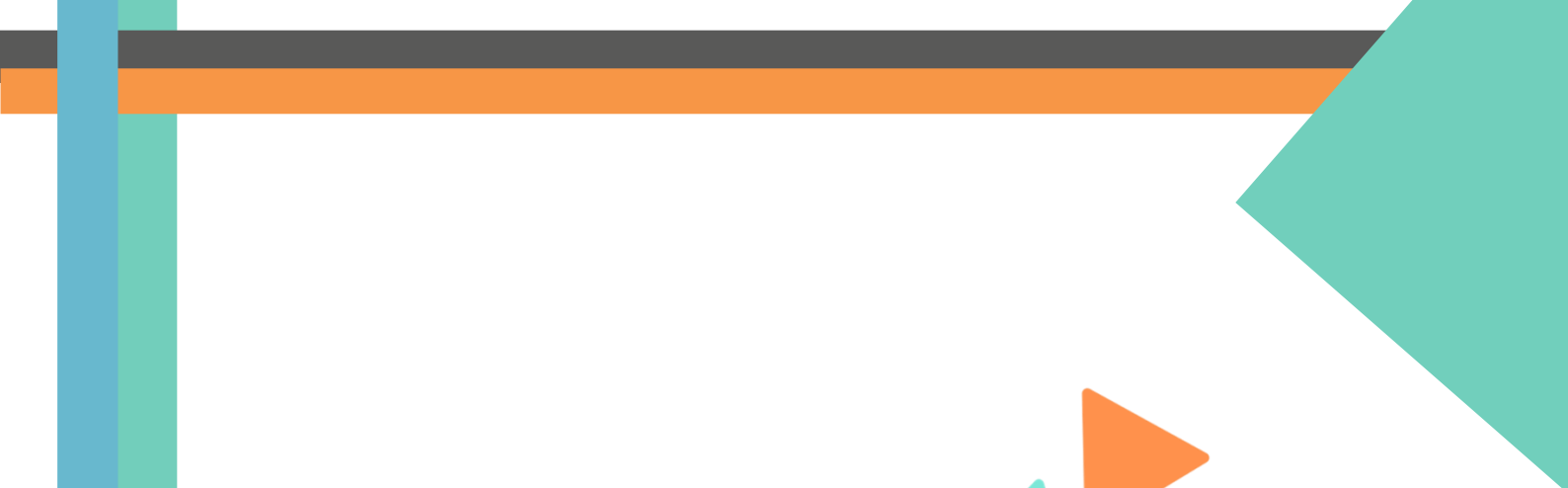




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Bold steps: Entrepreneurship in times of change

BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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OPERATIONALISING ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY IN TOURISM SMES: MICROFOUNDATIONS OF PACAP– RACAP CONVERSION

Andrea Vincis
University of Cagliari, Italy
andrea.vincis@unica.it

Cinzia Dessì
University of Cagliari, Italy
cdessi@unica.it

Abstract

Tourism SMEs operate in knowledge-intensive, service-dominated settings where competitive advantage depends on the ability to recognise external signals, translate them into organisational routines, and continuously innovate and refresh offerings (Cooper, 2006; Hall & Williams, 2008; Shaw & Williams, 2009). While they are often lauded for adaptability and frequent, incremental improvements (Pikkemaat & Peters, 2006), their underlying innovation processes remain unevenly theorised, mainly because their practices are fragmented, informal, and embedded in day-to-day operations rather than formal R&D structures (Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2010).

The ACAP literature has long recognised the critical distinction between PACAP, the acquisition and assimilation of external knowledge, and RACAP, the transformation and exploitation of that knowledge into operational outcomes (Volberda et al., 2010; Zahra & George, 2002). Whilst this conceptual framework has been extensively theorised, the actual mechanisms through which organisations convert PACAP into RACAP remain empirically underexplored, particularly in the context of SMEs operating in service-intensive sectors (Flatten et al., 2011; Noblet et al., 2011).

Tourism SMEs represent a compelling empirical setting for examining this conversion process. These organisations frequently engage with external knowledge sources such as customers, suppliers, competitors, but also destination management organisations (DMOs), technology providers, industry associations, and institutions, yet face significant constraints in their ability to transform this knowledge into operational innovations (Hjalager, 2010; Thomas et al., 2011). The seasonal nature of tourism, resource limitations, and the accelerated digital transformation requirements post-COVID-19 create unique pressures on the PACAP-RACAP conversion process that have not been adequately addressed in the existing literature (Sigala, 2020; Thomas & Wood, 2014).

This study will involve Sardinian tourism SMEs, where respondents are owner-managers or senior operators with a cross-firm view. Sardinia offers a unique environment, as its

insularity and pronounced seasonality influence inter-organisational dynamics and knowledge flows in tourism SMEs, where learning and innovation are often facilitated through informal, place-based networks (Baldacchino, 2007; Ruggieri & Platania, 2024). ACAP represents one of the most influential theoretical constructs in innovation literature. The concept was initially developed to explain why and how some firms can recognise, assimilate and exploit external knowledge more effectively than others, thereby achieving superior levels of innovation and competitive advantage (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). The theoretical significance of ACAP lies in its recognition that organisations are not passive recipients of external knowledge but active agents that must develop specific capabilities to identify, acquire, and utilise knowledge from their environment. This perspective shifts the focus from knowledge availability to knowledge absorption capability, emphasising the organisational mechanisms and processes that enable adequate knowledge integration and exploitation.

Building upon the foundational work of Cohen and Levinthal, Zahra and George (2002) provided a crucial reconceptualisation that modified ACAP from a unidimensional construct into a multidimensional process. Their contribution defined ACAP as a dynamic capability (Teece, 2007), and introduced two distinctive but complementary components, PACAP, which includes the organisational capabilities needed to acquire and assimilate external knowledge by understanding the relevance and potential applications of external information, and RACAP, which represents the practical application phase (transformation and exploitation) where assimilated knowledge is converted into operational improvements, new products or services, or enhanced organisational capabilities. Considered in a dynamic perspective, ACAP expresses its peculiar role in continuously reconfiguring a firm's resources and routines, aiming to internalise external knowledge into operational processes and foster innovation.

The literature has established that PACAP and RACAP are distinct organisational capabilities (Zahra & George, 2002). However, the field has seldom unpacked the operational mechanisms that effectuate PACAP to RACAP in practice, an omission that is especially salient in enterprises with limited formalised routines. Reviews and critiques call for micro-level, routine-based explanations and warn against the construct's reification (Lane et al., 2006; Volberda et al., 2010), while routine-based models explicitly highlight the need to operationalise ACAP as routines (Lewin et al., 2011). While seminal studies have operationalised PACAP and RACAP and linked them to distinct organisational antecedents, thus shedding partial light on the conditions under which PACAP converts into RACAP (Flatten et al., 2011; Jansen et al., 2005), the field still lacks fine-grained, processual evidence of the micro-routines that enact this conversion in practice.

This gap is particularly pronounced in the tourism context, where innovation and knowledge transformation typically involve managerial, process, and institutional changes, as well as other socio-technical adaptations, that coordinate multiple actors, customer interfaces, and destination systems, rather than linear product development processes (Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2010).

Moreover, recent research underscores the role of managerial cognitive capabilities and

organisational learning routines in enabling absorptive capacity, yet SME-focused empirical evidence remains fragmented and comparatively scarce, with only a few SME studies mapping learning–ACAP linkages (e.g. Sancho-Zamora et al., 2022), and team-level managerial dynamics affecting ACAP (Medina et al., 2019).

This study aims to explore how SMEs in tourism transform PACAP into RACAP, addressing a key gap in understanding knowledge conversion processes in resource-limited settings. Based on these considerations, the main research question that this study seeks to answer is: *How do tourism SMEs convert potential absorptive capacity into realised absorptive capacity through micro-level routines and socio-technical mechanisms in resource-constrained settings?*

We will adopt a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with owner-managers of tourism SMEs who have implemented at least one innovation within the past 36 months. This aligns with international innovation measurement standards and ensures definitional comparability across cases (OECD & Eurostat, 2018), thereby mitigating retrospective recall bias while allowing the PACAP-RACAP conversion to progress through routinisation stages that can be empirically observed.

We will employ purposive sampling to select 20 tourism SMEs in Sardinia, which is consistent with purposeful sampling for theory building in qualitative research (Palinkas et al., 2015). The design follows an abductive logic, iterating between emerging evidence and sensitising ACAP constructs (PACAP/RACAP), consistent with abductive reasoning in organisation studies (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013).

This study contributes to ACAP theory by developing micro-foundations of knowledge conversion, specifically contextualised within tourism SMEs, and establishing clear operational boundaries between conversion mechanisms and their outcomes. It does so through a qualitative design that enables deep examination of micro-foundational routines, directly answering calls for qualitative inquiry into ACAP in tourism organisations (Thomas & Wood, 2015).

This research aims to make two main contributions to absorptive capacity theory and tourism management practice. First, we develop the micro-foundations of the PACAP–RACAP conversion process in tourism SMEs, specifying routine-level, socio-technical mechanisms that translate potential into realised absorptive capacity in service-intensive, resource-constrained settings. This extends the dynamic capabilities work in small-firm/service contexts (e.g. Nieves & Haller, 2014). Second, we shall produce a taxonomy of conversion pathways and obstacles, complete with observable markers of robust RACAP implementation. This taxonomy will distinguish between different conversion approaches and their associated success conditions, providing a practical framework for managers and consultants working with tourism micro-enterprises.

Keywords: Absorptive capacity; PACAP-RACAP conversion; Tourism SMEs; Microfoundations; Innovation.

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