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ADVANCES IN GLOBAL SERVICES AND RETAIL MANAGEMENT

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Innovation Labs to Support Tourism Organisations in Transforming Crisis Into Opportunities: Insights From a Case Study

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the importance of the Innovation Lab as an effective management initiative supporting tourism organisations in facing the serious challenges of innovation posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis of literature related to tourism innovation and Innovation Labs, is integrated with the field study of an Innovation Lab, that is intensely working with several companies and their stakeholders of a tourism ecosystem located in south of Italy, to seize opportunities and new solutions facing the tremendous crisis of the tourism industry. The paper contributes to study how Innovation Lab can constitute an effective management initiative supporting knowledge co-creation and exploitation for innovation dynamics in organisations, in response to disruptive socio-economic crisis and the negative outcomes of the Covid-19 outbreak.

Keywords: innovation lab, knowledge co-creation and exploitation, tourism industry, case study

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Introduction

Tourism and cultural organisations, pursuant their attitude to be a labour-intensive production sector, in which the competitive advantage depends on the differentiation of the tourism product and the humanisation of the offered experiences, resulted as one of the sectors that most repudiate digital transformation, conceiving it as a process that would lead to standardisation and loss of appeal to the end customer (Meyer and Mayer, 2015).

However, nowadays, due to the emerging challenges in the Digital Age that are also affecting the tourism and cultural sector, the need for embracing digital innovation journeys favouring digital transformation and business model innovation should be considered mandatory to guarantee competitiveness and the gain of a sustainable competitive advantage. In the digital age, therefore, innovation is the essential condition to face and address challenges and opportunities of the competitive scenario (Santarsiero et al., 2019; 2020). Public administrations, companies, suppliers, and professionals are driven to innovate and digitize their offer to face fierce competition and to provide citizens and users with increasingly efficient products and services.

The rapid development of digital technologies and solutions, and their democratisation, induced changes in consumers' and users' habits and behaviours, resulting in the need for developing new products, services and methods of use based on emerging market needs. In the same way, organisations are asked to become resilient, proactive and able to evolve in the same way the competitive landscape does.

After Covid-19, besides, the needs for digital innovation journeys and digital revolutions are even more accentuated, confirming that the pandemic has acted as an accelerator of DT dynamics. The competitiveness and attractiveness of organisations and destinations will therefore depend on the digital innovative capacity and ability of operators and destination managers to rethink the tourist offer according to the new emerging trends and context dynamics. Companies that aim to survive and play a leading role during and after the crisis have to be ready to innovate and to change their business model in response to the evolution of the socio-economic context very quickly.

Although the need for embracing digital innovation journeys is crucial, it is not an easy process to manage and exploit (D'Este et al., 2012). Organisations, indeed, experience several difficulties and innovation barriers. In SMEs, in particular, which represent a typical configuration of tourism and cultural organisations, resistance to innovation, and insufficient skills, finance, culture, attitudes, and often also the time to devote to innovation due to overburden of bureaucratic aspects and various routines, are particularly accentuated. It follows these organisations require forms of support to face these needs and develop an innovative capacity, fostering DT and BMI to improve offers, competitiveness, efficiency, as well as customisation and customer relationships.

In such scenario, the research of new solutions, practices, and management models enabling continuous innovation dynamics has become a hot topic both for scholars and practitioners (Fecher et al., 2018). Nowadays, this research has become particularly imperative in order to effectively navigate the coronavirus crisis. Recently, among the emergent practices, Innovation Labs have appeared as a valuable answer to organizations' needs to develop digital culture and continuous innovation attitudes (Osorio et al., 2019; Santarsiero, 2021).

Innovation Labs are management initiatives based on the construction of an innovative space - physical, virtual, hybrid, relational -; on the definition of dedicated time for innovation; and on the development of a platform that contemplates tangible and intangible infrastructure dimensions. These Labs are aimed at fostering creative and critical thinking, promoting and supporting user-driven, open, and continuous innovation approaches, to facilitate stakeholders' engagement in innovations processes, and knowledge co-creation and exploitation to better understand users' needs, to drive digital transformation, to imagine and defining innovation opportunities, and to continuously develop new solutions capturing and delivering value to society.

The Covid-19 pandemic has generated new level of uncertainty and is posing difficult and even unprecedented challenges for the sustainability of organisations. Moreover, it also having significant implications on the exploitation of digital solution in organisational processes and strategy. The crisis, indeed, is tremendously challenging the organisation's capacity of innovating, changing their business model as well as of employment and deployment of digital technologies.

Focusing on Innovation Lab, this paper aims to sheds more light on the following questions: is Innovation Lab a suitable managerial model to support organisations in converting the challenges

from covid crisis into opportunities? How does an Innovation Lab help organisation to co-create and exploit knowledge with its stakeholders to drive digital transformation and develop new solutions in response to the Covid crisis?. In order to answer to the research questions, the paper analyses a case study. The case involves an Innovation Lab, i.e., the “Transforma Lab”, that is intensely working with several companies and their stakeholders of a tourism ecosystem located in south of Italy, to seize new solutions facing the tremendous crisis of the tourism industry.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a short overview of the literature on Innovation Lab. Then, the third section briefly describes the research method. The fourth section presents the case study and the fifth illustrates the results. Finally, in the last section, concluding remarks and directions for future research work are presented.

Literature Review

Innovation Lab

In the last years, organisations are discovering the advantages of creating Innovation Labs as dedicated “spaces “for innovation (Timeus and Gascò, 2018). The analysis of the organisations' experiences reveals that Innovation Labs are increasingly identified as innovation management initiatives based on the construction of an innovative space - physical, virtual, hybrid, relational - on the definition of dedicated time for innovation; and on the development of a platform that contemplates tangible and intangible infrastructure dimensions (Santarsiero et al., 2021). They are therefore conceived as management initiatives focusing on the creation of spaces for creative and innovative thinking. They can take different forms, with diverse contents and actions, adopting a wide variety of human, organisational, relational and technological resources, with the core scope of sustaining the development of innovation activities (Wagner and Watch, 2017).

The way how organisations can approach the creation of an Innovation Lab can be very different, and the size of the organisation significantly affect the process. Large firms seem more inclined to set up internal Innovation Labs or to restructure traditional R&D centres or think-thank by embracing the open innovation and user-driven paradigms. While, SMEs due to the lack of resources and expertise appear more inclined to share and exploit hybrid and external Innovation Labs (Van Goolen et al., 2014).

Innovation Lab can be considered as a collaborative ideation space that helps organisations to break down the walls of the traditional laboratories and enable different people to get involved in creative and innovative activities. Not only employees but also the users and other potential stakeholders get involved in the activities of an Innovation Lab.

Innovation Labs, indeed, enable organisations to embrace the paradigm of open innovation, user-driven innovation, and collaborative innovation by overcoming hierarchy and by promoting stakeholders' participation into the co-creation of potentially successful innovations (Lewis and Moultrie, 2005, Memon et al., 2018; Osorio et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2014). In such a prospect these Labs, are not "innovation theatre" but an "engine" to successfully spur and support the creation and exploitation of new knowledge in organisation.

Methodological Notes

The methodology is based on an inductive research approach, represented by the explorative case study of an Innovation Lab. Generally, case studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed (Yin, 1994).

As pointed out by Glaser and Strauss (1967), case studies support a research strategy involving an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context by using multiple sources of evidence (Robson, 2002). This research, therefore, investigating a real Innovation Lab in its real-life context, focuses on how this management initiative should support tourism organisations during the pandemic and how it should contribute generating innovation converting crisis into opportunities.

Data Collection

Data has been collected thanks to the direct involvement of one of the authors in the analysed Innovation Lab’s activities. The research has been carried out following the Yin’s approach (2009) to increase the validity and reliability of case studies. In particular, to guarantee validity, the researchers employed a disparity of methods to gather data. In particular, semi-structured interviews with tourism experts, operators, and key territorial stakeholders has been conducted (Spradley, 2016). Moreover, online thematic webinars engaging tourism actors and local communities have been organized following flexible approaches to understand informants’ perspectives and to reconsider or confirm the previous gathered insights (Myers, 2013). Resulting data, has then been triangulated with theoretical evidence emerged from the literature review to reduce typical bias of a single observation (Eisenhardt, 2002) and to identify reliable and valid results. Moreover, the research analyses a single case study. This may limit the possibility of generalising results. However, the awareness of the research limit, also contributes to guarantee validity and informing future research needs.

Case Study

To understand if Innovation Lab is a suitable management initiative to support organisations in converting the challenges from Covid-19 crisis into opportunities and how this initiative can help organisation to co-create and exploit knowledge with its stakeholders to drive digital transformation and develop new solutions in response to the Covid crisis, a case study has been developed.

The case involved an Innovation Lab, namely “Transforma Lab”. Currently, Transforma Lab is engaged in a very hard challenge, i.e. supporting some tourism companies, operating in a region located in the south of Italy, to seize fresh opportunities and generate innovative solutions against the uncountable challenges generated by the covid pandemic.

It is well known that worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 has brought the world to a standstill, and tourism has been the worst affected of all major economic sector. Currently, a great amount of companies, especially SMEs companies, are desperately looking for new solutions to survive. They found themselves forced to face a “digital transformation” journey. A very challenging journey, as the tourism sector is configured as the sector that most refuses digitization and digital

transformation. This is because it is labour-intensive production sector, in which the competitive advantage is based on product differentiation and on the humanization of the experience.

Therefore, some key barriers to innovation for tourism companies are the lack of strategic and cultural vision that allows them to redesign and rethink their traditional business models in a digital way. In order to support companies wishing to undertake their digital innovation paths and to be able to generate innovative solutions for relaunching their business, the Transforma Lab has conducted with the companies and their stakeholders a “digital transformation and innovation journey”. Through this journey, the Transforma Lab aimed to enhance companies’ innovative thinking and facilitate the co-creation and exploitation of new knowledge with their stakeholders.

For this purpose, the Lab planned and implemented a set of initiatives, built according to user-driven innovation, open innovation, agile- and lean innovation, stakeholders-value oriented, participatory-driven innovation principles. The activities were grouped into three main phases, based on the broader aims of the initiatives: i) identify challenges, ii) outline opportunities, iii) define and test possible solutions according to an iterative approach of continuous and validated learning. In the following, each phase is described in details.

Phase 1 – Identify Challenges

The first set of initiatives aimed to collect and discuss the main challenges of tourism industry, with several actors of the regional tourism ecosystem. This is with the main aim to co-create a shared knowledge base for rethinking the future of tourism industry and designing digital responses and proposals, which appropriately tested, validated and evaluated, would represent a valuable response to the current crisis. 180 tourism operators were interviewed, through semi-structured interviewed. Moreover, the Lab has designed and carried out 6 thematic webinars broadcasted live on the main social media.

Several managers, tourists, entrepreneurs, experts, startupper, representatives of institutions actively attended the webinars. These webinars were designed on semi-structured schemas using a flexible approach that allowed gathering the informants’ perspectives on specific issues and checking whether informants could confirm insights and information already held by the Transforma Lab’s experts (Myers, 2013). The goal of the webinars was co-generating, through the creation and proactive involvement of a community of experts, entrepreneurs, tour operators, DMOs, citizens, tourists and institutions, shared knowledge about the main business challenges of the tourism industry due to the Covid-19.

Phase 2 – Outline Opportunities

The second phase aimed to convert the challenges identified in the previous phase into opportunities for the revival and growth of tourism organisations affected by the pandemic. In this perspective, a first set of initiatives organized by the Transforma Lab consisted in an intra-sectoral and intersectoral action of exploration, benchmarking and analysis of best practices and case studies concerning virtuous examples of projects, practices or initiatives which have allowed organisations to deal with crisis in innovative ways. The results of these actions acted as stimuli and matter of debate for the community of tourism actors, experts, entrepreneurs, DMOs, citizens, tourists and institutions that was involved in a further series of focus groups, semi-structured

interviews and thematic online webinars. During these activities, and thanks to the support and guide of Transforma Lab's experts, emerging opportunities have been discussed, clustered, prioritized and then readapted to the reference context.

Phase 3 – Define and Test Possible Solutions

During the third phase, an online hackathon lasting 48 hours based on lean and agile methodologies has been organized with the aim of transforming the outlined opportunities in tested and validated innovative solutions ready to be implemented by the engaged tourism organisations. Inspired by open innovation and user-driven innovation principles, mentors, experts, technicians, tour operators, DMOs, entrepreneurs, tourists, and local communities worked together to generate innovative solutions for promoting growth and relaunching the tourism ecosystem, fostering dynamics of digital transformation, business model innovation, innovation of tourist offer, and / or innovation and space management. Specifically, 101 participants attended the event, grouped in 36 heterogenous teams, that benefitting from the support and facilitation of more than 20 mentors, were able to generate, test, validate and propose 23 innovative digital solutions.

Findings

The case study contributed to assess the effectiveness of Innovation Labs' approaches and principles in fostering and promoting innovation dynamics in tourism organisations, stimulating them to identify challenges, that are then transformed into opportunities, that represented, finally, the inspiration for the generation of innovative solutions. The adoption of methodologies inspired by the principles of co-creation, open innovation, user-driven innovation, participatory innovation, contributed to the production of solutions aligned with demand and scenario's challenges.

In particular, the thematic webinars were organized based on open and participatory approaches. This allowed to engage a great number of actors operating in the local tourism ecosystem, as well as key business experts, and to create a comfortable milieu where sharing and generating knowledge. Moreover, through the facilitation of the Transforma Lab experts a shared commitment around the importance of identifying a common vision of future tourism offer and the role played by each player, private or public, in achieving this vision was generated.

Furthermore, adopting a stakeholders-value oriented perspective, has allowed to capture various needs and requests to effectively balance and satisfy with new offer. Paying attention to tourists' viewpoints was helpful to identify and understand new emerging tourism habits, needs and expectations. Hearing the voice of local communities and institutions, allowed to involve them in the new path of innovation and territorial promotion. Lastly, the consideration of tourism organisations and tourism operators' point of view, allowed the identification of their main concerns and needs, as well as has offered the opportunity to stimulate their creativity and innovation capacity in rethinking approaches, processes, services and products, also in a digital perspective.

Conclusions

The coronavirus pandemic is dramatically facing companies. No industry is escaping the disruption of Covid 19. Workforce issues, supply chain disruptions, demand loss, employees' safety, financial and market volatility and cash flow problems, are just few issues that currently

companies are trying to deal with. However, the pandemic can, also present a good opportunity for organisations to embark on new journeys such as rethinking business model, improving the innovation capacity, undertaking digital transformation process in order to remain competitive and reinforce the business. Certainly these “innovation journeys” are not effortless and require resources, competence, culture, and attitudes not even easy to raise and manage. Recently Innovation Labs have appeared as a valuable answer to organizations’ needs to develop digital transformation and continuous innovation.

This paper, through a case study, analyses the role of Innovation Lab providing theoretical and managerial implications. In particular, from a theoretical perspective, the paper contributes increasing knowledge in the field of Innovation Labs, proposing them as an effective management initiative that can support companies in facing the serious challenges of innovation posed by the coronavirus pandemic. In the analysed case, companies operate in tourism sector.

Furthermore, the empirical evidences provide a set of guidelines and suggestions for managers and practitioners interested in setting up these types of initiatives. Specifically, the empirical evidences show that, through a set of initiatives, the analysed Lab has facilitated open dialogue and knowledge sharing among the various actors, public and private, such as entrepreneurs, tour operators, DMOs, citizens, tourists and institutions, operating in the tourism ecosystem along with companies.

This has allowed to co-create knowledge about the key challenges of tourism companies by collecting the views of a great number of actors operating in the local tourism ecosystem. These challenges represent the main input for the generation of new solution and the development of digital transformation processes. Moreover, through the facilitation of the Transforma Lab experts a shared commitment around the importance of identifying a common vision of future tourism offer and the role played by each player, private or public, in achieving this vision was generated.

Adopting a stakeholders-value oriented perspective and an open and participatory approach, has also stimulated the creation of new networks and reduced the companies’ inertia to digital change. The empirical evidences corroborate that Innovation Lab can represent an effective means supporting knowledge co-creation and exploitation for innovation dynamics in organisations, in response to disruptive socio-economic crisis and the negative outcomes of the coronavirus outbreak.

In definitive, the paper, through empirical investigations, contributes to validate the effectiveness of Innovation Labs in promoting innovation dynamics in tourism organisations through the analysis of the context to identify the problems, existing needs and define the critical challenges on which address future development/innovation strategies. Therefore, supporting tourism organisations in opening up to the external territorial ecosystem and opening the doors of R&D, following open innovation principles, through intra-sector and extra-sector benchmarking activities, it will be possible to identify best practices and emerging trends, which combined with the use of creative techniques, during focus groups, allow transforming challenges into opportunities. At this point, a process of designing and developing innovative solutions based on existing needs and existing knowledge, and which therefore generates knowledge and learning, can be developed.

This process contributes to the development of a continuous digital innovation culture and it can, therefore, lead to the generation of innovative solutions. Future developments of the research will concern a study of the further initiatives of the Transforma Lab as well as the development of an exploratory research of further case studies.

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