

# The innovative behaviour of tourism firms—Comparative studies of Denmark and Spain

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## Abstract

Tourism firms operate in a competitive sector where innovating is often a condition for survival. This article presents a theoretical framework for understanding tourist firms' innovative behaviour and innovation systems in tourism. The innovativeness of tourism firms and its determinants are investigated by analysing quantitative as well as qualitative data comparing Spain and Denmark. A taxonomy of tourism firms is suggested and the firms' characteristics which influence their innovativeness are presented. Additionally, the role of innovation networks is discussed, as is the role of innovation systems. The article suggests that large size, professionalism, but also entrepreneurship among small tourism firms are important determinants of innovation. Varied innovation networks are another determinant as are supportive innovation systems. These determinants favour Spanish firms, which are more innovative than Danish ones. In the final section, policy recommendations are presented.

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism firms operate in an extremely competitive sector which is characterised by continuous transformation (Wahab and Cooper, 2001). Therefore, tourism firms' competitiveness depends on their innovativeness in achieving lower costs and higher quality outputs that meet the demand requirements of potential customers, and which introduce new products (e.g., improved services and products, individualisation, environmental issues and ICT interaction). Nonetheless, research on innovation in tourism has been limited. The research

that does exist concludes that tourism firms are in most cases only moderately – if at all – innovative (Hjalager, 2002), examples of this being Danish tourism firms (Jensen et al., 2001) and British coastal resorts (Shaw and Williams, 1998). However, there is a great deal of diversity between countries (Pérez and Llaudes, 2001) and, for example, a number of Spanish destinations have significantly improved and diversified their products (Fayos-Solá and Bueno, 2001; Pérez and Llaudes, 2001). Thus, the research leaves one with the impression that tourism firms are, generally speaking, moderately innovative, but with some important exceptions, which indicates that there is potential for a higher degree of innovativeness in tourism. However, which firms are innovative and which are not is not known, nor is the explanation for these differences.

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The aim of this article is to provide a more detailed picture of the differences in the innovativeness of tourism firms and to provide an understanding of these differences. This is done on the basis of a general discussion of models of innovation systems. This discussion leads to a three-level analysis: at the level of the firm, the innovative behaviour and management of tourism firms will be analysed, at the network level, the tourism firms' co-operation with other firms will be considered, and at the system level, the role of innovation systems (Nelson, 1993) will be discussed. In this way, a broad array of factors are included and considered. The dominant theories of innovation as being of general importance for different productive sectors' innovativeness – are included and considered in the analysis. The analysis is based on qualitative and quantitative data from Spain and Denmark mainly relating to different tourist destinations within those countries. The data are used to generate a general understanding of the innovative behaviour of tourism firms. However, the data concerning the two countries and their destinations are also applied in a comparative manner so as to discuss geographical differences. Thus, the article uses different methods (quantitative and qualitative) as well as perspectives (geographical, sociological and managerial) in order to analyse and explain the innovative behaviour of tourism firms.

## 2. Innovation theory and tourism

The intention here is to study and understand tourism firms' innovation behaviour. This can be done by studying the behaviour of the individual firm at a micro level – an organisational approach (cf. Coriat and Weinstein, 2002). However, the innovation research tradition's institutionalist approach has emphasised the coordination of the behaviour of the individual firms and the external influence as important factors too, often called innovation systems (cf. Coriat and Weinstein, 2002). Both approaches are relevant to understanding innovation in the tourist sector and our empirical analysis of innovation in tourism will be placed in such a general theoretical framework. Thus we can give a broader and more general interpretation of the results and which possible policy consequences we can draw. We will start by discussing which general theoretical approach and model is most adequate. We will discuss this based on the assumption that tourism is a service industry and thus the characteristics of service innovations and service innovation systems can be applied to tourism. We will also put this discussion into perspective by referring to general models of systems of innovation and the arguments for and against the different models. After this general discus-

sion, we will construct the levels of innovation behaviour systems that are most adequate for our empirical analysis.

### 2.1. A general theoretical framework for innovation in tourism

Several models of innovation systems have been presented ranging from national or regional systems (e.g. Nelson, 1993; Oinas and Malecki, 1999) to more sector specific ones (e.g. Pavitt, 1984; Miozzo and Soete, 2001; Håkansson and Ford, 2002). They have mostly been developed from studies of manufacturing industries. Studies have demonstrated that innovation in services follows patterns that are to some degree different from those in manufacturing (e.g. Sundbo, 1998; SIC, 1999; Metcalfe and Miles, 2000; Andersen et al., 2000; Gallouj, 2002; Van den Aa and Elfring, 2002; Coombs, 1999a,b; Drejer, 2004; Howells, 2004, 2006). One of the main results shows that traditionally speaking innovation in services is not technological, but consists of a change of behaviour (e.g. Sundbo, 1998). Service is social behaviour and the personal interaction between the user and the service provider is the core of the definition of service and, thus, the explanation of service firms' behaviour (cf. service management theory, e.g. Grönroos, 1990), including their innovative behaviour. This means that the product and the process cannot be separated – the product is the process. On the other hand, it has been recognised that the service industry is increasingly dominated by technology, not least information technology (Miles, 1993; Miozzo and Soete, 2001), which means that a number of service innovations are technological. The products may be technological (such as a PDA tool that tells tourists about sights) and the processes may also be technology dominated (such as a PC system which has plans for serving meals for several hundred people). Nevertheless, these facts raise a discussion about the degree to which the models and frameworks that are mostly oriented towards explaining innovation in manufacturing sectors or technology based innovation processes can be applied to service industries such as tourism.

There are two dimensions of this discussion. The first one is the understanding of services in relation to manufacturing and technology. Gallouj (2002, p. 1) introduces a continuum to describe this understanding. At the one end of the continuum is the service-oriented approach (e.g. Edvardsson et al., 2000) that sees services as something specific and different from manufacturing/technology, at the other end of the continuum is what Gallouj terms a technologist approach, which equates

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