



## Knowledge management, social media and employee creativity



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### ABSTRACT

The study investigates the relation between social media use and employee creativity by adopting a knowledge management (KM) approach in order to consider the influence of social networks and interactions on individuals' creativity. The literature review debates how the use of social media empowers people to engage in conversational and collaborative KM, which in turn enriches people's cognitive and creative processes. Data collected from Greek tourism professionals confirmed that employees' creativity is positively related to their participation in social networks and their use of social media for: searching, storing and reading information (internal cognitive processes); and sharing, discussing and co-creating information (external cognitive processes). The study contributes to the field by providing a theoretical underpinning and practical evidence showing how social networks (i.e. a meso level) can influence employees' creativity. Hence, the findings highlight the need to shift focus from identifying and managing creative individuals (micro level) and/or organisational contexts (macro level) to creating and managing creative social networks (meso level).

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### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, knowledge, innovation and creativity are widely recognised as the most crucial competitive factors that can substantially support and foster an enterprise's adaptation, survival and outstanding performance (Bohn, 1994; Boisot, 1998; Mertins et al., 2000; O'Dell and Grayson, 1998; Palacios and Garrigos, 2006). Actually, there is a reciprocal relation between these three concepts, as the capacity of an organisation to sustain its ability to generate ideas and innovate is predicated on its capacity to learn, expand its knowledge base, and its people sharing their knowledge (Teece, 2007). Thus, in dynamic markets whereby competition and risk intensifies and the product/service life cycles become shorter and shorter, the root to sustainable competitive advantage can only be found in continuous organisational learning, knowledge management (KM) and creativity (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Gottfridsson, 2012; Sundbo, 2012). Specifically in the growing and highly competitive service sector whereby service innovation can get easily copied, the ability of KM to lead to sustainable performance is even more critical. This is because by being mainly tacit (intangible) and embedded in organisational structures and cultures, knowledge cannot be easily copied and substituted and so, it

enables firms to create business value in a unique, inimitable and non-transferable way.

The literature also makes a clear distinction between innovation and creativity. Innovation is often defined as the implementation of ideas, whereas creativity is related to the production of ideas (Amabile et al., 1996; Shalley et al., 2004). Moreover, studies investigating the antecedents of innovation (e.g. Prajogo and Ahmed, 2006) have concluded that 'creativity is a necessary factor enabling innovation' (Carayannis and Gonzalez, 2003, p. 587; Amabile, 2000) and that there is a positive relation between creativity and organisational innovation (Jiang et al., 2012). In this vein, creativity becomes the critical priority factor that firms have to enhance, as it helps them to respond to the rapidly changing environment and provides them with the stimulus for internal flexibility and revitalisation. Indeed, research shows that creativity is both a survival and competitive competency that can greatly increase the firms' performance (Lopez-Cabrales et al., 2009; Shin et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2011). This is because creative employee behaviour can positively influence both the personal and the team creativity performance and so, the firm's innovative performance (Hirst et al., 2009; Shin and Zhou, 2007; Slåtten and Mehmetoglu, 2011).

However, despite the great importance and inter-relations between KM, innovation and creativity, research has paid too much attention to the first two concepts, and overlooked the role of KM on creativity. Indeed, numerous studies reveal the impact of KM on the firm's innovation performance in the manufacturing (e.g. Revilla et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2009; Cantner et al., 2009)

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and the high technology sectors (e.g. Van Riel et al., 2004), while very few studies have examined this relation in the service sector and specifically, in tourism (Sigala and Chalkiti, 2007; Hu et al., 2009). Tourism research has also primarily focused on studying the relation between KM and firm performance (e.g. Yiu and Law, 2014; Cooper, 2006; Hjalager, 2002; Yang and Wan, 2004). Thus, there is no research investigating the relation between KM and creativity, although creativity is the critical pre-requisite of innovation and firm performance. This gap is also surprising, because: employees' creativity heavily depends on their accessibility and availability of the right information at the right time and place (Hemsley and Mason, 2012; Hemphälä and Magnusson, 2012); and several authors (e.g. Farr and Ford, 1990; Basadur, 2004; Amabile, 2000; Brown and Duguid, 1998) have advocated that the people's KM activities significantly influence their creativity generation process. In addition, the following technological advances and research gaps also urge the need to conduct research examining the relation between KM and employee creativity.

The social media have dramatically changed the firms' knowledge ecosystem enabling them to expand and efficiently conduct KM activities beyond their organisational borders as well as in continuous and informal ways (e.g. through social networks) (Sigala, 2012). Indeed, the social media enable people: to aggregate, share, store and synthesise knowledge from various sources for creating new meta-knowledge; to identify and join social networks in order to stay informed professionally and participate in collective knowledge generation processes by sharing experiences, criticising theories and findings within various communities of practices; and to manage their own meaning making and KM processes. In addition, the technology performs many of the cognitive operations previously performed by people (e.g. information storage, retrieval and interconnections), which in turn liberates cognitive resources to be devoted on performing higher order KM activities. Nevertheless, although research has paid a lot of attention on studying how the social media transform and enrich the KM abilities and practices of the firms (e.g. Hemsley and Mason, 2012; Sigala and Chalkiti, 2014), none study has examined yet the relation between the use of social media for KM purposes and employees' creativity. The latter is critically important, as the firms need to justify the time and efforts that their employees invest on social media.

Moreover, research in employee creativity has also primarily focused on studying the impact of personal/intra-individual factors (e.g. personality, cognitive style, motivation) and of organisational and contextual factors (e.g. organisational culture, leadership style, organisational design, size, etc.) on creativity (e.g. Shalley et al., 2004; Pirola-Merlo and Mann, 2004). However, by adopting a people- and/or organisational-focus, research in creativity has missed out the fact that the individuals' creativity performance is driven by the relations and networks in which they are embedded (Aubke, 2013). This omission is critical, since it is becoming recognised that creativity is not an individual process, but rather a social and communication process, whereby networks and interactions can significantly influence the emergence of ideas (Hemphälä and Magnusson, 2012). Indeed, recent studies have emphasised the need to start studying the creativity generation processes by looking beyond the factors influencing the individual cognitive processes and by focusing on the factors influencing the accessibility to diverse knowledge in the work environment such as, the employees' social structures (Perry-Smith, 2006; Hemphälä and Magnusson, 2012) and their collaborative networking ties (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006; Baer, 2010; Aubke, 2013).

Despite these challenges and research needs in the technology, KM and creativity fields, there is yet no research exploring the role that social media can play on employees' creativity. Moreover, as technology advances have transformed the employees' learning and knowledge transfer processes into autonomous, informal,

open, networked and always happening processes, the need to investigate the relation between employees' creativity and their accessibility to social networks and information has become very urgent. Although recent research has explored the impact of social ties and relations on employees' creativity (e.g. Perry-Smith and Shalley, 2003; Hemphälä and Magnusson, 2012; Cattani and Ferriani, 2008), these studies have adopted an intra-organisational focus by examining only the social interactions taking place within a firm and/or an innovation team. Moreover, these studies concentrated on creative output rather than the antecedents to creativity, and so, they have failed to provide an understanding on how networks can influence the creative performance. Consequently, as the social media expand the staff interaction, networks, knowledge exchanges and KM practices beyond the organisational spatial and contextual borders, it has become imperative to consider the creativity role of inter-employee interactions taking place within social networks by studying the relation of creativity and social media through the lens of KM.

The tourism sector is not excluded from such trends, as information is the lifeblood of tourism and the social media foster a paradigm shift in the tourism industry (Sigala et al., 2012). Actually, KM is recognised as a competitive and survival necessity for the tourism firms (Cooper, 2006; Hallin and Marnburg, 2008; Chalkiti and Sigala, 2008) that can significantly contribute to their performance (e.g. Yang and Wan, 2004). However, previous studies investigating KM in tourism (see review by Yiu and Law, 2014) have placed an increased importance on intra-firm KM, overlooking the need to also engage in knowledge creation and exchanges with stakeholders beyond the firm's borders (Bouncken, 2002; Zehrer, 2012). This is controversial since inter-firm knowledge sharing is highly important in tourism due to the complexity and the vulnerable nature of the tourism product. Tourism is an amalgam of many services from different suppliers, which in turn entails collaboration and increased interdependencies amongst the tourism firms and the destination stakeholders (Cooper, 2006). Tourism is also a dynamically changing and highly vulnerable industry that is continuously influenced by numerous environmental factors. To understand, keep abreast, foresee and respond to such changes, tourism firms need to continually collect, share and process a huge amount of information, so that, they can increase their creativity and continuously innovate. To address these challenges, the social media can currently empower the tourism firms to cultivate, expand and enhance their knowledge sharing practices with their customers, suppliers, various partners and other stakeholders. However, although tourism research has focused on investigating the business benefits of exploiting the social media for Customer Relationship Management, new service development, KM, e-commerce and marketing, there is no research examining the role that social media can play on tourism firms' innovation capabilities and specifically, on their employees' creativity.

Hence, given the importance of KM and social media on the creativity generation processes, specifically for tourism firms, the aims of this paper are twofold: to elaborate and provide a theoretical underpinning explaining the role of social media on KM; and to investigate the relation between the exploitation of social media for KM purposes and employee creativity. To achieve that, after analysing the KM processes, a literature review debates the transformative role of social media on KM by showing how the social media migrate the KM implementation from a technology-centric to a people-centric approach that supports conversational and collaborative KM processes. Then, a KM perspective is adopted for operationalising employee creativity and then, explaining how the social media enabled KM processes can enhance employee creativity. To investigate the latter relation, the study also conducted a national survey measuring the creativity and the use of social media for KM purposes by Greek tourism professionals. The

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