



The special characteristics of tourism innovation networks: The case of the Regional Innovation System in South Tyrol

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the relevance of inter-organizational and cross-sectoral relations for innovation activities in tourism, analyzing whether networked innovation in tourism differs from other sectors. The aim is to highlight the special characteristics of tourism in the context of a Regional Innovation System (RIS) by means of a Social Network Analysis (SNA) carried out on small and medium sized enterprises in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano-Bozen (South Tyrol) in Italy. The analysis indicates that enterprises in the hospitality and tourism industry are strongly embedded in their regional context, showing a distinct tendency to prefer collaboration across sectors for innovation. The conclusions of this study highlight that the characteristics identified with regard to tourism innovation networks, territorially embedded but highly influenced by other sectors, may provide a possible explanation for some of the traits of tourism innovation identified (e.g. a high degree of imitation in destinations).

1. Introduction

Globalization processes and increased competition have led companies to depend more and more on the development of new products and offers (Marais, du Plessis, & Saayman, 2017), on the participation in inter-organizational networks and the involvement in co-creative company-customer networks (Kandampully, Bilgihan, & Zhang, 2016). Networks can give added value to all the actors involved since they increase flexibility, facilitate access to resources and/or markets, reduce production costs, or promote inter-organizational learning (Bachinger, 2011; Jesus & Franco, 2016). Inter-organizational networks differ from social networks in general, as cooperation between enterprises requires taking into consideration organizational structures. Moreover, the coordination of networks between organizations may be more complex and multi-faceted than coordinating relationships between individuals. In particular, the participation in a network for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), if well-organized, can be a strategy to access resources and save costs (Farsani, Coelho, & Costa, 2014; Innerhofer, 2012; Kofler & Marcher, 2018; Pechlaner, Herntrei, Pichler, & Volgger, 2012; Volgger, 2017).

From a general viewpoint, according to Weber and Khademian (2008, p. 334), networks can be defined “by the enduring exchange

relations established between organizations, individuals, and groups.” Inter-organizational networks are understood as an independent form of coordination and interaction between autonomous organizations (i.e. formally associated groups of people, either for-profit or not-for-profit) working together for a certain period of time (Weyer & Abel, 2000). In the field of innovation, inter-organizational cooperation can help to overcome cost-related difficulties in single company-driven innovations. At regional level, horizontal and vertical cooperation between enterprises may also help to activate existing endogenous potentials owing to the supportive regional milieu and geographical proximity (Gunday, Ulusoy, Kilic, & Alpkın, 2011). In fact, typically, the actors involved are embedded in a regional context and do not innovate in isolation, but as part of a larger system that generates and disseminates knowledge and could be called a Regional Innovation System (RIS) (Cooke, Gomez Uranga, & Etxebarria, 1997; Doloreux & Parto, 2005). This sort of territorial embeddedness and proximity within regional networks can provide an important basis to build trust and transfer implicit knowledge (Parra-López & Calero-García, 2009; Woolthuis, Hillebrand, & Nooteboom, 2002). Therefore, scrutinizing network characteristics becomes central to understand the dynamics and complexity of inter-organizational cooperation with regard to the area of innovation at regional level.

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However, particularly in areas specialized in business-to-consumer (B2C) relationships, which characterize almost the entire service sector, it is difficult to measure innovation activities, since service-oriented enterprises usually do not possess technical components or do not normally register patents. The EU's Regional Innovation Scoreboard (European Commission, 2016) uses, for example, 12 indicators to measure the innovation activity of a region. These indicators are mainly based on data such as patents, gross domestic expenditure on R&D, the number of persons with a university degree, etc.¹ Against this background, regions are categorized in “innovation leaders,” “strong innovators,” “moderate innovators” and “modest innovators.” It is difficult to classify in these categories of regional innovativeness regions with a dominant service sector and, in particular, with a big tourism industry. Therefore, such regions risk to be classified as less innovative, although innovation in the service sector is just as important as in other industries. It is therefore clear that it is necessary to better understand the particular characteristics of inter-organizational innovation in tourism, in order to prevent a too hasty labelling of tourism as a low-innovation sector (based on partially inappropriate data). Only a few extant studies have investigated the role of tourism within a RIS (Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2010b; Pechlaner et al., 2012; Sundbo, Orfila-Sintes, & Sørensen, 2007; Weidenfeld, 2013; Weidenfeld & Hall, 2014) and, to the best of our knowledge, none of these RIS-oriented tourism studies focus on inter-sectoral links or on inter-sectoral comparisons by combining geographical and sectoral approaches to tourism innovation (Sundbo et al., 2007).

In addition to the specificities of the service sector, such as the ease in imitation (Sundbo et al., 2007), Volgger (2017) identifies distinguishing characteristics of the tourism industry, which consider: (1) regular guests as a factor capable of inhibiting innovation, and (2) the often small and medium-sized tourism and hospitality enterprises as capable of weakening innovation and knowledge transfer. Moreover, tourism products do not involve only single actors; product bundles at tourism destination level are of central importance. Therefore, in the case of tourism, it is accurate to speak about a genuine “network industry” (Brás, Costa, & Buhalis, 2010; Scott, Baggio, & Cooper, 2008). Although tourism is considered as a system where interdependence is essential (Scott et al., 2008), it is astonishing that combined research analyzing the interplay between tourism innovation and cross-sectoral cooperation are rare within tourism (Hjalager, 2010a; Innerhofer, 2012; Pechlaner et al., 2012). Taking into account such peculiarities of the tourism sector and the need for further research, this paper investigates the relevance of inter-organizational and cross-sectoral relations for innovation activities in tourism and analyzes whether networked innovation in tourism differs from other sectors. The research question is: How does tourism differ from other sectors in innovation activities? The purpose of this paper is to highlight the special characteristics of tourism in the context of a Regional Innovation System (RIS).

The research tackles such questions by focusing on the example of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano-South Tyrol in Italy. The region has a dominant service sector (75.0% of its GDP is generated by services, 20.3% by industry and 4.7% by agriculture; ASTAT, 2015a), mostly covered by accommodation and food service activities. Moreover, the 2016 Regional Innovation Scoreboard of the European Commission defined the region as a “moderate innovator.” This study is

¹ The Regional Innovation Scoreboard consists of 12 out of 25 indicators analyzed in the European Innovation Scoreboard: Population having completed tertiary education; exports of medium-high/high technology-intensive manufacturing; employment in medium-high/high tech manufacturing and knowledge-intensive services; patent applications; R&D expenditure in the business sector; R&D expenditure in the public sector; SMEs with product or process innovations; innovative SMEs collaborating with others; SMEs with marketing or organizational innovations; SMEs innovating in-house; non-R&D innovation expenditure by SMEs; sales of new-to-market and new-to-firm innovations by SMEs.

particularly interested in single enterprises, conceived as actors within a regional network. As argued elsewhere (Presenza & Cipollina, 2010; Scott et al., 2008), the social network analysis (SNA) is an appropriate method to analyze such inter-organizational network structures. Therefore, small and medium-sized enterprises of different sectors were interviewed through written questionnaires and personal interviews, and were specifically requested to name their key partners (Jansen, 2007; Merluzzi & Burt, 2013; Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

The paper contributes to the existing literature by showing that tourism innovation networks consist of a two-sided structure, shedding some light on the alleged innovation and imitation-dynamics within tourism (Hjalager, 2002, 2010a). In the networks observed, the inventions and new ideas generated seem to be driven by ties to other sectors, whereas the relevant implementation and everyday collaboration appear to be highly specific to tourism and the location, potentially resulting in an imitating behavior at destination level.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Regional Innovation Systems

Innovation can be considered as “[...] the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or a process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization or external relations.” (OECD & Eurostat, 2005, p. 46; see also Gunday et al., 2011). Generally speaking, there is a sort of novelty based on the different activities of an enterprise. Innovation can be the result of a process which solves economic (or social) problems and implies changes for all the actors involved (Mendoza, 2015). As innovation activities often have a spatially clustered characteristic, literature has developed various concepts that emphasize the intrinsic link between proximity and innovation behaviors, including National or Regional Innovation Systems, innovative Milieus, regional clusters or industrial districts (Bachinger, 2011; Cooke, Uranga, & Etxebarria, 1998; Jansen, 2007; Volgger, 2017; Weyer & Abel, 2000). Innovation is usually an interactive process characterized by networking, rarely linked to isolated actors (Weyer & Abel, 2000).

Owing to the relevance of spatial and cultural proximity, the territorial dimension can easily gain a central role for innovation activities. According to Doloreux and Parto, the focus on the innovation process within a regional economy opens to new possibilities: “A set of actors produces pervasive and systemic effects that encourage firms within the region to develop specific forms of capital that are derived from social relations, norms, values, and interactions within the community in order to reinforce regional innovative capability and competitiveness.” (2005, p. 135). Therefore, the concept of the Regional Innovation System offers a suitable analytical framework for analyzing inter-organizational relations at regional level, both generally and specifically for the tourism context (Pechlaner et al., 2012). Cooke, Uranga and Etxebarria define the RIS as a system “in which firms and other organizations are systematically engaged in interactive learning through an institutional milieu characterized by embeddedness” (1998, p. 1581) at regional level. This definition takes into account three significant elements: “interactive learning” as a dialogic and recursive process producing knowledge and innovation; “milieu” as a territorial context characterized by specific sets of values and norms; and “embeddedness” as a relational perspective in socio-structural and territorial terms. Krätke (2010, p.85) defines RIS as a “regionally interacting knowledge generation and exploitation system that is connected to external systems” and identifies three basic pillars within the RIS: internal innovation capacity (the capacity of the regional enterprises to be innovative), regional innovation infrastructure (public research establishments, innovation-related promotion agencies at regional level), and the regional knowledge network in which actors are involved informally or formally, channeling knowledge flows at regional

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