians in research relating to SMEs in tourism can be still considered to be limited. Many research areas still need to be further investigated and deepened, and a further effort should be done to acknowledge and to recognize spatial (i.e. different regions and

countries), sectorial (different tourism sub-sectors) and temporal variation (e.g. different time of observations) (Aber & Reichel, 2005; Thomas, Shaw & Page, 2011).

In existing studies, there is not still a universally accepted definition for small and medium tourism businesses in term of number of employees, gross profit and balance sheet (e.g. Morrison, Carlsen & Weber, 2010; Thomas, Shaw & Page, 2011). However, there is huge consensus about the main constraints and barriers that SMEs need to face to be competitive. Among the others, existing studies refer to information and tacit marketing practice (Bocconcelli et al. 2018; Jøcumssen, 2004; Yolal, Emeksiz & Cetinel, 2009), poor strategic marketing and planning (Agndal & Elbe, 2007), limited human, financial and operational resources (e.g. Aureli et al. 2015), little scope for economies of scale and scope, lack of access to capital markets (Franco et al., 2014). Research devoted to analyze the failure of SMEs has identified many reasons that increase the likelihood of business collapse, such as: emotional attachment to the business (Brown, 1987), no formal business or marketing background and no prior experience in tourism sector (McKercher & Robbins, 1998), ineffective strategies to cope with seasonal peaks, lack of knowledge and skills, limited adoption of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), internet and social media in marketing and management operations (e.g. El-Gohary, 2012; Karanasios, & Burgess, 2008; Lawson et al. 2003), administrative regulations, fears of commercial confidentiality (Hollis, 2003), ineffective customer relationship management (Özgener & İraz, 2006) and service design (Zehrer, 2009) and focus on lifestyle coupled with a limited desire to grow (Getz & Carlson, 2000).

As far as this last aspect is concerned, several recent studies have in fact highlighted that different types of small business owners are not always oriented towards the growth of their business and concerned with financial factors (the so-called small business oriented owners); hence, the term "lifestyle business" has been coined (e.g. Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000) to identify a category of the so-called non-entrepreneurs (people entering a business as a way of semi-retirement) and the ethically-driven owners (Lashley & Rowson, 2010). Tourism would be predominantly characterized by lifestyle-oriented businesses (Lashley & Rowson, 2010). However, it could be argued that the lifestyle orientation of small business owners is largely affected by the moral values of the individuals in themselves, an aspect largely influenced by the cultural background. This aspect would deserve further attention and call for cross-cultural comparison. Meanwhile, according to Hallak, Brown and Lindsay (2013), the actual support of SMEs to local communities is significantly influenced by their place attachment. Future studies would be needed to analyze the factors that might influence such an attachment and/or to examine the residents' views toward the SMEs support to the local community, a perspective largely unexplored in

existing literature. Significant theoretical and empirical efforts have been done to identify, mostly using a supply-side perspective, the critical success factors for SMEs in tourism and to identify possible solutions for overcoming barriers to their growth. Among critical factors, Avcikurt, Altay and Oguzhan Ilban (2006) identified the following: use of Internet, service quality, financial performance, service design, customer relationship marketing and experience marketing. Other studies referred to team working, organizational and collective learning, cooperative missions and strategies, networking (e.g. Von Friedrichs, 2010), clustering, networking benchmarking (Hwang & Lockwood, 2006), inter-organization trust (e.g. Braun, 2002), information and knowledge sharing (Kyriakidou & Gore, 2005; Novelli, 2006). Augmenting and enhancing horizontal (between competitors), vertical (between tourism businesses in a different level of the tourism supply chain) and lateral collaborations (between businesses working in different sectors), would allow SMEs to achieve economies of scale and scope and tourism destination to be more competitive (Bregoli et al. 2016; Del Chiappa & Presenza, 2013; Martini & Buffa, 2017).

Despite literature on networking and clustering among SMEs has undoubtedly grown over time, there are still emerging research areas that merit attention in future studies. Firstly, it would be useful to deepen our understanding about how networking can occur between SMEs located in remote areas and/or facing problems of geographical distance (Jacobsen, 2017), also considering the role that Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) (e.g. Bregoli & Del Chiappa, 2013; Fortezza & Pencarelli, 2018) can play in orchestrating all the local tourism stakeholders so that visitors can be pleased with unique and memorable tourist experiences (e.g. Pencarelli & Forlani, 2016). Secondly, there is a need to re-contextualize key concepts developed within the wider literature on knowledge management into the field of tourism knowledge overspill, community of practices, the importance of network and interlocking directorates, human mobility, territorial basis of collective learning, the potential role played by boundary spanners. Hence, future research should be developed to examine the different type of innovation that can occur in SMEs tourism businesses and how these are distributed via the process of knowledge transfer (Shaw & Williams, 2009). Further, it would be useful to deeply acknowledge the disruptive power that ICTs, internet and social media and their contribution in solving information and communication needs for both the industry and consumers but also in transforming the entire tourism supply chain and tourism industry (Sigala, 2018). ICTs, internet, social media give rise to new business species (both in term of service providers and intermediaries), thus giving rise to a fierce competition among “old” and “new” actors (e.g. Airbnb, Uber, etc.) that call for a dynamic realignment and redefining of the relationships that underpin the economy (Gretzel et al., 2015).

Hence, there is a need to re-contextualize the networking-related literature through the recent theoretical lens of digital business ecosystem (Baggio & Del Chiappa, 2013, 2014; Baggio & Del Chiappa, 2016) and of smart tourism destination (Boes et al., 2016; Del Chiappa & Baggio, 2015; Gretzel et al., 2015) to recognize the enabling role that ICTs, internet and social media can play in favoring network conviviality (Guercini & Ranfagni, 2016), information and knowledge sharing, the collective organizational learning, the co-creation and co-innovation within the network.

In such a smart environment, an emerging topic is the one related to cybersecurity, a mandatory asset for any tourism organization (Magliuolo, 2016; Moira, Mylonopoulos & Vasilopoulou, 2013). While large tourism companies have already started to implement their cybersecurity strategies, the most part of SMEs are struggling in achieving the same goal. Future research would need to be developed to investigate the extent to which both hospitality marketers and travelers are conscious about the issue, their attitude toward it and what are they actually doing to cope with it.

Another research area that would merit attention is the one devoted to properly conceptualize the internationalization in tourism and to investigate why and how SMEs internationalize and innovate their operations (Williams & Shaw, 2011). In this vein, it would be also interesting to analyze whether and how the international mobility of tourism entrepreneurs and immigrants can contribute to the innovation process, and/or why their contribution should differ when compared to the one of national entrepreneurs. These aspects call for future research in the field of Ethnic SMEs (Williams & Shaw, 2011).

Finally, a further effort should be done to deepen our understanding about the motivations and the barriers to SMEs in tourism sector being sustainable and being able to cope with climate change and global warming issue, the actual actions to cope with these issues, and the impact of these measures (Buffa et al., 2018; Font et al., 2016; Goffi et al., 2018). Given that the most part of the existing studies devoted to these research areas are based on self-reported survey, future studies should be more focused on adopting qualitative and longitudinal approaches (Brouthers, Nakos & Dimitratos, 2015) and should be aimed to investigate the gap between self-reported and actual behavior, and to observe its dynamics over time.

This special issue was launched to call for research papers aiming to deepen our understanding around some of the aforementioned research venues.

Overall, fourteen research papers were received from national and international scholars, thus confirming the relevant interest academics have in further contributing to understand the main dynamics, challenges and opportunities that SMEs, the real backbone of many countries around the world, face in the tourism and hospitality sector. After a double round of

blind review involving national and international reviewers, eight papers have been accepted to be published in *Piccola Impresa/Small business* (acceptance rate: 57,14%). The editorial policy of the Journal establishes that each issue can include up to five papers. This is the reason why this issue included only five articles, which were the fastest in ending the whole reviewing process. The remaining three articles will be published in the next issue of the journal.

The special issue opens with the paper "Current trends and prospects of tourism education and training in Greece", authored by Moira, Mylonopoulos and Kefala. The authors analyze how the tourism education and training system in Greece has been changing over time to cope with the economic crisis that has affected the country in the last decade and to make it more attractive for entrepreneurs, manager in SMEs and young people. Particularly, their study shows that the Greek tourism education and training system has been significantly transformed by merging university departments to eliminate previous dead-end paths of study, and by rationalizing the offer of available programs, boost stronger research opportunities, financial aids and high-end technological facilities. This led to a gradual increase in admissions and positions offered.

The second paper authored by Badran and Badran, "Strategic networks and alliances among tourism MSMEs: the case of Dubai's Wander With", is devoted to investigate the criteria and factors for Micro Small Medium & Enterprises (MSMEs) to make effective networking with each other and to analyze the main challenges, risks and benefits MSMEs face/obtain when trying partnerships to increase the competitiveness of the whole tourism destination. Selecting Dubai as the research site of their study, and adopting a case study methodology, authors show that alignment with experience objectives, consistent high quality of delivery, low risk, reliable performance and integrity are significant variables for success.

The last three papers all deal with the relevant role ICTs, social media and the sharing economy all exert in being instrumental for solving the information and communication needs of both industry and consumers, and for representing a key transformational driver of the entire tourism supply chain and tourism industry.

Cioppi, Curina, Forlani and Pencarelli, in their article titled "The impact of the web 2.0 on the marketing processes of the restaurant firms", adopt a multiple approach-types method to investigate whether and how restaurants are able to effectively lever on Travel 2.0 application to boost the e-reputation and what effects social media use caused on restaurants' marketing processes. Despite the awareness and the use of social media appear to be widely existing, significant room for a further improvement seems to still exist. Interestingly, the study also proposes an Online Visibility Index of Restaurants (OVI-R index) to be used to measure the restaurant perfor-

mance and to be benchmarked against competitors.

The paper “Profiling Italian street travel agencies based on their attitudes towards social media”, authored by Del Chiappa, Atzeni and Pung, apply a factor-cluster analysis to a sample of Italian street travel agencies to profile them based on the extent to which they engage with social media as part of their marketing operations. The study shows that four different clusters exist (i.e. “Passive users”, “Active users”, “Strategically myopics” and “Enthusiasts”), and that significant differences among these groups are based on the frequency of use of social media, freedom to access the Internet, number of branches, and the firm’s attitude towards marketing and communication tools.

The last paper, “The intersection between tourism and sharing economy from a different angle: the Home4Creativity case study”, authored by Fortezza, Berdicchia and Masino, aims to enhance the body of knowledge devoted to analyze the sharing economy phenomenon, by presenting and discussing a specific case study (i.e. Home4Creativity) portraying a new value creation model in tourism that is rooted on a hybrid set of collaborative practices (i.e., renting, bartering, and sharing) that goes along a continuum between market exchange and shared sociality.

Closing this editorial, we would wish to thank all the authors for contributing to this Special Issue, and all the national and international reviewers for the useful comments and suggestions they provide to authors to further improve the quality of their manuscripts. Last, but not least, we are deeply grateful to the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal (Prof. Pencarelli), and all the Editorial Board Members, for giving us the possibility to experience such a wonderful “journey”.

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