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Enhancing knowledge transfer in tourism: An Elaboration Likelihood Model approach

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ABSTRACT

It has been widely recognised that knowledge transfer between tourism academics and the tourism industry is inefficient and ineffective. This research responds to this challenge by applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as a framework to guide the design of knowledge transfer in tourism, from the early design of research through to the delivery of the data. The ELM model posits that messages can influence behaviour via both peripheral and central cues, yet surprisingly has scarcely been applied to knowledge transfer literature. The paper argues that new technology enables innovative, usable and credible visualisation of tourism data, thus maximising the opportunity to apply principles of ELM and ultimately the transfer of knowledge to an array of tourism stakeholders from different backgrounds. In doing so, it presents an opportunity to depart from traditional reporting formats, and as such, enhances the uptake of academic tourism research by the tourism industry.

1. Introduction

Knowledge transfer (KT) has an immense impact on economic and socio-cultural systems, especially as it influences innovation management at its very core (Grosse Kathoefer & Leker, 2012; Sørensen, 2007). Nowadays, universities play an increasingly important role in the knowledge economy in terms of producing and disseminating knowledge. Although universities are aware of their role in terms of knowledge creation, the general perception remains that universities are 'ivory towers' and do not relate to every-day practical realities and business practices (Hawkins, 2006). As such, the transfer of academic knowledge into industry is an emerging concern for academics and practitioners alike (Cooper, 2006; Czernek, 2017; Walters, Burns, & Stettler, 2015).

In times of continuous technological, socio-economical and regulatory advancement, academic researchers and industry practitioners in many sectors (IT, engineering, medicine etc.), have embraced co-operation to promote bidirectional knowledge sharing (Brennenraedts, Bekkers, & Verspagen, 2006; Cummings & Teng, 2003). However, as emphasised by Czernek (2017), Walters et al. (2015), and Scott and Ding (2008), the tourism and hospitality industries are lagging in this area. Although competitive research funding programmes such as ARC Discovery in Australia, Innovate UK in United Kingdom, Horizons 2020 in the European Union and the United States Department of Commerce now require dissemination and communication of research results (Australian Research Council, 2016; European Commission, 2016; Government of United Kingdom, 2018; US Department of Commerce, 2018), concerns remain as to how to best communicate processes and results to a wider audience.

Tourism research faces idiosyncratic knowledge transfer hurdles, which are attributed to the vagaries of the tourism industry. The tourism industry is spatially diffuse, highly fragmented in its ownership structure and product offerings, seasonal, characterised by a highly changeable workforce, and, perhaps most importantly, thought to have a low uptake of research findings (Czernek, 2017; Hallin & Marnburg, 2008; Hjalager, 2002; Shaw & Williams, 2009). One of the persistent criticisms of the failure of KT in tourism research relates to communication (Cooper, 2006; Czernek, 2017; Hawkins, 2006; Thomas, 2012; Xiao & Smith, 2007). First, it is posited that one communication challenge relates to the nature of the research being undertaken; Xiao and Smith (2007, p. 315) argue that tourism research's multidisciplinarity can cause issues: 'some of its contributing disciplines make significant contributions to conceptual understanding whereas others contribute more to instrumental, political and process uses'. Thus, while academics produce a significant quantum of tourism research, only a small subset of it may be relevant for industry. A second communication challenge relates to language. Often when academia and the tourism industry attempt to communicate and collaborate, it seems that the two speak two different languages – one academic, one commercial.

A lack of applied knowledge of tourism management has hindered

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the debate on knowledge transfer in the tourism industry (Grizelj, 2003). In response to this deficiency, using the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as a framework, this paper explores the elements of ELM that may enable successful bi-directional knowledge transfer, with a focus on knowledge transfer from academia to industry. The paper is based upon research which adopted an action research approach to undertake a project that tracked tourists via an app with integrated GIS and survey software, as they travelled through Tasmania. This research was based upon a participatory design approach which featured extensive engagement between university researchers and local tourism stakeholders.

1.1. Knowledge transfer: definitions and origins

As early as the 1960s, discussion surrounding the concept of knowledge transfer and management emerged within various fields and disciplines (Tuomi, 2002). Its first formal definition was provided by Chase (1997, p. 83): 'the encouragement of people to share knowledge and ideas to create value-adding products and services.' Since then, a variety of definitions have emerged many focussing on new knowledge (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2003; Rogers, 1995) as a result of interaction between one entity (individual or group) to another (Czernek, 2017; Hawkins, 2006). The process of knowledge transfer has been widely conceptualised through the Triple Helix framework that investigated University-Industry-Government relations in the knowledge-based economies (Champenois & Etzkowitz, 2017; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995).

Recently, the concept of innovation has been incorporated into these definitions – Hallin and Marnburg (2008) argue that the key role of KT is the ability to promote innovation in light of the knowledge-based economy. Furthermore, Champenois and Etzkowitz (2017) assert that the interaction of the three institutional spheres – University-Industry-Government – provides a location conducive to 'innovation in innovation'. This paper uses two definitions of KT to guide its direction. We combine elements of sharing and idea generation from the early definition by Chase (1997) with the aforementioned work by Hallin and Marnburg (2008). Like Xiao and Smith (2007), we regard KT as an 'outcome' as well as a 'process' of academic research, with the application of knowledge representing the ultimate goal of information dissemination. Consequently, we define KT in tourism as the sharing of knowledge and ideas between groups that results in the creation of innovative tourism products and services.

The evolution of knowledge transfer and management (terms that are often used interchangeably) as a concept has been influenced by three phases in the knowledge management literature (Cooper, 2006):

1. The role of information technologies in enhancing productivity by managing the rapid growth and availability of information.
2. An understanding that people live in a knowledge-based society that is driven by markets rather than production, and, as such, the focus is on customers and service quality. It is understood that businesses become more competitive by immersing themselves into untapped practices and knowledge.
3. The realisation that knowledge has become a resource. This stage focusses on removing barriers to knowledge transfer and adoption.

Given these developments many governments are actively promoting the diffusion and commercialisation of research. This is a result of a realisation that the ability successfully exploiting its intellectual and knowledge-based assets is a key factor playing into a nation's competitiveness (Ruhanen & Cooper, 2004). The transfer of knowledge is a pivotal factor when determining the success of knowledge management structures. For example, since the launch of the program in 1990, the Australian Government has funded 211 Cooperative Research Centres for industry-led research hosted by an Australian university or research organisation. The programme has seen approximately 4 billion AUD spent to facilitate knowledge transfer between researchers, government and industry (Australian Government, 2016; The Allen Consulting Group, 2012). In return, The Allen Consulting Group (2012) report estimated upwards of 14.45bn AUD in direct economic benefits as a return on this investment. More recently, popular political discourses around an innovation economy and an 'ideas boom' have led to further incentivising for research in collaboration with industry, including the Linkage Grants scheme of the Australian Research Council (Australian Government, 2015). While political will, and to some extent, research funding, exists to support and enhance KT, there are still barriers to maximising its efficiency and outcomes.

1.2. Constraints of knowledge transfer in tourism

The concept of knowledge transfer appears infrequently in tourism research. This differs from other academic fields of study such as agriculture, engineering, ICT and mining, who have a strong tradition of University-Industry-Government collaboration, which is often framed as extension, research and development (R&D) or research and innovation (Caravannis, Rozakis, & Grigoroudis, 2018; Chapman et al., 2018; McDowell, 2003; Roling, 1988). An entire body of research is now dedicated to exploring the phenomena of technology transfer, with publications such as the *Journal of Technology Transfer* devoted to the field. Several authors (e.g. Scott & Ding, 2008; Walters et al., 2015) highlight this difference in research traditions. They pose that the tourism industry trails behind other industries in terms of knowledge sharing practices. When it is addressed within the tourism literature, research into academic knowledge generation and transfer tends to be primarily focused on the hospitality sector (Cooper, 2006; Frechtling, 2004; Ruhanen & Cooper, 2004). A small body of research addresses knowledge transfer in tourism enterprises; Xiao and Smith (2007) identify that knowledge transfer faces barriers in a tourism industry built primarily on small and medium enterprises, while Cooper (2006), Shaw and Williams (2009), and Weidenfeld, Williams, and Butler (2010) investigate knowledge transfer as it is applied to the varying sizes of tourism enterprises.

The reasons why knowledge transfer in tourism falls behind other industries has been considered from a number of angles. Czernek (2017) argues that tourism practitioners regard tourism research as 'unnecessarily complicated' and 'excessively sophisticated'. As such, they favour tools that are easy to implement, understand and are solution-based. Similarly, Walters et al. (2015, p. 492) emphasise that in order to ensure a successful communication between tourism researchers and tourism practitioners, tourism research should be presented 'in a manner that enables industry to have a comprehensive understanding of the results'. In other words, tourism researchers should learn how to be bilingual, i.e. they should learn the language of the industry. A further constraint on knowledge transfer is the current publishing environment within which many academics now work. Journal ranking schemes and performance incentives for publishing within high ranking journals act as powerful incentives for the prioritisation of publications over industry engagement and dissemination. While recent government initiatives in countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia have added engagement and impact to their research priorities, research output and journal ranking quality (referred to as the publish or perish phenomenon) remains the dominant standard for promotion and appointment processes. Arguably, this serves as a significant constraint to enhanced knowledge transfer practices between the tourism industry and academia.

The effectiveness of academic knowledge transfer between universities and the tourism industry is discussed by Cooper (2006) and Xiao and Smith (2007). They propose that knowledge use is more effective when developed in collaborative research networks. The authors argue that there is a need for research designs that examine issues associated with improved knowledge and use of academic research. The same authors summarise the work of Menon and Varadarajan (1992),