

Innovation and Its Impact on Tourism Competitiveness: A Research Review

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Abstract: Innovation has become a critical foundation for sustaining competitiveness across industries, and tourism is no exception. In the context of globalization, rapid technological change, shifting consumer preferences, and increasing sustainability demands, innovation is widely recognized as a key driver of competitiveness at both the destination and firm level. Building on classical theories of innovation (Schumpeter, 1934; OECD, 2005) and destination competitiveness (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003), this article conducts a structured qualitative review of international and Vietnamese studies to synthesize existing knowledge on the nexus between innovation and tourism competitiveness. The findings highlight four dominant categories of innovation: product, process, marketing, and organizational. Product and service innovations enrich visitor experiences and generate differentiation; process and technological innovations enhance efficiency and sustainability; marketing innovations strengthen destination branding and digital visibility; and organizational innovations improve flexibility, collaboration, and human capital development. Taken together, these forms of innovation provide multidimensional pathways for destinations and enterprises to develop and maintain long-term competitiveness in dynamic markets. This paper contributes by systematizing fragmented literature, identifying gaps, and proposing future research directions such as digital transformation, artificial intelligence applications, and sustainability-oriented innovation. From a managerial perspective, the study underscores the importance of embedding innovation into tourism development policies and business strategies to enhance long-term competitiveness.

Keywords: Innovation, Tourism Competitiveness, Product and Process Innovation, Marketing Innovation, Organizational Innovation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic industries in the global economy, significantly contributing to GDP growth, employment, and sustainable development (UNWTO, 2023). In an increasingly competitive environment, destination competitiveness is considered a decisive factor determining the survival and growth of

destinations and tourism enterprises (Porter, 1990; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003).

Within this context, innovation has become a crucial engine for differentiation, efficiency, and adaptability. From Schumpeter's (1934) classical perspective positioning innovation at the core of economic development, to modern approaches

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emphasizing product, process, marketing, and organizational innovations (OECD, 2005; Hjalager, 2010), the literature consistently affirms the importance of innovation in strengthening competitiveness. Innovation not only enhances visitor experiences but also improves operational efficiency and resilience, contributing to long-term sustainability.

Although extensive research has examined innovation in tourism (Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2010; Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Croes *et al.*, 2021), the existing body of knowledge remains fragmented. Many studies focus on isolated aspects such as technological innovation or digital marketing, with limited efforts to provide an integrated understanding of how different types of innovation collectively enhance competitiveness. In Vietnam, research remains relatively underdeveloped, often descriptive in nature, and lacks comprehensive theoretical or empirical generalization.

This review addresses these gaps by aiming to: (i) systematize theoretical foundations and prior studies on innovation in tourism; (ii) analyze the mechanisms through which different forms of innovation influence competitiveness; and (iii) propose directions for future research along with managerial implications to strengthen competitiveness in the context of globalization and digital transformation.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Innovation Theories in Tourism

Schumpeter (1934) conceptualized innovation as the fundamental engine of economic development, encompassing five types: product, process, market, supply, and organizational. Building on this foundation, OECD (2005) and Hjalager (2010) adapted the classification to tourism, distinguishing product/service, process, marketing, and organizational innovations. Hall and Williams (2008) further argued that innovation in tourism is not only a source of advantage but also a necessity for adapting to technological disruptions, changing consumer demands, and sustainability pressures.

2.2. Tourism Competitiveness Theories

Tourism competitiveness builds on Porter's (1990) notion of competitive advantage and has been extensively modeled by Crouch and Ritchie (1999), who emphasized core resources, supporting factors, policies, and destination management. Dwyer and Kim (2003) integrated comparative and competitive advantages into a holistic model. Later contributions stressed environmental management (Mihalič, 2000), marketing and branding (Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008), managerial efficiency (Assaf & Josiassen,

2012), and sustainability with adaptability (Croes *et al.*, 2021).

2.3. Prior Research

International research demonstrates that innovation significantly enhances competitiveness:

- **Product/service innovation:** generates differentiation and improves visitor satisfaction (Hjalager, 2010; Assaker & Hallak, 2013).
- **Process/technological innovation:** improves operational efficiency and sustainability (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2015; Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019).
- **Marketing innovation:** strengthens branding and visibility (Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008).
- **Organizational innovation:** enhances adaptability and human resource quality (Hall & Williams, 2008; Baum, 2007).

In Vietnam, Nguyen Thi Thu Trang and Bui Thi Hong (2020) highlight the role of infrastructure and marketing, while Pham Hong Thai, Le Thi Thu, and Tran Minh Duc (2021) emphasize human resource development. However, these studies remain fragmented and largely descriptive.

2.4. Research Gaps

Current research lacks integrative approaches combining different forms of innovation to explain competitiveness comprehensively. Empirical evidence from developing countries, particularly Vietnam, remains scarce. Comparative and large-scale studies are also limited, pointing to opportunities for future inquiry.

3. REVIEW METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a **systematic qualitative review** approach.

- **Data sources:** Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.
- **Selection criteria:** peer-reviewed articles, international reports (OECD, UNWTO, WEF), and selected Vietnamese studies published between 2000 and 2024 focusing on innovation and tourism competitiveness.
- **Process:** (i) keyword-based search ("innovation in tourism", "tourism competitiveness", "digital innovation in tourism"), (ii) removal of duplicates/irrelevant works, (iii) classification following Hjalager's (2010) four categories, (iv) qualitative content analysis.

4. FINDINGS OF THE REVIEW

4.1. Product and Service Innovation

Enhances visitor experience and differentiation (Assaker & Hallak, 2013). Limited empirical validation in Vietnam.

4.2. Process and Technological Innovation

Involves adopting smart technologies, online platforms, and green practices; improves efficiency and sustainability (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2015; Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019).

4.3. Marketing Innovation

Focuses on digital marketing, social media, VR/AR applications; strengthens branding and visibility (Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008). Vietnamese tourism marketing remains underdeveloped.

4.4. Organizational Innovation

Involves restructuring governance, fostering public-private collaboration, and developing human resources (Hall & Williams, 2008; Baum, 2007). Empirical studies in Vietnam (Pham Hong Thai, Le Thi Thu & Tran Minh Duc, 2021) emphasize HR innovation as crucial.

Table 1: International studies on innovation and tourism competitiveness

No.	Source	Title of Study	Main Findings	Outlet
1	Schumpeter, 1934	The Theory of Economic Development	Classical theory of innovation; identified five types (product, process, market, supply, organization)	Harvard University Press
2	Porter, 1990	The Competitive Advantage of Nations	Innovation as a driver of national and sectoral competitiveness	Free Press
3	OECD, 2005	Oslo Manual	Guidelines for measuring and classifying innovation (product, process, marketing, organizational)	OECD Publishing
4	Hall & Williams, 2008	Tourism and Innovation	Conceptual framework of innovation in tourism; role of knowledge, networks, and policy	Routledge
5	Hjalager, 2002	Repairing innovation defectiveness in tourism	Addressed innovation gaps and management solutions in tourism	Tourism Management
6	Hjalager, 2010	A review of innovation research in tourism	Systematic review; proposed four main categories of innovation	Tourism Management
7	Hjalager, 2015	100 innovations that transformed tourism	Overview of innovations that reshaped the tourism sector globally	Journal of Travel Research
8	Camisón & Monfort-Mir, 2012	Measuring innovation in tourism	Measurement of innovation through Schumpeterian and dynamic capabilities perspectives	Tourism Management
9	Orfila-Sintes, Crespi-Cladera & Martínez-Ros, 2005	Innovation activity in the hotel industry	Empirical evidence: innovation enhanced performance in Spanish hotels	Tourism Management
10	Sundbo, Orfila-Sintes & Sørensen, 2007	The innovative behaviour of tourism firms	Comparative study of innovative behavior in tourism enterprises	Tourism Management
11	Martinez-Ros & Orfila-Sintes, 2009	Innovation and performance in the Spanish hospitality industry	Innovation positively linked to firm performance	Annals of Tourism Research
12	Enz & Siguaw, 2000	Best practices in service innovation	Service innovation in hospitality improves competitiveness and customer experience	Cornell Hospitality Quarterly
13	Pikkemaat & Peters, 2005	Towards the measurement of innovation in hospitality	Pilot study to measure innovation in small hospitality firms	Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism

No.	Source	Title of Study	Main Findings	Outlet
14	Pikkemaat & Peters, 2006	Innovation in tourism networks	Innovation in networks of small tourism firms enhances competitiveness	The Service Industries Journal
15	Weiermair, 2006	Product improvement or innovation	Compared product improvement vs. innovation as drivers of competitiveness	OECD: Innovation and Growth in Tourism
16	Hall, 2009	Innovation and tourism policy	Role of policy in fostering innovation and destination competitiveness	Tourism Recreation Research
17	Gretzel, Sigala, Xiang & Koo, 2015	Smart tourism: Foundations and developments	Conceptual basis of smart tourism; digital innovation	Electronic Markets
18	Gretzel, Werthner, Koo & Lamsfus, 2015	Smart tourism ecosystems	Digital ecosystems and their role in destination competitiveness	Computers in Human Behavior
19	Neuhofer, Buhalis & Ladkin, 2015	Smart technologies for personalized experiences	Smart technologies personalize experiences and enhance competitiveness	Electronic Markets
20	Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019	Real-time co-creation and nowness service	Digital marketing innovation; co-creation improves competitiveness	Tourism Review
21	Assaf & Josiassen, 2012	Identifying and ranking determinants of tourism performance	Efficiency and innovation as key determinants of performance	Tourism Management
22	Croes, Ridderstaat, Baggio & Brandt, 2021	Tourism competitiveness and sustainability	Conceptual model linking innovation, sustainability, and competitiveness	Annals of Tourism Research
23	Assaker & Hallak, 2013	Moderating effects of novelty-seeking	Novelty-seeking enhances satisfaction and competitiveness	Tourism Management
24	Tajeddini, 2010	Customer and entrepreneurial orientation in hotels	Customer orientation and innovation improve firm competitiveness	International Journal of Hospitality Management
25	Sigala & Chalkiti, 2014	Knowledge management, social media and innovation	Knowledge management and social media as drivers of innovation	International Journal of Hospitality Management
26	Sigala, 2018	Social media and value co-creation	Social media-based innovation enhances competitiveness	International Journal of Hospitality Management
27	Sørensen, Sundbo & Mattsson, 2013	Organisational conditions for service innovation	Organizational structures enabling innovation improve competitiveness	Service Industries Journal
28	Zehrer & Hallmann, 2015	Policy indicators of innovation in tourism	Stakeholder perspectives on innovation-oriented policy indicators	Journal of Travel Research
29	Chen, Chen & Lee, 2016	Destination resources and tourists' loyalty	Resource-based innovations increase loyalty and competitiveness	Journal of Travel Research
30	Marasco, Buonincontri, van Niekerk, Orlowski & Okumus, 2018	Innovative services in tourist satisfaction and loyalty	Service innovation strengthens loyalty and competitiveness	International Journal of Hospitality Management

Note: Compiled by the authors based on Scopus and Web of Science indexed sources (2000–2024).

Table 2: Vietnamese studies on innovation and tourism competitiveness

No.	Source	Title of Study	Main Findings	Outlet
1	Nguyen Thi Thu Trang; Bui Thi Hong, 2020	Tourism competitiveness in Vietnam: A case study of destination development	Marketing and infrastructure innovation play important roles in competitiveness	Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research
2	Pham Hong Thai; Le Thi Thu; Tran Minh Duc, 2021	Human resources and sustainable tourism development: Evidence from Vietnam	Innovation in training and HR management strengthens sustainable competitiveness	Current Issues in Tourism
3	Le Van Hoa, 2019	Innovation in tourism products for Mekong Delta	Proposed innovative agro-tourism and community-based products to boost competitiveness	Vietnam Tourism Review
4	Nguyen Van Dinh, 2020	Digital transformation in Vietnam's tourism industry	Digital innovation and smart tourism as critical drivers of competitiveness	Journal of Economics and Forecasting
5	Tran Thi Minh Hoa, 2018	The role of innovation in developing sustainable tourism in Vietnam	Highlighted innovation in governance, human resources, and sustainable products	VNU Journal of Science: Economics and Business
6	Pham Van Long, 2021	Innovative marketing strategies for Vietnam's tourism destinations	Digital marketing strategies enhance branding and destination competitiveness	Journal of Economics and Development
7	Le Thi Lan Huong, 2022	Organizational innovation in tourism enterprises: Evidence from SMEs in Vietnam	Analyzed organizational restructuring as a means of competitiveness	Journal of Economic Studies
8	Nguyen Hong Son, 2020	Smart tourism and innovation for destination competitiveness in Vietnam	Proposed smart tourism applications as innovation tools for competitiveness	Journal of Economic Management
9	Vo Thi Thu Huong, 2023	Innovation and sustainable development in Vietnam's coastal tourism	Service innovation and sustainable models support competitiveness	Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities

Note: Compiled by the authors, including Vietnamese studies published in Scopus journals and reputable domestic outlets.

5. DISCUSSION

The review confirms that innovation is consistently linked to enhanced competitiveness, supporting Schumpeter's (1934) economic theory and modern frameworks of destination competitiveness (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Product innovation creates differentiation, process innovation fosters efficiency and sustainability, marketing innovation strengthens branding, and organizational innovation ensures adaptability.

However, existing research remains fragmented. Most studies emphasize single dimensions such as technology or marketing, with limited integrative approaches. Empirical work in developing countries is sparse and often descriptive, highlighting the need for comparative, multi-dimensional, and longitudinal research.

Theoretically, this review integrates innovation into the discourse of tourism competitiveness, enriching established models with

contemporary insights. Practically, it underscores the need for policymakers and firms to implement innovation holistically across product, process, marketing, and organizational domains.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1. Conclusion

Innovation is a central determinant of tourism competitiveness. Four interrelated categories—product, process, marketing, and organizational innovation—jointly shape destinations' ability to sustain long-term competitiveness.

6.2. Managerial Implications

- **Destination authorities:** integrate innovation into policy frameworks, emphasizing digitalization and smart tourism.
- **Tourism enterprises:** invest in product development, digital marketing, and organizational restructuring.

- **Human resources:** foster training in innovation skills, creativity, and technological capabilities.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

Research on innovation in tourism remains limited in Vietnam and other developing contexts. Future studies should:

- Conduct empirical validation of innovation's impacts across contexts.
- Explore emerging forms such as digital, AI-driven, and ESG-oriented innovation.
- Compare across regions to derive lessons for Vietnam.

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