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McCamley, Claire and Gilmore, Audrey

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# **Entrepreneurial co-creation in emerging heritage tourism regions; the role of entrepreneurial networks**

## **Introduction**

Tourism is often considered as a tool for economic development; however it transcends the economic paradigm and also has a social context (Buhalis, 2000). There may be a desire to use tourism to promote an area, to improve the look and feel of the area or to deal with social problems. In a heritage tourism context, the immediate community will be part of the tourist product, therefore it is important to take account of local identities and environmental sustainability (Dana, Gurau and Lasch, 2014; Saxena and Ilbery, 2008). SMEs and social enterprises are often deeply ingrained within their local communities (Anderson, 2000), and are rich sources of information and value. Tourism marketing requires engagement between a range of stakeholders in order to develop and deliver the composite tourist experience (Panyik, et al 2011; Sautter and Leisen, 1999). This paper examines the role of entrepreneurial networks in heritage tourism regions and the role played by them to contribute to value co-creation. The paper also proposes to examine how entrepreneurial networks can contribute to the value creation process, in a heritage tourism context. Specially, the research is based in two heritage regions in Northern Ireland; the Causeway Coast and Glens and the Mourne region.

## **Entrepreneurship in tourism**

SMEs represent the majority of tourism business and are central to the provision of tourism products and services. Their unique and specific characteristics are influential to the success of tourism in a given area (Thomas, Shaw and Page, 2011). However some tourism related SMEs may be able to make a return on investment without much marketing or entrepreneurial efforts, and many may not actually aspire to grow and instead be driven by non-economic factors (Thomas, 2000). Those SMEs that are motivated to grow often attempt to engage other stakeholders in value creation through networking. Entrepreneurs recognise that by working collaboratively they can create more value, and a better tourist product, which is beneficial to a range of stakeholders.

An inherent characteristic, and potential challenge of tourism marketing, is that a range of stakeholders are required to work together in order to develop the tourist product (Dwyer et al, 2009; Aas et al, 2005). Despite a vast body of literature concerning the characteristics of the entrepreneur, and their ability to recognise opportunities (Hulbert, Gilmore, Carson 2015) the potential of entrepreneurial stakeholder networks to identify opportunities may be overlooked (Burns et al, 2015). The entrepreneur's network is "the group of people with whom entrepreneurs discuss ideas about business matters and from whom they obtain resources" (Staber, 1993, p.74). In a heritage tourism context, key stakeholders include representatives from government level institutions, to destination marketing organisations (DMOs) and the private and community sectors (Bornhorst, 2010). Entrepreneurial motivation is influenced by a range of factors, including the functional and social landscapes, and also the nature of strategic development and the extent to which decisions are implemented (Dana, Gurau and Lasch, 2014).

## **Co-creation**

There are several views on co-creation and many contributions consider co-creation of value to be an interaction between a firm and a customer (Suntikul and Jachna 2016; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Gronroos (2012) develops the debate by

reconceptualising the theory of co-creation, positing that the phenomena is not solely concerned with the customer, but instead defines the concept as “joint activities by parties involved in direct interactions, aiming at contributing to the value that emerges for one or both parties” (p.1520). In the context of tourism, entrepreneurial co-creation can be viewed in terms of networking theory (Novelli, 2006), providing small businesses with an opportunity for innovation. Value can be created by several parties collaboratively although different roles are not necessarily specified (Gronroos, 2012). Despite government institutions taking the lead in tourism development, it is recognised that entrepreneurs are more instrumental than government agencies at developing tourism products and services (Komppula, 2014), thus creating value for the tourist.

### **The role of co-creation in the tourism marketing context**

This paper seeks to broaden the concept of co-creation, moving beyond an economic paradigm and focusing on social, environmental and economic goals, given the non-economic stakeholders involved. When developing a tourist destination, the entrepreneur is constrained by the actions of the public sector (Panyik 2011; Cai 2002) in terms of strategic orientation, destination promotion and product development (where the product encompass the natural resource). Tourism entrepreneurs are not independent entities operating independently in the market, but interact with other actors in the network (Lemmetyinen, 2009) (Cited in Nieminen and Lemmetyinen 2015 p.77). Heritage tourism, which draws on the natural resource, inevitably encompasses local communities as part of the tourism experience (Nieminen and Lemmetyinen 2015). Networks and clusters are vitally important in creating a framework for providing SMEs with innovative opportunities to operate in the tourist industry (Novelli et al. (2006).

### **Methodology**

This research aims to gain in-depth insights into the role of entrepreneurial co-creation in the context of heritage tourism. A qualitative methodological approach is adopted in order to get a comprehensive and nuanced account of entrepreneurial actions (Wilson, Nielsen & Buultjens 2009). Exploratory in-depth interviews were carried out with eleven small business and community sector entrepreneurs from both the Mourne region and the Causeway Coast and Glens, an overview of which is provided in table 1.

Table 1 Profile of respondents

<b>Type of organisation</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Duration of interview</b>
Owner / manager Accommodation 1	Causeway	2 hours
Owner / manager Accommodation 2	Causeway	1 hours
Owner / manager Visitor Attraction 1	Causeway	1 hours
Marketing Manager Accommodation 3	Causeway	1.5 hours
Chair Person Community Association 1	Causeway	2 hours
Chair Person Community Association 2	Causeway	2 hours
Chair Person Community Association 3	Mourne	2 hours
Owner / manager Accommodation 4	Mournes	1.5 hours
Owner / manager Accommodation 5	Mournes	1 hours
Owner / manager Visitor Attraction 2	Mournes	1 hours
Business Development Manager Visitor Attraction 3	Mournes	1 hours

This research aims to investigate the behaviour of SMEs operating in two emerging heritage regions in Northern Ireland specifically in relation to entrepreneurial co-creation.

The research will address the following objectives:

1. To examine the nature of entrepreneurial co-creation in a heritage tourism context and the characteristics of entrepreneurial networks.
2. To investigate the opportunities created through entrepreneurial co-creation in a heritage tourism context, and their value to the overall tourism offering.

### **Initial findings**

To date, research has been carried out in two heritage based regions in Northern Ireland; the Causeway Coast and Glens region, and the Mourne region. This research was carried out in the context of strategic marketing planning for heritage tourism. The research revealed evidence of independent collaborations between private sector tourism providers, whereby SME owners behaved entrepreneurially to co-create value for tourists. This behaviour was a result of SMEs being disappointed by the government-led marketing activity and was intended to improve the tourism offering in the immediate locality.

The entrepreneurial actions revealed were not just from businesses but from community organisations or tourism enterprises. The entrepreneurial action is a response to inaction from government institutions charged with tourism development. Overall, government constraints in relation to marketing activity force entrepreneurs to utilise their networks in order to create value for themselves, by developing better tourist products and then passing this value on to their customers (tourists). Interestingly, the entrepreneurs operated not only individually, but also collaboratively in an attempt to create better tourism products, recognising the benefit of a collaborative approach. Indeed, entrepreneurs utilise their networks in order to develop a better tourist product.

There was evidence of networking by SME entrepreneurs working collaboratively to develop joint promotional campaigns and contributing to the stabilisation of networks by creating constitutionally based community tourism organisations, and successfully gaining funds for tourism projects. This study reveals a realignment of the prescribed approach to tourism management, in which government bodies take the lead in strategic direction and provide a range of tourism products and services. However, further research needs to be carried out in order to address the level of influence possessed by entrepreneurs, the integrity of stakeholder networks in this context, and the overall added value from such behaviours.

### **Conclusion**

This research is at an early stage. Preliminary data collection and analysis has revealed evidence of entrepreneurial co-creation in the context of heritage tourism marketing. This co-creation has been spurred by several things, not least in an urgent, if not exasperated desire for SME tourism entrepreneurs to develop and improve their regions tourism offering. Given that this behaviour has been detected, further research will enhance understanding of the nature of entrepreneurial co-creation in a heritage tourism context. In particular, several areas are prominent for further investigation, including: the network characteristics, network outputs, network commitment (formal networks, informal networks), network value, strength of links (formal, informal) and social exchange in pursuit of value co-creation.

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