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Organizational Learning Capacity and Sustainability Challenges in Times of Crisis: A Study on Tourism SMEs in Galicia (Spain)

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Abstract: The COVID-19 crisis has encouraged a major shift towards greater environmental awareness and sustainable consumption. However, in times of severe crisis, SMEs primarily look to return to normalcy and their own survival rather than implementing a sustainable agenda. This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the learning problems faced by small tourism enterprises in a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper explores the learning capacity of SMEs and the importance of establishing mechanisms that provide SMEs with the keys to organizational learning as a source of continuous knowledge. Open-ended semi-structured interviews with 39 tourism SMEs managers in Galicia (Spain) were conducted during the toughest months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show that SMEs have not been fully involved in the learning process, which is mainly related to knowledge transfer and integration. DMOs can act as promoters of knowledge management for organizational preparedness by providing SMEs with learning mechanisms and strategies to go beyond simple problem solving when they arise.

Keywords: organizational learning; crisis management; barriers to learning; knowledge transfer; small tourism enterprises



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has made tourism organizations more vulnerable. The new reality has forced organizations to renounce pre-existing certainties that have been invalidated, which has made successful planning very difficult to undertake. Tourism organizations must firstly know what their main vulnerabilities are and, secondly, understand how to assume these vulnerabilities and integrate them into the organization's planning and strategy and into daily management. This is a complex learning process for companies, especially for SMEs and in a crisis context.

Two main streams of work connect learning and crisis. The first focuses on building resilience, obtained in an endogenous self-organization process, which facilitates adaptation to changing situations [1–3], whereas the second considers learning as part of crisis preparation [4,5]. Both visions have a proactive approach that has been widely discussed in the academic literature. Traditionally, the second vision addresses learning as the last phase that takes place in the tourism disaster management planning process [6–9]. This approach focuses mainly on the management of extraordinary events from which we try to learn.

In the case of learning from a resilience-building perspective, an organization has the ability to self-organize, but this is not necessarily the case in crisis management thinking [10]. Resilience is defined by characteristics such as a system's ability to withstand a disturbance while maintaining its basic functions, the ability to self-organize, and the

ability to learn and adapt [11]. Adaptive capability occurs because the process encompasses the entire scope of the organization, not just those aspects directly related to the crisis. In this sense it is a broader vision, since in addition to preparing for sudden and extraordinary changes, the organization becomes involved in a process of adaptation to incremental and cumulative changes in which employees participate [1]. Disaster management in tourism is necessary but not sufficient to advance knowledge on how organizations plan for, cope with, and recover from tragic events and adapt to continuous change [10].

Both views are complementary and not exclusive, and take a fundamentally cognitive approach to learning, i.e., the relationship between crises and learning is based on the assumption that a better understanding of the causes of crises and the opportunity to learn from past crises can prevent a recurrence of crises [12]. Accordingly, organizations, and specifically managers, must be aware of their specific vulnerabilities and understand how the crisis will affect their organization. In order to quickly adapt to new scenarios and take advantage of opportunities, they must be aware of the basic aspects that make up the organizational learning process.

McManus et al. [13] noted that organizational resilience is comprised of three factors: an organization's overall situation awareness, management of keystone vulnerabilities, and adaptive capacity. In order to manage and address one's own vulnerabilities, one must first identify them and be aware of their existence. Ignorance of the organization's vulnerabilities and "how to learn" causes a decision bias in the organizations with the main interest being the return to normalcy as soon as possible [14,15]. Roux-Dufort [15] noted that in times of crises organizations engage in a normalization process, i.e., managers strive toward restoring the status quo as soon as possible rather than looking for opportunities to change. Even managers equipped with the best resources are subject to cognitive biases that can make decisions irrational, erroneous, or flawed [16]. In this condition, organizational learning is not undertaken in a well-managed and defined way, which reduces the capability of tourism organizations to create new knowledge to facilitate future crisis management [17].

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the whole world and caused a change in the tourism paradigm. Many SMEs around the world were severely affected by the need to completely shut down their activities for months, and expectations for recovery in the medium term are not optimistic. SMEs are more vulnerable to crisis impacts due to their limited capacity to reduce risk [18]. SMEs do not have the capacity and increased resources—financial, human, operational—of large companies to prepare for crisis contingencies and respond to the challenges they face, and due to their small size, resources, and knowledge, small businesses are unable to analyze potential threats, to assemble crisis teams, and produce crisis plans [19]. In addition, we know that small businesses have serious difficulties learning from a crisis and during a crisis, and a series of barriers hinders the learning process and prevents them from having the knowledge and willingness to cope with change and adapt quickly to unexpected situations [15,20]. This is an area of growing importance and concern where specific research and more in-depth knowledge is needed, all the more so because of the dominance of SMEs in the tourism sector.

Studies on organizational learning have identified major underlying organizational characteristics and management practices that are key conditions for learning to take place in an organization. The learning process is not spontaneous, but requires training, mainly in micro and small enterprises. The contribution that this work is intended to make is to discuss the learning problem faced by small tourism enterprises in a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, it highlights the importance of providing SMEs with the keys to organizational learning as a source of continuous knowledge that helps them acquire the ability to adapt and manage crises more effectively. Managers and owners of small tourism businesses were asked about the application of several management practices to identify the dimensions of organizational learning capacity, where the main weaknesses lie, and potential barriers. Providing organizations with learning mechanisms

and strategies can help them go beyond simply solving problems when they arise and can help them to build more resilient business models for the future.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Crisis Management and Sustainability

Crisis management and resilience typically emerge in the discussion of tourism and sustainability. Practitioners and academics have been interested in how sustainable development and commercialization strategies should include plans to prepare, protect, and rebuild a destination after a disaster, both in terms of physical assets and destination image [21–24]. Ritchie and Crouch [25] included crisis management as one of the main components of the competitiveness and sustainability model of a tourism destination. For large-scale problems, crisis management may be a critical factor that determines the sustainability and success of a destination [26]. Thus, de Saumarez [27] argued that conventional indicators of sustainable tourism development may be augmented with additional indicators of potentially damaging crises, and Orchiston [28] (p. 1) affirmed, “risk management is shown to be essential to address the triple bottom line of sustainable tourism management.”

There are also links between sustainability and the concept of resilience. Espiner et al. [29] deepened the conceptualization of resilience as a dynamic long-term state, which bears obvious parallels to the sustainability concept. Biggs et al. [30] explained that enterprise resilience is central to sustainable tourism management, for economic, socio-cultural, and environmental reasons. In the context of tourism destinations, Tyrrell and Johnston [31] presented a model on the interaction between tourism sustainability and resilience, which they defined as the ability of social, economic, or ecological systems to recover from tourism-related stress. Cahyanto and Pennington-Gray [32] proposed the conceptual framework of resilience to fateful crises using the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA), in which sustainability and resilience are both complementary and distinct. Espiner et al. [29] claimed that resilience is necessary but not sufficient for sustainability. For these authors, resilience may be seen as a “lubricant”, enabling the mechanisms of sustainability: without resilience, sustainability cannot be realized.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a major change in tourism consumption patterns [33], with an important influence towards more sustainable consumption, environmental awareness, and, to a lesser extent, social responsibility [34]. It has been shown that it is possible to operationalize a strong sustainability agenda into practice [35]. Roberts and Tribe [36] noted that the predominance of SMEs in tourism, their central role in human activities, and their growing importance in sustainable tourism development suggest that these entities have the potential to help tourist destinations move towards sustainability goals. Gössling, Scott, and Hall [37] considered that after the COVID-19 crisis there is an urgent need not to return to business-as-usual; rather, there is an opportunity to reconsider a transformation of the global tourism system more aligned to the sustainable development goals (SDGs). However, this is not an easy process for small businesses, as a prolonged low-income situation can inevitably lead to business closure; SMEs want to return to normalcy as soon as possible, thus they mainly seek their own economic sustainability [14,15]. In this context, the ability of SMEs to understand, manage, and respond to risk is an essential component for the development of sustainable tourism [27–38].

With the growth of the tourism sector, aspects related to the competitiveness and sustainability of business have gained more importance. Sharples [39] (p. 268) noted that “sustainable tourism development seeks to optimize the benefits of tourism to tourists (their experiences), the industry (profits) and local people (their socio-economic development) while minimising the impacts of tourism development on the environment.” Strengthening economic sustainability and the competitiveness of tourism SMEs is even more necessary in times of crisis. A critical point can be reached where the long-term management, care, and protection of basic and fundamental tourism resources face a state of emergency, either by the intrusion of extraordinary circumstances or by a continuum of subtler adversities [25].

In both contexts, planned action is necessary to counteract the effects of the crisis through decisive crisis management in the first case, or by building resilient systems capable of adapting, responding, and evolving in response to incremental changes in organizations' routines [1,10,40].

2.2. Organization Learning and Crisis

Organizational learning is present in crisis management models [41,42], in which it is discussed mainly at the review or feedback stage. Ghaderi et al. [17] explored the mechanisms that indicate how organizations learn within the framework of tourism crisis management. Various works have applied the concepts of organizational learning to specific cases of disasters. For example, Faulkner and Vikulov [7] studied the lessons learnt from a disaster through the tourism disaster management framework developed by Faulkner [41]. Henderson [43] explicitly pointed out the importance of organizational learning by including it in the final stage of a crisis management model of a fatal plane crash.

The occurrence of a large number of crisis events in the tourism sector makes it an area of concern for managers, with a focus on learning [17,44]. Through organizational learning, managers learn from tragedy when it strikes and try to be better prepared the next time to make productive decisions and manage crises more effectively [45]. Despite its importance, few managers establish mechanisms to develop in-depth learning from a crisis management approach [17,20,46]. Miller and Ritchie [47] argued that, in the resolution and feedback stage, crises may better enable reflection on the mistakes that caused the problems, creating double-loop learning. Double-loop learning can take the form of restructuring organizational strategies and assumptions. Old ways of doing things—objectives, rules, and an organization's work procedures—are discarded, in favour of adopting new ones. In this sense, Ritchie [42] (p. 679) noted that "double loop learning requires a paradigmatic shift as a result of the experience and so emergent knowledge is produced and ultimately new understanding is derived compared to single loop learning".

The learning approach that focuses on building organizational resilience is a driver of the adaptive capacity culture. According to Lee et al. [48] (p. 32) "an organization's adaptive capacity is their ability to continuously design and develop solutions to match or exceed the needs of their environment as changes in that environment emerge". This capacity enables organizations to adapt to disturbances and seize opportunities emerging from changing environments [49]. The adaptive management approach has become essential to deal with uncertainty. For Holling [50], this type of management is necessary to enable rapid operational adjustment to change, to seize opportunities that arise, and to build resilience. Adaptive management encourages the various stakeholders to co-manage on a broad understanding and learning basis, in which expertise is transferred from one generation to another [51]. Schianetz et al. [52] noted that a learning organization approach to destination management offers tourism stakeholders a shared understanding of adaptation to a changing environment and promotes a collective awareness of eventual economic, social, and environmental risks and impacts, as well as how to minimize or counter risk. To advance sustainability in the tourism industry, approaches are needed that promote learning at the level of organizations, as well as the destination. In this sense, Schianetz et al. [52] (p. 1486) argued that the goal is "to creating tourism organisations within a destination which are adaptive to change and capable of learning how to improve sustainability continuously".

2.3. Mechanisms and Barriers to Organizational Learning

Factors potentially related to the crisis-induced learning process include organizational culture, organizational structure, the role of leadership, the stages of crisis management, post-crisis evaluation reports, and a shared sense of lessons to be learned [53]. In this area there are barriers to the learning process, many of which are associated with organizational culture, rigidities, and ineffective communications [20]. Pauchant and Mitroff [54] pointed out that there are psychological barriers in organizations that prevent them from taking

the study of crises with due rationality, i.e., there is a lack of willingness to face the crisis because of its negative connotations. In turn, Mitroff [55] considered that many of the crises appear because there was previously a minor crisis that was not well managed. Ritchie [42] highlighted that the ability of organizations to learn is determined by the degree of their interest in learning from incidents, the top managers' attitude of openness, and the trust between top managers and employees, all of which are clearly related to the organizational culture.

Several authors have argued that organizations should be appropriately structured and managed for effective learning to occur. Goh and Richards [56] and Goh et al. [57] identified five major underlying organizational characteristics and management practices that are key conditions for learning to take place in an organization. These are the following: clarity of mission and vision, leadership (commitment and empowerment), experimentation, transfer of knowledge, and teamwork and group problem-solving. Jerez-Gómez et al. [58] developed a measurement scale for organizational learning capability, and highlighted the important role played by organizational learning in the current context of competitiveness, in which knowledge is considered a key resource. They identified four organizational learning capability dimensions: managerial commitment, systems perspective, openness and experimentation, and knowledge transfer and integration. The above studies seem to support the value of building a learning capability in organizations. An appropriate management intervention—establishing conditions that allow the organization to operate in a learning environment—can help increase the knowledge base and facilitate more effective learning, which in turn influences the performance, long-term effectiveness and survival of the organization [56].

However, in general, organizations are very reluctant to learn from crises and even to consider them as learning opportunities [15,59,60]. Very often, the plans do not work, the recovery takes longer than anticipated, and the learning for individuals, organizations, and communities is minimal [10]. Primarily for SMEs, crisis as a learning opportunity is much more an espoused theory than a theory in use [15]. Small businesses rarely develop a preparedness plan to deal with risks or threats, even in those destinations prone to negative events [61]. This is probably due to the fact that during the crisis the level of uncertainty is so high that it is preferable to wait. In this sense Taylor and Enz [62] (p. 9) have pointed out that “overall, the general consensus at the corporate level on the economic outlook for the industry appeared to be one of uncertainty, which translated into a wait-and-see attitude.”

Small businesses lack the expertise and resources to effectively carry out the process of transferring and integrating knowledge gained in emerging crises. Some authors have argued for the importance of the action of third parties in this process. Thus, Blackman et al. [63] highlighted that destination management organizations (DMOs) play an important role in crisis management, especially with regard to their action as a critical information channel for the entire relevant tourism sector. DMOs can act as knowledge brokers to facilitate knowledge management of tourism crises and disasters. In their study of the Canterbury earthquakes, Orchiston and Higham [64] also showed how DMOs were useful tools for the management of a badly damaged tourism sector and helped to incorporate the “lessons learned” from an emerging crisis into the flow of knowledge for organizational preparedness.

2.4. Methodology

In this research, interviews with semi-structured questionnaires were used as a method to collect and analyze data on organizations in order to explore the complexity and fragmented nature of the business and the social context [65]. Semi-structured interviews offered an acceptable degree of flexibility, while maintaining sufficient uniformity to achieve interpretations consistent with the purposes of the study [66]. This tool defines the information that must be collected from the respondent through specific items, while allowing comparisons between different responses [67,68].

A number of questions on organizational learning capacity dimension were posed to small and medium tourism entrepreneurs. Specifically, on the application of a series of managerial practices that assessed the degree of learning capacity in the organization. For this purpose, we built a fifteen-item open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire used in this research was based on the scales developed by Goh and Richards [56] and Goh et al. [57] who developed an organizational learning survey to measure learning capability from a managerial perspective. The interview questions were taken from the major underlying organizational characteristics and management practices that are key conditions for learning to take place in an organization. The fifteen questions were grouped into the following four managerial practices (the Organization Learning questionnaire is included in Appendix A):

1. Focus on the company's objective and mission; the degree to which employees know and share the organization's mission and objectives and understand how they can contribute to its success and achievement (two questions).
2. Managerial commitment; the role of organizational leaders in creating a participatory employee culture consistent with a dynamic and changing attitude (four questions).
3. Openness and experimentation; new ways of completing the job, giving employees freedom to take risks, and incorporating insights from other stakeholders (four questions).
4. Knowledge transfer and integration; the systems that enable employees to learn from others and from past failures, and to generate innovative ideas, as well as the problem-solving capacity of the organization's working groups (five questions).

2.4.1. Study Site and Context

The study was carried out in the autonomous community of Galicia, in the northwest of Spain, where tourism is a relevant sector. An analysis of the tourism sector in this area of study revealed a predominance of the following activities: restaurants, rural tourism, tourist accommodation, tourist agencies/consultants, and wineries (wine tourism). In 2019, more than 5.1 million people visited Galicia, 6.2% more than the previous year, and the total number of overnight stays reached 11 million. The tourism sector represents 10.4% of the GDP and 11% of the employment in the community [69]. In recent times, this autonomous community has repeatedly suffered the impact of two major types of disasters: oil spills, caused by oil tankers sinking near the coast; and forest fires. Both types of disaster directly affected the most valuable attributes of the destination, such as its landscape and natural environment, beaches and coastline, gastronomy, hospitality, and security [70].

2.4.2. Data Collection Procedures

The study sample was selected based on the snowball sampling method. This is a non-probabilistic method used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources [71]. The study began by contacting at least one individual from the prevailing activities cited, thus initiating the snowball effect from various points in the sector, seeking the greatest representativeness and heterogeneity of responses [72]. We selected individuals who met the requirements of the target population, in our case, managers and entrepreneurs of small businesses in the tourism sector. They were asked to identify other individuals who met that requirement, i.e., other small entrepreneurs who could be interviewed.

A total of 39 interviews were carried out with managers from various subsectors of the tourism industry. Appendix B identifies the sample participants. All of the selected companies are profit-oriented organizations and SMEs. Most of the interviewees hold senior positions in the organizations, or they own or manage businesses as owners, managers, or directors. This is a rough representation of Galicia's tourism sector, where the subsectors of rural tourism, wine tourism, and health tourism stand out, so we considered the requirements for representativeness of the sample were sufficient to carry out the interviews.

The interviews were conducted from 1 May to 15 June 2020 by the researchers of this paper. During this period, Spain was in a state of alarm, due to the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. The state of alarm decree forced the confinement of citizens and the closure of a large number of business activities. As a security measure, and due to the impossibility of travelling around the country (except for essential services), the possibility of face-to-face interviews was discarded, and it was decided to carry them out by phone. The telephone interviews lasted between 30 and 50 min and were recorded with the permission of the interviewees.

2.4.3. Data Analysis

The data from the texts collected were reviewed and coded to extract the underlying information; an inductive process of analysis led to the results [73]. The steps in the interview coding scheme to identify patterns were as follows: (i) Preparation of data for analysis. The questionnaire was presented in Spanish to the respondents. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and two university scholarship students transcribed the answers of the 39 respondents. Then the responses were translated into English and fully recorded and tabulated in Excel sheets for analysis; (ii) Data review. Due to the convenience of a flexible and in-depth review of the topics discussed to thereby obtain relevant information, the researchers themselves carried out a detailed reading and thematic analysis. Two researchers conducted a first content analysis to determine the criteria for organizing and classifying the data. Following Braun and Clarke [74], repeated responses, main patterns, as well as ideas and statements shared by several of the interviewees were identified. Finally, the determining criterion for classification was the positive or negative response of the respondents to the various measures and practices proposed; (iii) Data coding. Since the aim of the research was to find out whether employers were aware of and were applying organizational learning practices in their business, a simple coding was chosen (see Table 1).

Table 1. Coding scheme.

Expressions in the Text	Code
Yes. Always. Of course.	Absolutely Positive (AP)
It depends. Sometimes. Broadly speaking. Not always. I think so. At a certain level. Only in part. As long as . . .	Positive With Restrictions (PWR)
In theory, the practice is different. It's complicated, we try	Positive in Intention, Negative in Practice (PINP)
No. Not. Never.	Negative (N)

(iv) The data were clustered in categories, and the information was organized according to the size of the company. The very grouping of questions in the four sections structured the interview in a way appropriate to the interests of the research, since the first three sections emphasize ideas and intentions, and the fourth managerial practice, “knowledge transfer and integration”, focuses on the transfer and implementation of that knowledge.

3. Results

3.1. Overview

Despite the fact that the companies interviewed were located in a tourist area that has suffered the impact of major disasters in the last ten years, only a third of them claimed to have a crisis plan and a little more than half have taken out a policy that insures the risk of crisis due to a catastrophe. This was confirmed, even more markedly, in the answers we obtained in the interviews in relation to the little interest shown by business managers in establishing prevention systems or tools that allow learning from past experiences. The fact

that more than two-thirds of the sample companies were micro-enterprises may explain this lack of preparedness, due to lack of resources and capacity.

After applying the coding to the interview texts, some results from a first analysis could be extracted. In general, there was a large majority of affirmative responses from owners, managers, and directors for the various organizational learning measures proposed. However, there were obvious differences depending on the group of measures concerned (Figure 1 is provided to facilitate an understanding of the results). For example, measures to promote awareness of the company's objectives and mission and to make employees aware of their contribution in the company were mostly supported. In the second group of questions, related to business commitment, there was greater variety in the answers, for example, a significant group of respondents were not in favour of involving employees in important business decisions, nor of directly rewarding employees for contributing novel ideas. The group of questions referring to openness and experimentation were quite homogeneous and generally positive in the application of the measures. The least followed measure was the one that concerned the stimulation of experimentation and innovation. We found a visible change in the answers is the last group, related to knowledge transfer and integration. This set of questions asked about the use of specific systems to stimulate ideas, teamwork, or knowledge transfer. In this case, approximately half of the interviewees did not carry out these types of activities.

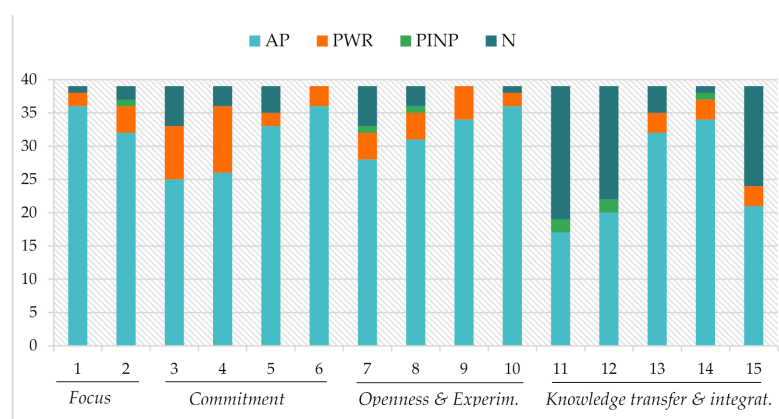


Figure 1. Implementation of the organizational learning measures.

3.2. Focus on the Company's Objective and Mission

All but one of the respondents agreed that managers and employees of the company knew and shared the general objectives of the company. In general, the interviewees stated that it is impossible to achieve the objectives of the company if the personnel are unaware of them or are not involved in their achievement. Moreover, some managers noted that knowledge of the general objectives by all staff is essential for the development of the activity. The companies with the largest number of employees (more than 50) structured the transference of this knowledge in a more systematic way. For example, the following quotes illustrate this point: "Periodic meetings are held where the objectives and lines of development are discussed" (participant 1, deputy executive director) and "sessions are held to inform the strategic plan to everyone" (participant 2, general manager).

In the same vein, most of the managers affirmed that departments and workers were aware of how they contributed to the company's objectives, and some of them mentioned rules and procedures in place in the company to value that contribution. However, the answer was not unanimous as it was in the previous question. This is illustrated by participant 2, "the greater the number of workers, the more difficult it is to control . . . It is very complicated in a company with more than 50 workers" (general manager). Managers try to make the employees aware of the company's objectives. However, this is not so obvious when it comes to temporary workers. This type of worker is quite common

in seasonal tourism businesses and could become disinterested in the objectives of the company.

3.3. Managerial Commitment

Most managers agreed that involving workers in company decisions is in the best interest of business operations. The following quotation illustrates the idea that the responsibility lies primarily with the management: “We try to involve them, since much of this responsibility is more of the management than the workers” (participant 29, general manager). Several interviewees were reluctant to involve all employees in company decisions, favoring only those in positions of responsibility. Thus, the general manager of a 53-worker winery mentioned, “important decisions are made in the Management and Executive Committee, to which some of the workers belong, but obviously not all of them” (participant 2).

This section also assesses how the company reacted to the ideas, proposals, or criticisms of the workers. Most of the interviewees responded that the management of the company rewarded innovative ideas from employees. Recognition could be intangible, through verbal stimulus, or it could materialize through different acknowledgments, such as salary incentives and internal promotion of those profiles that contributed the most. Larger business leaders were more reluctant to reward innovative ideas. The four businesses with the largest number of employees in the sample said that employees were rewarded during the course of operations, and as far as possible, but without specific incentives, or simply verbally.

Most of the interviewees welcomed changes to implement new ideas and adapt or anticipate new situations. As microenterprises they can make their businesses more flexible and responsive, as one of the managers stated: “Of course. Having an open mind to opinions and criticisms from third parties is important to implement improvement processes. We have no, or rather little, hospitality training, so experience and opinions are our main source of knowledge”. (Participant 33, owner). A few businesses shared different opinions and suggested that they did not passively accept all new ideas. The owner of a restaurant with 25 employees explained it this way, “there is always an initial rejection, which in the second phase, if the idea is suitable (...) is accepted and recognized” (participant 5). The pandemic situation and business closures during which the interviews were conducted had a clear influence on the responses. The manager of an ecotourism business commented, “we believe that at this moment we have to make the changes that the situation demands” (participant 22).

Finally, the interviewees affirmed their commitment to seek a solution to the criticisms raised, but under the prism of the objectives and added value for the business. Thus, one executive commented, “we prefer to listen to the different opinions, and assess whether they fit into an improvement of the business within our possibilities, and according to the course we have set” (participant 33, owner). In general, managers and owners considered the opinions of the workers to be very valuable, as by being in direct contact with the clients, they are the ones who can convey, in a more realistic way, the problems detected in the performance of their work. In addition, several of the interviewees commented that their companies had implemented a quality system and the procedures included the collection of criticisms.

3.4. Openness and Experimentation

Most managers considered that their company encouraged experimentation and innovation as a means of improving the production process. However, some of them stated that they did not have the capacity to carry it out or manage it properly. They suggested that work was being completed in this direction, although there was still room for improvement. Thus, they used expressions such as “we do not do it constantly”, “not in all functional areas”, or “it is the way to follow, but it is not always possible.”

Being continuously aware of the movements of other companies in the sector and adopting practices and techniques that are considered useful and interesting were key tasks for almost all the interviewees. The general manager of a company that organized tourist events emphasized, “if there is an innovation that is successfully applied by other competitors, our company also adapts” (participant 29). All managers said that they initially valued ideas provided by external sources, such as consultants, clients, or training companies. However, their incorporation and use in the company was not immediate; one executive noted that there was a “previous analysis of pros/cons of the intended implementation (. . .), because sometimes they do not fit with our means” (participant 5, hotel chief operating officer).

3.5. Knowledge Transfer and Integration

The aim of this section is to understand the flow of information and knowledge transfer in the company. In the previous sections, we saw how important it was for the company to know the opinion of the workers; however, more than half of the interviewed sample admitted that they did not have a specific system or programme to promote the ideas of the employees.

The coordinated working mode became more frequent as the number of workers increased. Thus, one of the managers of a company with the largest number of employees stated, “the interconnection between departments is very direct. There are no watertight departments. The organization chart is very horizontal so communication is fluid” (participant 1). In businesses with more employees, formal systems of coordination were usually established, as a hotel manager said: “monthly management meetings are held with each of the three teams (reception, cleaning and maintenance) to contribute ideas, suggest changes and improve” (participant 7). However, businesses with few employees developed an informal type of coordination, as is illustrated in the following quote: “The company I work for is a family business with few employees, and since there is trust between the employees and those responsible, issues can be discussed in a coordinated manner when they arise” (participant 26, owner).

As for the analysis and discussion of the errors, the will to face them was unanimous. However, in general they did so whenever they detected errors, as some managers explained that, many times, they are not aware of the errors. This may mean that, even if there are good intentions, no systematic controls are in place to identify operations failures so that they can be addressed. Finally, regarding the availability of instruments, such as manuals, databases, files, or routines that allow them to remember and to leverage experiences, 21 companies had records where this information was collected, or quality standard protocols, such as International Organization for Standardization (ISO) or British Retail Consortium (BRC). Fifteen interviewees chose not to use records, and others argued that the manuals did not fit the reality or could not adapt quickly enough to the situations. As described by Rittichainuwat and Chakraborty [75] in small businesses, systematic preparation does not seem to be a priority, and a wait-and-see attitude prevails [62].

4. Discussion

The innovation management literature demonstrates the importance of learning capability for product innovativeness, which is vital for firm performance [76]. In this research, the main role of the openness and experimentation dimension was found. Management practices related to business commitment and openness and experimentation were the most widely applied by the companies interviewed. Openness and experimentation denotes a climate of accepting new ideas, both internal and external, allowing individual knowledge to be constantly renewed, widened, and improved. Openness includes the willingness of members of an organization to consider the adoption of an innovation [77]. This attitude favours experimentation to search for innovative and flexible solutions to current and future problems based on the possible use of different methods and procedures. Developing and enhancing a firm’s learning capability to devise innovative solutions to

problems and launch successful new products provides the basis for the sustainability and success of the company into the future [76,78].

As Goh and Richards [56] explained, in general, managers want to create a climate of egalitarianism and trust where access to people is facilitated, and failures are part of the learning process. For employees to be able to commit and become involved, it is important that they know how to do so, which accounts for the need for a continuous flow of information and internal company communication. However, there is a perceived lack of knowledge transfer and integration of experiences from past events. Although the intention may be different, systems and procedures are not put in place to make learning effective.

The results showed that half of the employers had not set up systems to encourage and develop employees' ideas, and a significant number of them had chosen not to use records. Goh and Richards [56] argued that the effectiveness of knowledge transfer and integration is based on the absence of internal barriers and the existence of systems that allow employees to learn from others, from past failures, and from other organizations. As Smith and Elliot [20] pointed out, many of the barriers to learning from crises are associated with rigid core beliefs, values, and assumptions. Small businesses do not perceive preparedness as a priority in terms of cost-effectiveness; the priority is to carry out daily activities, covering the most probable risks and establishing adequate protection measures for tourists and visitors [75]. As Cioccio and Michael [61] and Toubes et al. [60] argued, we found that managers of small tourism enterprises were not generally inclined to implement the type of plans used by large companies.

The COVID-19 crisis has created a context in which existing standards and practices can be challenged. However, as Smith and Elliot [20] pointed out, full cultural readjustment represents an ideal that is rarely achieved. Learning is a continuous process, and the simple experience of having been through a crisis does not seem to be a sufficient element of preparation for a tourist destination. The small tourism businesses interviewed rarely established a preparedness plan to deal with risks or threats, even in a destination that is traditionally subject to the impact of disasters. In line with Burling and Hyle [59], we found that despite the recommendation to incorporate the experiences of previous crises into proper crisis management, few administrators actually converted the knowledge acquired into a better development of the crisis management process. This is probably because, during a crisis, the level of uncertainty is so high that it is preferable to wait [62].

According to Roux-Dufort [15], normalization mechanisms restrict the learning potential released by the crisis. Managers strive to return to normal as soon as possible, without carefully analysing what has happened, or what is happening, and being able to learn from it. This is a consequence of the organization's tendency to focus on single-loop rather than double loop learning [79]. Double-loop learning requires a climate of openness that welcomes the arrival of new ideas and points of view, internal and external, which allow individual knowledge to be constantly renewed, expanded, and improved. To maximize the recovery from a disaster, tourism destinations must employ knowledge transfer and strategies to minimize organizational forgetting [80]. According to Ritchie and Jiang [81] and Blackman and Ritchie [6], organizational learning and knowledge management integrate a number of processes that enable organizations to improve crisis and disaster plans and responses. Included in this process are knowledge acquisition and storage, information distribution, interpretation, and organizational memory [63]. Many of the companies interviewed had experienced other crises in the past, but after time, the organization forgot the body of knowledge that was generated in previous crisis, making it impossible to generate innovative knowledge (see de Holan et al. [82]).

The key to effective crisis management is based on a structured and continuous learning process designed by management, rather than on detailed manuals or emergency practices [83]. We found in the interviews that one of the most positive factors in this area was the promotion of the implementation of quality systems in those organizations that

established standardized procedures for the collection of evidence, allowing the internal transfer and integration of knowledge to occur simultaneously.

The pandemic has fostered a greater awareness of more sustainable consumption in tourism and the flourishing of so-called regenerative tourism [84]. This trend favours the implementation of measures leading to the achievement of the SDGs. Concurrently, the crisis has particularly affected SMEs, which do not have the resources and capacities to manage the crisis effectively. Small businesses strive to return to normalcy as soon as possible; their survival is at risk, and they pursue economic sustainability in the short term. This behaviour distances SMEs away from the currents that advocate taking advantage of the context of the crisis to achieve the sustainability paradigm. One way to break this vicious circle is to provide SMEs with the tools for organizational learning which, in its various dimensions, includes knowledge transfer for crisis management and openness to innovation that makes them more competitive and less dependent on short-term income needs. Smith and Elliot [20] identified the lack of information availability as one of the main barriers to learning as it makes it difficult to identify vulnerabilities. There must be a motivation for the transfer of this knowledge by those responsible for tourism enterprises. Paraskevas and Arendell [85] studied the prevention and mitigation of the impacts of terrorism in tourist destinations and found that the DMO's performance was particularly interesting in the long-term recovery phase since, in addition to its role in the field of communication and marketing, the DMO also has the role of advocating a "no fault learning" culture within the destination. DMOs can act as promoters of knowledge management generated by the crisis, becoming the entities that carry out the task of facilitating learning and knowledge transfer in the context of crisis [80].

5. Conclusions

Even in the present, when the COVID-19 pandemic continues to severely affect the tourism sector, it is difficult for organizations to learn from the crisis because there are a number of barriers. This paper contributes to the study of the barriers to organizational learning in the context of a crisis.

"Learning" is usually the last stage of the crisis management process; however, studies that focus on learning as an attitude related to the building of resilience and adaptive capacities understand learning as a continuous process. This work addresses this approach by bringing together the theory of organizational learning with knowledge in the field of crisis management. Managers and owners of small tourism businesses interviewed in this research developed a series of management practices to strengthen the learning capacity of their organizations. Nevertheless, a high percentage of the businesses did not have systems to encourage the development of innovative ideas among their workers, and they did not have tools such as manuals, databases, files, or organizational routines that allow what was learned in past situations to remain valid, even if the employees change. Even organizations that experienced crisis situations in a tourism destination barely transferred the knowledge gained in those previous situations into the development of plans and other crisis preparedness practices. This lack of intuitive or informal transfer of past experiences therefore requires the implementation of formal learning systems, especially in SMEs.

The lack of available information to identify their own vulnerabilities is one of the main barriers. This lack of information and knowledge has managerial and policy making implications. External entities with expertise and experience, such as DMOs, may be the appropriate bodies to carry out the transfer of such knowledge since SMEs often do not have the will or the emotional and physical capacity to engage themselves in the learning process. DMOs have a greater capacity to preserve past crisis experiences and act as promoters of this knowledge. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is a favourable situation to implement learning tools and adopt strategic approaches that favour changes in the business model and in the basic assumptions of organizations, orienting them towards a new paradigm rooted in sustainability [86]. The new scenario is an opportunity to direct

the measures for the recovery of tourism towards an optimization solution that integrates workers, the local community, the environment, and social and economic ecosystems [87].

The interviews took place during the period of confinement caused by the pandemic. Although this unique fact may be an element that adds interest to the study, it may also have introduced bias in the responses, due to the great uncertainty present. A limitation of this research is the difficulty of generalizing the results to other tourist destinations with characteristics different from those of the area under analysis.

This is a study of an exploratory nature. In further research, it would be interesting to move the analysis of organizational learning barriers and their relationship with crisis management practices forward through explanatory methodological approaches.

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Appendix A

Interview questionnaire. Organizational Learning.
Focus on the company's objective and mission

1. Do the company's employees and managers know what the general objectives of the company are? Does everyone in the company share these objectives?
2. Is everyone in this company (departments, teams, employees) aware of how they contribute to achieving the company's objectives? Do they have the means to value their contribution to the organization?

Managerial commitment

3. Are employees involved in important business decisions?
4. Does management reward innovative and useful ideas?
5. Do you welcome changes to implement new ideas or adapt and/or anticipate new situations?
6. Do you study the criticism that reach the management? Are you trying to find a solution?

Openness and Experimentation

7. Do you think that the company encourages experimentation and innovation as a means of improving the production process?
8. Are other companies in the sector monitored, adopting those practices and techniques that are considered useful and interesting?
9. Are good ideas from external sources (consultants, clients, training companies, etc.) incorporated into the company?
10. Are employees encouraged to express their opinions, make suggestions or question the way things are done?

Knowledge transfer and integration

11. Are there any systems or programs in place to encourage employee ideas that can be implemented in the company?
12. Is team building encouraged to solve the problems of the organization?

13. Do you work in a coordinated way? How is the degree of interconnection between departments or teams?
14. Are failures and errors, at all levels, analysed and discussed constructively?
15. Does the company have tools (manuals, databases, files, organizational routines, etc.) that allow what was learned in past situations to remain valid, even if the employees are no longer the same?

Appendix B

Table A1. Sample participants.

Participants	Descriptor	Sample
Number of employees group	1–4	19
	5–10	8
	11–50	10
	Over 50	2
Job title	Hotelier	10
	Owner	9
	General manager	8
	Managing director	7
	Deputy Executive Director	2
	Chief Operating Officer	2
	Manager of Human Resources	1
Business type	Country house	8
	Restaurant business	6
	Hotel	5
	Winery-Enotourism	3
	Ecotourism	3
	Hotel management	2
	Pilgrim hostel	2
	Rural tourism	2
	Ski resort	1
	Resort spa rural	1
	Health resort	1
	Media	1
	MICE tourism management	1
	Business consultancy	1
	Communication	1
	Tour operator	1

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