

# CALL FOR PAPERS

## Special Issue



## Innovation and Entrepreneurial Small Firms in the Tourism Sector

**Submission Deadline:** 28 February 2025

**Guest Editors:** Federica Murmura, Elisabetta Savelli, Salvador Anton Clavé

Piccola Impresa/Small Business is pleased to announce a call for papers for a special issue on “Innovation and Entrepreneurial Small Firms in the Tourism Sector.” This special issue aims to explore the latest developments, trends, and challenges in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship within the tourism industry, with a specific attention to the role of small companies. Innovation and entrepreneurship are critical drivers of growth and competitiveness in the tourism sector. The dynamic nature of this industry, indeed, characterized by rapid changes in consumer preferences, technological advancements, and global challenges, needs unceasing innovation and entrepreneurial activities (Hjalager, 2010; Hall & Williams, 2019).

Recent advancements in ICT and digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and the Internet of Things (IoT), have significantly transformed tourism businesses, enhancing operational efficiency and customer experiences (Volo, 2012; Boes et al., 2016; Del Chiappa & Fotiadis, 2019; Pencarelli et al., 2019; Sfodera et al., 2024). For instance, the use of AI-powered chatbots, available 24/7, can provide instant responses to customer inquiries, streamline booking processes, and offer tailored recommendations based on user preferences and behaviors, thus reducing wait-times and improving the overall customer experience. Additionally, data analytics and the integration of big data can allow for more accurate demand forecasting and personalized service offerings, supporting customized marketing strategies that are vital for maintaining a competitive edge (Ardito et al., 2019). Such strategies, while encouraging a deeper connection between tourists and the brand, contribute to higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty, supporting the long-term survival and competitiveness of tourism businesses (Gretzel et al., 2020).

Sustainability has also become a focal point of innovation within the tourism sector. With growing awareness of environmental and social issues, there is an increasing demand for sustainable tourism practices. Innovations in this area include the development of eco-friendly accommodations, sustainable transportation solutions, and community-based tourism initiatives promoting local culture and heritage (Font & McCabe, 2017). Such practices not only meet consumer demand but also contribute to the long-term viability of tourism destinations.

Overall, recent world crises and the COVID-19 pandemic have made the need for innovation increasingly urgent in the tourism industry. They have forced businesses to rethink their strategies, adopt new technologies, and explore alternative revenue streams to survive (Sigala, 2020, Splendiani & Forlani, 2023). Innovations in health and safety protocols, virtual tourism experiences, and flexible booking policies are some of the responses that have emerged, highlighting the sector's adaptability and resilience. Additionally, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of contactless services, enhanced digital marketing efforts, and encouraged the development of sustainable tourism practices, which are vital for long-term industry recovery and growth.

In this evolving scenario, entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in driving innovation and the overall business competitiveness. Studies have shown that entrepreneurial behaviour in tourism firms leads to higher productivity, market share, and profitability, underlining the importance of visionary and creative leaders in this industry (Işık et al., 2019; Kallmuenzer et al., 2019). The entrepreneurial ventures of Walt Disney's theme parks exemplify how innovative ideas can revolutionize the tourism industry and significantly contribute to economic development (Işık et al., 2019). The emergence of startups leveraging digital platforms offering unique and customized

travel experiences are further examples of vital entrepreneurship. Platforms like Airbnb and Uber have revolutionized the accommodation and transportation sectors, respectively, showcasing the potential of entrepreneurial innovation in reshaping traditional business models (Cohen & Munoz, 2016; Dogru et al., 2019). Particularly, entrepreneurship in tourism can profoundly impact on regional development, especially in underdeveloped areas. A notable example is the advancement in rural tourism enterprises, which provide unique experiences to tourists while promoting local culture and community development. Rural tourism, agri-tourism, and homestays are prime cases where entrepreneurial efforts have successfully created sustainable tourism models (Beeton, 2004; McGehee & Kim, 2004).

Within this context, the role of entrepreneurial small firms has been often debated. Over the past, small businesses have been seen as the economic lifeblood of the tourism sector being vital to destination competitiveness (Jones & Haven-Tang, 2005), development (Johns & Mattsson, 2005) and sustainability (Fuller et al., 2005). Small firms are often able to introduce innovative products and services that cater to niche markets, thereby enhancing the overall tourism experience (Martini et al. 2017). For instance, the rise of eco-tourism and adventure tourism has been largely driven by small entrepreneurial firms that recognize and exploit emerging consumer trends (Ateljevic & Li, 2009; Presenza et al., 2015; Ferrucci et al., 2021).

Simultaneously but paradoxically, tourism small businesses have been also considered as “the laggards that prevent innovation and growth” (Thomas et al., 2011), due to the lack of knowledge and resources (both finance and human capital) to invest in innovation (Verreynne et al., 2019). Tourism small firms, indeed, often face disadvantages in developing innovation, such as (i) economies of scale; (ii) limited access to capital markets; and (iii) inadequate management capabilities (Nguyen et al., 2021).

While substantial progress has been made in understanding the role of innovation and entrepreneurship, also concerning tourism small firms, several gaps remain.

Firstly, there is a need for more research on the unique challenges faced by small tourism firms in rural and underdeveloped areas. These businesses often play a crucial role in local economic development, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting sustainable practices. Studies should explore how entrepreneurial activities can drive tourism development in these regions, considering factors such as access to resources, community engagement, and the impact on local economies (Yachin & Ioannides, 2020).

Secondly, the long-term impact of entrepreneurial ventures on regional development and community well-being is underexplored. Research should investigate how small tourism entrepreneurship contributes to economic resilience, social cohesion, and environmental

sustainability in smaller destinations. Understanding these dynamics can inform suitable policies encouraging growth and innovation in the tourism sector (Germanovich et al., 2020; Rosalina et al., 2021).

Thirdly, while there is a growing body of research on the application of digital technologies in tourism to support innovation and competitiveness, much of it remains fragmented. Studies often focus on specific technologies or isolated use-cases, without providing a holistic view of how these technologies can be integrated into a comprehensive digital strategy for small tourism firms (Mariani & Wirtz, 2023). For instance, although AI-powered chatbots and personalized marketing strategies have been shown to enhance customer engagement and satisfaction, the long-term impacts of these technologies on the overall customer experience and loyalty are underexplored (Wang et al., 2023). Similarly, there is a lack of segment-specific studies (e.g., luxury vs. budget travelers or domestic vs. international tourists) which are critical to understand the nuanced effects of digital technologies on different segments of the tourism market (Ameen et al., 2023).

Finally, there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of supporting programs and policies aimed at fostering small entrepreneurship in the tourism industry. The role of policy and regulation in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship cannot be overlooked. Government policies and regulations play a crucial role in creating an enabling environment for innovation, providing support through funding, infrastructure development, and favorable regulatory frameworks (Carrillo-Hidalgo & Pulido-Fernández, 2019). Their role is also critical in supporting collaborative attitude among tourism businesses (Della Corte & Aria, 2016). Indeed, these relationships, when based on mutual trust, contribute to a better promotion of tourism destinations and to the improvement of knowledge sharing within the business aggregation themselves (Della Corte & Aria, 2014; 2016). Moreover, public policies aimed at promoting tourism innovation can stimulate investment in new technologies and business models, driving sector growth. Future studies should evaluate the impact of governmental and non-governmental initiatives on the success and sustainability of small tourism enterprises, particularly in less developed areas (Sigala, 2020).

#### **Topics of Interest:**

We welcome submissions on a wide range of topics related to innovation and entrepreneurship in tourism, including but not limited to:

- **Technological Innovations:** The impact of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and big data on the tourism sector.

- **Sustainable Tourism:** Innovations promoting sustainability and eco-friendly practices in tourism.
- **Startups and New Ventures:** Case studies and analyses of successful startups and new ventures in tourism.
- **Small firms:** Opportunities for innovation in small entrepreneurial firms
- **Rural tourism:** Innovation and small entrepreneurship fostering regional development, especially in underdeveloped areas.
- **Policy and Regulation:** The role of governmental policies and regulations in fostering innovation and small entrepreneurship.
- **Customer Experience:** Innovations in enhancing customer experience and satisfaction in tourism.
- **Cultural and Heritage Tourism:** Innovative approaches to preserving and promoting cultural and heritage sites.
- **Marketing and Branding:** Novel marketing strategies and branding initiatives in tourism.
- **Collaborative Networks:** The role of networks, partnerships, and collaborations between small firms in driving innovation.
- **Human Resources:** Innovations in workforce management and development in the tourism industry.

#### **Submission Guidelines:**

Authors are invited to submit their manuscripts through the [online platform](#) by the **deadline of 28 February 2025**. All submissions will undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process to ensure the publication of high-quality research.

#### **Important Dates:**

- **Submission Deadline: 28 February 2025**
- **Notification of Acceptance: 31 May 2025**
- **Publication Date: December 2025, March 2026**

### **Manuscript Preparation:**

Manuscripts should be prepared according to the Piccola Impresa/Small Business guidelines, which can be found on the [Journal's website](#). Submissions should not exceed a total of 22 pages and should include an abstract of up to 300 words.

### **Contact Information:**

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We look forward to receiving your contributions to this exciting and pertinent special issue.

Sincerely,

Prof. Tonino Pencarelli

Editor in chief of the Journal

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