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## Papers

### Innovation and Entrepreneur Learning in the Tourism Sector: Cross-Case Analysis in Small and Medium Enterprises in the city of Aracaju, Sergipe

Inovação e Aprendizagem de Empreendedores no Setor de Turismo: Análise Comparativa de Casos de Empresas de Pequeno e Médio Porte na cidade de Aracaju-Sergipe

Innovación y Aprendizaje de Emprendedores en el Sector de Turismo: Análisis Comparativo de Casos de Empresas Pequeñas y Medianas em la ciudad de Aracaju-Sergipe

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#### Keywords:

Tourism Innovation;  
Entrepreneurial learning;  
Small and medium  
tourism enterprises.

#### Palavras-chave:

Inovação em Turismo;  
Aprendizagem empreendedora;  
Empresas turísticas de pequeno e  
médio porte.

#### Abstract

The process of entrepreneurial learning is evident in the introduction of innovations in small tourism businesses. However, while there is general agreement that learning is an essential condition for generating innovations, few studies have explored the relationship between these topics. This study aimed to investigate how entrepreneurs of small and medium-sized tourism companies in the city of Aracaju learn to innovate and what types of innovation are adopted in these companies. To achieve this goal a conceptual model was built based on the type of innovation, on interorganizational learning concept and learning types and dimension models. The research strategy adopted was to study multiple cases and eight cases concerning small and medium-sized hotels/inns and travel agencies. The interviews were carried out with entrepreneurs using a semi-structured script. Cases were analyzed individually and afterwards a cross-case analysis was elaborated. It was found that the entrepreneurs undergo a continuous learning process to innovate, and this learning occurs both as individual and from established relationships with other individuals (group learning) or institutions (interorganizational learning).

#### Resumo

O processo de aprendizagem empreendedora é evidente na introdução de inovações em pequenas empresas turísticas. No entanto, apesar do consenso que a aprendizagem é uma condição essencial para gerar inovações, poucos estudos exploram o relacionamento entre os dois temas. Este estudo buscou analisar como os empreendedores de empresa turísticas de pequeno e médio porte da cidade de Aracaju aprendem a inovar e quais os tipos de inovação

adotados nessas empresas. Para alcançar esse objetivo, foi construído um modelo conceitual baseado em tipologia de inovação, no conceito de aprendizagem interorganizacional e nas tipologias e dimensões dos modelos de aprendizagem. A estratégia de pesquisa adotada foi a de estudo de casos múltiplos e foram analisados oito casos de hotéis/pousadas e agências de viagens de pequeno e médio porte localizados na cidade de Aracaju. Entrevistas foram realizadas com os empreendedores por meio de roteiro de entrevistas semiestruturado. Os casos foram analisados individualmente e posteriormente foi realizada a análise comparativa. Verificou-se que os empreendedores passam por um processo contínuo de aprendizagem para inovar, e este aprendizado ocorre tanto individualmente, como a partir dos relacionamentos estabelecidos com outros indivíduos (aprendizagem grupal) ou instituições (aprendizado interorganizacional).

#### Palavras clave:

Inovação em turismo;  
Aprendizaje emprendedora;  
Empresas de turismo pequeñas y medianas.

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#### Resumen

El proceso de aprendizaje emprendedor es evidente en la introducción de innovaciones en pequeñas empresas turísticas. Sin embargo, a pesar del consenso que el aprendizaje es una condición esencial para generar innovaciones, pocos estudios exploran la relación entre los dos temas. Este trabajo buscó analizar cómo los emprendedores de empresas turísticas de pequeño y mediano porte de la ciudad de Aracaju aprenden a innovar y cuáles son los tipos de innovación adoptados en esas empresas. Para lograr este objetivo, se construyó un modelo conceptual basado en la tipología de innovación, en el concepto de aprendizaje interorganizacional y en las tipologías y en las dimensiones de los modelos de aprendizaje. La estrategia de investigación adoptada fue el estudio de casos múltiples y se analizaron ocho casos de hoteles / albergues y agencias de viajes pequeñas y medianas. Entrevistas fueron realizadas con los emprendedores por medio de un guión de entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los casos fueron analizados individualmente y posteriormente se realizó el análisis comparativo de los casos. Los emprendedores se someten a un proceso de aprendizaje continuo para innovar, y este proceso de aprendizaje se produce de forma individual, a partir de las relaciones establecidas con otros individuos (aprendizaje en grupo) o instituciones (aprendizaje inter-organizacional).

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The introduction of innovations in companies is directly related to the learning process because, as Henriques, Sacomano, Camargo, Giuliani and Farah (2008) point out, any innovation can be characterized as a learning process in which new knowledge is created or shared. In the context of small enterprises, the process of learning and generating innovation strongly depends on the entrepreneur (Deakins, O'Neill & Mileham, 2000), because he/she is the one who defines strategies and makes decisions (Zhang, Macpherson & Jones, 2011). According to Rae and Carswell (2000), entrepreneurial learning is characterized by being a continuous social process of individual learning, through which people learn from their own experience and that of others. It is through this process that entrepreneurs acquire the skills necessary to start and manage new business, such as: capacity to identify opportunities, deal with risks, creativity, and innovation (Rae, 2000).

Given the arguments presented, the importance of the learning process is evident, more specifically, entrepreneurial learning, for the introduction of innovation in small businesses. However, although there is a consensus that learning is an indispensable condition for innovation generation, few organizational studies explore the relationship between these topics (Isidro-Filho & Guimarães, 2010). In addition, despite the relevance of entrepreneurial learning for small businesses, little attention has been paid to studies dealing with this issue (Ravasi & Turati, 2005). According to Deakins, O'Neill and Mileham (2000), the literature on learning is focused mainly on large organizations, and the role of entrepreneurial learning for small business success has been largely neglected.

Thus, the present study attempts to fill this gap by analyzing how small and medium sized entrepreneurs of the city of Aracaju learn to innovate, and what types of innovation are adopted in these companies. To achieve this goal, we propose a conceptual model, taking as reference the type of innovation adopted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCDE, 2005), which considers that innovations adopted by a company can be classified into four types: service innovation, process innovation, organizational inno-

vation, and marketing innovation. In addition, this model is based on the concept of interorganizational learning by Larsson, Bengtsson, Henriksson and Sparks (1998), the type of learning adopted by Conlon (2004), and the dimensions of learning models by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1997), Rae and Carswell (2000), and Politis (2005).

In small companies, the learning process of entrepreneurs and innovation generation are particularly important because, as emphasized by Silva Neto and Teixeira (2011), the innovation emerges as an alternative to try to reduce the high mortality rates of micro and small enterprises (MSEs) and increase their competitiveness. As part of the service sector, the tourism sector deserves to be highlighted due to the rapid growth in the implementation of innovative actions in tourism companies (Yu & Klement, 2006). The importance of innovation in tourism is associated with the characteristics of the activity, because in addition to the seasonality that characterizes tourist services, the industry faces a highly unstable environment where customers increasingly seek differentiated services (Ottenbacher, 2007).

In this context, the importance of this study is evident since it combines the topics of innovation and entrepreneurial learning, which although they are strongly associated, have rarely been addressed together in the literature.

## 2 ENTREPRENEURIAL LEARNING

In small companies, the entrepreneurial learning process occupies a prominent role, since the entrepreneur is the one who knows the business in all aspects. Entrepreneurial learning, as explained by Rae and Carswell (2000), can be defined as a continuous social process through which individuals learn through their experiences and the experiences of other individuals. Politis (2005) presents a similar definition, when stating that entrepreneurial learning is characterized by being an experiential process, developed throughout the career of the entrepreneur, through which the entrepreneur's personal experiences are transformed into knowledge, which in turn can be used to guide the choice of new experiences. As for Minniti and Bygrave (2001), entrepreneurial learning is a process that includes replication and experimentation and that increases entrepreneurs' confidence in certain actions and adds to their stock of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

The entrepreneurial learning process, as highlighted by Man (2006), can be explained from three theoretical approaches: cognitive, experiential, and networking. The author explains that the cognitive approach considers learning as a mental work of acquisition and structuring of knowledge, being that individual attitudes, emotional aspects, and personality factors affect the learning process. The experiential approach is based on the experiential learning model by Kolb (1984), according to which learning is a process by which concepts arise and are continually altered by experience. In this sense, Politis (2005) explains that the mere existence of previous experience is not enough for learning to take place. In order for the learning process to take place, it is essential that previous experiences undergo a process of transformation.

Another approach of learning highlighted by Man (2006) is the one of networking, which evidences the contextual nature of the learning. According to this approach, entrepreneurs' skills and knowledge are for the most part, obtained through their social relation inside and outside their organizations. In this sense, Ho (2006) explains that entrepreneurial learning is a process that occurs in practice through the observations and relationships developed by entrepreneurs. The learning through networking goes beyond the organization itself and includes the relationship with suppliers, employees, customers, competitors, and is one of the richest forms of learning, since it involves the exchange of knowledge from the most variable sources.

It is worth highlighting the learning that occurs through the transfer of knowledge between organizations: interorganizational learning. According to Larsson et al. (1998), this type of learning occurs through interaction between organizations, and can occur either through the transfer of existing knowledge from one organization to another, but through the creation of completely new knowledge.

In addition, Conlon (2004) states that the entrepreneurial learning process can be both formal, informal, and accidental. Formal learning, as explained by Conlon (2004), is that which occurs in classrooms, through training programs and instructors, and is characterized as being a structured, institutionalized process, which involves learning assessment. This type of learning, although important, presents some limitations, since the

process of knowledge transfer is decoupled from practice, turning only to transfer the explicit part of knowledge, in addition to depriving the social interactions that enhance learning (Pamponet-de-Almeida & Souza-Silva, 2012). Informal learning, explains Conlon (2004), is characterized by being unintentional, and is based on the learning opportunities that occur in individuals' daily lives, favoring informal relationships and learning that comes from everyday experiences.

Another form of entrepreneurial learning highlighted in the literature is that which occurs through mentoring (Hisrich & Peters, 2004). In the relationship established with the mentor, the entrepreneur will acquire skills, self-confidence, and positive professional behaviors, which will contribute to the decision-making process regarding their goals and professional trajectory (Kram, 2007 apud Pamponet-de-Almeida & Souza-Silva, 2012). As illustrated by Rae and Carswell (2000), entrepreneurs can learn from their direct experiences, practices, successes, and failures, as well as from established relationships with others, such as: family, consultants, employees, suppliers, customers, other entrepreneurs, teachers, and mentors. These different ways of learning, highlight Deakins, O'Neill and Mileham (2000), are fundamental to business development, as a successful learning process gives entrepreneurs the acquisition of qualifications, knowledge, and skills required to manage their business at different stages of development.

### 3 INNOVATION AND LEARNING

For Moedas, Sguera and Ettlie (2015) the interconnectedness of topics stems from the fact that it is through the learning process that individuals learn to innovate and make technological changes, positively impacting company performance. As explained by Isidro-Filho and Guimarães (2010), innovation is regarded as the result of the application of new knowledge in routines, processes, and procedures. Thus, the long-term survival of organizations depends increasingly on their ability to innovate and to maintain a continuous learning process that allows their constant evolution (Pereira & Dathein, 2012). In that same line of thought, Penrose (2006) explains that organizations are institutions with capacity for knowledge accumulation. This capacity, according to the author, has been considered a driver of innovation in organizations. For authors such as Lundvall (1992), the importance of learning to generate innovations in an organization is associated with the fact that learning makes organizations more flexible and agile, so they can deal with an environment full of uncertainties.

Another contribution on innovation and learning was provided by Bessant and Tidd (2009), by arguing that innovation is a skill, and as such must be learned. This process of learning, according to the authors, takes place over time, and may occur through trial and error, through experiences, as well as through relationships with other people. Thus, Pereira and Dathein (2012) highlight, the learning process has been configured as a link between generation and dissemination of innovations. The knowledge base generated by the learning process, explains Nonaka and Takeuchi (1997), is composed of tacit and explicit knowledge, and tacit knowledge is considered as a unique competitive advantage that can only be acquired through the practical experience of professionals. Therefore, the process of innovation in organizations requires much more tacit knowledge than explicit, since there is no exact formula or recipe for innovation (Tigre, 2006).

More specifically, regarding the relationship between entrepreneurs' learning and innovation, Rae (2006) states that there is a clear connection between the process of entrepreneurial learning and innovation. Furthermore, in the context of entrepreneurial learning and its relation with innovation, Politis and Gabrielsson (2005), point out that during the learning process, entrepreneurs exploit new possibilities and experiences, which enables them to generate innovations, as they accumulate new knowledge. Moreover, Priyanto and Sandjojo (2005) emphasize that it is through learning that entrepreneurs develop their skills and abilities, which is confirmed by Rae (2000), when stating that through learning entrepreneurs develop entrepreneurial competences among which we can emphasize the capacity of creativity and innovation.

### 4 CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE STUDY

To guide this research, we propose a conceptual model based on the typology of innovation proposed by the OECD (2005), the concept of interorganizational learning by Larsson et al. (1998), the type of learning adopted by Conlon (2004), and dimensions of learning by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1997), Rae and Carswell

(2000), and Politis (2005). With regard to the typology of innovation proposed by the OECD (2005), innovations adopted by a company can be classified into four types: service innovation, which includes the introduction of new or improved service with regard to its characteristics or possible uses; process innovation, which involves the implementation of new or improved methods of production or distribution; organizational innovation, which refers to the introduction of a new organizational method in the company's business practices, in the organization of the workplace, or in the relationships with stakeholders; and marketing innovation, which includes implementing a new marketing method, that involves changes in service design, positioning, promotion, or price formation.

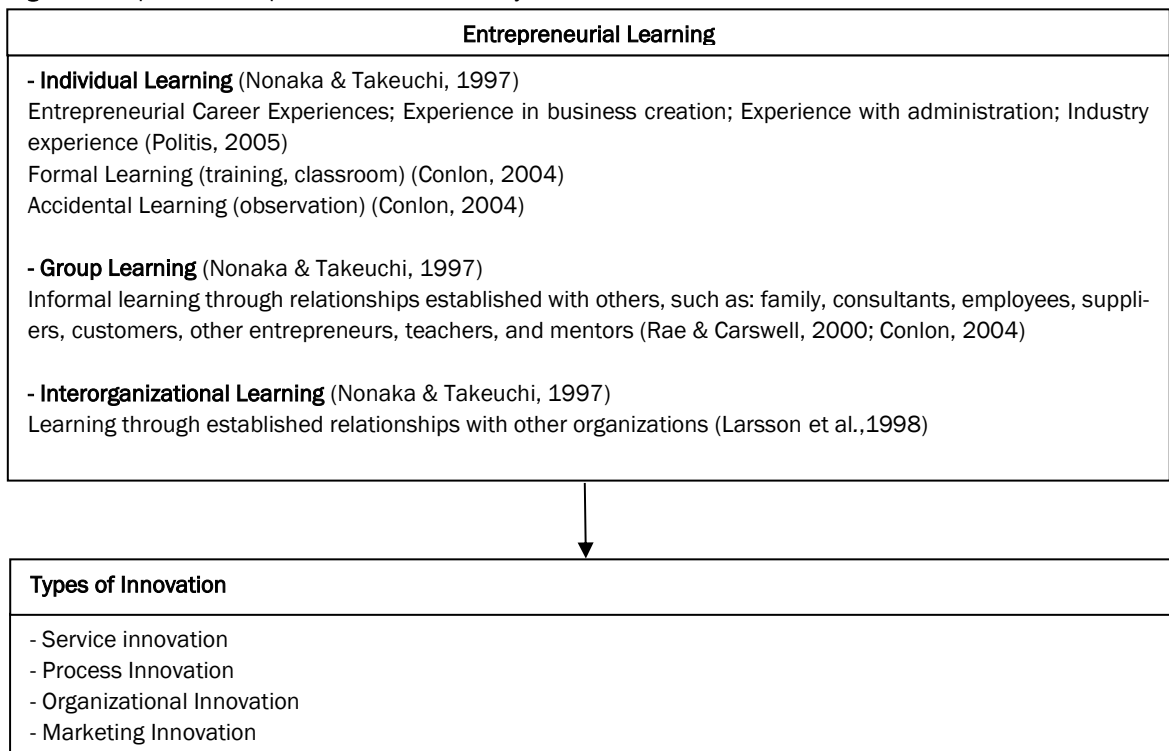
With regard to the concept of interorganizational learning, we based on Larsson et al. (1998), who consider interorganizational learning as a process of knowledge acquisition among a group of organizations, which can occur either through the transfer of existing knowledge from one organization to another, as well as through the creation of completely new knowledge driven by the interaction between organizations. Regarding the type of learning proposed by Conlon (2004), learning can be of two types: formal learning, such as the one which takes place in classrooms, through training programs and instructors; informal/accidental learning, which is based on the learning opportunities that occur in individuals' daily lives, including observation and informal interactions, such as relationship networks.

Regarding the dimensions of the learning models adopted, we selected from the learning models by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1997), Rae and Carswell (2000) and Politis (2005), some dimensions that best fit the study. These models encompass a range of learning possibilities, ranging from the entrepreneur's learning from their daily experiences and activities, to the learning that occurs from the relationships they establish with other people and organizations.

Regarding adopted learning dimensions, it is appropriate to point out that learning levels of the model by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1997) were not used in this study in the sense of cumulative knowledge learning between levels, but rather as a learning process that can occur individually, in groups, or through interorganizational relationships. Based on the concept of interorganizational learning, the types of innovation and learning, and the dimensions of the learning models adopted, we formulate a new model that classifies innovations adopted by an organization into four types: service, process, organizational, and marketing. Also, the model assumes that the learning to adopt these innovations can be individual, group, and interorganizational.

The proposition of these dimensions of entrepreneurial learning (individual, group, and interorganizational) is justified by arguments put forward by Jarvis (1987) and Warren (2004). According to the authors, although the entrepreneurial learning process starts from individual experiences, managers live their experiences with others; they establish various interactions with other people and organizations, sharing certain knowledge, beliefs, and practices.

Individual learning is one that occurs through the diverse experiences undergone by the entrepreneur, such as: experience in creating and managing other businesses, and experience in a specific industry (Politis, 2005). In addition, individual learning also involves learning gained through participation in trainings/courses, as well as by observing competitors or partners (Conlon, 2004). Group learning involves learning that occurs through the exchange of knowledge and experience with others such as: family, consultants, employees, suppliers, customers, other entrepreneurs, teachers, and mentors (Rae & Carswell, 2000; Conlon, 2004). Finally, interorganizational learning is one that occurs from the relationships maintained by the organization with other companies or institutions. Figure 1 shows the proposed model for the study now reported.

**Figure 1:** Proposed Conceptual Model for the Study

**Source:** Prepared by the authors based on Nonaka and Takeuchi (1997); Politis (2005); Rae and Carswell (2000); Conlon (2004); Larsson et al. (1998); OCDE (2005)

## 5 METHODOLOGY

We can classify this work as a mixed approach, since it combined the inductive and deductive reasoning in the same research. This type of approach is advantageous, since both qualitative researchers can benefit from specifying a priori constructs, as well as quantitative researchers, benefiting from the inductive reasoning in the elaboration of hypotheses (Leão; Mello; Vieira, 2009).

The research method adopted was a case study, more specifically, a multiple case study. This method was considered the most indicated in that it allows a better understanding of the phenomena, because when analyzing more than one case it is possible to obtain greater depth and analytical richness (Yin, 2010).

Regarding the choice of cases, Eisenhardt (1989) states that the ideal is to stop adding cases when one perceives a theoretical saturation, i.e., when researchers consider that the phenomenon studied has been seen before, or that incremental learning is minimal. We chose eight companies, of which six are small and two are medium-sized, belonging to the tourist sector of the city of Aracaju, because with this number, it was possible to reach theoretical saturation.

Regarding the criterion of choice, we selected five hotels/inns, of which four are small and one medium-sized, and three travel agencies, one medium-sized and the other two small, through the criterion of typicality, since companies were chosen intentionally for their size, adopting the SEBRAE classification, which considers as small service companies those with between 10 and 49 employees, and as mid-sized companies those with between 50 and 99 employees.

Data collection took place between December 2012 and March 2013, and we used three sources of evidence: interviews, documentary analysis, and observations. Data collection, through interviews, occurred with the application of a semi-structured interview script with the owners of the selected hotels and travel agencies. All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed, classified, and codified, to carry out the analysis.

Documentary analysis included documents such as leaflets and folders, as well as information obtained from the study companies' websites. In addition, we used the technique of direct observation and during interviews we observed the types of innovation implemented in hotels and travel agencies, such as information systems, changes in the structure of the rooms, as well as how services are delivered to customers, including innovations in care, room service, among others. In qualitative studies, since there is no concern with measurement items, the operational definitions are represented by analytical categories, which allow the organization of the elements of analysis grouped by closeness of meaning (Laville & Dionne, 1999). Frame 1 details the analytical categories and the elements of analysis that formed the basis for this study.

**Frame 1 - Analytical Categories and Elements of Analysis**

Research Questions	Analytical Categories	Elements of Analysis
What is the profile of entrepreneurs and the characteristics of the companies of the tourist sector of Aracaju?	Profile of entrepreneurs and Company characteristics	Gender, Age, Education, Work experience, Birthplace
		Time of market, Location, Company structure, Company size, Number of employees, Services offered, Customers.
What types of innovation have been adopted?	Types of Innovation	Product/service innovation; Innovation process; Organizational innovation; Marketing innovation (OCDE, 2005)
How do entrepreneurs learn to innovate based on the dimensions of individual, group and interorganizational learning?	Individual Learning and adoption of innovations	Experience with the creation of other companies; management experience; industry experience; Participation in courses and training; Observation (Politis, 2005; Conlon, 2004).
	Group learning and influence in the adoption of innovations	Employees; suppliers; customers; relatives; friends; consultants, other entrepreneurs, teachers, and mentors (Rae & Carswell, 2000; Conlon, 2004)
	Interorganizational Learning and adoption of innovations	Relationship established with other organizations (Larsson et al., 1998)

**Source:** Developed by researchers (2014)

We qualitatively analyzed the data of this study through content analysis, which according to Bardin (1977), is a set of techniques for analyzing dialogues, which aims to obtain indicators that allow the inference of knowledge regarding the conditions of production/reproduction of messages. Then we used the cross-case analysis technique. According to Eisenhardt (1989), the cross-case analysis technique seeks to discover patterns among the cases, making it possible to emphasize the similarities and differences between cases, as well as to compare the results obtained with the studies presented in the theoretical review.

## 6 COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS

Here the comparative analysis of the eight cases will be carried out, according to the analytical categories and the elements of analysis established in the methodology.

### 6.1 Characteristics of Business Ventures and Profile of Entrepreneurs

We found that while the hotels/inns are located near Atalaia Coast, one of the main tourist attractions in the city of Aracaju, travel agencies are located in regions closer to the city center. Regarding the operating time, we observed that the companies analyzed are already consolidated, since they have been in the market for more than five years, only Hotel 2 was recently opened. Only hotel 3 and travel agency 3 are medium-sized, with 52 and 55 employees respectively. Regarding customers, we note that in hotels/inns most of the guests are business tourists, except for hotel 2, where almost all the guests are leisure tourists.

Regarding the profile of entrepreneurs, we observed that they are in the age range between 40 and 62 years, except for the entrepreneur of hotel 3, who is 31 years old. With regard to gender, we found that there is a predominance of men and that the level of education of the interviewees is high, since seven out of the eight interviewees have higher education.

We observed that in the case of travel agencies all the interviewees had previous experience in the sector, whether working in other travel agencies or airlines. In the case of the hotels, the entrepreneurs did not have previous experience with tourism. These results were also found in the Teixeira study, carried out in 2010, in which it was verified that a small part of the entrepreneurs of the tourism sector had previous experience in the sector.

## 6.2 Service Innovations and Entrepreneurial Learning

We verified that the innovations adopted have involved the expansion and modernization of the physical structure, and the introduction of several innovative services (Frame 2).

**Frame 2** - Service Innovations and Entrepreneurial Learning

	<b>Service Innovations</b>	<b>Entrepreneurial Learning</b>
Hotel 1	Chalets for lodging; hotel extension/modernization; 24-hour room service; services at the pool bar; air conditioning in the hotel restaurant; lunch and dinner for guests.	Individual Learning: observation of other hotels; Group Learning: relationship with family members (father and brothers); employees; customers.
Hotel 2	Eco and leisure-oriented design; leisure and relaxation services; decoration of the rooms valuing the local culture; restaurant and gym air conditioning; restructuring of the gym.	Individual Learning: observation of other hotels; Group Learning: relationship with suppliers; customers.
Hotel 3	Expansion and modernization of the hotel; steam room; fitness center; beauty salon; convenience store; bicycle rentals; Atalaia Coast tours; happy hour in the lounge; national and international cuisine.	Individual Learning: observation; Group Learning: relationship with customers.
Inn 1	Expansion and modernization of the inn; convenience store; 24-hour room service; decoration.	Individual Learning: observation of other hotels; Group Learning: relationship with customers; employees.
Inn 2	Breakfast kit; breakfast in single portions; providing recipes on the hotel website; laptop for guests; wireless Internet; creation of the half-day rate.	Individual Learning: observation; Group Learning: relationship with employees; family, customers.
Travel Agency 1	Online service; Search for airfare and hotel rates by agency website; Currency converter, time zone, and multilingual mini-dictionary on the website; VIP lounge at the airport with massage service and snacks.	Individual Learning: observation of other travel agencies.
Travel Agency 2	Honeymoon Specialist; Sale of packages to Disney in groups; Purchase and service online.	Individual Learning: workshop participation; observation; Group Learning: relationship with family members.
Travel Agency 3	Implantation of VIP room at the airport; early check in; wake-up service; virtual store; customer space on the website; new travel packages; call free.	Individual Learning: previous professional experience; observation of other companies; Group Learning: relationship with employees; suppliers; customers.

**Source:** the authors (2015)

In addition to the expansion and modernization of the physical structure, the entrepreneurs highlighted the adoption of a series of innovative services, such as: innovations in the pool bar and in the room service, in addition to the offer of services of beauty/wellbeing. Regarding innovations in room service, we verified that 24-hour room service was implemented (hotel 1 and hostel 1). Another innovation common to the hotels surveyed refers to the offer of beauty and wellbeing services.

It is worth mentioning other service innovations such as: bicycle rental for guests, tours to Atalaia Coast, and happy hour organization with live music in the hotel lounge, the creation of the half-day rate, the offer of the "breakfast kit", and innovations in the breakfast service, which went on to be served through individual portions. We also found this result in Klement's research developed in 2010, in which it was verified that among the innovations adopted by the researched hotel changes in breakfast, which was served using unitarily packaged products, were highlighted.

In the travel agencies, in turn, the service innovations adopted were different from those implemented in hotels, because although they participate in the tourist segment, they work with different services.

Scholars (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2005) highlighted the use of information technology (IT) as a common innovation in the tourism sector, especially in travel agencies. This study is consistent with this finding, since it was verified that in all agencies innovative services were implemented through the Internet, such as: online service and purchase.

In addition to the use of IT, other innovative services were also observed in the agencies surveyed, such as: creation of VIP rooms at the airport, and the provision of new travel packages for specific audiences. Similar result was found in the research by Gorni, Dreher and Machado (2009), in which it was observed that travel agencies are innovating by offering new packages and tourist routes.

With respect to the learning of these innovations by the entrepreneurs, we verified that there was the influence of two types: individual and group. The individual, which occurs through the observation of other companies, was the type of preponderant learning for adoption of service innovations.

According to the entrepreneurs interviewed, observation is an important source of learning to innovate, since, by observing the practices of other companies, it is possible to get new ideas and copy what best suits the profile of one's business. Bingham and Davis (2012) had already emphasized that observational learning is one of the most common ways of learning, and that the most frequent result of this type of learning is the imitation of the successful practices of other companies.

Also with regard to the contribution of individual learning to the adoption of service innovations, the results obtained corroborate previous studies (Teixeira & Morrison, 2004; Teixeira, 2011), which had already identified that tourism entrepreneurs prefer to learn by doing, i.e., in practice, as well as through the observation of other companies in the sector and participation in training.

Another type of learning considered in this study, relevant to the introduction of service innovations, refers to group learning. In addition, the contribution of group learning resulting from the relationship with family, employees, and suppliers was also highlighted for the adoption of service innovations. These results are supported by existing literature. Authors such as Man (2006) and Rae and Carswell (2000) had already emphasized that much of the skills and knowledge of entrepreneurs are obtained through their established social relationships with others, such as: family, consultants, employees, suppliers, customers, other entrepreneurs, teachers, and mentors.

### 6.3 Process Innovations and Entrepreneurial Learning

Frame 3 summarizes the main process innovations and learning modes in the analyzed cases.

With respect to the process innovations adopted by hotels/inns, it was possible to observe that in all cases, sustainable process innovations were adopted, such as: use of renewable energies, implementation of selective waste collection, adoption of measures to reduce water consumption, use of well and/or rain water, and use of environmentally friendly materials.

The importance of adopting innovations in sustainability, by companies of the hotel industry, had already been highlighted by De Conto (2005), who stated that hotels have a relevant environmental role and must commit themselves to the development of sustainable actions in all their processes. In this sense, Rosa and Silva (2017), state that the adoption of sustainable measures is a consequence of the social pressure that causes the hotels to manage the environmental impacts generated in their activities.

**Frame 3 - Process Innovations and Entrepreneurial Learning**

	<b>Process Innovations</b>	<b>Entrepreneurial Learning</b>
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Hotel 1	Solar energy; selective waste collection; changes in towel washing; use of well water; rainwater harvesting system; changes in the kitchen; purchase of new kitchen equipment; changes in food handling and meal preparation; hot liquids replacement system; new breakfast equipment; Acquisition management system.	Individual Learning: observation of other hotels; participation in courses; Group Learning: relationship with relatives (sibling); consultants; Interorganizational Learning: relationship with Senai.
Hotel 2	Solar energy; selective waste collection; use of well water for irrigation of common areas; new process of cooking oil disposal; new kitchen equipment; changes in the hotel's monitoring system; use of cement floors. Acquisition of management system.	Individual Learning: observation of other hotels; participation in fairs; Group Learning: relationship with customers; suppliers; employees.
Hotel 3	Solar energy; installation of automatic taps; new process of cooking oil disposal; changes in the washing process of towels and sheets; changes in the transfer from the hotel to the airport/bus station; laundry mechanization; monitoring system; restructuring of the hotel kitchen; purchase of kitchen equipment; food handling.	Individual Learning: participation in courses; participation in fairs; Group Learning: relationship with customers; employees; Consulting; Interorganizational Learning: relationship with Senai and Sebrae.
Inn 1	Use of solar energy; use of well water; acquisition of a monitoring system; modernization of the monitoring system; changes in kitchen structure; adoption of new procedures in the kitchen; purchase of new kitchen equipment; mechanization of dishwashing; management system.	Individual Learning: observation; previous professional experience; Group Learning: relationship with suppliers; customers; Interorganizational Learning: relationship with Sebrae.
Inn 2	Mechanization of the process of washing and drying clothes; washing frequency of towels; purchase of new equipment for hotel monitoring; purchase of new kitchen equipment; kitchen remodeling; adoption of new techniques for meal preparation and food handling; pool bar service.	Individual Learning: relationship with Sebrae; Group Learning: relationship with suppliers; Interorganizational Learning: relationship with Sebrae and Senai.
Travel Agency 1	Changes in the sales process with use of new systems; changes in the service process	Group Learning: relationship with suppliers; employees.
Travel Agency 2	Change in the sales process, using modern systems.	Group Learning: relationship with suppliers.
Travel Agency 3	Change in the sales process through the acquisition of advanced systems.	Group Learning: relationship with suppliers.

**Source:** the authors (2015)

The second sustainable innovation common to the hotels/inns surveyed is related to changes in the waste collection process. This type of process innovation was also found in the research developed by Töpke, Vidal and Soares (2011), in which it was found that hotel enterprises are innovating through sustainable measures, such as the adequate disposal of organic and inorganic waste. The third innovation of a sustainable process was the adoption of innovations in the washing process of towels and sheets, aiming to reduce water consumption.

The fourth sustainable innovation identified in this study refers to the use of well and/or rainwater. This result is consistent with the findings of Sperb and Teixeira (2008) who, in a study carried out in hotels, verified that the use of well water is a common sustainable measure in the segment. The latest sustainable process innovation is associated with the use of environmentally friendly materials, such as: reforestation wood and cement floors.

In addition to the sustainable innovations, other process innovations were observed, such as: acquisition of new kitchen equipment for establishments, changes in the way of preparing dishes and food handling, mechanization of processes, acquisition of management systems, modernization of security systems and changes in the way of providing the services offered.

Regarding the acquisition of new kitchen equipment for hotels/inns, it was found that in all cases new equipment was purchased, such as: cold rooms, ice machine, modern stoves and refrigerators. This type of innovation was also verified in Queiroz, Pigatto and Scalco (2012), in which the companies researched adopted new processes of food hygiene and washing, aiming to reduce the risk of contaminations and to increase the quality of the products.

The adoption of management systems to assist in company management and decision-making was another process innovation implemented by the companies surveyed. This type of innovation was also found in the study carried out by Klement and Yu (2008), which verified that hotel companies are innovating through the implementation of management systems.

The innovation in security systems of the hotels/inns studied, in turn, occurred through the purchase of new equipment for the storage of recorded images, and the acquisition of new cameras that record in high definition. Another innovation is related to how to provide the service in the pool bar. This innovation, according to Kim and Mauborgne (2005), is considered an innovation of value, because through it the hostel managed to align innovation and utility propositions; price and cost, as it innovated in its service, and reduced its operating costs.

The process innovations adopted by the travel agency referred to the sales process adopted in all travel agencies. The innovations occurred through the acquisition of software that made the process more practical and faster. This result is corroborated by Gorni, Dreher and Machado (2009), who in their study verified that the adoption of new ways to serve customers is a process innovation common among travel agencies.

Regarding the influence of entrepreneurial learning for the adoption of process innovations, we verified that there was influence of the three forms of learning examined in this study: individual, group, and interorganizational learning.

Regarding the contribution of individual learning to the implementation of process innovations, we verified that there was the influence of learning that occurs through the observation of other companies and participation in courses and fairs.

The entrepreneurs highlighted—in terms of group learning influence—the contribution of learning that occurs through the relationship with employees, customers, consultants, and suppliers, being that group learning that occurs from the relationship maintained with suppliers was the one that was most prominent in the introduction of process innovations.

This result was also verified in the study by Padilha, Wojahn, Gomes and Machado (2015), in which it was found that the dialogue between team members, as well as the communication with the external environment are fundamental for the innovative performance. Finally, with regard to the contribution of interorganizational learning, the entrepreneurs pointed out that from the contact maintained with institutions, such as Sebrae (hotel 3, inn 1 and inn 2) and Senai (hotel 1, hotel 3, inn 2), knowledge that enables them to innovate. We

also find this result in the study by Mello, Machado and Jesus (2010), who verified that small and medium enterprises can increase their level of innovation through interorganizational relationships.

#### 6.4 Organizational Innovations and Entrepreneurial Learning

Regarding the organizational innovations implemented by the companies surveyed (Frame 4), the decentralization of management, adoption of new organizational structures, and changes in the system of meetings are highlighted.

It is worth noting organizational innovations adopted by some companies. In the case of the hotel 2, it was identified the adherence to the new classification system for accommodation establishments created by the Ministry of Tourism: the Sbcass. In the case of agency 3, in turn, the businessman stressed that he is implementing a quality management system to acquire the certification of ISO 9001. Álvares and Lourenço (2011) highlighted that certification programs are an innovation that generates quite positive impacts for tourist destinations, since they seek to define standards of competence of companies and/or professionals, raising the quality of services offered.

**Frame 4** - Organizational Innovations and Entrepreneurial Learning

	<b>Organizational Innovations</b>	<b>Entrepreneurial Learning</b>
Hotel 1	Decentralization of management; departmentalization.	Individual Learning: participation in courses; Group Learning: relationship with suppliers.
Hotel 2	Adoption of a new classification for the hotel (SBCLASS).	Individual Learning: previous experience with management; Group Learning: relationship with employees.
Hotel 3	Restructuring sales; recruitment of trainees; sectorization; decentralization of management; meetings.	Individual Learning: participation in courses; Group Learning: relationship with consultants.
Inn 1	Decentralization of management.	Individual Learning: day-to-day experiences; Group Learning: relationship with family suppliers.
Inn 2	Change in meeting pattern; decentralization of management.	Individual Learning: participation in courses; Group Learning: relationship with family members.
Travel Agency 1	Implementation of monthly meetings.	Individual Learning: participation in courses.
Travel Agency 2	Change in company meetings; decentralization of management.	Individual Learning: participation in courses; experience with company management.
Travel Agency 3	Decentralization of management; departmentalization; implementation of ISO 9001.	Individual Learning: experience with business management; Group Learning: relationship with employees; consultants.

**Source:** the authors (2015)

In referring to entrepreneurial learning process for adopting organizational innovations, the entrepreneurs highlighted two types of learning: individual and group. With regard to the contribution of individual learning, we observed that in all cases the entrepreneurs stressed the importance of this type of learning, which occurred both through participation in courses and training, the result is consistent with Zampier (2010), who in his study had already emphasized that the learning process of entrepreneurs, from their experiences has an important influence on the adoption of innovations by companies.

In addition to individual learning, it was possible to verify that there was also the influence of group learning in the introduction of organizational innovations. Entrepreneurs reported that the relationships developed

with suppliers, employees, consultants, and family were instrumental in the adoption of organizational innovations, since through these relationships information and knowledge are exchanged, and new ideas are shared. Didier and Lucena (2008) found similar results who, in the study carried out in the tourism sector, found that managers of tourism companies basically learn through relationships established with other individuals.

### 6.5 Marketing Innovations and Entrepreneurial Learning

Looking at marketing innovations implemented by the studied companies, the use of social networks, website redesign, satisfaction survey, adoption of new promotional strategies and use of new dissemination media stand out (Frame 5).

We observed that in all cases entrepreneurs are using social media—e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Fanpage, and Instagram—for promotional purposes. In the study by Flores, Cavalcante and Raye (2012), this type of marketing innovation was also identified, in which it was verified that more than 80% of Brazilian “Internet users” are connected to some social network.

**Frame 5** - Innovations in Marketing and Entrepreneurial Learning

	<b>Marketing Innovations</b>	<b>Entrepreneurial Learning</b>
Hotel 1	Use of social networks for dissemination; website redesign.	Individual Learning: observation of competitors; Group Learning: relationship with customers.
Hotel 2	Changes in the visual identity; use of social networks; satisfaction survey.	Individual Learning: observation of hotels; Group Learning: relationship with employees.
Hotel 3	Use of new dissemination media (radio, billboard at the airport; Facebook, Twitter); website redesign.	Group Learning: relationship with consultants; suppliers.
Inn 1	Website redesign; use of social networks to advertise; promotion on Google.	Group Learning: relationship with family members.
Inn 2	Reformulation of the inn's website; use of social networks for dissemination.	Group Learning: relationship with family members.
Travel Agency 1	Creation of an awards festival; use of social networks and television for dissemination.	Individual Learning: observation of agencies; Group Learning: relationship with customers.
Travel Agency 2	Promotion of services in the workshop and Getting married guide; site modernization; use of social networks; implementation of loyalty card for corporate clients; distribution of pamphlets with people dressed as Disney characters.	Individual Learning: observation; Group Learning: contact with colleagues; Interorganizational Learning: relationship with Sebrae.
Travel Agency 3	Satisfaction survey; use of social networks.	Individual Learning: observation of competitors; Group Learning: relationship with employees.

**Source:** the authors (2015)

Another marketing innovation introduced in the companies surveyed refers to website redesign. According to Flores, Cavalcante and Raye (2012), depending on the commercial content and information made available on the websites, these can become an advantage and influence the purchase decision process of tourists, since, as Buhalis and Law (2008 *apud* Flores, Cavalcante and Raye, 2012) point out, a well-informed consumer is able to better interact with local and cultural resources to find the products and services that meet their needs and to take advantage of special offers and reduced prices.

It is worth mentioning that in the case of hotels 2 and 3, website redesign involved another innovation: the inclusion of a “virtual tour”, which allows customers to “walk” through the website as if inside the hotel, knowing its premises. In a study carried out by Moraes (2007), the results pointed out that the virtual tour is an innovation that has been used specifically by tourism companies, in that it allows customers to experience a place even before there is an effective trip.

Also in the field of marketing innovations, we verified that new promotional strategies were adopted. These included the creation of a festival with raffle prizes (case of agency 1), and the development of exclusive promotional actions for corporate clients, with the creation of a loyalty card, which provides discounts or free tickets or accommodation (agency 2).

These results are in line with those of Pires (2010), who found that tourism companies are investing in loyalty or reward programs, where customers get benefits based on purchase volume, i.e. the higher the volume the greater the possibility of winning tickets or obtaining benefits and awards. Regarding the use of new media for dissemination, we observed that innovative media is being adopted in four cases.

With regard to the influence of entrepreneurial learning for the adoption of marketing innovations, we verified that there was influence of the three types of learning considered in this study, based on the conceptual model adopted and described in Section 5: individual, group, and interorganizational. A similar result was found in the study by Silva, Vieira, Kubo and Bispo (2015), in which it was verified that learning in the organization occurs at the three levels observed, and is considered essential for organizational competitiveness.

In five cases we found the influence of individual learning on innovations, through the observation of competitors. With regard to the influence of group learning, it was possible to observe that this was the predominant form of learning for the adoption of marketing innovations.

In all cases analyzed, group learning in its various forms (relationships with customers, employees, family, friends, consultants, and suppliers) influenced the implementation of marketing innovations. Finally, in the case of agency 2, there was a contribution of interorganizational learning through the relationship maintained with Sebrae, which through a consulting service suggested new marketing actions for the company.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

The present research sought to identify, based on a multiple case study, the types of innovation adopted by tourism companies in the city of Aracaju and analyze how entrepreneurs learn to adopt these innovations.

The companies surveyed are small and medium-sized and offer a wide range of services to their customers, common to these companies. Regarding the innovations implemented by tourism companies, it stands out the concern with the adoption of innovative services that can be an advantage vis-à-vis competitors, since the sector is increasingly competitive, entrepreneurs must be creative in implementing new services.

In addition, the findings suggest that there is a tendency to innovate using the Internet. Entrepreneurs reported that the provision of services over the Internet has become an almost obligatory innovation, because there was a change in the profile of consumers, who currently want to purchase tourism services without leaving home.

The adoption of sustainable measures, which lead to lower costs and greater customer satisfaction, stood out in terms of process innovations introduced by the companies. With regard to organizational innovations, we observed that all entrepreneurs considered themselves to be centralizers and seeking to innovate through the adoption of more decentralized management, either by sharing responsibilities or granting greater autonomy to employees. In addition, it was also pointed out as organizational innovation, the introduction of management systems, which aid in business administration and decision-making. In marketing innovations, the use of social media was highlighted as a means of dissemination. Entrepreneurs reported that social networks have a greater reach than traditional advertising, and serve as a direct channel of communication with customers.

In order to adopt these innovations, we verified that there was influence of the three types of learning indicated in the conceptual model adopted in this study: the individual, the group, and the interorganizational.

In all cases, emphasis was placed on individual learning that occurs through observation and practical experiences of the entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs pointed out that their previous experiences (obtained working in the sector, and in daily life), as well as the observation of competitors give them a wealth of knowledge to innovate.

About the influence of group learning, attention was drawn to the knowledge acquired by entrepreneurs from the contact they had with their customers. Entrepreneurs reported that they seek to maintain a good relationship with customers and are always attentive to complaints and suggestions.

Finally, we found that there were almost no references to the influence of interorganizational learning. The entrepreneurs stated that, practically, they do not establish relationships with other companies of the sector due to the great competition. In addition, they do not seek to establish contact with educational or development institutions. This result indicates the difficulty of tourism entrepreneurs in establishing networks of interorganizational cooperation.

We conclude that companies are investing in innovation and seeking to innovate in different ways. Moreover, for the introduction of these innovations, the entrepreneurs go through an ongoing process of learning, indicating the existence of a direct relationship between the topics. In addition, the results show that in this process of learning to innovate, entrepreneurs learn the idea of innovation, not innovation itself.

It was evident, however, that interorganizational learning is a form of underutilized learning among tourism entrepreneurs, due to their difficulty of cooperative association. In addition, it should be noted that although Sebrae has developed, in the State of Sergipe, the Local Innovation Agents (ALI in the Portuguese acronym) program, aiming to encourage the development of innovations in small companies, the tourist chain was not selected to participate in the program.

Thus, there is a need to broaden the interaction of tourism companies with other companies in the sector, as well as Research and Development Institutions, Universities, and Class Associations, in order to foster the exchange of interorganizational knowledge, generating an ongoing learning process for innovation.

From the results presented, we suggest conducting future research with the same subject in other sectors, with a view to comparing the results, as well as the accomplishment of quantitative research correlating the

topics of innovation and learning, aiming to verify the types of innovations most frequently implemented by tourism entrepreneurs, and what form of learning influences the introduction of these innovations.

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