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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Martínez-Martínez, A, Cegarra-Navarro, JG & Garcia-Perez, A 2023, 'Sustainability knowledge management and organisational learning in tourism: current approaches and areas for future development', *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 895-907. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2022.2086560>

DOI 10.1080/09669582.2022.2086560

ISSN 0966-9582

ESSN 1747-7646

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

*This is an Accepted Manuscript version of the following article, accepted for publication in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. Martínez-Martínez, A, Cegarra-Navarro, JG & Garcia-Perez, A 2023, 'Sustainability knowledge management and organisational learning in tourism: current approaches and areas for future development', *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 895-907. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2022.2086560>. It is deposited under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.*

Sustainability knowledge management and organisational learning in tourism: current approaches and areas for future development

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Abstract

Tourism is one of the major drivers of socio-economic growth. For tourism organisations to remain competitive, they must be able to adapt to the current dynamic scenario where the sector operates. Organisational learning strategies can provide the sector with the knowledge required to transform tourism research and intellectual property into capabilities for the industry and stimulate tourism models with a minimal effect on the environment. Knowledge management involves managing tacit and explicit information in a way that ensures it is available where and when needed. From a knowledge management perspective, environmental learning refers to the processes of acquiring, distributing and using knowledge of the natural environment, involving the processes of socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation of knowledge and its central aim is to improve performance. This paper describes how knowledge management and organisational learning can help to achieve a sustainable tourism sector. Sustainability in this context is understood as efforts to progress simultaneously in environmental, societal and economic development. The paper argues that the principles of sustainable tourism lead to both improved strategies and avenues for future research, provided they are informed and supported by learning and knowledge management; value co-creation; co-operation and trust-building; corporate social responsibility and pro-environmental behaviour.

Keywords: Organisational learning, knowledge management, sustainable tourism, corporate social responsibility, pro-environmental behaviour, sustainability knowledge.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, scholars and practitioners from all sectors have increasingly viewed knowledge as one of the key resources for organisations to succeed in the contemporary socioeconomic landscape (Akhavan et al., 2016). Knowledge management (KM) has evolved significantly as a discipline, and its relevance for organisations has increased in recent years (Bolisani & Bratianu, 2018). Firms from all sectors, including tourism, have learned that KM leads to organisational learning (OL), the creation of new ideas, and innovation in products, services, processes, technologies, and projects (Wang & Noe, 2010). Adopting a KM approach can assist tourism organisations in their efforts to learn and address the challenges related to environmental change. KM is the key antecedent for the innovation capability of organisations (Baker & Yusof, 2017), and OL can help tourism companies become more resilient and better able to cope with uncertainties (Leta & Chan, 2021).

If one particular sector other than healthcare can be singled out as having been significantly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, that sector was tourism. Local and national lockdowns, limited movement, and curfews, among others, reduced tourism activity to historic levels during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling et al., 2021; Sigala, 2020). The pandemic brought major changes to our daily lives, and countries that were by 2019 facing the challenge of tourism saturation have since had to deal with a total absence of tourists (Jones & Comfort, 2020). In this dynamic environment where the global tourism sector looks for new business models to respond to the demands of customers and other stakeholders.

OL is presented as a core strategy, in line with a continuous improvement of their processes and operations (Edwards, 2022). OL can be defined as a process that unfolds over time, and links information to knowledge utilisation and improved performance (Boiral, 2002; Senge, 1997; Sun & Scott, 2006). A learning organisation is one that is skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge and changing its behaviour to indicate new knowledge and understandings (Jaaron et al., this issue). Although COVID-19 triggered to consideration of organisational learning as many organisations' core strategy, this is also partly linked to forced learning and has some negative consequences, for example, lack of culture, unknowledge how to redesign processes to adapt to COVID-19 or lack of IT resources.

As the sector recovers, it seems apparent that the demand for less crowded and more sustainable destinations will grow, as will the demand for tourism products with greater flexibility for changes and cancellations (Vanapalli et al., 2021). Hygiene measures, in both facilities and food, will also need to increase. In addition, tourists will pay more attention to issues that did not seem as important in the past, such as airlines' air filters. From the point of view of marketing, air and water quality will be key elements to be considered. The demand for adventure activities in nature and outdoors will grow. Travel and luggage insurance policies will also be valuable marketing tools. Information and communication technologies are also expected to impact the sector positively, reducing charges and increasing competition. Accommodation options will be sought with the availability of computers and printers to combine vacations with work (Sharma et al., 2021).

Based on the above analysis, it can be argued that knowledge in itself does not hold a competitive advantage unless tourism organisations are willing to not only use that knowledge but also renew it and adapt it to the different contexts where it brings value. In this vein, KM can help tourism organisations to see in current sustainability concerns a scope for opportunities rather than threats, and face sustainability challenges with optimism. Both large companies and SMEs need adaptability and an open culture to enable the capitalisation of their knowledge assets to survive and remain competitive (Jones & Comfort, 2020; Singjai, Winata, & Kummer, 2018). This way, not every impact from the COVID-19 pandemic will necessarily be harmful to the tourism sector. Opportunities will arise, and the companies that know how to adapt and change will be those that know how to make efficient use of updated knowledge. Other companies may disappear or simply endure an uncertain future. Stakeholders' expectations of new skills, knowledge, capabilities, and qualifications from the tourism sector make this an extraordinary moment for the application of KM and OL strategies and tools in order to reduce the environmental impact of the tourism industry and improve its sustainability (Jaaron, Pham, & Cogonon, this issue; Sigala, 2020).

The term "sustainability" refers to balanced development between environment, society and economy (Horng et al., 2017). It is well known that natural resources are deteriorating, and action must be taken now to reduce and reverse the degradation of the environment. In this regard, the application of environmental knowledge has attracted the attention of different stakeholder groups, including both organisations and society as a whole (Dumay et al., 2016). KM may help tourism companies to innovate and search for new, alternative solutions to maintain and improve the quality of sustainable services (Rogers, 2012). In doing so, KM plays an essential role in allowing business decision-making processes to be based on verified information instead of relying on unconfirmed, often biased information from a variety of sources (Barley et al., 2018; Kim & Kim, 2017). The main focus of this Editorial Letter is environmental sustainability.

With the aim of advancing the current debate on the subject, this special issue explores the potential links between KM, OL and the sustainability challenges faced by the tourism industry.

The selected studies provide new insights into how sustainability opportunities can be turned into innovations by using systematic mechanisms which are based on organisation learning processes at individual, group, organisational and societal levels (Lam, 2000). The special issue seeks to advance scholarly understanding of key areas of research and practice, including integration of sustainability and environmental issues, attention to technological innovation, improved organisational learning, targeted responses to social challenges, and investment in human resource development for sustainability in tourism (Binder, 2019; Salehzadeh et al., 2021).

Organisational learning and knowledge management

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on environmental matters. While certain issues such as CO₂ emissions have had a lower environmental impact due to a reduction in travel, others including the use of plastic, an increased number of single-use products, or waste derived from products such as personal protective equipment have experienced a tangible increase (Kang et al., 2021). While the tourism sector is perceived as a driver of recovery for local economies, it is also a major contributor to global climate change. The current socio-economic context, defined by the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore becomes an ideal scenario for the tourism industry to learn, unlearn and relearn how to deal with the current challenges, as a mechanism to foster eco-innovations in the sector (Jaaron, Pham, & Cogonon, this issue).

This special issue has been conceived to address the correlations between the sustainability challenges currently faced by organisations, individuals and society, and the domains of KM and OL (Huber, 1991). To that aim, the issue includes theoretical and empirical research that explores a range of topics of relevance for the domains of sustainability knowledge.

In the context of this special issue sustainability knowledge refers to the understanding by individuals and organisations of the social, ethical and environmental issues related to sustainability (Adams & Lamont, 2003; Lee, 2010). A key resource for organisations in the current competitive environment, sustainability knowledge can be better understood as the degree to which an individual or organisation has become and remains aware of and concerned with ecological and socio-cultural issues (Boiral, 2002). In the current literature, the concept is often used to refer to the stocks of data, information and knowledge resources (i.e. sustainability memories), which have been gathered and accumulated by using the organisational knowledge structures (Day et al., 2001) and OL processes (Aramburu et al., 2006).

Key to understanding the concept of sustainability memories are the differences between knowledge stocks and knowledge flows. At a particular point in time, the knowledge that has not yet been turned into innovation can be considered a knowledge stock (Dias et al., 2020). If, on the other hand, the knowledge has been adapted and used over a period of time, it is said to have become a knowledge flow (Roper & Hewitt-Dundas, 2015). A key area of KM research and practice is a model for knowledge stocks and knowledge flows that emphasises the imperative of absorptive capacity, knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange as a strategic management function in the tourism industry (McTiernan et al., this issue). As Dias, Silva, Patuleia, & González-Rodríguez (this issue) point out, knowledge spillovers that stem from those processes allow entrepreneurs in the tourism industry to discover and exploit opportunities.

The considerations above point towards the need for organisations to turn their knowledge assets into agile structures to respond to the socio-economic challenges that emerge as a result of current and future sustainability-related issues, increased business competition and continuous social changes (Jiang et al., 2021; Rogers, 2012; Vihari et al., 2019). In the presence

of a framework for their exploitation, reliable organisational knowledge structures become a key driver for sustainable development (Butowski, 2019; Hall, 2019). However, their exploitation requires the deliberate integration of sustainability issues, improved absorptive capacity, targeting social challenges, and investment in human resource development (Hair Awang et al., 2013).

It should also be noted that lack of resources can slow down companies' sustainability-oriented innovation and value creation strategies (Ma et al., 2017). This includes, for example, limited financial resources, resistance to change, lack of intellectual property rights, resistance from organisational members, limited internal knowledge, lack of in-house knowledge or lack of information and knowledge about technologies. Inter-organisational collaborations could help reduce the impact of the current scarcity of resources. Co-creation describes a joint effort to create value, involving firms and their stakeholders. It is an inclusive and participatory process that can result in different sets of commercial, intellectual, or collaborative values (Pantuffi, Brunstein, & Walvoord, this issue). Co-creation of value is a process that aims to be goal-oriented and collaborative towards learning and achieving goals of common interest. Some motivations to collaborate can include the desire for an improved reputation, financial performance, social performance (Ja-Shen et al., 2017), emotional drivers (Font et al., 2021), and lack of resources or environmental knowledge (Loureiro et al., 2020).

In times of high uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic, knowledge sharing strategies implemented in collaboration with stakeholders can help with both stocks and flows of knowledge in organisations from most sectors (Rupietta & Backes-Gellner, 2019). Under this framework, companies with embedded knowledge and learning structures are more flexible and able to respond to market changes quicker and more effectively than those with less dynamic structures (Jiang et al., 2021 this Issue). With dynamic and rapid changes in the tourism sector, a significant volume of knowledge has become outdated and therefore needs to be replaced with new knowledge (Bossle et al., 2016). It also means that the current knowledge base of organisations will in time prove insufficient. In these circumstances, unlearning can help the tourism sector discard old and outdated knowledge structures to make way for new knowledge (Zhao & Wang, 2020). Looking towards the future, this also implies relearning new processes or services for tourism in a context of continuous improvement (Jaaron, Pham, & Cogonon, this issue).

From the studies selected in this special issue, it can be inferred that OL and KM are complementary and support each other in efforts to achieve the desired sustainability goals. Easterby-Smith & Lyles, (2003) defined OL with a focus on the process of acquiring and using new knowledge, whereas the focus of KM strategies would be on the the objective and subjective forms of knowledge acquired by the organisation (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). The connection between both concepts has also been based on a perception of OL as the ultimate target of KM strategies. From both perspectives, OL becomes one of the most important mechanisms through which organisations can sustainably improve the utilisation of knowledge. KM helps the business understand the needs and expectations of its stakeholders and –in the process, update their own knowledge structures in line with those requirements. Instead, OL helps develop internal training programs in tourism companies in order to overcome challenges such as limited understanding of environmental regulations or a low motivation in the workforce to engage in the implementation of sustainable strategies.

Sustainable knowledge management in tourism

Sustainability helps strengthen the capacity of organisations to create competitive advantage while caring for the environment (Nieves & Haller, 2014; Zaragoza-Sáez et al., this issue). It is,

however, a broad and complex concept that involves both 'environmental' and 'sustainable' knowledge. Despite the fact that both concepts are often used interchangeably, 'environmental' and 'sustainable' knowledge do not refer to the same processes or activities. While sustainable knowledge could be understood as knowing what is necessary to perform an activity over time without damaging the environment or the resources necessary to carry out the activity (i.e., the activity is maintained by itself), environmental knowledge is the knowledge that individuals have of themselves and of the environment that surrounds them (Myung, 2018).

The above considerations lead us to argue that while sustainable knowledge belongs to the company and is the result of (not only but mostly) KM strategies (Dayan et al., 2017), environmental knowledge belongs to the individual and is mostly the result of OL strategies. However, as the studies in this special issue suggest, both environmental and sustainable knowledge are flow variables. That is, they feed off each other and the importance of one over the other varies over time. For this reason, continuous feedback between OL and KM is required to maintain the stock and flow of environmental knowledge (Obeso et al., 2020). However, the literature supports that knowledge flows from individual to groups, to intra and inter-organisational levels and in opposite directions. Individuals' knowledge is also the source of the groups, intra and inter-organisational knowledge. Besides, many individuals learning is determined by their personal traits and behaviours, and they learn even when their companies do not necessarily appreciate or are concerned about OL strategies (Grieves, 2008) .

Sustainable knowledge management can be the result of an appropriate balance between OL and KM. While OL allows tourism workers to pose concepts and questions with a wider environmental perspective, KM allows tourism organisations to identify environmental opportunities and benefit from them. Under this framework, sustainable knowledge management is the bridge that allows managers and public administrators to link employees' environmental knowledge with the sustainable knowledge of the company. This is in broad agreement with the conclusions of authors such as Rastegar & Ruhanen, (this issue), who assert that knowledge sharing builds environmental knowledge of natural disasters, and plays a key role in sustainability, hence building capacity for sustainable tourism. In fact, sustainable knowledge management strategies focus on recognising the role of environmental concerns in society and the need to reorganise resources to meet environmental requirements and expectations (Po-Shin & Li-Hsing, 2009).

Environmental knowledge has also been identified as local knowledge (i.e., a body of knowledge and practices related to a specific geographical location, culture, or tradition), which can be transferred from one generation to another and evolves over time (Cuaton & Su, 2020). In the case of local stakeholders' knowledge, it has the potential to contribute to the organisational environment or the context of the destination. Further, local knowledge has been found to play a critical role in encouraging knowledge sharing across different stakeholder groups (Kim & Lee, 2013).

Based on the findings from research reported in this special issue, this study considers that while sustainable knowledge involves the discarding of certain existing values, behaviours and practices by members of a specific community, environmental knowledge involves learning the skills of co-operation: how to negotiate with peers, give and take, collective problem-solving (Sessa & London, 2006). Therefore, the sharing of sustainable knowledge is also important for the purposes of sustainability (Hair Awang et al., 2013; Jiang et al., this issue). A company's capability to update, integrate, and reconfigure its operations to align its current knowledge with sustainable demands, will allow it to be strategically successful.

The above considerations lead us to argue that sustainable knowledge management strategies are as important in the local contexts as they are at an international level. Local trust is essential if tourism managers are to support efforts to transfer environmental tacit knowledge across the organisation (McTiernan et al., this issue). For it to be effective, knowledge transfer requires a degree of social relationships having been previously established among knowledge actors. In a knowledge transfer process, social capital plays an important role. Internal and external collaboration between parties contributes to creating social capital and to knowledge transfer (Jiang, Ritchie, & Verreyne, this issue). The academic literature also refers to the concept of sustainable knowledge management as a valuable tool to examine individuals' knowledge sharing behaviours, and hence a new avenue for research in the sustainable tourism domain. The applicability of the above principles to the context of sustainable tourism and their potential for future research are also explored in the special issue.

Papers appearing in the special issue reflect developments in the field from a more traditional view of knowledge and its definition, such as strategies for value creation based on the concept of tacit knowledge as defined by Nonaka, (1994). Given that tourism lifestyle entrepreneurs are often associated with a place, tacit local knowledge is likely to have a higher strategic value. Besides, tourism lifestyle entrepreneurs could be benefited from including knowledge stickiness, mainly while covering the local tacit knowledge and its sharing. Not only is local knowledge difficult to access and replicate by competitors, but it can only be accessed through impersonal interactions, often in the right location (Dias et al., this issue). To address the challenges of local knowledge conversion –as per Nonaka's SECI model, Dias et al., (this issue) have proposed unique mechanisms to acquire local knowledge in the context of tourism lifestyle entrepreneurs. Socialisation can contribute to minimising or avoiding internal barriers to applied environmental knowledge, a principle that has been further explored in this special issue. In line with previous research (Dias et al., this issue; Hallak et al., 2013), the interpersonal links between tourism lifestyle entrepreneurs have been found to contribute to sustainable business models that lead to greater innovativeness and self-efficacy in the sector.

External changes, such as a change in customers' expectations regarding corporate social responsibility, could serve as a motivation for managers to seek opportunities to engage in the creation and nurturing of pro-environmental behaviours (Pham et al., this issue; Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Zaragoza-Sáez et al., this issue), which can be defined as "deliberate and effective actions that respond to social and individual requirements whose expected consequence is the protection of the environment" (Páramo, 2017, pp. 43). For example, in the context of hotels, it is important to motivate employees to provide suggestions for green practices that lead to environmental protection. Management could also volunteer for engagement in environmental projects or activities and encourage stakeholders to adopt green behaviours in the workplace (Pham et al., 2020). In other words, environmental knowledge, skills, and awareness facilitate pro-environmental behaviour and green practices in hotels (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014; Myung, 2018). This dimension of sustainability in tourism has received attention in this special issue, in research that found that green practices motivate employees, drive environmental knowledge sharing and also contribute to environmental strategies of hotels.

As unexpected and unpredictable natural, health and economic crises have a direct impact on the tourism industry (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019), tourism organisations increasingly need to develop their dynamic capabilities (Winter, 2003). Dynamic capabilities provide the tourism organisation with mechanisms to strategically adapt, build or reconfigure their internal and external competencies, resources, and routines, to address rapidly changing environments, which can help tourism companies to meet future needs (Teece et al., 1997). Therefore, resources and dynamic capabilities such as culture, organisational agility (Walter, 2021), leadership or

knowledge (Grant, 1996) can enable the organisation and the sector to improve their performance in a sustainable manner (Kabongo & Boiral, 2017).

The literature on the subject also contains reports that suggest that businesses, especially SMEs, barely harness the knowledge gained from past experiences into crisis preparedness practices and strategies. Tourism SMEs face limitations and barriers that prevent them from knowing and being willing to cope with change and adapt quickly to unexpected situations (Jaaron, Pham, & Cogonon this issue; Jiang, Ritchie, & Verreynne, this issue). In uncertain times, identifying enablers and barriers has been found to be a competitive advantage for companies and the environment (Jiang, Ritchie, & Verreynne, this issue). The COVID-19 crisis should become a catalyst for restructuring the tourism industry and offerings through continuous learning processes (Jaaron, Pham, & Cogonon, 2021; Pantuffi, Brunstein, & Walvoord, this issue).

A synopsis of the methods of research included in the special issue

A significant contribution of this special issue is the diversity of methodologies applied to OL and KM in order to achieve different goals, with particular emphasis on the protection of the environment. The special issue addresses key KM and OL challenges and their theoretical and practical implications for sustainable tourism strategies and tools through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. A range of methods are employed, including case studies, theoretical and applied approaches, as well as the use of techniques for complex modelling in social science and business research, such as PLS-SEM, in quantitative analyses. Vignettes are also applied to capture the learning and competencies developed in the context of the tourism organisation (Gherardi, 2012; Pantuffi et al., this issue).

Conceptual frameworks developed with qualitative methods are proposed in the special issue, to provide a conceptual basis for recognising diverse values and worldviews and encourage local knowledge recognition and integration in sustainable tourism. For example, Rastegar & Ruhanen (this issue) draw upon the work of Jabareen, (2008) to address multidisciplinary phenomena linked to knowledge management and sustainability. Rastegar and Ruhanen develop a broad, sector-wide approach to an increased understanding of tourism sustainability, based on principles drawn from the knowledge management domain including knowledge sharing, organisational justice, and local knowledge systems.

There is a need to better understand how managers of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises receive, absorb, and apply pro-environmental tacit knowledge in practice (McTiernan et al., this issue). McTiernan et al. (this issue) follow Jaakkola (2020) to examine the relationship between pro-environmental knowledge, trust, and tacit knowledge transfer in a tourism-related context. McTiernan, Musgrave and Cooper research the relationship between critical elements such as trust, self-efficacy, social norms, the credibility of knowledge sources and social capital, approaching these as a combination of psycho-social elements, both asynchronous and context-dependent. Arguably, maintaining and fostering these antecedents will minimise resistance to the transfer of pro-environmental knowledge in extending the determinants of inter-organisational knowledge transfer to manage psycho-social conditions of trust-based decisions in tourism.

Qualitative studies have attempted to understand the mediating role of sustainable intangible capital between hotel performance, corporate social responsibility, and strategic knowledge (Zaragoza-Sáez et al., this issue). Zaragoza-Sáez et al. (this issue) conducted a qualitative study involving a sample of 120 respondents from Spain, and adopted a series of procedural and statistical remedies. In terms of the methodology of research, this study provides statistical techniques to learn how to extrapolate to other studies. Using the data from interviews with

CEOs and HR Directors, Zaragoza-Sáez et al. (this issue), identified relevant aspects for future research into intangible assets, such as defining corporate social responsibility from the triple (the economic, social, and environmental) bottom line.

Local knowledge acquisition and tourism lifestyle entrepreneurship could facilitate sustainable business models in tourism as environmental knowledge becomes a facilitator of tourism lifestyle entrepreneurs (Dias et al., this issue). Dias et al., (this issue) in their mixed-methods study based on a sample of tourism entrepreneurs in Portugal and Spain used the variance-based SEM methods and SmartPLS to find that entrepreneurial communication has a positive effect on the innovativeness and self-efficacy of tourism lifestyle entrepreneurs (Dias et al., this issue). Value co-creation of experiences between local stakeholders and communities is seen as key to creating valuable knowledge for tourism and setting economic and non-economic goals (Dias et al., this issue). Co-creation and use of local knowledge provide services and experiences that are unique and difficult for competitors to replicate (Agrawal et al., 2015). The framework and qualitative study developed by the authors not only make a significant contribution to the extant literature on the subject but also open new avenues for research into value co-creation in other contexts.

The stakeholders' strategy to quickly respond to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was found to have a positive impact on other tourism stakeholders. In this editorial letter stakeholders in tourism organisations are considered anyone who is involved with a particular project, organisation or business. Jaaron et al. (this issue) used case study research and Jiang et al. (this issue) used 40 in-depth interviews of tourism business operators and other stakeholders to explore tourism in contexts such as the luxury cruise business in Vietnam during the peak of the Covid-19 outbreak. The findings were also presented from tourism organisations' perspectives highlighting the resources to develop dynamic capabilities. The authors found that changes made to the operation of tourism organisations during the crisis and other lessons learned from the pandemic enabled stakeholders to create new services with improved health protocols (Gössling et al., 2021).

Finally, the application of vignettes to OL and KM is a novel research method which allows the researcher to obtain perceptions and opinions from responses or comments to stories that represent different scenarios or contexts. This method was also used as a practice-based lens that serves to study the reasoning behind sustainability decisions. In this special issue, vignettes are stories by specialists that address the research question from the perspective of social and environmental problems (Pantuffi et al., this issue).

Conclusions

The current socio-economic context presents significant challenges for the tourism sector and the tourism organisation. In addition to meeting an increase in demand as the world emerges from a pandemic, the sector will be required to balance the creation of value with a significant increase in environmental, social and economic expectations and standards. Confronted with this unique context, the tourism sector is today expected to transform its business models, taking into consideration concepts such as environmental knowledge and sustainable knowledge, which support the sustainability expectations of the new tourist. Therefore, this study contributes to the vast literature devoted to sustainability by proposing sustainable knowledge management as a tool to achieve a sustainable balance between OL and KM.

Individuals' and societies' relationships with the environment and their understanding of environmental challenges have made sustainable KM one of the most important resources for tourism organisations. From the perspective of the papers selected for this special issue,

sustainable KM takes advantage of the opportunities that the current context offers to organisations in the tourism sector, while simultaneously enabling learning processes with the aim of taking advantage of the skills and attitudes of the tourism workforce. This finding is important in the ongoing debate surrounding the relationship between OL and KM, and confirms what authors such as Fai Pun & Nathai-Balkissoon (2011) mean when they argue that boundary objects may be useful to integrate the theories of KM and OL into organisational practice. A boundary object is a class of information that can be used in different ways by different communities (Kanwal et al., 2019). Therefore, this editorial letter contributes to a better understanding of 'sustainability' as a boundary object by helping focus the efforts of multiple organisations into the common, wider aim of sustainability.

The OL and KM fields can be studied through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods including case studies, theoretical and applied approaches, as well as the use of techniques for complex modelling in social science and business research, such as PLS-SEM, in quantitative analyses. The special issue addresses key knowledge management and organisational learning challenges and their theoretical and practical implications in sustainable tourism strategies and tools. In this special issue tourism and KM scholars can find examples of how to deal with bias problems; however, in future work in this area, we encourage researchers to follow the measured latent marker variable (MLMV) approach to detect potential problems of common method variance (CMV) (Chin et al., 2013). Since endogeneity may arise when non-random samples are selected and/or some important variables are omitted in the model (Antonakis et al., 2010), we also encourage authors to follow the recommendations of Huit et al., (2018) to test endogeneity issues.

Qualitative studies with a vignettes approach are also applied to capture the learning and competencies developed in the context of the tourism organisation (Gherardi, 2012; Pantuffi et al., this issue), which is a novel methodology when applied to KM and OL. Vignettes are used to capture the lessons learned by hotels through stories and a clear focus. Their findings are derived from the inclusion of a variety of stakeholders and represent social and environmental sustainability dilemmas, problems or disruptions which are valid in the context of other tourism institutions (Hughes & Huby, 2012; Pantuffi et al., this issue).

From the different methodologies employed in this special issue, it can be asserted that the variables that support OL, KM and the sustainability of the tourism sector are latent and complex variables, and to a large extent are only theoretical constructs created by scientists (i.e., artificial variables). This might mean that only by using different techniques is it possible to avoid bias problems and extrapolate the results to different contexts. For this reason, future studies should focus on analysing the nature of the constructs, for example, composites versus factors, in other words, composites are measurements based on multiple data items or factors are considered as a latent variable that expresses themselves through their relationship with other measured variables. It is also important to note the similarity and parallelism between the variables studied in this special issue, for example, environmental knowledge and sustainable knowledge. Future studies from the methodological point of view should also address the discriminant validity of the constructs under investigation.

As the tourism organisation becomes aware of and concerned with ecological issues, new opportunities emerge for the tourism sector to improve its strategies and operations. This special issue has been developed to bring together the experience of knowledge management and sustainability scholars and practitioners to address these and other challenges facing the tourism sector. The articles in the special issue explore, from a variety of perspectives and in different contexts, how sustainability can rise to the stature of the socio-economic importance of tourism for countries and regions around the world.

The authors in the special issue have exposed solutions based on co-operation and trust-building mechanisms, on learning, unlearning and relearning strategies, on absorptive and desorptive capacities, on knowledge transfer and value co-creation in the management of tourism destinations. More than established solutions, these concepts become avenues for further research as tourism scholars and practitioners collaborate with those from other subjects to address sustainability challenges. It is hoped that this special issue will contribute to the current debate on how KM and OL can align with and support the way the tourism organisation works today and in the future, helping the sector meet the growing sustainability expectations of business and society.

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