Innovation culture as a premise for engaging and memorable tourist experiences through gamification

Sonia Mileva[a] iD

[a] Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria), Faculty of Economics and Business Administration;
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5636-874X; e-mail: smileva@feb.uni-sofia.bg

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to research the impact of innovativeness and innovation culture as premises for effective gamification at destination level. The main hypothesis defended is that innovation culture and gamification can be powerful tools for tourism destination management. By creating a culture that supports innovation and implementing gamification strategies, tourism destinations can enhance their competitiveness, attract more tourists and improve the overall tourism experience. Bulgaria has been selected as the tourism destination for analysis. The methodology combines desk research with key informant surveys. The first survey is about innovativeness and innovation culture and the second is about destination gamification. Both include 18 informants, representing the travel and hospitality sectors in Bulgaria. The main findings are that innovation culture and gamification can be powerful tools for tourism destination management. The contribution is a first attempt to link innovation culture with destination management and the use of gamification as a tool for memorable tourist experiences. The article contains data and gives practical insights reflecting the Bulgarian perspective in the field.

KEYWORDS

innovation, innovation culture, gamification, tourism, Bulgaria

1. Introduction

Innovation has been the focus in a large number of studies and in tourism in particular and technological innovations have transformed business models and travelers' behavior (Buhalis et al., 2005). Innovation can be driven by a range of factors, including customer needs, new technologies, government policies, competitive pressures and is influenced by internal and external factors (Gomezelj, 2016). A strategic and systematic approach to innovation is vital for the development of an innovation culture which refers to an organizational mindset that encourages and fosters innovation in all aspects of business. This includes the development of new products, services, processes and strategies that can help an organization stay competitive and adapt to changing market conditions. Besides the organizational aspect, innovation culture is important for tourism destination management, especially in the light of the new smart strategies and smart destination management which form overall destination competitiveness. The efficiency of smart tourism destinations depends not only on the implementation of adequate technological solutions,

but also on appropriate governance, incorporating relational, instrumental and applied levels (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2019).

In this context we have selected for analysis gamification as a tool for the creation of engaging and memorable tourist experiences at destination level. Gamification as an expression of new technologies and as a marketing tool has become an integral part of many destination management organizations, allowing the interaction and engagement of tourists, but also dependent on the 'ecosystems' and involvement of different stakeholders (Mileva et al., 2021).

The analysis refers to destination management in Bulgaria, taking into consideration innovation and the innovation culture of tourism organizations with the integration of gamification for enriched and memorable tourist experiences.

2. INNOVATION AND INNOVATION CULTURE IN TOURISM

The leading innovations that have dramatically changed the face of tourism are external to the industry (Hjalager, 2010, 2015). and they radically change connections and dependencies between remote elements of the tourism system. The innovative capacity of microenterprises show that innovativeness depends on external connections and associations (networks, clusters, etc.) (Rønningen, 2010). Start-ups or 'young' enterprises seek, experiment and develop new products and services (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000). Scientific and technological progress promotes tourism development, but there is usually some lag in the implementation of achievements in practice. The readiness and absorptive capacity of the organization itself also plays an essential role. In most cases, innovations in tourism are moderate, imitative and transferred (adapted) from other spheres (Weidenfeld et al., 2010).

Innovations go through different stages (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977): from earlier ones aimed at 'physically' close markets in terms of culture, language and business models to later when investments are directed to more distant markets, benefiting from experience and accumulated knowledge. Although the tourism market is by definition 'mobile', the model is useful as enterprises providing services in an institutionally different environment must develop new supply channels which require innovation in terms of creating new organizational forms and partnerships at each stage of the internationalization. An important aspect of innovation management is the optimal integration of external knowledge as more and more innovations are born in a network of interacting companies. So-called 'born global' tourism enterprises are a confirmation

of this (Calof & Beamish, 1995; Chetty & Campbell-Hunt, 2004; Hjalager, 2015) as specific knowledge and awareness of the importance of internationalization for the success and future development of the enterprise are the basis of innovation. The acquisition of knowledge both external and internal to the enterprise itself depends on the ability, accessibility, transparency and effective communication for the acquisition of knowledge. In tourism, this refers to the possession of language skills, knowledge of the specifics and peculiarities of leisure time and consumer behavior while there is a dependence on networks and cooperation along the supply chain (Adner & Kapoor, 2010; Paget et al., 2010). Innovation requires not just knowledge transfer, but also effective absorption or even absorptive capacity: organizational, resource and cultural. In the field of tourism, the challenges are primarily related to intercultural features, including tolerance, differences, openness and others that can successfully be transformed into innovations (Chen, 2011). Innovation is based on competition, the pursuit of higher quality at lower price (Jacob et al., 2010).

Innovations require special attention to both so-called intra-organizational knowledge, as well as those outside the enterprise. Successful internationalization requires openness to external sources of knowledge and effective engagement in formal and/or informal networks. In the so-called network approach (Johanson & Mattsson, 1998) emphasis is placed on relations between firms as a coordinating mechanism determining behaviour. It is networks that bind enterprises together, providing them with various resources and sector-specific knowledge. In the network approach, markets are considered as relations between economic agents, therefore the individual enterprise cannot be studied independently, but only in relation to the other participants in the network. In tourism, networks and collaboration with different stakeholders, openness and readiness for exchange of ideas are essential for innovation culture. Tourism is a service sector for which new technologies and the reduction of barriers have created fundamentally new forms of service provision (Knowles et al., 2001). Many different business entities are involved in the supply chain, which means exceptional coordination and cooperation to ensure the quality of the tourist experience at the destination. Hence, a significant part of competitive advantage depends on innovation culture and the capabilities and capacity of individual organizations to partner with other entities along the supply chain. The leading role in the supply chain is usually held by market leaders (leadership), often with political and public influence (environmental).

At organizational level innovation culture is studied as an impact on business performance. It is identified as a critical factor in competitiveness, enabling adaptation

and greater flexibility to market conditions and changing customer behavior (Gomezelj, 2016). Innovation culture in tourism is a multifaceted concept, involving different factors shaping a company's performance. These factors are individual, organizational and environmental (Baggio & Del Chiappa, 2014). Underlying innovation culture are the requirements for strong organizational culture, leadership and management practices supporting innovation, individual values, beliefs and behaviors that promote creativity, experimentation, risk-taking and collaboration (Gomezelj, 2016). The focus on continuous learning, improvement and the ability for effective management of the innovation process, requires a long-term commitment and willingness to invest in resources and capabilities to support innovation. Different types of innovation, product, process, organization and marketing (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & Statistical Office of the European Communities, 2005) require different forms of innovation culture and management practices. The adoption of innovation culture at organizational level can lead to a range of benefits such as increased competitiveness and improved customer satisfaction, but also increased employee engagement and retention, and enhanced business performance (Gomezelj, 2016). In order to foster innovation culture it is important to prioritize innovation as an integral part of a strategic agenda and promote a culture of continuous learning and improvement, providing training and development opportunities for employees, encouraging cross-functional collaboration and knowledge sharing, and incentivizing and rewarding innovation and creativity.

Emerging trends and new technologies transform the external environment (macro and micro), competition, governmental policies and the agenda for strategic development which itself reflects innovation culture. The latest developments and consequences of COVID-19, clearly changed the environment by revealing the real benefits from innovation culture as a premise for survival and competitiveness.

At destination management level, innovation culture is characterized by a willingness to experiment, take risks and collaborate with stakeholders in order to develop new products and services enhancing the tourist experience. Core to the success of innovation culture at destination level is again the existence of strong leadership, effective communication and the active involvement of a broad range of stakeholders. The adoption of an innovation culture can lead to a range of benefits for the destination such as increased competitiveness, but also an improved quality of life for residents. Environmental and external factors, including market trends, government policies and technological change, influence the development of innovation culture in tourism destinations.

Smart destinations are characterized by the use of advanced information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance the visitor experience, improve the management of tourism flows and increase the sustainability of the destination (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2019). The development of smart destinations requires a collaborative approach among stakeholders, including government, businesses, residents and visitors. The adoption of new technologies in destination management facilitates real-time monitoring and decision-making, allowing destinations to respond quickly to changing conditions and visitor needs. The application of ICT also raises a range of challenges, including data privacy and security concerns, the need for appropriate infrastructure and technical expertise, and also has the potential for over-reliance on technology. There is no doubt that the future of tourism destination management will continue to be shaped by the evolution of new technologies, e.g. artificial intelligence (AI), internet of things (IoT), blockchain and others, offering a wide set of opportunities for innovation. Thus, the success of innovation culture in tourism destinations depends on the ability to create a supportive ecosystem that fosters creativity, learning and collaboration among stakeholders and aligning the innovation efforts with broader community goals and objectives (Gomezelj, 2016; Ivars-Baidal et al., 2019).

3. Gamification for engaging tourist experience in destination management

As a concept, gamification is defined as the "use of game design elements and game thinking in a non-gaming context" (Deterding et al., 2011, p. 9).

At the destination level, gamification has proved to be an effective tool in marketing efforts for destination development, the raising of awareness, enhancing tourist experience, engagement, entertainment, improving customer loyalty and also at the organizational level supporting employee management (Corrêa & Kitano, 2015; Xu et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2017). Gamification works in a dynamic ecosystem based on complex relations between the major stakeholders in tourism: tourism organizations, tourists, employees and the community (Negruşa et al., 2015). It has great potential for tourist engagement, satisfaction, loyalty, learning, promotion of sustainable and responsible practices and behavior change. As a destination tool in can be applied in various tourism contexts, including destinations, attractions and events, and can be implemented using various technologies such as mobile apps, websites and social media. Gamification has become an increasingly popular research topic in tourism and hospitality, especially in the context of digital platforms (Bravo

et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2014). The success of gamification depends on the careful consideration of various factors, such as user experience, game design, and alignment with the destination's goals and values (Pasca et al., 2021). Gamification is highly suitable for integration with different technologies such as augmented reality (AR). The combination of gamification with augmented reality enhancing visitors' learning and knowledge acquisition and providing a more immersive and interactive experience. The limitation factors besides gamification design, mechanics and dynamics are also quality of the technology and the alignment of game objectives with the destination's goals and values (Wu & Stilwell, 2018).

In practice we can find different approaches integrating gamification into destination management. Among them are gamified loyalty programs, the stimulation of repeat visitors and loyalty by offering rewards and badges for certain behaviors or achievements, such as visiting multiple attractions, sharing social media posts and completing surveys (Abou-Shouk & Soliman, 2021; Hofacker et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2017). Another way to apply gamification is by the creation of interactive wayfinding experiences for visitors, such as treasure hunts or scavenger hunts, that encourage exploration and discovery of the destination (Hsiao & Tang, 2021; Swacha & Ittermann, 2017). Gamification can be applied to the creation of immersive and interactive learning experiences for visitors, such as quizzes, puzzles and interactive exhibits that provide information on the history, culture and attractions of the destination (Corrêa & Kitano, 2015; Mileva et al., 2021). Not to be underestimated are different gamified sustainability initiatives, such as encouraging visitors to reduce waste or conserve energy through gamified challenges and rewards (Pasca et al., 2021). For destination marketing gamification allows the creation of interactive marketing campaigns that promote the destination and encourage visitor engagement, such as online games, social media challenges and augmented reality experiences (Abou-Shouk & Soliman, 2021; Bravo et al., 2021).

Overall, gamification can help to enhance the visitor experience, increase engagement and loyalty, and promote sustainable tourism practices, while also providing destination managers with valuable data and insights on visitor behaviors and preferences.

The benchmark analysis identified the following good practices in innovation culture in tourism destination management:

1. Amsterdam Innovation Motor (AIM) (Aimsterdam, n.d.): a public-private partnership that fosters innovation culture in Amsterdam by connecting businesses, universities and government entities to promote innovation and entrepreneurship.
2. Dubai Future Foundation (n.d.): an organization that aims to foster innovation culture in Dubai by

promoting research, development and innovation in various sectors, including tourism.
3. Innovation Norway (n.d.): a government-funded organization that supports innovation culture in Norway by providing funding, advice and support to businesses and entrepreneurs in various sectors, including tourism.
4. VisitOSLO (n.d.): the official tourism board for Oslo, Norway, which has implemented various innovative initiatives, such as the Oslo Pass, a travel card that provides discounts and free entry to various attractions, and the Oslo Visitor Centre, a digital platform that offers personalized travel recommendations to visitors.
5. Tourism New Zealand (n.d.): the national tourism organization, which has implemented innovative marketing campaigns, such as the '100% Pure New Zealand' campaign, promoting the country's natural beauty and outdoor activities. They also have a strong focus on sustainable tourism practices.

These are just a few examples of how innovation culture can be fostered and implemented in tourism destination management. Gamification applications promoting different attractions and destinations have become a popular tool for the enrichment of tourist experience; a 'cross tool' between entertainment, digital marketing and promotion which definitely has the potential to raise tourist attention. But what are the limitations and borders of such experience when visiting an attraction or destination? What are the premises for successful and effective gamification in the light of current trends for innovation and the importance of innovation culture?

4. Methodology

The main research question can be defined as what is the relationship between innovation culture, gamification, tourism and destination management in the context of Sofia, Bulgaria? The research question is based on the need for deeper investigation into this complex relationship, specifically within the context of Sofia. It is based on a literature review on the topic, as well as on desk research on innovation, innovation culture and gamification in tourism.

The research methods employed consist of the combination of literature review, desk research, qualitative surveys and a mixed-methods approach to investigate this relationship. It utilizes both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Desk research was applied for analysis of national strategic documents such as 'Digital Bulgaria', 'National Vision for Tourism Digitalization 2030',

surveys related to the Communication Strategy of Sofia as a Tourist Destination (2023–2027) (Sofia Municipality, n.d.), and data from the *Innovation.bg* report (European Commision, Representation in Bulgaria, 2020). This desk research helps provide background information and context for the study.

The primary data was collected by qualitative research methods through two surveys using the key informant technique. Measuring innovation culture is a complex process that involves assessing various factors related to organizational culture, leadership, employee behaviour and innovation outcomes. Different tools and methodologies can be used to measure innovation culture, such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, observation and analysis of organizational data. The main findings of exploratory factor analysis (Dobni, 2008) suggest that innovation culture can be measured as a generalized construct consisting of five dimensions: leadership support, empowerment and autonomy, idea generation, work environment and resources. In the survey these dimensions do not exist precisely, as in the preliminary test, and direct answers were too general, revealing a willingness to represent the organization as innovative and in positive light. This is why the questions were changed and we asked about the major deficits and weaknesses in innovation activity and innovation culture.

Two surveys were undertaken:
1. Survey 1: Targeted at the main players at the destination level, including travel agencies and the hospitality sector. This survey was conducted with 18 key informants. The sample selection criteria included factors such as revenue volume, efficiency and the number of employees.
2. Survey 2: Aimed to obtain deeper insights into gamification as a tool for destination marketing and management. This survey also involved 18 key informants representing various sectors, including tourism associations, cultural institutions, destination management organizations, governmental bodies, the IT sector and academia.

The first survey was directed at the main players at destination level: travel agencies and the hospitality sector. The second survey aimed to obtain deeper insight into gamification as a tool for destination marketing and management. The survey period initially launched in 2020, was extended in 2022 in order to take into account the COVID-19 consequences. In selecting the key informants, five eligibility characteristics were considered, namely, formal role and position in the community, knowledge, willingness, communicability and impartiality.

In the first survey 18 key informants participated, and the sample selection was made by such criteria as revenue volume, efficiency and the number of employees. Initially the sample was formed on the basis of available information on the degree of development (stability coefficient) according to the National Statistical Institute and the Bulgarian Industrial Association. Although attempts were made to form a sample, due to the lack of sufficient, reliable and representative information, the use of a random principle for selecting respondents was forced. A limitation of the survey is the lack of clear distinction between the personal opinion of the informant and the eventual official position for the represented organization. A semi-structured survey, combining open-ended and closed answer questions on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*insignificant*) to 5 (*extremely significant*), was used in order to grade the importance given by the respondents to the questions asked. The survey period in 2020, was reopened and extended in 2022. The results do not consider differences in time (e.g. COVID), but rather evaluate it as a whole.

The second survey again with 18 key informants, was selected to represent tourism associations and companies, cultural institutions, Sofia destination management organizations, governmental bodies, the IT sector and academia.

The survey questionnaires were designed to include a combination of open-ended and closed-answer questions with a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*insignificant*) to 5 (*extremely significant*). This allowed respondents to provide both qualitative and quantitative data. The data collection methods for both surveys used Google Forms, allowing invited key informants to complete the questions online.

Key informants were selected based on five eligibility characteristics: formal role and position in the community, knowledge, willingness to participate, communicability and impartiality.

The key themes for the open-ended questions were identified based on a literature review and were then quantitatively assessed. Additionally, 'free comments' were collected and analyzed using an iterative-inductive thematic analysis method, which involves identifying themes or patterns in the data and refining them through a repeated process of comparison and revision. This allowed a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data collection to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. The two surveys aimed to explore the relationship between innovation culture, gamification, tourism and destination management and used a mixed-methods approach to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon.

The collected data were analyzed using various methods, including exploratory factor analysis for measuring innovation culture, thematic analysis for open-ended questions and quantitative analysis for closed-answer questions. The iterative-inductive thematic method was employed to identify themes and patterns in the data.

Our main hypothesis is that successful implementation of gamification in tourism requires a culture of innovation within the organization. The mixed methods approach has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings including sample size and selection. The sample size is non-representative and the selection procedure of key informants may not have been representative of the entire sector. The study could only be considered a pilot and an introduction to developing an actual research methodology for the complexity of innovation culture and relationship with gamification in tourism. Also, the research relied on self-reported data from key informants which can be subjective and influenced by personal biases or perceptions. Moreover, the scope is limited as the research focused on a specific region (Sofia) and specific sectors (tourism, innovation, gamification), which may not be representative of the broader context. The research did not collect longitudinal data to track changes in innovation culture, gamification or tourism over time. Last, but not least, measuring innovation culture is complex, and the study relied on self-reported data and exploratory factor analysis, which may not capture the full complexity of this construct accurately. Not covered in detail are external factors able to influence innovation culture through gamification in tourism, such as changes in government policies (stimuli), economic conditions or industry-specific trends.

5. Main findings

5.1. Evaluation of innovativeness and innovation culture in Bulgarian tourism organizations

The innovation potential of the Bulgarian economy is driven primarily by the impact of external factors (European structural financing, EU pressure for developing an innovation-oriented policy framework), and despite obstacles at national and local levels (lack of understanding among policymakers of the importance of innovation; low administrative capacity; lack of mechanisms for promoting entrepreneurial and innovation culture; corruption).

The innovation system is considered as a set for the co-creation or the joint creation of value, composed of interconnected and interdependent networked actors. These include the firm, customers, suppliers, complementary innovators and other agents as regulators (Gomes et al., 2018).

There is no comprehensive vision of the priorities of the national economy, and the innovation system in particular, resulting in ad hoc policies and inconsistent and unsustainable measures for their enforcement. The input indicators of the national innovation 'ecosystem' and its functioning vary significantly from year to year, thus highlighting the precariousness of Bulgarian innovation policy which has no clear direction or parameters. The political instability over the last two years has not contributed to this in Bulgaria.

In Bulgaria, the units identified by innovation theory as elements of an ecosystem, along with the links among them (to the extent that they exist), are not managed within a consistent framework based on in-depth analysis of the potential and the need for innovation, the causal links in the innovation life-cycle, the place and role of individual units in the innovation ecosystem, the synergy effects among them and the opportunities for growth. Thus, the management of innovation processes remains outside the priorities of the policy cycle.

Innovation ecosystems include heterogeneous organizations that jointly grow through the creation of added value (Adner & Kapoor, 2010; Autio & Thomas, 2014; Moore, 1993). Participants in the ecosystem are from different projects, clusters and organizations, with different ways and forms of financing, with different management models, network connectivity and built partnerships between them. Some have been purposefully created as a result of targeted policies, programs and measures. The ecosystem is a dynamic structure that changes, but at the EU level policies are aimed at providing opportunities and supporting active participants in the ecosystem.

Overall, Bulgaria's innovation ecosystem is still in its early stages of development, but there is a growing momentum and support for innovation and entrepreneurship that is driving the growth of the start-up community in the country.

Bulgaria has adopted the Smart Specialization Strategy 2014–2020 and the Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization (ISSS) for 2021–2027 (Republic of Bulgaria. Ministry of Innovation and Growth, n.d.). Among the five smart specializations are new technologies in creative and recreational industries. The strategy recognizes their innovation potential as a driver for social and cohesive innovations and new business models. The cultural and creative industries include digitalization and applications (computer and mobile) with an educational, marketing and recreational character and are seen as drivers for innovation. In this context the evaluation of innovation culture, digitalization and gamification in particular, are becoming important, not only in the tourism sector, but also for Bulgaria's development and resilience.

At the EU level, there is no single common index for measuring innovation, innovation culture and research activity. The main indices used for the analysis and assessment of the R&D ecosystem are the European

Innovation Scoreboard (EIS), Regional Innovation Scoreboard (RIS), Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), Global Innovation Index (GII), European Index of Digital Entrepreneurship Systems (EIDES), European Digital Social Innovation Index (EDSII), the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) of the World Bank, and the International Innovation Index (I3) which has been published since 2009 by the Boston Consulting Group. There are also other indices under development for which data should be purposefully collected and additional studies conducted: the Innovation Ecosystem Index (IEI), and Innovation Radar (IR) which is focused on the business and digital aspects of innovation.

According to the latest available data from the European innovation scoreboard 2022 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2022), Bulgaria is still an emerging innovator with a performance at 45.5% of the EU average. Performance is increasing (1.6% points) at a rate lower than the EU (9.9% points) and the performance gap is becoming larger.

The tourism innovation ecosystem is characterized by collaboration, technology, customer feedback, education and research, and government support. These factors work together to create an environment that supports the development and adoption of new ideas and practices that can help tourism businesses stay competitive and meet the changing needs of visitors.

The results of the survey with key informants about innovations in Bulgarian Tourism organizations were in most responses neutral and product and marketing innovations were as significant (Figure 1).
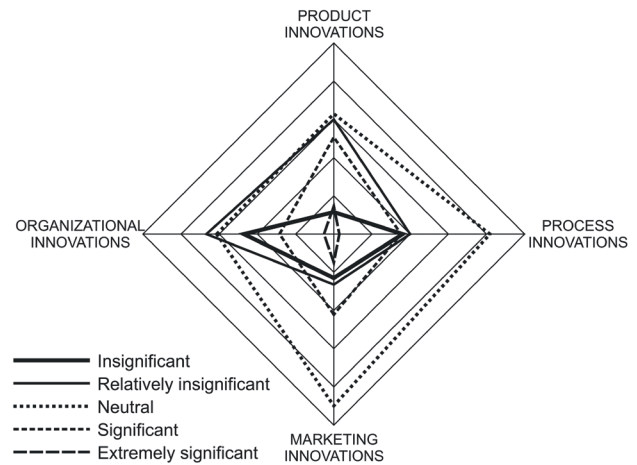

Figure 1. Innovations in Bulgarian tourism organizations
Source: survey results

The general evaluation of innovations and innovation culture in Bulgarian tourist organizations is not positive or high. Asked to identify the major deficits and weaknesses, the following answers deserve interest (see Table 1).

Table 1. Weaknesses and deficits in innovation and innovation culture

Respondent	Organization type	Comments
R1	Hospitality	We are lagging behind in innovation in terms of product development. … We are lagging behind the leaders
R2	Academia	Problems with innovation are related to culture and mentality, to inertia, getting into ruts, greed, copying 'neighbours' and therefore the inability to 'see' new opportunities'
R3	Tour operator	In Bulgaria, innovations occur with a delay compared to other European countries, this makes it more difficult for Bulgarian companies to adapt to rapidly changing business conditions
R4	DMO, NGO	'Traditionalism' in the thinking and actions of management and the limited resources of small and micro companies, which are the majority of those in tourism
R5	Hospitality	The market is 'maturing' with difficulty, and businesses are not taking enough risks. The majority of companies do not follow global trends and innovations, do not become informed
R6	Hospitality, NGO	Innovation processes in our country are at a slower pace and on a modest scale. The reasons are the low level of expertise and short-sightedness of the owners of the hotel base, betting mainly on physical investment and underestimating the upgrading of the service through quality, innovations, increasing the attractiveness of a stay etc.
R7	Hospitality	Not enough financial opportunities and resources, needed for innovations. Non-supportive management to innovative thinking people. Slightly rigid thinking of those employed in the industry and unwillingness to change the status quo. Competition and administrative stimuli will enhance the development of innovations in tourism
R8	Tour operator/ travel agency	Innovations require financial resources which are beyond the strength of the majority of Bulgarian companies. In addition, innovations are usually associated with change, which disrupts the momentum of business, and Bulgarian business does not like that

Table 1 (cont.)

Respondent	Organization type	Comments
R9	NGO, academia	Lack of financial resources, organizational problems, external economic and political factors that directly and indirectly affect Bulgarian tourism and innovation culture
R10	Hospitality	Lack of motivation, quality and capacity. There are successful practices, but unfortunately, they are isolated and do not show a sustainable trend in the organizations and enterprises where they happened
R11	NGO	Lack of experience, low involvement of the state administration in the problem and lack of cooperation in the non-governmental sector
R12	Hospitality	Innovation culture is extremely poor and there is a clear lack of working innovative solutions. There is a lack of innovation in products, marketing and processes and as a result we have a standard tourism product
R13	Academia	Innovations and innovation culture are in accordance with the overall country's status of emerging innovation performance. Tourism is not among the most innovative sectors in general, rather adopting those of others'
R14	Tour operator, NGO	Lack of serious governmental support, adequate policy and an adequate ecosystem structure working purposefully for the development of Bulgaria as an attractive tourist destination (compared to Turkey for example). We do not have an adequate strategy for the development of tourism, financial support in marketing and advertising, adequate personnel policy etc.
R15	Academia	Lack of investment in academic and research activities, including development and innovation transfer between research institutions and business
R16	DMO	There is openness to innovation, but no significant investment and financial support for tourism in particular
R17	Hospitality	Investments are mostly in reconstruction and the modernization of the tourist infrastructure, while funds allocated for innovations represent only about 2%
R18	Academia	Lack of an entrepreneurial culture aimed at innovation in tourism. Innovations are seen only as the application of new technologies and the reduction of transaction costs for more effective process work

Source: survey results.

The overall answers of key informants are not very positive in their evaluation of innovativeness and innovation culture in Bulgarian tourist organizations. Among the major deficits are a lack of financial resources, poor innovation culture, lack of adequate governmental support and stimuli for innovations. Many of the innovations are in practice, benchmarking or imitations of leading competitors' products, without distinctive features or specific competitive advantages.

5.2. Evaluation of gamification for destination management

The results of the survey with 18 key informants about gamification and its role for destination management confirm that integration of gamification adds value to the tourist experience (94.4%). As a limitation, gamification is not suitable for all ages with the major effect being on younger generations. Asked to evaluate the most important elements of gamification – mechanics, dynamics, aesthetics and technology for destination management with a scale (1 – *the lowest* and 5 – *the highest*) there is an almost balanced distribution of answers with the exception of the high importance of aesthetics (see Figure 2). The experts ranked different factors which encouraged tourists to prefer gamification applications at the destination: outlining alternative ways to learn about the destination, the opportunity to enrich experience through virtual reality and entertainment (see Figure 3). The evaluation of the potential marketing effect for destination management shows (see Figure 4) the highest average evaluation for the opportunity to raise awareness of the destination, engagement and co-creation, followed by brand awareness and creation of positive attitudes. The lowest turned out to be the catalysation of loyalty and brand positioning.

From a marketing perspective, the use of location-based gamification apps envisaged by local key informants coincides with the experience and potential outlined in other destinations (Mileva et al., 2021). The innovative approach would be attractive and in compliance with new consumer needs and new forms of travel. Gamification apps are mainly considered as a promotional tool and the opportunity to expand

channels for communication, raising awareness, including feedback and data collection (Xu et al., 2017). A high level of agreement is stated in terms of deeper engagement and commitment (including the co-creation of services) and the effect on the experiences of tourists at the destination resulting in higher satisfaction (Sever et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2017).
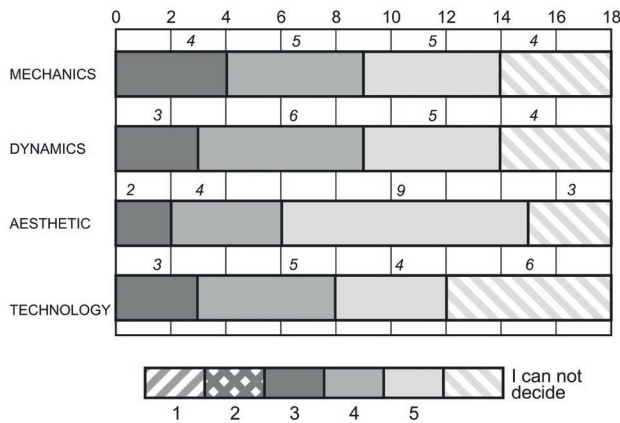

Figure 2. Most important elements of gamification for destination management
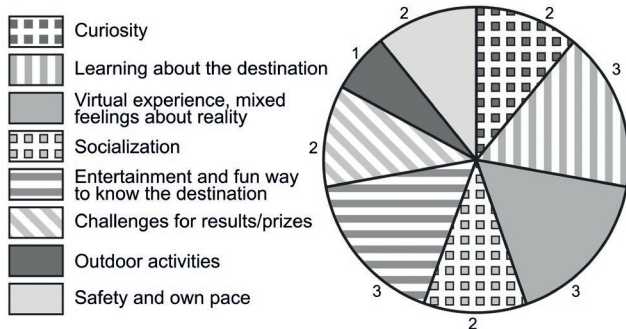Source: survey results

Figure 3. Factors encouraging tourists to prefer gamification applications
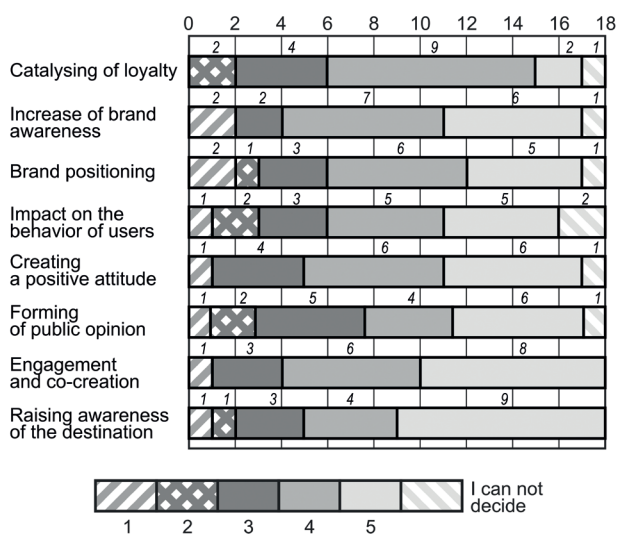Source: survey results

Figure 4. Evaluation of the potential marketing effect
Source: survey results

6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This article focuses on the role of innovation culture in driving competitiveness, growth and sustainability in tourism. Highlighted is the importance of an organizational mindset that values and rewards creativity, experimentation and risk-taking to achieve success in a rapidly evolving and highly competitive market. Some of the key themes explored in the literature include different types of tourism innovation and the impact of innovation on tourism organizations. The article gives practical insights from the perspective of Bulgarian experience, desk research and surveys with key informants.

Innovation culture in tourism can be defined as the organizational mindset, values and behaviors that encourage and support the development of new ideas, processes, products and services to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of tourism businesses and destinations. It involves a willingness to take risks, experiment with new technologies and business models, and embrace changes in response to evolving market demands and customer expectations.

Innovation culture in tourism is critical to the success of tourism businesses and destinations in today's rapidly evolving and highly competitive market. It helps organizations to stay ahead of the curve, adapt to changing market conditions, and provide innovative and memorable experiences for tourists. By fostering an innovation culture, tourism businesses and destinations can unlock new opportunities for growth and profitability, while also contributing to the sustainable development of the tourism industry as a whole.

The surveys in Bulgaria revealed that innovations are mostly recognized as related to new technologies and digitalization, increased opportunities, speed, capacity and ways of working both at the intra-organizational level, as well as outside the organization in relationships with partners and suppliers. Innovation culture in Bulgarian tourist organizations is poor and this is aligned with its overall status of an emerging innovator performer.

Innovation culture can play a crucial role in the development and implementation of gamification in tourism destination management. An organization's culture that supports innovation can foster creativity, risk-taking and experimentation, which are essential components of successful gamification strategies in tourism. Moreover, an innovation culture can facilitate the adoption of new technologies and practices, allowing tourism destinations to stay competitive and meet the evolving needs and expectations of tourists.

Gamification, in turn, can be a tool for enhancing innovation culture in tourism organizations. By incorporating game elements and mechanics into the

development of products and services, gamification can promote innovation by encouraging creativity, problem-solving and collaboration among employees. Furthermore, gamification can also facilitate knowledge-sharing and learning which are vital for creating a culture that values innovation and continuous improvement.

The survey showed that there is clear recognition of the importance of gamification for destination management. Gamification apps can (a) be an essential part of destination management, (b) create added value, awareness and recognition of a destination's tourist resources and (c) be a useful management solution for urban public areas in terms of the spatial concentration of tourists.

Tourism destination management can benefit from both innovation culture and gamification by providing a unique and engaging experience to tourists. Innovative tourism destinations that implement gamification strategies can attract and retain more visitors, increase revenue and enhance their reputation. Gamification can also help tourism destinations to better understand the needs and preferences of tourists, leading to the development of personalized and customized services. The analysis outlined other possibilities for how innovation culture can improve destination management and the integration of gamification for engaging and memorable tourist experiences:

1. Co-creation: collaboration between different stakeholders, including tourists, locals and businesses, can foster a culture of innovation in destination management. Co-creation can involve joint problem-solving, design thinking workshops and community engagement initiatives inclusively through gamification.

2. Digital transformation: embracing digital technologies and platforms can enable destinations to better understand their customers, improve service delivery and create more personalized experiences. This can include the use of social media, mobile apps such as gamified ones and big data analytics.

3. Sustainable tourism: a focus on sustainability can lead to innovative solutions in destination management. This can include initiatives to reduce carbon emissions, minimize waste and promote responsible tourism practices. Gamification can stimulate and incentivize tourists to engage in sustainable and responsible behaviors during their travels. This approach can help promote innovation in destination management by encouraging stakeholders to find new and creative ways to balance the economic benefits of tourism with the need to protect the environment and local communities.

4. Entrepreneurship: encouraging and supporting the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can foster a culture of innovation in destination management. This can include providing training, mentoring and funding opportunities for entrepreneurs and start-ups.

5. Design thinking: adopting a design thinking approach can encourage creative problem-solving and innovation in destination management. This involves a human-centered approach to problem-solving that prioritizes empathy, experimentation and collaboration.

6. Applying gamification not only for tourists, but also in promoting an innovation culture for destination management through training programs for employees in the tourism industry. These programs can help foster a culture of innovation by encouraging employees to experiment with new ideas and approaches to their work, while also providing them with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement these ideas effectively.

This is because gamification often involves the use of new technologies, such as mobile apps and AR, which may require significant investment and development resources. A culture of innovation can help to ensure that the organization is open to exploring new ideas and technologies, and is willing to take risks to achieve its goals. Moreover, an innovative culture can also help to ensure that the gamification strategy is aligned with the organization's overall objectives and values. This can help to ensure that gamification elements are relevant and meaningful to tourists, and that they contribute to the overall brand image and reputation of the destination. Ultimately, the connection between innovation culture and the introduction of gamification in tourism lies in the ability of an innovative organization to create more engaging and memorable experiences for tourists through the use of new technologies and creative design elements.

The main findings, answering the defined research question of what the relationship is between innovation culture, gamification, tourism and destination management in the context of Sofia, Bulgaria, reveal the following:

1. There is a positive relationship between the presence of a strong innovation culture within organizations in Sofia's tourism sector and the successful implementation of gamification strategies. Organizations with a culture that encourages innovation may be more adept at leveraging gamification techniques for marketing and management purposes.

2. The dimensions of innovation culture are complex and easy to evaluate, but key factors from the survey are leadership support, empowerment and autonomy, the work environment and resources. These dimensions could provide insights into what factors contribute to fostering innovation within the context of Sofia's tourism industry.

3. Gamification is used as an effective tool for destination marketing and management in Sofia's tourism industry. At the same time, the main challenges and opportunities associated with the implementation of gamification in the tourism sector in Sofia are innovation culture, technical barriers, budget constraints and resistance to change, while opportunities could relate to enhanced visitor engagement and competitive advantage.

The research confirms the main hypothesis that successful implementation of gamification in tourism requires a culture of innovation within the organizations surveyed in Sofia. There is evidence that organizations with a strong innovation culture are better equipped to innovate through gamification techniques.

As a conclusion, innovation culture and gamification can be powerful tools for tourism destination management. By creating a culture that supports innovation and implementing gamification strategies, tourism destinations can enhance their competitiveness, attract more tourists and improve the overall tourism experience. Gamification can foster innovation culture in destination management by providing stakeholders with the motivation, skills and knowledge necessary to develop and implement innovative solutions to the challenges facing the tourism industry.

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