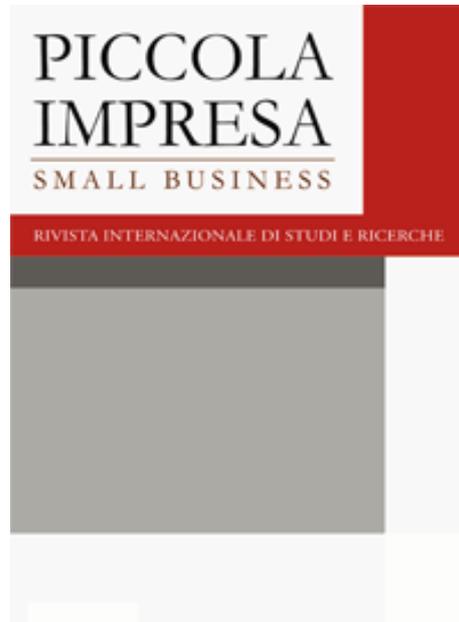


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Special Issue



Research Areas and Emerging Challenges in Small and Medium Tourism Enterprise

Tourism, with its related subsectors, is a highly fragmented sector with most of 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 academicians 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; Jocumsen, 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.

In this vein, this special issue invites papers addressing issues related to the following but not limited issues:

- Critical success factors of SMEs in tourism
- Decision making to cope with crises
- Opportunities and threats of sharing economy
- SMEs orientation toward sustainability
- E-reputation management practices
- Digitalization Social media marketing
- Social and lifestyle entrepreneurship in tourism
- CSR in SMEs in tourism
- Critical success factors of SMEs in tourism
- Strategic network and alliances among tourism related and non-tourism-related SMEs
- Tourism Education and entrepreneurial orientation
- Analysis of similarities and differences of SMEs in tourism (and related sub-sectors) and other sectors
- Knowledge transfer, acquisition and absorption
- Tourism business policy and SMEs growth and development
- Cybersecurity in tourism
- Digital ecosystem and smart tourism destinations
- Collective entrepreneurship
- Internationalization in tourism SMEs
- Consumers' attitude and behavior toward SMEs in tourism
- Epistemology, general theory development, and methods of research in tourism SMEs
- Gender and female tourism SMEs
- Human resource management in tourism SMEs
- Franchising and Tourism SMEs
- Co-Creation and SMEs

- Smart tourism and SMEs
- Tourism overcrowding and SMEs
- Cryptocurrency and Tourism SMEs

We welcome paper adopting both a supply-side or a demand-side perspective and using qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods.

Deadlines

- Submission of abstract (up to 750 words): 30 September 2018
- Notification of abstract acceptance: 5 October 2018
- Submission of full paper: 20 November 2018;
- First editorial screening outcome: 10 December 2018
- Notification of acceptance/rejection/revision: 15 February 2018
- Deadline to submit revised version: 15 March 2019
- Notification of final acceptance: 15 April 2019

The special issue is planned to be published in 2019 the first issue of the journal. However, it could shift to the second issues when required to cope with reviewing and editing needs. All the submitted paper need to be original, unpublished and/or under revision in other journals. All the submitted paper will be subject to a double-blind review process.

Abstract proposals need to be submitted to the following e-mails: gdelchiappa@uniss.it and Anestis.Fotiadis@zu.ac.ae. Full papers need to be submitted through the online platform <http://www.rivistapiccolaimpresa.it>. The platform can be browsed also in English by using the button “selection language” in top right side of the home page. Authors will be first requested to fill in the section “Registrazione/registration”; then, they will need to click on “Nuova Proposta/New proposal” in the section “Cruscotto/Dashboard” to upload the files related to their submission.

All the papers need to strictly adhere to the specific guidelines of the journal that can be found at this link: <http://rivistapiccolaimpresa.uniurb.it/index.php/piccola/about/submissions#authorGuidelines>. The guidelines can be also browsed in English by using the button “selection language” in top right side of the webpage.

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