



EDITORIAL
**INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SMALL FIRMS
IN THE TOURISM SECTOR**

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Abstract

Purpose: This editorial introduces and contextualizes the thematic framework underpinning the Special Issue on innovation and entrepreneurial small firms in the tourism sector. It examines how entrepreneurship, sustainability transitions, digital transformation, youth engagement, and circular models are reshaping tourism ecosystems, with a specific focus on the role of small firms and peripheral territories.

Design/methodology/approach: The editorial summarizes and discusses the five contributions included in the Special Issue, highlighting their collective insights into eco-entrepreneurship, sustainability communication, circular economy adoption, youth-driven development, and the influence of founders' educational backgrounds on intellectual capital and business models.

Findings: The contributions show how innovation in tourism SMEs is a relational and context-dependent phenomenon emerging from the interplay of entrepreneurial values, human capital, territorial identity, and institutional frameworks.

Practical and social implications: The findings underscore key levers for sustainable and inclusive tourism growth, including improved governance, communication capacity, territorial networking, youth empowerment, and cross-disciplinary competencies.

Originality of the study: The editorial frames innovation in small tourism firms as a multi-actor, ecosystem-based and place-sensitive process.

Tourism is experiencing profound structural transformations driven by rapid technological advancements (Hjalager, 2010; Gretzel et al., 2020), evolving sustainability imperatives, demographic shifts, and increasingly fragmented consumer expectations. Recent scholarships have highlighted how artificial intelligence, data analytics, and digital ecosystems (Boes et al., 2016; Ardito et al., 2019) are reshaping competitive structures and enabling new forms of personalised and efficient service delivery. Parallel to digital transformation, sustainability has become a strategic and ethical imperative (Font & McCabe, 2017), influencing governance arrangements, business models, and visitors' choices. Moreover, crises such as COVID-19 (Sigala, 2020) have further exposed vulnerabilities in tourism systems, accelerating the need for resilience, adaptability, and collaborative capacity. These dynamics are not isolated but intersect in ways that challenge traditional tourism models and call for innovative responses from firms, institutions, and territories.

Within this transforming landscape, small tourism firms occupy a central yet complex position (Jones & Haven-Tang, 2005; Thomas et al., 2011). Their embeddedness in local contexts allows them to act as custodians of territorial identity and as agile innovators capable of anticipating or adapting to emerging trends. At the same time, their limited financial, organizational, and managerial resources make them particularly vulnerable to systemic shocks and institutional fragmentation. This tension, between potential and constraint, defines much of the contemporary debate on tourism SMEs.

The broader research agenda reflected in the current Special Issue responds to these challenges by examining the drivers and barriers of innovation in tourism, especially considering the role of SMEs, from multiple angles, including: the management of eco-entrepreneurship and sustainable practices in hospitality; the use of sustainability certifications and related tourist perceptions; the main drivers and constraints of circular economy adoption in tourism SMEs; youth engagement and entrepreneurship in peripheral regions; the role of founders' educational backgrounds in shaping tourism business models and intellectual capital.

The first contribution, concerning *eco-entrepreneurship and sustainable innovation in hospitality* (by Simone Splendiani, Ginevra Testa, Luca Giraldi, and Chiara Mencarelli), highlights how environmentally oriented entrepreneurs operationalise sustainability through actions such as resource optimisation, local sourcing, waste reduction (Fuller et al., 2005; Martini et al., 2017), and guest education. These practices are grounded in strong value-driven motivations and a commitment to local heritage. Yet eco-entrepreneurs encounter systemic barriers, including regulatory complexity, high investment costs, and limited market awareness, that limit the scalability

of their initiatives. Although eco-entrepreneurship may represent a crucial lever for accelerating sustainable transitions in tourism, the analysis underscores the need for more coordinated governance frameworks capable of aligning policy objectives with entrepreneurial efforts.

The second contribution deals with *sustainability certifications and tourist behaviour* (by Luca Giraldi, Guido Capanna Piscè, and Luca Olivari) investigates a persistent inconsistency in sustainable tourism: although many travellers express concern for environmental impacts, this rarely translates into booking behaviour. The study shows that while sustainability awareness is widespread, knowledge of certification schemes remains limited (Font & McCabe, 2017). As a result, certifications often fail to influence decision-making. The article emphasises the importance of transparent, credible, and educational communication strategies that make sustainability legible and meaningful to tourists. For SMEs, communication thus becomes a strategic capability essential for bridging the gap between supply and demand.

The third contribution (by Alex Almici, Luisa Bosetti, Raffaella Cassano, Tommaso Fornasari, and Francesca Gennari) offers a systematic review of *circular economy (CE) adoption in tourism firms*. It identifies drivers and barriers across governance, stakeholder relationships, and innovation. While initiatives such as recycling, reuse, and resource reduction have gained some traction, CE practices often remain fragmented and insufficiently integrated into strategic planning. The findings indicate that systemic circular models require stronger leadership, cross-sector collaboration, and continuous organisational learning. Given their flexibility and proximity to local ecosystems, SMEs are well positioned to experiment with CE approaches, provided that enabling institutional conditions are in place.

The fourth contribution (by Elisabetta Savelli, Alessio Travasi, Giada, Pierli, and Federica Murmura) explores the role of *young people as emerging agents of innovation in peripheral territories*. Survey results show that youth possess strong attachment to place (Yachin & Ioannides, 2020) and perceive tourism as a promising sector for local revitalisation. However, structural constraints - including inadequate infrastructure, limited cultural offerings, and scarce networking opportunities - hinder their entrepreneurial engagement. The study stresses the importance of policy interventions that enhance mobility, enrich cultural life, strengthen territorial networks, and cultivate youth capabilities. Empowering young residents is essential for activating tourism-driven development pathways in marginal regions.

Finally, the fifth contribution (by Vincenzo Vignieri) examines how founders' *educational backgrounds shape business models* (Mariani & Wirtz, 2023) and *intellectual capital* in cultural and creative organisations. Creativity, relational networks, technological adaptability, and cross-disciplinary competencies emerge as central components enabling firms to design com-

elling value propositions and sustain organisational resilience. The study also highlights the role of higher education institutions in fostering entrepreneurial ecosystems through knowledge transfer, partnerships, and academic spin-offs.

Taking together, these contributions reveal how innovation emerges not solely from technological adoption but from the interaction among values, identities, capabilities, and territorial ecosystems. Across their diversity, the papers converge on a shared understanding of innovation as a relational, contextual, and multi-scalar process. Innovation emerges from interactions among entrepreneurs, communities, institutions, and visitors; it is shaped by territorial identity, social capital, and governance arrangements. Human capital, particularly youth competencies and founders' educational backgrounds, functions as a strategic resource supporting adaptability and resilience.

This ecosystemic understanding of innovation suggests tourism firms, especially SMEs, the need to act along three interconnected strategic directions.

First, strengthening governance structures, managerial capabilities, and organisational learning processes is essential to enable SMEs to cope with the growing complexity of digital and sustainable innovation. Given their limited resources, small tourism firms often struggle to internalise technological change and sustainability requirements (Pencarelli et al., 2019). Enhancing governance capacity may allow SMEs to better integrate digital tools, sustainability standards, and innovation practices into coherent business strategies, rather than adopting them in a fragmented or reactive manner. Organisational learning, in this sense, becomes a critical mechanism through which firms can absorb external knowledge, adapt to regulatory and market pressures, and build long-term resilience.

Second, empowering youth and local communities emerges as a pivotal lever for fostering inclusive, place-based development. SMEs are deeply embedded in their territories and can act as gateways for mobilising local human capital, cultural resources, and social networks. By engaging young people not only as employees but also as co-creators, entrepreneurs, and community actors, small tourism firms can contribute to reversing demographic decline, stimulating local innovation, and reinforcing territorial identity. Community empowerment further enhances legitimacy, trust, and collective commitment, all of which are crucial for sustaining tourism development in peripheral and marginal areas.

Third, cultivating cross-disciplinary competencies, creativity, and technological adaptability is increasingly vital for sustaining resilient business models. Innovation in tourism SMEs rarely stems from specialised technological expertise alone; rather, it emerges from the combination of creative capabilities, relational skills, digital literacy, and contextual knowledge. Cross-disciplinary competencies enable small firms to design distinctive value propositions, combine cultural and technological resources, and re-

spond flexibly to changing visitor expectations (Del Chiappa & Fotiadis, 2019). In this perspective, adaptability becomes less a function of scale and more a function of cognitive and organisational openness.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that small tourism firms should be understood not merely as economic units, but as ecosystem builders capable of contributing to cultural vitality, social cohesion, and environmental stewardship within their territories. Their capacity to innovate, collaborate, and leverage territorial identity positions them as key intermediaries between local communities, institutions, and markets. As such, SMEs play a decisive role in shaping the future trajectories of tourism, particularly in contexts where development depends on balancing economic viability with social and cultural sustainability.

Within this framework of complex and multi-dimensional innovation, sustainability emerges as a central and unifying theme. Sustainable transformation is not reducible to the adoption of environmentally friendly practices; rather, it depends on integrated governance arrangements, inter-organisational collaboration, and the capacity to mobilise shared visions across heterogeneous stakeholders. For tourism SMEs, sustainability represents both a strategic orientation and a collective endeavour, requiring alignment between entrepreneurial values, institutional frameworks, and territorial aspirations. Only through coordinated action and collaborative governance can sustainability move from an individual commitment to a systemic transition.

Finally, this Special Issue opens several promising avenues for future research. Further studies are needed to deepen understanding of how tourism SMEs build and sustain innovation capabilities over time, particularly under conditions of uncertainty and resource scarcity. Comparative and longitudinal research could shed light on the evolution of entrepreneurial ecosystems and the role of governance in enabling or constraining innovation. Moreover, greater attention might be paid to micro-level processes, such as learning, identity construction, and value formation, underpinning sustainable and digital transformation in small firms. By embracing methodological plurality and cross-disciplinary perspectives, future research can continue to advance a more context-sensitive understanding of innovation in tourism entrepreneurship.

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