

A network perspective on organizational learning research in tourism and hospitality

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A systematic literature review

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review existing literature on organizational learning (OL) through networking activities in tourism and hospitality (T&H) research. Referring to theories and concepts from the mainstream literature in OL and inter-organizational network research, the study provides an overview of the existing level of knowledge in T&H research, elaborates theoretical and practical implications and suggests future research directions.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic literature review approach was used to identify and analyze relevant literature. The literature search involved six scientific online databases, namely, EBSCOhost, Emerald, ProQuest, Sage, ScienceDirect and Web of Knowledge, which were systematically scanned with defined keywords. Relevant articles were evaluated, selected, analyzed and synthesized to find out what is already known and what is yet to be known.

Findings – A total of 69 articles were identified that present insights into OL through networking activities in T&H research. The review reveals that the resource, and especially the knowledge-based view of the firm, social capital theory, the relational view and trust and agglomeration theory represent insightful theoretical approaches to study OL phenomena and OL outcomes such as innovation, value creation and competitive advantage.

Originality/value – According to the author's information, this paper represents the first attempt to provide a comprehensive review of T&H-specific OL literature from a network perspective. The findings call for increased attention to this research field, especially regarding the adaptation of OL concepts to a T&H-specific context as a networked industry.

Keywords Innovation, Organizational learning, Networks

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Over the past few decades, networks have experienced increasing attention in organizational and management research and the stock of literature available is by now quite substantial (Borgatti and Foster, 2003; Zaheer *et al.*, 2010). The rising interest in network orientated research, especially on inter-organizational network research, also



encompasses the service industries, particularly tourism and hospitality (T&H) research (Scott and Laws, 2010).

As the T&H industry becomes more information and customer driven (Saxena, 2005) and due to the common understanding of a destination as a system, which consists of intertwined relations between diverse stakeholders (Timur and Getz, 2008), scholars have increasingly stressed the importance of applying a network perspective to the diverse fields of T&H research (Aubke, 2014; Cooper, 2006; Merinero-Rodríguez and Pulido-Fernández, 2016; Timur and Getz, 2008). Furthermore, managing the diverse and heterogeneous tourism product – which is provided by independent, yet interdependent, actors – requires a network perspective (Denicolai *et al.*, 2010; Ndou and Passiante, 2009). In fact, the study of inter-organizational networks and relationships has by now become a key element in explaining and studying the phenomenon of tourism (Merinero-Rodríguez and Pulido-Fernández, 2016). According to Aubke (2014), most network studies in the context of T&H are either driven by the question of network antecedents or they aim at defining the effects and consequences of networks. Therein, the issue of networks as resource access is a recurring research topic, most commonly measuring the flow of resources and information between actors in a network (Aubke, 2014; Baggio and Cooper, 2010; Timur and Getz, 2008).

The access to resources in pursuit of imitation, innovation and competitive advantage is a pertinent topic in inter-organizational network research (Brass *et al.*, 2004; Zaheer *et al.*, 2010). According to Powell (1998), participation in networks is an important prerequisite for organizational learning (OL), especially for the highly competitive T&H industry and its interdependent businesses (Baggio and Cooper, 2010; Novelli *et al.*, 2006). There is emerging evidence that service-intensive firms, particularly the prevalently small- and medium-sized T&H enterprises (SMEs), benefit more from knowledge networking than businesses in other industries, as smaller firms often face disadvantages in establishing learning infrastructure (Hurley and Hult, 1998; Liu and Lee, 2015; Salem, 2014; Thomas and Wood, 2014). Given the collaborative and knowledge-driven character of the T&H industry, a network perspective on OL requires considerable attention.

This paper attempts to systematically review the existing literature on OL through inter-organizational networks in the context of T&H research. The main objectives of this review are threefold:

- (1) first, theoretical approaches from mainstream organizational research are presented, elaborating network-related theories and OL concepts. For this purpose, literature reviews, handbooks and seminal works on inter-organizational network research and OL have been analyzed;
- (2) second, this paper attempts to provide a comprehensive review and analysis of T&H-specific OL literature from a network perspective. Particularly, the analysis focuses on how and to what extent OL concepts and network-related theories are applied to the T&H industry. It thus, provides an overview in the sense of “generic benchmarking” as the paper aims at comparing industry-specific with mainstream research. To achieve this goal, a systematic search and analysis of T&H-specific literature was conducted to identify, which concepts from mainstream organizational research have been applied within a T&H context;
- (3) third, the systematic analysis of relevant literature provides theoretical and practical implications to further develop the research field and to transfer relevant knowledge for practical application. The main output, thus, lays out the state of knowledge in T&H-specific research, elaborates theoretical and practical

implications, and finally, suggests directions for future research. The paper is structured as follows:

- First, there is an introduction to theories used in mainstream inter-organizational network research and OL frameworks. The first part of this section highlights network-related theoretical approaches and their significance in the study of OL issues. The second part embraces an introduction to OL, which is a long-standing, wide and diverse research field. Therefore, the chapter elaborates on and presents those OL concepts, which attach importance to learning from network relationships. The theories and concepts presented in this section are used as a framework for the ensuing review and analysis of the T&H-specific literature.
- Second, the method of the “systematic literature review” according to [Tranfield et al. \(2003\)](#) is explained and how it was applied in this paper.
- Third, the section “findings” reviews and analyzes T&H-specific literature, engaging with the role and the effects of inter-organizational networks on OL. The section provides an overview of the papers reviewed, trends in T&H-specific OL research and a citation analysis. Finally, the topical analysis applies OL concepts and network-related theories (as presented in the first section) to the T&H industry.
- The concluding section summarizes the key findings, presents theoretical and practical implications and suggests directions for future research.

Inter-organizational network research and organizational learning

Theories in inter-organizational network research

In mainstream organizational research, different theoretical lenses have been applied to study how inter-organizational networks and business relationships can be used to acquire new knowledge and learning capabilities ([Borgatti and Foster, 2003](#)). According to [Zaheer et al.'s \(2010\)](#) review on the network perspective in inter-organizational research, the most relevant theoretical approaches in network research encompass social capital theory, the resource-based view, the relational view and trust. These theoretical approaches shall be briefly presented in the ensuing paragraphs, focusing on the networking-OL nexus:

Social capital. [Nahapiet and Ghoshal \(1998, p. 243\)](#) define social capital as “the sum of actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by a social unit.” In their view, the construct possesses three dimensions: the structural, the relational and the cognitive dimension. Scholars frequently draw on [Granovetter's \(1985\)](#) concept of relational and structural embeddedness: while structural embeddedness emphasizes the actor's network architecture and its individual position within the network, relational embeddedness describes the quality of relationships in terms of closeness, trust, reciprocity and frequency of interaction ([Granovetter, 1985](#)). Social interactions are at the core of these concepts ([Borgatti and Foster, 2003](#)), which are associated with certain advantages for the actor who can use the contacts to access new knowledge ([Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998](#)) or to acquire learning capabilities ([Uzzi, 1997](#)).

The resource-based view. The resource-based view of the firm ([Barney et al., 2001](#)) is one of the most salient theoretical approaches in organizational research to explain why and how organizations achieve competitive advantage. Basically, it is argued that sustainable competitive advantage derives from an organization's valuable, rare and inimitable

resources and capabilities (Barney *et al.*, 2001). In this context, Gulati (1999, p. 399) specifies “network resources” that “inhere [...] in the interfirm networks in which firms are located” and distinguishes them from “resources that reside securely within its boundaries.” In this view, networks are a potential source of valuable information for organizations, and therefore, play a crucial role in explaining competitive advantage (Gulati, 1999). As economies and societies were continually driven by more intellectual resources (such as knowledge), the resource-based view was extended and brought forward the knowledge-based view of the firm (Grant, 1996), emphasizing knowledge as one of the most important resources to secure competitive advantage. Hence, OL is aided by inter-organizational network relationships as they represent platforms for intellectual resource exchange and learning opportunities (Kreiser, 2011).

Relational view. The relational view suggests that interfirm relationships are an important unit of analysis for understanding competitive advantage, as a firm’s critical resources may be embedded in interfirm resources and routines (Dyer and Singh, 1998). Thus, the relational view is regarded as an extension of the resource-based view (Lavie, 2006) and concurrently shows overlaps with social capital theory (Zaheer *et al.*, 2010). While social capital theory focuses on the “strong-versus-weak-ties-dichotomy,” the relational view further emphasizes cognitive and effective aspects of relationships.

Trust. The notion of trust in inter-organizational exchange relationships and its impact on performance has long been regarded as an important area of research, especially after Granovetter’s (1985) seminal publication on the embeddedness concept. In an inter-organizational context, trust is defined as “the extent of trust placed in the partner organization by the member of a focal firm” (Zaheer *et al.*, 1998, p. 142) and influences the exchange of resources.

Collectively, the theories presented provide eligible core assumptions for studying networks as a resource access (Zaheer *et al.*, 2010). To come first, social capital theory and the relational view and trust provide insights into the relational and structural characteristics of an organization’s network relationships. Understanding the role of trust, closeness, reciprocity and other cognitive and effective relational characteristics is deemed particularly important to understand an organization’s learning practices. Second, the resource-based and the knowledge-based view assume that valuable, rare, inimitable and not easily substitutable resources do not only inhere inside an organization but also outside its boundaries. In this context, inter-organizational networks are perceived as fruitful arenas for knowledge acquisition and sharing, learning and innovation. Given the importance of inter-organizational networks in accessing new knowledge and learning capabilities, the notion of OL as a function of network relationships becomes obvious.

Organizational learning – from a closed to an open process

OL has long been a research topic in organizational studies, drawing on and contributing to developments in diverse scientific disciplines (Argote and Miron-Spektor, 2001). Because of the long-standing tradition and because of numerous concepts, which have as been developed, scholars have suggested a variety of different definitions and frameworks (Crossan *et al.*, 1999)[1]. However, its conceptualization as the acquisition and use of (new) knowledge in pursuit of continuous change and renewal (Crossan *et al.*, 1999), innovation (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Hurley and Hult, 1998; March, 1991), performance and competitive advantage (Kogut and Zander, 1992) is found in many OL concepts (Argote and Miron-Spektor, 2001).

Until the late 1980s, though some concepts included the idea that organizations could also learn from the experience of others (Levitt and March, 1988), OL was rather viewed as a

closed process, which takes place within the boundaries of the organization. With an upsurge in the number of scholarly publications in the early 1990s, networks and the firm's external environment have experienced increased attention in OL (Beeby and Booth, 2000).

In 1990, for instance, Cohen and Levinthal (1990) coined the concept of absorptive capacity and Senge (1990) introduced his idea of the learning organization. Absorptive capacity is defined as the firm's "ability to recognize the value of new, external information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends [exploitation]" (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990, p. 128). Acquisition involves a firm's capability to identify and acquire external knowledge, assimilation refers to processes and routines to interpret and internalize the knowledge. Exploitation is mainly connected to innovation capabilities, that is, to convert knowledge into new products or processes (Zahra and George, 2002). Hence, the ability of a business organization to learn from other business organizations is determined by their relational characteristics (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998). Similarly, Senge (1990) argues that networks play a crucial role in the learning process. His concept of the learning organization embraces five disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. The "fifth" discipline, systems thinking, provides substance to the other four disciplines and fosters collaborative learning processes. One year later, March (1991) considered ambidextrous learning strategies (exploration versus exploitation) as two different – and conflicting – OL modes. While exploitation refers to the refinement and implementation of existing knowledge, exploration involves the acquisition of new knowledge, risk-taking, experimentation and discovery of new knowledge, especially outside the organization's boundaries (Liu, 2018; Martínez-Pérez *et al.*, 2016). Still, in the early 1990s, Nonaka (1994) introduced the model of knowledge creation in which he describes how tacit and explicit knowledge can be transformed by socialization (from tacit to tacit knowledge), externalization (from tacit to explicit knowledge), combination (from explicit to explicit knowledge) and internalization (from explicit to tacit knowledge). The model conceptualizes knowledge creation through the mutual interplay within the organization and in its networks (Beeby and Booth, 2000). Unlike most of the earlier OL concepts, the ideas of absorptive capacity, the learning organization, ambidextrous learning strategies and knowledge creation attached considerable importance to the organization's external environment, especially to its network relationships.

Later concepts, such as the dynamic capability view or knowledge management, strongly influenced and refined the notion of OL as an open process (Vera *et al.*, 2011). Dynamic capabilities refer to a firm's ability to adapt to environmental demands by altering its value-creating resources (Teece, 2007; Vera *et al.*, 2011). They can be disaggregated into sensing opportunities (building new knowledge by scanning the environment), seizing those opportunities (creating new products, services or processes) and reconfiguration (transforming the organization to adapt to the requirements of new business models) (Teece, 2007). Although "classic" knowledge management is conceptualized rather as an organizational process, scholars increasingly postulate "knowledge network management," which involves knowledge stocks and flows between organizations as well (Cooper, 2006; Gretzel *et al.*, 2006).

Taken together, the inter-organizational network aspect is by now an essential part of OL concepts. Scholars agree that collaborative activities do not only enhance an organization's access to new knowledge but also further influence the firm's ability to process and use it in pursuit of innovation and competitive advantage. Hence, network-related theories open up new and significant perspectives in the study of OL phenomena.

Method

Conducting a systematic literature review, implies the use of a standardized and replicable procedure, making explicit databases, languages included, keywords, search operators, inclusion and exclusion criteria. [Tranfield *et al.*'s \(2003\)](#) systematic literature review approach is widely accepted to identify and analyze relevant literature. Their procedure reduces the researcher's subjectivity and provides guidance on how to form logical conclusions in regard to what is learned and what is yet to be learned ([Farrington *et al.*, 2017](#); [Omerzel, 2016](#)). Following their propositions, the process adopted in this paper includes the following five steps: data collection, first screen, second screen, topical analysis and conclusions.

Data collection

In the first phase, a comprehensive search for relevant literature was conducted. The literature search relied on six scientific databases, namely: EBSCOhost, Emerald, ProQuest, Sage, ScienceDirect and Web of Knowledge. These databases cover a large number of T&H-related peer-reviewed journals and are frequently used for systematic literature reviews ([Omerzel, 2016](#); [Oh and Kim, 2017](#); [Farrington *et al.*, 2017](#)). It started with the identification of relevant keywords and search strings, based on the author's prior experience. As suggested by [Tranfield *et al.* \(2003\)](#), the list of keywords was further extended in a two-step process: first, the literature was revisited to identify further synonyms for "OL" and "network." Second, the keywords were discussed with peer researchers. This procedure led to a total of 19 keywords ([Table I](#)). They were subsequently constructed into search strings using Boolean logic, combining the keywords with "OR" and "AND." Following other researcher's recommendations concerning quality ([Omerzel, 2016](#)), the search was restricted to English language contributions in peer-reviewed journals. There was no restriction made concerning the publication year.

First screen

The primary search yielded a total of 512 articles, which were further screened by analyzing the title and abstract of each paper, using the following exclusion criteria:

- the industry focus is not T&H, and/or;
- the article is not relevant to the topic under review, and/or;
- the article is not published in a peer-reviewed journal, and/or; and
- the article was already found in another database.

Applying these criteria, a total of 100 papers remained, which were subsequently subject to in-depth reading.

Network	OL	Industry scope
Network	OL	Tourism
Collaboration	Organizational change	Hospitality
Alliance	Absorptive capacity	Hotel
Cluster	Knowledge creation	Travel
External relationship	Knowledge utilization	
Business relationship	Knowledge exploitation	
Embeddedness	Knowledge management	
	Learning organization	

Table I.
Keywords used in the
literature search

IJCHM
31,7

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	No.	(%)
<i>Journals</i>		
<i>Tourism Management</i>	12	17
<i>IJCHM</i>	8	12
<i>IJTR</i>	5	7
<i>Annals of Tourism Research</i>	4	6
<i>Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism</i>	4	6
<i>International Journal of Hospitality Management</i>	3	4
<i>Tourism Review</i>	3	4
<i>Journal of Travel Research</i>	2	3
<i>Management Decision</i>	2	3
<i>T&H Research</i>	2	3
<i>Tourism Geographies</i>	2	3
<i>Other Journals</i>	22	32
Total	69	100
<i>Industry focus</i>		
T&H businesses in general	27	39
Hotel businesses	19	28
DMO	9	13
Restaurants	4	6
Travel agencies	3	4
Other (attractions, airlines, etc. . .)	11	16
Total	69	100
<i>Business type</i>		
Small businesses	10	14
Small and medium sized businesses	8	12
Large businesses	13	19
No, special focus	38	55
Total	69	100
<i>Research Method</i>		
Empirical	55	80
Qualitative (incl. case studies)	25	36
Quantitative	23	33
Mixed methods	7	10
Conceptual	14	20
Total	69	100
<i>OL concept applied</i>		
Knowledge management (incl. knowledge acquisition and sharing)	26	38
Absorptive capacity	10	14
Learning organization	4	6
Knowledge creation	3	4
Ambidextrous learning strategies (exploration-exploitation)	3	4
Dynamic capabilities	3	4
Other (i.e. org. change or renewal, action-based learning, . . .)	20	29
Total	69	100

Table II
Overview of the
reviewed articles

Second screen

The second screen focused on in-depth reading and a final decision was made whether or not to include an article in the analysis. In this phase, the following inclusion (resp. exclusion) criteria helped to make an objective decision:

- the article explicitly includes an inter-organizational network perspective on OL;
- the main focus is organization orientated, and finally; and
- articles were eliminated, which dealt with T&H education or research institutions.

At the end of this stage, a total of 59 articles met the criteria and were included in the final database. Additionally, a backward snowballing approach and a manual search in the top three journals, *Tourism Management*, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* (IJCHM) and *International Journal of Tourism Research* (IJTR) were used to include relevant articles, which have not been covered by the primary search process. Thereby, another ten relevant papers were added to the database, yielding a final sample of 69 articles.

Findings and analysis

In this phase, the articles were analyzed according to the publication year, journal, methodology, industry focus, business type and OL concepts applied. Additionally, a citation analysis was conducted to identify the most influential publications. Finally, the paper provides a topical analysis and groups the papers along the main theories in inter-organizational network research as presented in the preceding section.

Findings

Overview of the reviewed literature

Among the articles found, 58 are published in T&H-specific or service-industry orientated journals, among which *Tourism Management* (12 articles), *IJCHM* (8 articles) and *IJTR* (5 articles) are most prominent.

Research method. The majority of the papers (80 per cent) are empirical, whereas 20 per cent are conceptual contributions to the research field. Among the empirical papers, approximately one-third of all articles reviewed reveal quantitative methods, all of them cross-sectional studies with 243 survey participants on average. Besides quantitative research designs, qualitative and case study approaches were found to be used in 36 per cent of the articles. Only 10 per cent of the articles used a mixed-methods approach, which mostly involved a two-step procedure with in-depth interviews or focus groups in a first step and a quantitative survey as a second step. This procedure was mainly applied in relatively new research fields, which required an exploratory approach before applying quantitative methods.

Industry focus. While more than half of the papers use a specific industry focus, 39 per cent embrace diverse branches, which together constitute the T&H industry (most commonly accommodation, catering, attractions, travel and visitor services, transport). The fact that T&H is often described as a networked, interdependent industry and destinations as a system of intertwined relations between diverse stakeholders, might explain the relative dominance of articles with a focus on the whole industry. However, the studies' industry scopes differ with regard to the number and type of sub-branches included. [Sigala and Chalkiti \(2015\)](#), for instance, also included the MICE sector, whereas the study by [Zach and Hill \(2017\)](#) also embraced firms providing ancillary products and services (such as agricultural or medical firms, education, churches or construction). Half of the studies use ambiguous definitions of "T&H industry" or do not provide a definition at all.

OL concepts. Almost, four out of ten papers apply the concept of knowledge management (or subconstructs such as knowledge acquisition or knowledge sharing) to T&H businesses. Furthermore, the absorptive capacity construct has experienced increased attention in T&H

research. A relatively large number (almost 30 per cent) use implementation-orientated OL concepts with the aim of practical application. These concepts suggest that change often occurs by higher powers and managers are forced to solve problems for which they are often not prepared. This notion probably embraces concepts such as action-based learning, learning by doing or human decision-making processes and often occur in a collaborative context between tourism SMEs.

Trends in tourism and hospitality specific organizational learning research

According to the period of time in which the papers were published, it was found that interest in this research topic has steadily increased (Table III). Until 2005, a minority of research papers broached the issue of OL through inter-organizational networking. After 2005, the amount of scholarly research in this field steadily increased, especially after 2013. Table III further demonstrates how T&H-specific OL research evolved over time. Early studies do not mention explicit theories on which they are based and use OL concepts to explain firm survival and business success. Between 2006 and 2009, scholars increasingly engaged in applying knowledge management (and related concepts) and the idea of the learning organization to T&H-specific issues. The dominance of explorative studies and conceptual papers indicates that researchers developed the young research area and particularly engaged in sector-specific theorizing and the development of frameworks. After 2010, more and more quantitative and mixed-methods papers have been published aiming at testing causal relationships between network characteristics and OL phenomena. Most of the studies focus on knowledge acquisition and sharing issues. The years between 2014 and 2018 brought forward a remarkable dominance of quantitative studies. Scholars picked up a variety of OL concepts, of which knowledge management still dominated the research area. However, the research scope broadened and the interest in diverse OL concepts steadily increased.

Citation analysis

The primary objective of the citation analysis applied in this paper was to evaluate the popularity of the articles analyzed based on the number of times they are cited. The analysis was carried out using google scholar, which is a widely recommended tool for citation analyses (Law and van der Veen, 2008). Table IV presents the top ten most popular and influential works, sorted by the average number of citations per year. The analysis shows that papers with a focus on theorizing and explorative study designs provide important contributions to the development of the research field and tend to stimulate further research in ensuing years. Tourism Management proves to be the most important and influential scholarly journal in this research field.

Topical analysis

The topical analysis groups the papers into the main theories in inter-organizational network research and OL concepts applied. This review reveals a relative dominance of the resource-based view, particularly the knowledge-based view (33 per cent of the papers). Another seven papers (10 per cent) apply a social capital perspective on OL. To date, the relational view and trust tend to be less prominent theories that inform OL research in the context of T&H. However, three studies explicitly mention the importance of incorporating diverse relational characteristics into OL research practices. Additionally, agglomeration theory was applied in 4 articles reviewed: these studies conceptualize spatial proximity as a mechanism that stimulates knowledge exchange, knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer and innovation. However, a large number of papers (more than 40 per cent) do not explicitly

Period of publication	No. of publications	OL concept	Prevalent theories	Methods	Research issues
Until 2005	4	OL	No, explicit theories mentioned	Quantitative and qualitative papers	Research focus on OL outcomes (firm survival, business success)
2006-2009	20	Knowledge management and related concepts The learning organization/the learning region	Resource-based view, knowledge-based view Social capital theory	Mainly qualitative approaches (incl. case-studies) and conceptual papers	Focus on explorative studies Scholars engage in sector-specific theorizing and the development of frameworks
2010-2013	20	Absorptive capacity Knowledge creation Knowledge management and related concepts Dynamic capabilities Absorptive capacity	Resource-based view, knowledge-based view Relational view	Qualitative and quantitative approaches Mixed methods	More quantitative and mixed-methods approaches aim at testing causal relationships Many studies focus on network effects on knowledge acquisition and sharing issues
2014-2018	25	Absorptive capacity Knowledge management and related concepts Ambidextrous learning strategies (exploration vs exploitation) Dynamic capabilities Knowledge creation	Resource-based view, knowledge-based view Social capital theory	Prevalently quantitative papers	Remarkable dominance of quantitative studies Scholars pick up a variety of OL concepts in the context of T&H industry Research focuses on network effects on the OL process and outcomes (innovation, competitive advantage)

Table III
Trends in T&H-specific OL research

Table IV.
Overview of the ten
most popular and
influential papers

Position	Author(s), year published	Title	Journal	Method	Total no. of citations	Average no. of citations per year
1	Novelli <i>et al.</i> (2006)	Networks, cluster and innovation in Tourism: UK experience	<i>Tourism Management</i>	Case study	794	66
2	Baum and Ingram (1998)	Survival-enhancing learning in the manhattan hotel industry, 1898-1980	<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research</i>	Quantitative	840	42
3	Cooper, C. (2006)	Knowledge management and tourism	<i>Annals of Tourism Research</i>	Conceptual	463	39
4	Shaw, G. and Williams, A. (2009)	Knowledge transfer and management in tourism organizations	<i>Organization Development Journal</i>	Conceptual	302	34
5	Gretzel <i>et al.</i> (2006)	Searching for the future: challenges faced by destination marketing organizations	<i>T&H Research</i>	Qualitative	351	29
6	Saxena (2005)	Relationships, networks and the learning regions: case evidence from the peak district national park	<i>Tourism Management</i>	Case study	304	23
7	Nieves and Segarra-Ciprés (2015)	Management innovation in the hotel industry	<i>Tourism Planning and Development</i>	Quantitative	61	20
8	Carlisle <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Supporting innovation for tourism development through multi-stakeholder approaches	<i>Tourism Management</i>	Case study	101	20
9	Nieves and Haller (2014)	Building dynamic capabilities through knowledge resources	<i>Journal of Convention and Event Tourism</i>	Quantitative	79	20
10	Hallin and Marnburg (2008)	Knowledge management in the hospitality industry	<i>International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration</i>	Conceptual	191	19

Theoretical approach	No. of articles	OL concept(s) used	Examples	Summary
Resource-based view	9	Absorptive capacity Dynamic capabilities Knowledge creation	By and Dale (2008) Denicolai <i>et al.</i> (2010) Helgenberger (2011) Nieves and Segarra-Ciprés (2015) Zach (2012)	Studies focus on network resources (i.e. knowledge) that potentially can be accessed through network ties Collaboration between T&H firms positively affects knowledge creation and the development of learning capabilities
Knowledge-based view	14	Knowledge management	Breukel and Go (2009) Cooper (2006) Hallin and Marnburg (2008) Hoarau (2014) Shaw and Williams (2009) Zehrer (2011)	Knowledge is viewed as one of the most important resources and a source of competitive advantage T&H is developing into a knowledge-based industry The study of knowledge management in the context of T&H needs to be expanded to provide a network perspective
Social capital	7	Absorptive capacity Exploration-exploitation Knowledge acquisition	Hoarau and Kline (2014) Liu and Lee (2015) Liu (2018) Sorensen (2007)	Social capital is viewed as a valuable asset within a firm's individual network structure Social capital building is perceived especially important for T&H SMEs to access knowledge in pursuit of OL and innovation
Agglomeration theory	4	Knowledge acquisition Knowledge sharing Knowledge transfer	Aarstad <i>et al.</i> (2015) Novelli <i>et al.</i> (2006) Weidenfeld <i>et al.</i> (2010) Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Tourism clusters stimulate knowledge sharing, learning processes and knowledge transfer. Thus, the adoption of best-practices, innovation and sustainable destination development is enhanced
Relational view	3	Absorptive capacity Knowledge acquisition Knowledge sharing	Hsu <i>et al.</i> (2012) Ndou and Passiante (2009) Nieves <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Links with external factors have the potential to provide important advantages for T&H firms Different characteristics of organizational network ties impact knowledge acquisition and utilization capabilities
Trust	2	Learning organization Knowledge sharing	Saxena (2005) Saxena (2006)	Mutual trust in interpersonal relationships between small T&H firms is important when mobilizing community networks and socio-economic resources

Table V.
Theories applied in
reviewed articles

mention a theory, which informs the research presented, although close examination reveals that many concepts used are relatable to social capital approaches, the resource-based or the relational view. They refer to “social networks” or to “tourism networks” as a web of stakeholders (“nodes”) that establish relationships (“ties”) among each other.

Resource-based view. Articles related to the resource-based view of the firm focus on valuable, rare, inimitable and imperfectly mobile resources and learning capabilities inhering in inter-firm collaborations and networks. In this context, scholars conceptualize OL as knowledge creation (Palacios-Marqués *et al.*, 2015), dynamic capabilities (Helgenberger, 2011; Nieves and Haller, 2014; Nieves and Segarra-Ciprés, 2015) or as absorptive capacity (Brookes, 2014; Garay *et al.*, 2017; Hoarau, 2014; Thomas and Wood, 2014). Helgenberger (2011), for instance, investigates OL in Alpine tourism businesses based on the “capacity of response” concept, which describes a firm’s capacity to adjust its products and operations to long-term climate trends. In this respect, considerable importance was ascribed to joint, formalized information management networks to integrate local knowledge with external expert knowledge. Nieves and Haller (2014) found in their quantitative study that learning and sensing capabilities are strongly related to “declarative knowledge,” which is more general and resides outside the firm, while “procedural knowledge” is available internally and more closely related to integrating capabilities. Brookes (2014) and Garay *et al.* (2017) use the absorptive capacity concept to explain successful knowledge transfer and performance. Both studies emphasize the crucial role of external relationships.

Knowledge-based view. Within the knowledge-based view of the firm, OL is mainly conceptualized as knowledge management (or related concepts such as knowledge acquisition and knowledge sharing). The review revealed that not only a substantial body of empirical and conceptual contributions highlight the importance of knowledge management for T&H businesses but also knowledge management has early and continuously attracted scholarly interest, producing a substantial body of papers (Breukel and Go, 2009; Chalkiti and Sigala, 2008; Chalkiti, 2012; Cooper, 2006; Hallin and Marnburg, 2008; Okumus, 2013; Salem, 2014; Shaw and Williams, 2009; Sheehan *et al.*, 2016; Sigala and Chalkiti, 2015; Tiedemann *et al.*, 2009; Yiu and Law, 2013; Zehrer, 2011). Scholars underline the need of adapting existing concepts to T&H businesses (Cooper, 2006; Hallin and Marnburg, 2008): the dominant view of the micro-level focus on organizations needs to be expanded to embrace knowledge stocks and flows within an organization’s network (Hallin and Marnburg, 2008). Single businesses and whole destinations need to move from classic knowledge management to knowledge network management (Gretzel *et al.*, 2006; Pechlaner *et al.*, 2002), also referred to as destination management systems (DMS) (Sigala, 2013). Institutional support through destination management organizations (DMOs), local governments or trade associations play a vital role in stimulating networking and in establishing collaborative knowledge management activities (Carlisle *et al.*, 2013; Cooper, 2006; Gretzel *et al.*, 2006; Lemmetyinen, 2010; Sheehan *et al.*, 2016; Sigala, 2013; Zehrer, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2015), such as mapping existing knowledge stocks and identifying relevant knowledge (Cooper, 2006; Zehrer, 2011). Sheehan *et al.* (2016) understand a DMO’s role as an intelligent agent that acts as a boundary spanner between actors within and outside the destination. In the context of these studies, investment in information and communications technology (ICT) is perceived vital for knowledge acquisition and sharing (Tiedemann *et al.*, 2009), especially when it comes to data processing, searching and selection, knowledge storing and sharing on an intra- and an inter-organizational level (Okumus, 2013). Using modern ICT tools simply enhances an organization’s use of resources and information (Brine and Feather, 2010), leads to a better understanding of the external environment (Ali and

Frew, 2014), helps to build collaborative partnerships with other tourism businesses and stakeholders (Ali and Frew, 2014) and facilitates the dissemination of information and knowledge sharing processes (Breukel and Go, 2009; Del Chiappa and Baggio, 2015; Gretzel *et al.*, 2006). Apart from ICT infrastructure, Ku (2014) underlines the importance of training employees in the efficient use of these tools.

Social capital theory. A few studies use social capital theory or the embeddedness concept on OL. In this context, diverse OL concepts are used such as absorptive capacity (Camprubi *et al.*, 2008; Hoarau and Kline, 2014), ambidextrous learning strategies (Liu, 2018; Martínez-Pérez *et al.*, 2016; Sorensen, 2007) and aspects of knowledge management such as knowledge acquisition and mobilization (Casanueva *et al.*, 2013; Liu and Lee, 2015). Liu and Lee (2015) investigated the relationship between Taiwanese night-market vendors and their customers to understand how knowledge from customer collaboration is acquired. The findings suggest that all three dimensions of social capital have significant effects on accessing diverse, new knowledge. A strong relationship between social capital and knowledge acquisition and absorption was found in the studies of Camprubi *et al.* (2008), Casanueva *et al.* (2013) and Hoarau and Kline (2014): organizations, which have bridging (“structural”) and bonding (“relational”) social capital are in the best position to acquire, assimilate and exploit new knowledge for innovation and building a competitive advantage.

Relational view. A minority of the articles under review explicitly apply the relational view to OL (Hsu *et al.*, 2012; Ndou and Passiante, 2009; Nieves *et al.*, 2014). However, many more studies investigate diverse relational characteristics in respect to knowledge and learning benefits. Relational ties might be characterized in many different ways, among which tie strength, political vs business ties (Hsu *et al.*, 2012), kinship (Abdullah *et al.*, 2009) or formality (Brine and Feather, 2010; Chalkiti, 2012; Ferrary, 2015) are frequently used to explain absorptive capacity, knowledge acquisition or knowledge sharing. Scholars have found that tourism professionals prefer informal to formal ways of collaboration and that spontaneous gatherings and gossip are crucial for knowledge sharing and spill-overs between organizations (Shaw and Williams, 2009). In spite of the relevance and preference of informal relationships, scholars ascribe increasing importance to formal methods of collaboration (Cooper, 2006; Fan and Ku, 2010; Hager and Sung, 2012; Pechlaner *et al.*, 2002). This might be due to the fact that T&H professionals tend to overestimate informal relationships, and thus, neglect formal business networks, leading to a limited and inaccurate information supply (Brine and Feather, 2010). Combining the strengths of formal and informal relationships, both relationship types seem indispensable for T&H businesses. Chalkiti’s (2012) survey suggests that informal knowledge sharing should be indirectly supported (and thus, controlled) by the management through formal social interaction opportunities (such as training or socialization activities) or communication structures. Ferrary (2015) views formal relationships as an opportunity to build strategic knowledge through transferable human capital.

Agglomeration theory. Drawing on agglomeration theory, it is argued that OL is a spatial phenomenon, which is facilitated by geographic proximity (Aarstad *et al.*, 2015; Novelli *et al.*, 2006; Weidenfeld *et al.*, 2010; Zhang *et al.*, 2015). Novelli *et al.* (2006) found in their study in the UK “healthy lifestyle tourism cluster” that knowledge transfer through face-to-face interactions stimulates learning processes and results in a number of innovations. In turn, Aarstad *et al.* (2015) suggest that strategic relationships with non-local partners need to be nurtured and they provide access to novel information and contribute to increased learning and adoption of best practices beyond a local destination. In light of the global tourism market, scholars also address the need for transnational knowledge networks, which are especially important for SMEs to improve their own market position as they enhance knowledge creation and learning (Pechlaner *et al.*, 2002). In this respect, modern

ICT infrastructure and social media platforms are valuable tools in overcoming geographic limitations (Chalkiti and Sigala, 2008; Okumus, 2013).

Trust. Trust reinforces social relationships and represents a theoretical mechanism to explain OL. However, it is rarely used in T&H research as a theoretical foundation. The concept appears for instance in Saxena's (2005, 2006) works on the learning regions: the studies highlight how social interactions among different tourism organizations provide a context for OL. Trust and commitment, interactivity, honesty, open communication and reciprocity, such as the mutual fulfillment of promises, are key elements in this process. Other studies mention trust in inter-organizational relationships as a driving force for knowledge acquisition (Denicolai *et al.*, 2010), knowledge sharing (Mei *et al.*, 2016) and innovation (Zach and Hill, 2017).

Discussion and conclusions

Conclusions

This review provides a comprehensive assessment of inter-organizational network effects on OL in a T&H-specific context. It further documents a growing interest in this research field as the number of scholarly publications has increased considerably in recent years. As the T&H industry is particularly network orientated and individual organizations depend on interactions with other organizations, a network perspective on OL becomes obvious.

The topical analysis of the major theories in inter-organizational network research reveals that networks and collaborative arrangements do not only supply an organization with new knowledge, they also put the organization in a good position to use and exploit the knowledge and transform it into concrete innovations and competitive advantage. The study will be of interest to T&H scholar engaging with the role of networks and collaborative arrangements to foster knowledge acquisition and utilization practices, organizational innovation and value creation: first, it provides an overview of the most influential papers and journals in this research field, methodologies used, industry focus and OL concepts applied. Second, network-related theoretical approaches are presented regarding their significance in the study of diverse phenomena connected to OL and innovation. Furthermore, the reader is incrementally informed on the evolution of and trends in T&H-specific OL research. However, T&H-specific research in this field is still young and the review reveals that issues are being slowly, albeit steadily, conceptually and empirically elaborated. Therefore, this paper has gone some way toward enhancing our understanding of OL phenomena in the context of T&H networks and attempts to stimulate further research in this field. Both theoretical and practical implications and future research directions are discussed in the following sections.

Theoretical implications

The grouping of the papers according to theories used in inter-organizational network research underpins the understanding of OL as a relational phenomenon. While the resource-based view (in particular, the knowledge-based view) and social capital theory are frequently used theoretical approaches, the relational view is less prominent in the articles reviewed although the theory provides an interesting framework for the study of OL in the context of T&H (Nieves *et al.*, 2014). Besides the "strong-versus-weak-ties" perspective the studies under review focus on relational characteristics such as formality or kin- and friendship. The consideration of additional relational characteristics in future T&H-specific OL research would add value to the discussion. Furthermore, the study highlights trust as a fundamental and insightful construct to better understand inter-organizational exchange relationships. In the articles under review, however, it is used as a keyword rather than a theory, which informs the research and the studies do not do justice to the complex nature of

the construct. Eventually, the perception of [Zaheer et al. \(2010\)](#), who present trust as a distinct theory in inter-organizational network research, should be scrutinized. As other theories (i.e. relational view or social capital theory) incorporate the notion of trust, future research might focus on trust in the context of these theories.

The present review was designed to provide an overview of common theories used to explain phenomena connected to OL and to present their relevance for the T&H industry. However, a surprisingly large number of papers do not explicitly cite the theory on which they are based. Although in-depth reading indicates certain theoretical directions, this seems problematic as the concerned papers lack core assumptions, which inform the research presented.

Regarding OL, it was found that the majority of the papers “borrow” concepts and frameworks from mainstream organizational research. Although this procedure is typical for T&H-specific research, their implementation in a service-specific context might be problematic, especially when it comes to operationalization and measurement issues. This criticism is frequently brought forward in industry-related literature reviews ([Farrington et al., 2017](#); [Oh and Kim, 2017](#)) and partly applies to this literature review as well. While some of the papers reviewed simply adopt “borrowed” models and scales, in contrast, 14 out of the 69 papers engage in sector-specific theorizing and/or the development of frameworks and scales ([Cooper, 2006](#); [Schianetz et al., 2007](#); [Shaw and Williams, 2009](#); [Thomas and Wood, 2014](#)). More scholarly contributions in this vein would recognize the industry’s peculiarities, increase the reliability and validity of OL concepts and scales in a service-intensive environment and encourage further research in this area. Therefore, it might be recommended to publish special issues in T&H journals or to increasingly broach the issue in the context of scientific conferences.

Another interesting implication refers to OL in SMEs and large enterprises. The findings suggest that larger companies are in a better position to build learning routines than SMEs, which lack the organizational slack and structure necessary to build absorptive or knowledge management capabilities ([Nieves and Haller, 2014](#); [Salem, 2014](#)). In spite of this, learning also appears in smaller companies (albeit in a more unplanned and unstructured way) and is aided by network participation and collaborative arrangements. In fact, SMEs particularly benefit from entering into alliances, networks, clusters or from participation in DMS, which enable them to access, exchange and combine internal and external resources. As the T&H industry in many countries heavily depends on SMEs, more theorizing and empirical evidence about collaborative learning in smaller organizational contexts would be necessary and how their innovative and competitive power might be strengthened.

The topical analysis also reveals that the issue of knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing and exchange in T&H networks is quite extensively broached and effects of relational characteristics, geographic proximity, social capital dimensions and trust on knowledge acquisition modes and the willingness to exchange and share knowledge, is well-documented. Comparatively less is known about how external relationships actually affect an organization’s ability to integrate, exploit and transfer the knowledge in pursuit of innovation, value creation and competitive advantage. Some studies vaguely suggest that long-term interactions and professionally managed networks do not only put the organization in a good position to acquire knowledge but also enhance an organization’s capabilities to use it ([By and Dale, 2008](#); [Hoarau and Kline, 2014](#); [Kelliher et al., 2009](#); [Schianetz et al., 2007](#)). However, the empirical evidence has the potential to be expanded to better understand the evolution of knowledge integration, exploitation and transfer abilities through inter-organizational networks.

With the exception of some articles, little evidence could be found about the nature of the knowledge embedded in network relationships: in the context of agglomeration or social capital

theory for instance, scholars state that non-local network relationships and relational and structural social capital facilitate the access of new, non-redundant knowledge (Aarstad *et al.*, 2015; Booyens and Rogerson, 2017; Camprubi *et al.*, 2008). The studies indicate that external relationship characteristics do not only influence the possibility and willingness to share but also the quality and quantity of the knowledge accessed, redundancy issues and its potential to be exploited in terms of innovation. Consequently, inter-organizational networks and their characteristics do not only shed light on *why* and *how* external knowledge is acquired and integrated but potentially provide valuable insights into *what type* of knowledge is accessed and its usability for innovation. It is, therefore, essential to deepen our awareness of the relationship between network characteristics and the type of knowledge acquired as an additional dimension in the OL process to better understand what has the potential to be used and exploited.

Practical implications

In terms of managerial usability, valuable recommendations might be derived from this review. First, the study highlights the importance of external relationships for knowledge acquisition and sharing practices, knowledge conversion and exploitation in pursuit of innovation, value creation and competitive advantage. While these insights are not new as such, they underpin their particular importance for the networked T&H industry, which – paradoxically – still reveals strong prejudices against network participation (Pikkemaat and Weiermair, 2007) and negative attitudes and dissatisfaction with knowledge sharing in networks (Mei *et al.*, 2016). One key implication, therefore, is the understanding of how different relational characteristics affect the access and use of new knowledge and that networking with other businesses should not be left to chance. Network participation and collaborative arrangements should be the result of strategic managerial considerations to consciously influence the amount and quality of knowledge acquired and its usability. Therefore, T&H professionals should harness the combination of different types of network relationships, instead of relying on one type of relationship only. Besides establishing and fostering informal business relationships with local partners, formal local and non-local networks might be appropriate platforms to enhance the organization's knowledge supply. The use of modern ICT tools, social media platforms and appropriate employee training could help to overcome geographic distances. Preferred partners might not only be other T&H businesses but also universities and businesses outside the industry to supply the company with new insights and non-redundant information. A general networking strategy – in line with the firm's strategic goals – might help to identify suitable partner collaborations and network affiliations, which enhance the establishment of OL routines.

Second, practitioners are well-advised to establish close and long-term business relationships based on the principles of trust and reciprocity, particularly with key informants, knowledge-intensive organizations and structurally well-embedded partners who potentially “open doors” to new network contacts. The findings suggest that strong and mutually gratifying network relationships increase participants' willingness to share diverse and new knowledge, facilitate its absorption and support innovation. It is further advantageous to pursue frequent meetings to promote joint projects, exchange experiences and foster close relationships.

Third, there is the need to foster an awareness among managers of T&H businesses that OL is, to a great extent, a collaborative process. Explicit learning orientated practices should be integral components of all types of business relationships. Furthermore, the participation in DMS (Sigala, 2013), collaborative knowledge management (Cooper, 2006) or tourism learning networks (Kelliher *et al.*, 2009) seem to be an essential task to overcome the micro-level focus on OL. This will, of course, entail necessary investments in “hardware” (state-of-

the-art ICT equipment) and “software” (employee training and awareness). In this context, DMOs or local chambers of commerce play a decisive role in the training of employees and in motivating individual businesses to collaborate. This review supports the idea that T&H enterprises’ willingness to enter such networks heavily depends on the reliability and trust demonstrated by the public DMO, its managerial efficiency and the environmental and competitive context. While a DMO has no bearing on the context in which it is operating, it certainly has the possibility to improve its managerial efficiency and to construct strong relationships based on trust and reliability.

Limitations and future research

Although the methodology applied in this review ensures rigor and reduces the researcher’s subjectivity, the present paper is not without limitations. Similar to other review papers, it is certainly limited by the search and selection process of relevant literature. Though a standardized and replicable procedure has been applied, the search was limited to English language contributions in peer-reviewed journals. Yet, the inclusion of six scientific databases and the application of a standardized search and selection procedure reduces the probability of excluding scientific contributions, which might lead to substantially different findings. Another limitation refers to the analysis method: a meta-analysis, for instance, would be an interesting and powerful approach to underpin the present literature review. However, the research revealed that more than half of the papers are either conceptual contributions or based on qualitative research, which are not suitable for meta-analytical approaches. Therefore, meta-analysis might be considered for a future review paper where more quantitative contributions are available.

Considering the theoretical and practical implications, several future research directions deserve consideration. First, sector-specific research in this field needs to further advance in more theorizing, aiming at the development of industry-specific concepts and measurement tools. Therein, more research in diverse sub-sectors of the T&H industry is desirable to learn more about OL practices and mechanisms in specific branches. This is all the more important, as almost 40 per cent of the studies reviewed claim to investigate “T&H industry” in general. Though this seems important and logical (T&H industry is often described a “networked” industry), at the same time, it is problematic and leads to inconsistencies as scholars often use ambiguous and varying definitions of “T&H industry”.

Second, the literature review revealed that DMOs – unlike other businesses within T&H industry – appear in two different ways: some of the papers focus on DMOs as enterprises, which establish OL processes (Zach, 2012; Zehrer, 2011). Additionally, scholars stress DMOs’ special role in stimulating networking and collaborative learning activities (Cooper, 2006; Sigala, 2013). Sheehan *et al.* (2016), for instance, refers to DMOs as “intelligent agents” or “boundary spanners between actors” in establishing knowledge sharing and learning routines. Consequently, more studies focusing on the special role of DMOs as learning stimulators and facilitators might add value to the research field.

Third, a considerable share of the papers under review are explorative studies, using a qualitative or case study research design. While qualitative research approaches provide valuable contributions to the in-depth exploration of OL dimensions and their possible connections, the degree to which these results can be generalized is limited. Future research should, therefore, concentrate on quantitative research approaches, with the objective to test causal relationships between network constructs and OL. Thus, insights could be gained into the strength and direction of relationships and the results would have a greater

potential to be generalizable. Furthermore, longitudinal study designs are desirable to learn more about long-term network effects on OL.

Fourth, specific research on OL practices in T&H SME might be interesting. In this context, scholars should be directed to investigate how network structures and collaborative arrangements compensate the lack of organizational structures in the development of learning routines.

Another research direction refers to the types of knowledge acquired through networking activities. Researchers might be prone to investigate the impacts of diverse network configurations on different knowledge dimensions and their usability for innovation.

Finally, the majority of the papers under review focus on one or at the most, two OL sub-constructs (i.e. knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer). Studies focusing on network effects on knowledge acquisition, its integration and utilization and specific OL outcomes are rare. This review calls for more research using a holistic view on collaborative OL to capture the whole picture instead of single pieces of the puzzle.

Note

1. For further reading, see [Argote \(2011\)](#) and [Easterby-Smith and Lyles \(2011\)](#). [Argote \(2011\)](#) presents a brief overview of past, present and emerging research in OL. The handbook on OL, edited by [Easterby-Smith and Lyles \(2011\)](#), provides an in-depth overview of trends and patterns in OL research, bringing together approaches from the leading experts in OL. Furthermore, [Kasim \(2015\)](#) provides a brief overview of T&H-specific OL research.

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