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Typologies of Entrepreneurial Innovations in Small and Medium Tourism Enterprises in Resource-Scarce Destinations

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Abstract

Drawing on the theoretical lens of context, entrepreneurial innovations, and critical sociology, this paper theorizes the typologies of entrepreneurial innovations occurring in the tourism industry context within resource-scarce destinations. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with managers, owners, and employees of small and medium-sized hotels (SMSHs) across four African countries. The results uncover six types of entrepreneurial innovations and how these emerge from strategic decisions of managers of SMSHs in response to the tourism industry context as an asset (opportunity) versus a liability (challenge). The findings reveal the development process of different types of entrepreneurial innovations, in terms of the decision-making by managers and the circumstances that create the conditions for these innovations. The study applied a sociological perspective to examine the extent to which industry context represents opportunities or challenges for entrepreneurial innovations in hospitality and tourism businesses after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial innovations; critical sociology; industry context; small and medium-sized hotels; sub-Saharan Africa.

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Introduction

Entrepreneurial innovation has long been recognized as central to the growth and resilience of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Yet, most of the existing literature has focused on radical and breakthrough innovations in science and technology industries (Nelson, 2014), often overlooking how innovation unfolds in service-based sectors such as tourism. Scholars have called for research that broadens this perspective, examining how entrepreneurial innovations are shaped by the specific industry and geographic contexts in which SMEs operate (Autio et al., 2014). Tourism, a highly service-oriented industry, represents such a context. As Hjalager (2010) notes, innovation in tourism differs from the traditional manufacturing and technology-oriented view of innovation, requiring analysis across firms, markets, and locations (Martínez-Ros & Orfila-Sintes, 2009). This perspective aligns with Schumpeter's (1934) conceptualization of economic development as the discontinuous emergence of new combinations that yield more viable economic outcomes. While studies have explored tourism innovation, the successful evolution of enterprises through distinctive product, service, and process innovations at different stages of their life cycles has rarely been considered as evidence of entrepreneurial innovation (Srinivasan, 2011). This gap is particularly relevant in the wake of the global polycrisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely disrupted the tourism industry both locally and internationally (Kimbu et al., 2021; Škare et al., 2021). The pandemic amplified calls for tourism enterprises to become more innovative and transformative in designing and delivering products and services in order to enhance their sustainability and resilience (Ribeiro et al., 2025; Seyfi et al., 2025; Ngoasong et al., 2021). In responding to such challenges, entrepreneurs operating in multiple contexts face dilemmas that stem from context-specific opportunities and constraints (Stam et al., 2014). Context refers to the "natural setting, circumstances, conditions, situations, or environments" of an enterprise (Welter, 2011: 167), shaping the "origins, forms, functioning and diverse outcomes of entrepreneurial behaviour" (Zahra et al., 2014: 481). Entrepreneurial innovation, defined as the creation of new products, processes, or enterprises for commercialization or to strengthen commercial activities (Autio et al., 2014), is thus inseparable from its context. Importantly, context can be both an asset—where opportunities emerge—and a liability—where constraints limit innovation (Welter, 2011; Ribeiro et al., 2021). Despite the growing recognition of context, much of the tourism innovation literature has focused on *what* innovations have been developed (Hjalager, 2010; Buijtendijk et al., 2021; Thomas & Wood, 2014), with less attention to *why* tourism businesses choose to innovate. Motivations for innovation are closely tied to entrepreneurship, including risk orientation, result orientation, and social impact orientation of managers (Garud et al., 2014). Understanding these motivations reveals why one type of innovation emerges over another and illuminates the decision-making processes underpinning entrepreneurial innovations. This paper seeks to fill this gap by asking: How do entrepreneurial innovations emerge as strategic responses to the tourism industry context as an asset (opportunity) or a liability (challenge), particularly in resource-scarce destinations?

By addressing this question, the article makes two contributions to the study of context in entrepreneurship and innovation. First, it develops a theoretical framework that identifies different types of entrepreneurial innovations and demonstrates how they can be uncovered through managers' strategic responses to industry-specific opportunities and challenges within the tourism industry context. This framework integrates two perspectives: studies linking context and entrepreneurial innovation (Autio et al., 2014), and a critical sociology lens (Bramwell & Rawding, 1996; Stanworth & Curran, 1999). From the former, context dependencies are reflected in the entry and post-entry strategic decisions of owners, managers, and employees, highlighting that industries are embedded in a multidimensional "context mix" spanning social, cultural, institutional, and spatial dimensions (Autio et al., 2014). From the latter, the framework emphasizes empowerment and emancipation, recognizing the innovative potential of marginalized enterprises and neglected sectors (Lynch, 2005). Viewing entrepreneurship through a context lens enables scholars to use the variability of contexts to 'establish, refine, or challenge existing theories' (George, 2015: 9). Second, the article uncovers the types of entrepreneurial innovations found in small and medium-sized hotels (SMSHs) operating in resource-scarce tourism destinations in Africa, which were disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Ngoasong et al., 2021; Kimbu et al., 2021). The notion of "resource-scarce" refers to destinations characterized by low purchasing power, untapped but growing market opportunities, and a high prevalence of entrepreneurial activity (Ngoasong, 2018). Focusing on independently owned SMSHs—those unaffiliated with international hotel chains (Ahmad, 2015; Sharma & Upneja, 2005)—this study draws on qualitative case studies from Kenya, Cameroon, Ghana, and Nigeria. SMSHs play a crucial role in tourism development through innovation and entrepreneurship, influencing tourist experiences, consumer purchase decisions, and local job creation (De la Peña et al., 2016; Hjalager, 2010). They also enhance destination competitiveness (Aldebert et al., 2011; Sharma & Upneja, 2005). Yet, SMSHs often face unfair competition from multinational hotel chains, which benefit from extensive global networks, advanced operational systems (Menkiti & Ward, 2016; Mohammad, 2016), and stronger human resource capabilities (Adeola, 2016; Haber & Reichel, 2007). Our findings show how SMSHs recognize and leverage industry-specific opportunities (Nelson, 2014) to generate distinct types of entrepreneurial innovations. The remainder of this paper presents the theoretical background, outlines the research methods, and discusses the findings, before concluding with key theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical background

Context and entrepreneurial innovation

Entrepreneurship research has increasingly recognized the importance of context as a conceptual lens for understanding entrepreneurial behaviour and innovation. Zahra et al. (2014) identify six dimensions of context—temporal or historical, geographic or spatial, social, industry, organizational, and institutional—that shape the perceptions, motivations, and decisions of entrepreneurs and managers. Building on this, Autio et al. (2014) conceptualize context as a multidimensional construct that both enables and constrains decision-making, leading to specific types of entrepreneurial innovations. Welter (2011) similarly highlights the "where" (geographic) and "when" (temporal and historical) dimensions as particularly influential in shaping entry choices and post-entry strategic decisions. These choices determine whether context functions as an asset (opportunity) or a liability (challenge). This distinction between context as an asset versus a liability is evident in how entrepreneurs strategize, innovate, and confront uncertainty. Entrepreneurial success depends on navigating these dynamics—transforming opportunities into viable innovations while mitigating constraints (Garud et al., 2014; Buijtendijk et al., 2021). Entrepreneurial innovation can thus be defined as the simultaneous pursuit of risk-taking entrepreneurial activities and innovative practices (new enterprises, upgraded products or services, or novel processes) aimed at achieving survival and growth. Table 1 summarizes this conceptualization.

Table 1. Key studies linking context to entrepreneurial innovations.

Key literature	What is entrepreneurial innovation?	Types of entrepreneurial innovation	Dimensions of context
Autio et al., (2014)	the disruption of existing industries and creation of new ones through multi-level processes and stakeholders, multiple actors and multiple contexts that constitute different entrepreneurial ecosystems	Biotechnology, personal computers, and internet search engines	Institutional, geographic, social, technology, industry
Nelson (2014).	The entrepreneurial process of developing and commercializing breakthrough innovations	Waveguide physical modelling or PM technology	Organizational context
Garud et al., (2014)	The emergence of new business opportunities when viewed as an unfolding entrepreneurial process	Does not outline particular types of entrepreneurial innovations	Historical or temporal
Hung & Mondejar (2005)	Risk-taking and acceptance of change when developing and implementing new initiatives in the innovation process of the firm	Assumes that product, service, and process innovations are entrepreneurial innovations	Organizational
Srinivasan (2011)	The successful evolution of an enterprise over the stages of the enterprise life-cycle is evidence of entrepreneurial innovations	Product, process, and managerial innovations in a consumer goods multinational enterprise	Organizational, historical, temporal

The present study extends this discourse by showing how industry context, embedded within a broader context mix (Autio et al., 2014), influences entrepreneurial agency. The notion of a context mix captures the interplay of industry-specific structures with social, cultural, institutional, and spatial dynamics. Understanding these interconnections is crucial to explaining why entrepreneurs in resource-scarce destinations pursue particular types of innovation. Existing research offers three strategies for uncovering evidence of entrepreneurial innovation. First, scholars can examine episodes where innovations are discovered or created within enterprises. Second, they can analyse industry dynamics—such as co-creation, path dependency, or meaning-making—through which innovations emerge (Garud et al., 2014). Third, they can investigate the choices and decisions of individuals, teams, or organizations that result in innovation and high firm performance (Autio et al., 2014; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2025). Focusing on industry dynamics provides particular theoretical value because it captures the temporal evolution of industries (Srinivasan, 2011), structural and sectoral changes (Nelson, 2014), and organizational configurations that affect entrepreneurial outcomes (Garud et al., 2014). A focus on industry context also illuminates intra-industry

stratification, where social structures influence firms primarily through industry-specific hierarchies (Shelton, 2010). Cross-examining firms within the same industry allows researchers to identify the conditions under which context acts as an asset versus a liability (Welter, 2011). These insights not only advance theory but also inform policy efforts to regulate and encourage innovation in resource-scarce contexts. This is the research gap that this study seeks to address.

Tourism industry context and entrepreneurial innovations

To deepen this inquiry, the study adopts a critical sociology perspective (Bramwell & Rawding, 1996) to theorize the relationship between industry context, context mix, and entrepreneurial innovation in the tourism industry. The tourism industry broadly constitutes the twelve-standard industrial classification of the sectors of the economy that provide products and services consumed by visitors (UNWTO/Eurostat/OECD, 2008). Within consumer services, it is often depicted as a "super-sector" comprising a main sector (travel and leisure) and several sub-sectors, including accommodation, airlines, gambling, recreational services, food and beverage, tourism and travel (FTSE International, 2012). Small and medium-sized hotels (SMSHs) operate within the accommodation sub-sector, and are integral to the tourism industry structure, supply chain, and stakeholder networks (Martínez-Ros & Orfila-Sintes, 2009). These interdependencies reflect the broader context mix within which innovation occurs. Critical sociology, defined as "the study of structural shifts in capitalism and capitalist society", situates entrepreneurial behaviour within political-economic contexts (Bramwell & Rawding, 1996:6). Cooper (2013) stresses that scholars adopting this lens must clarify both the targets of critique and the specific settings in which they apply before formulating an appropriate response. In this study, two critiques of existing literature are central. First, innovation in tourism is often narrowly conceptualized in terms of technological or scientific breakthroughs. Such definitions obscure the forms of innovation prevalent in service-oriented industries in developing countries. In resource-scarce contexts, even incremental improvements can represent significant breakthroughs. Tourism studies report evidence of innovations such as ad hoc service enhancements (e.g., premium pricing, star ratings), diversification strategies (e.g., differentiated room attributes), customization (e.g., flexible check-in/check-out), specialization (e.g., boutique hotel concepts) (Arasli, 2002; De la Peña et al., 2016), and coopetition (collaboration with competitors) (Damayanti et al., 2017; Ibrahim et al., 2023). These examples demonstrate that entrepreneurial innovation in tourism reflects both risk-taking and incremental or transformative practices that cumulatively enhance small-firm performance (Ribeiro et al., 2021; Haber & Reichel, 2007; Stanworth & Curran, 1999). Second, critical sociology highlights how marginalized enterprises sustain themselves in structurally imbalanced industries. Boltanski (2011) argues that smaller firms must maintain a state of "constant imbalance" to resist domination by large multinationals. For SMSHs in developing countries, the dominance of multinational hotel chains creates competitive pressures that threaten their survival (Adeola, 2016; Mohammad, 2016). These dynamics manifest in unfair competition, crowding-out of local firms, and barriers to innovation. Applying Porter's (2008) five forces framework further illustrates these constraints. Competitive rivalry, threats of new entrants, supplier and buyer power, and substitutes shape the competitiveness of SMSHs. For example, low entry barriers and limited staff qualifications can reduce competitiveness, while countries offering high-quality and innovative tourism services can enhance visitor flows for smaller firms (Zehrer & Hallmann, 2015). Similarly, access to well-functioning tourism supply chains—linking hotels to farm products, handicrafts, and manufactured goods—can strengthen innovation capacity (Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2016). The presence or absence of such supply chains determines whether context functions as an asset or a liability (Arasli, 2002). This study critiques and challenges the assumption that innovation is the preserve of large firms in advanced, incentivised, and regulated industries. While small tourism enterprises are often portrayed as dependent suppliers to multinational hotel chains (Hall et al., 2012), they also innovate independently despite constraints such as limited infrastructure (Haber & Reichel, 2007; McKelvie & Wiklund, 2010), diseconomies of scale, and lack of brand recognition (Pereira-Moliner et al., 2011). By investing their own and partners' resources in pursuing new opportunities, SMSHs engage in entrepreneurial innovation that strengthens competitiveness, even within structurally unequal industries.

Research methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design, which is well-suited for theory development (Yin, 2009) and has been effectively applied to studies of entrepreneurial innovations (Nelson, 2014). The research was conducted in Kenya, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana, where reliable firm-level data on hotels is scarce. National Bureau of Statistics and hotel reservation databases are often incomplete or aggregated under general service industries due to poor recordkeeping (Khavul et al., 2009; Kimbu, 2011). To mitigate this challenge, the authors consulted additional sources, including Ministries of Tourism websites, Ward Hospitality Group, National Hotel Associations, and Tourism Regulatory Authorities (Adeola, 2016; Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013; Kimbu, 2011). These countries illustrate different tourism situations: Kenya is a fairly developed destination, while Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana are emerging markets. All four were heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a 40–50% decrease in tourism's contribution to GDP and over a 70% reduction in international visitor spending between 2019 and 2020 (WTTC, 2021). Tourism SMEs, especially small and medium-sized hotels (SMSHs), were among the most severely affected. Although governments provided financial support, the future of many SMSHs remained uncertain (Ngoasong et al., 2021; Kimbu et al., 2021). Purposive sampling enabled the selection of information-rich cases (Patton, 2002), while theoretical sampling ensured alignment between research questions and data, supporting extrapolation and theory building (Yin, 2009; Khavul et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2016). The analysis focused on SMSHs as case studies in which owners/managers, working with staff in a sector usually considered as "high stress" (Teoh et al., 2019), undertook entrepreneurial innovations in response to industry opportunities and challenges. Fieldwork was conducted in two phases. The first phase (2017–2019), before the pandemic, involved independent research, consultancy projects, and conferences, with visits

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lasting 5–15 days per country. The second phase (2022) facilitated post-pandemic follow-up. After obtaining ethical approval from the author's respective institutions, using university-approved travel agencies, the authors randomly chose 10 SMSHs per country (40 in total) for initial contact via email and informal phone interviews. Screening was based on two criteria: (1) independent ownership—hotels with 25–120 rooms not affiliated with multinational chains (Çetinel et al., 2008), and (2) evidence of capital investment in new or upgraded products, services, or managerial processes (Garud et al., 2014; Hjalager, 2010; Nelson, 2014; Buijtendijk et al., 2021). From these, 16 SMSHs were purposively selected for in-depth study, based on the richness of evidence provided. Names have been anonymized (Table 2).

Table 2. Demographics of the SMSHs studied and sources of data

Hotel attributes					Characteristics of Interviewees		Participant observation
Pseudo-name of hotels	*Country*	*Star Rating*	*Size (Rooms)*	*Age (Years)*	*Primary person interviewed*	*Time in hotel (Years)*	*Secondary information and informants interviewed during stays at hotels*
Wintop	Kenya	3	84	45	Co-Owner & Manager	17	Two Department Heads and one long-serving bar staff
MCG House	Kenya	3	116	16	General Manager	9	Guided tour of facilities, attendance of management meeting, informal discussion with staff
IC Hotel	Kenya	2	31	11	Owner-Manager	11	Hotel review websites & flyers
Saphire Hotel	Kenya	3	75	5	Operations Manager	4	OTAs & promotional material
GSN Hotel	Cameroon	3	94	15	General Manager	15	Head of Marketing, 2 client firms (whose employees regularly lodge in the hotel)
Orchard Hotel	Cameroon	3	88	7	General Manager	5	Hotel owner, Long-serving front desk staff
Junction Hotel	Cameroon	2	46	9	General Manager	9	Hotel owner, Head Chef, tour of facility
Horizon Hotel	Cameroon	2	35	10	General Manager	7	Hotel owner's son, facilities manager,
ExHotel	Nigeria	3	70	21	General Manager & Operations Director	6	Observed training workshop; Informal chat with 2 housekeeping staff;
RANC Hotel	Nigeria	3	53	5	General Manager	3	Hotel booking & review websites, flyers, informal interview with hotel owner
Wescent Hotel	Nigeria	3	80	8	Marketing Director & Co-Owner	8	2nd co-owner; guided tour of facilities by duty manager
Pearl Hotel	Nigeria	3	35	6	Operations Manager	6	Duty manager; Hotel website, review websites, flyers.
Hotel GCII	Ghana	3	100	11	Manager	6	One member of Board of Directors, Masters student on internship,
Ashanti Hotel	Ghana	2	50	15	General Manager	10	Receptionist, front office supervisor
DT Hotel	Ghana	3	64	9	Owner-Manager	9	Hotel staff in various capacities (x 4)
Guest House	Ghana	3	35	13	General Manager & Co-Owner	13	Deputy Manager, Long-serving Head Chef

Note: [a] Based on national tourism boards or self-rated, not international classification

Data were collected from both primary and secondary informants (Martínez-Ros & Orfila-Sintes, 2009; Thomas & Wood, 2014). Primary informants were senior managers identified for their knowledge of hotel-specific innovations. Sixteen in-depth interviews (one per SMSH) were conducted, each lasting 60–90 minutes and tape-recorded. Secondary informants included owners, supervisors, department heads, and employees. Twenty-five additional interviews were conducted with these groups, each lasting 20–60 minutes and documented as detailed notes. Company documents complemented interview data (Patton, 2002; Rosenbaum, 2006).

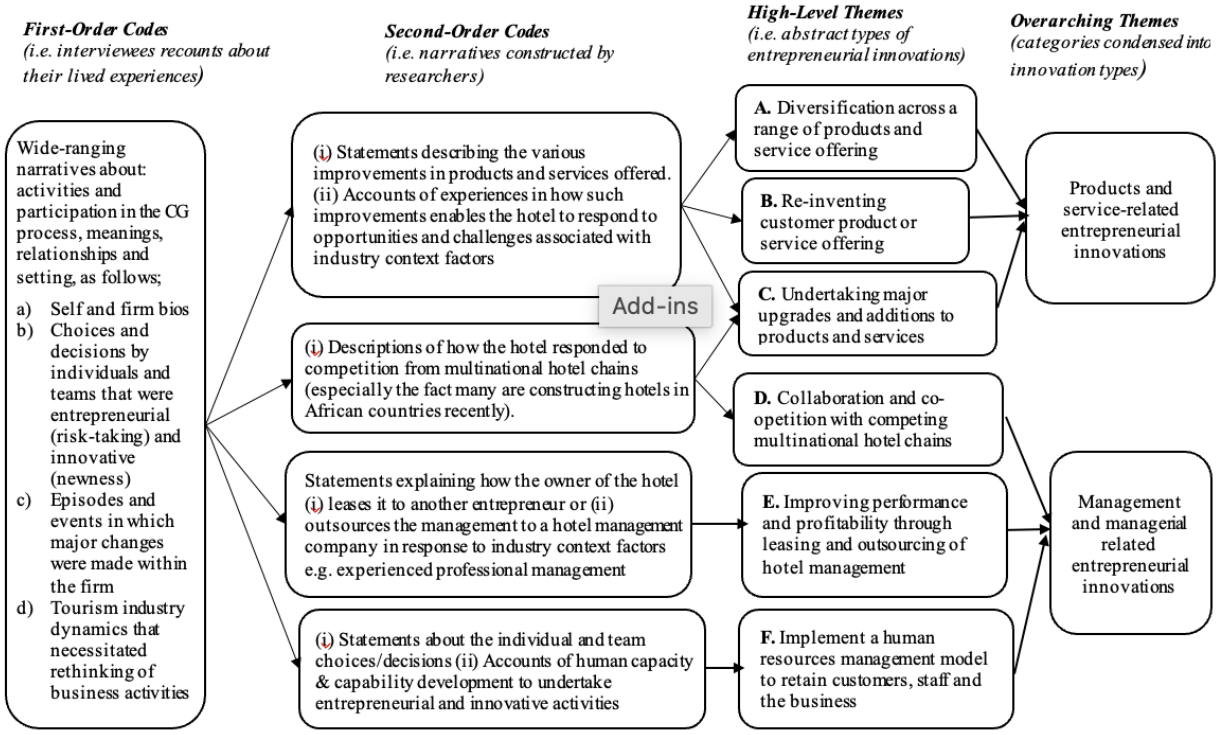

Figure 1. Coding Process to Identify Distinctive Types of Entrepreneurial Innovations

Interviews, guided by our literature, explored how context-specific events, episodes, and dynamics (Garud et al., 2014) shaped management responses, focusing on when context acted as an opportunity (asset) or challenge (liability) (Welter, 2011), in the

choices, decisions, or actions of hotel management. Informants were asked to describe instances of simultaneous entrepreneurial (risk-taking) and innovative (radical or incremental) activities. These accounts were coded into types of entrepreneurial innovations (Martínez-Ros & Orfila-Sintes, 2009; Nelson, 2014). Retrospective accounts covering three to five years of operations enabled the capturing of temporal contexts of innovation cycles and firm growth (McKelvie & Wiklund, 2010). Data analysis followed the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), appropriate for small samples aimed at theory development. Rather than comparing cases (Yin, 2009), this method builds a data structure consisting of first-order concepts (informant terms), second-order themes (theoretical constructs), and aggregate theoretical dimensions. Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive labels for activities and innovations reported by the owners/managers of the SMSHs that we studied were coded as first-order categories. Second, these categories were grouped into second-order themes through iterative abstraction. Themes reflected whether industry factors acted as assets (entrepreneurial opportunities) or liabilities (challenges) (Welter, 2011) and the strategic responses they elicited (Autio et al., 2014). Third, the themes were synthesized into aggregate dimensions, revealing six types of entrepreneurial innovations used by SMSHs to respond to their industry context. These six types were further consolidated into two broader categories widely recognized in tourism innovation research, namely product and service innovations, and management and managerial innovations (Hjalager, 2010). This hierarchical data structure illustrates how SMSHs strategically responded to their contexts through entrepreneurial innovations. Figure 1 presents the data structure and aggregate dimensions. The final step was to move from data structure to theory development by linking constructs into a conceptual framework that explains how SMSHs in resource-scarce African destinations generate entrepreneurial innovations (Gioia et al., 2013).

Findings

The empirical analysis reveals six distinct types of entrepreneurial innovations undertaken by small and medium-sized hotels (SMSHs) and how these innovations emerge from the strategic decisions of managers responding to circumstances in which the tourism industry context was interpreted either as an asset (opportunity) or a liability (challenge). As illustrated in Figure 1, the six types of innovations fall under two overarching categories: (1) product- and service-related entrepreneurial innovations and (2) management- and managerial-related entrepreneurial innovations. These categories align with the service-oriented nature of the tourism industry, distinguishing it from innovation patterns found in traditional science and technology industries (MartÍnez-Ros & Orfila-Sintes, 2009; Nelson, 2014). This section examines how the six types of entrepreneurial innovations emerged from managerial decision-making in SMSHs. It begins with an analysis of how managers interpreted the tourism industry context as both an asset and a liability. It then explores contextual influences on the realization of different types of innovations across cases, supported by direct quotations from interview transcripts.

The tourism industry context as an asset versus liability for entrepreneurial innovations

Analysis of the industry context in the four countries studied reveals multiple events, episodes, and trends that shaped opportunities for, and constraints on, entrepreneurial innovations (Garud et al., 2014). While official statistics on destination competitiveness remain incomplete, Table 3 shows the contrast between Kenya as a relatively developed destination and Cameroon, Ghana, and Nigeria as emerging destinations.

Table 3. Tourism development indicators in the study countries

Contextual factors	Ghana	Nigeria	Cameroon	Kenya
Destination type	Emerging	Emerging	Emerging	Established
Tourism industry attractions	Heritage & Cultural tourism Eco-tourism MICE & business Backpacking VFR/Diaspora tourism	Cultural & heritage tourism MICE & business Eco-tourism VFR/Diaspora tourism	Cultural tourism Photo wildlife & nature safaris Eco tourism VFR/Diaspora tourism Sun/sand/sea MICE & business	Photo wildlife & nature safaris MICE & Business Sun/sand/sea Cultural tourism
World Travel and Tourism Council Indicators of tourism development – Most recent data				
Contribution of tourism to GDP	5.9% (2019) 4.2% (2022)	4.4% (2019) 3.9% (2024)	8.0% (2019) 4.1% (2023)	8.1% (2019) 7.0% (2024)
Number of international visitors	1,088,000 (2019) 1,288,804 (2024)	1,889,000 (2016) 1,770,000 (2024)	997,000 (2018) 1,300,000 (2023)	2,048,000 (2019) 2,394,376 (2024)
Tourism's share in total employment	6.0% (2019) 7.2% (2024)	4.8% (2019) 3.0% (2022)	8.0% (2019) 3.0% (2022)	8.5% (2019) 8.0% (2024)
World Economic Forum Travel and Tourism Development Index (TTDI) (2019 & 2024)				
Overall (2019)	115	129	128	82
Overall (2024)	106	112	117	77
Enabling Environment	4.01	3.16	3.07	3.72
Tourism Policy & Enabling conditions	3.53	3.48	3.12	4.46
Infrastructure	2.4	2.59	2.08	2.56
Natural & cultural resources	1.71	2.44	2.05	2.47
Sustainability	4.26	4.24	4.56	5.15

Sources: WEF (2024) and WTTC (2025)

Interviewees explained that compared to multinational hotel chains, independent SMSHs were more vulnerable to structural constraints such as the high cost of doing business, excessive taxation, and bureaucratic hurdles. Many managers highlighted limited access to capital as a persistent liability. Human resources also emerged as a major issue, with managers citing "*issues of poor pay and limited career advancement opportunities*" (General Manager, Orchard Hotel, Cameroon) and a *"shortage of qualified and devoted personnel"* (Operations Manager, Pearl Hotel, Nigeria). Additional challenges included pilferage, poor customer service, and high staff turnover, particularly acute during and after the COVID-19 pandemic when perceived industry-wide emotional labour decreased, increasing the professional mobility of employees (McGinley et al., 2018). Collectively, these

factors illustrate how the tourism industry context often acted as a liability (Kimbu et al., 2021; Welter, 2011), especially in terms of costs and operational constraints for SMSHs. However, existing institutional frameworks and government programs across the four countries created enabling opportunities for entrepreneurial innovations. National development plans — Vision 2030 (Kenya), Vision 2035 (Cameroon), Vision 2020 (Ghana), and Vision 2020 (Nigeria) — explicitly recognized tourism as a strategic driver of growth. Kenya's Tourism Regulatory Authority (Tourism Act No. 28 of 2011), alongside the Association of Hotel Keepers and Caterers, established the National Classification Framework for Hotels and Restaurants to raise service standards. Similarly, Cameroon's Ministry of Tourism and Leisure initiated reclassification processes, accelerated hotel registration, and introduced capacity-building programs in collaboration with the Association of Professional Hoteliers. Likewise, Ghana's Tourism Act 817 of 2011 mandated government-industry partnerships to improve training and service quality, while Nigeria created semi-autonomous Hotel Licensing Authorities to oversee regulatory compliance and classification. These institutional factors reflect broader industry dynamics (Garud et al., 2014) that functioned as assets (Welter, 2011), providing a foundation for entrepreneurial innovation. As one Marketing Director in Kenya emphasized:

> One, the government authorities have accepted tourism as a major income earner, a source of job creation, and an attraction for investments. They are developing programs to try to grow the tourism industry. Two, a lot of international players have moved into the Nigerian market, despite the recent global recession. The third is social media and extensive travel by the middle class, which has made local customers more brand-conscious, more knowledgeable about what good services should be (Marketing Director, Sapphire Hotel, Kenya).

Nevertheless, liabilities persisted, particularly in relation to security and health crises. National, regional, and international responses to terrorist threats — Boko Haram in Cameroon and Nigeria, and Al Shabab in Kenya — as well as the Ebola outbreak across Ghana, Nigeria, and West and Central Africa, had severe negative impacts on visitor arrivals. Such crises heightened the vulnerability of SMSHs. Yet, as will be discussed, these threats sometimes created unexpected opportunities, where hotel employees or managers innovated to ensure survival and even growth.

Contextual influences on types of entrepreneurial innovations in SMSHs

Using cross-case comparison (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016), the study also examined the strategic decisions taken by SMSH managers and how these translated into entrepreneurial innovations. The cases reveal both entrepreneurial actions (risky, deliberate, or random decisions) and innovative outcomes (new offerings or significant upgrades) (Garud et al., 2014). They also show how industry context can function as either an asset or a liability (Welter, 2011) in shaping tourism innovation outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa. In 5 of the 16 hotels studied, no systematic entrepreneurial innovations were observed. Instead, managers engaged in ad hoc activities — incremental or reactive adjustments to immediate problems — rather than strategic innovations (Arasli, 2002; De la Peña et al., 2016). Still, across the remaining cases, owner/managers articulated clear motivations for innovating, seeing it as *"something that we had to do to attract tourists"* (Owner-Manager, DT Hotel, Ghana), to *"increase sales"* or *"reduce the high costs of the services we were providing"* (General Manager, GSN Hotel, Cameroon), simply "*to survive and overcome the [COVID-19] crisis"* (General Manager, RANC Hotel, Nigeria), or *"a major overhaul aimed at achieving multiple organizational objectives"*. The following subsections detail specific cases grouped under key themes that reflect how entrepreneurial innovations were realized across the four countries.

Entrepreneurial innovations in response to competition from multinational hotel chains

Wintop Hotel in Kenya illustrates how competition from multinational hotel chains (MNHs) prompted SMSHs to undertake interlinked entrepreneurial innovations (Figure 1: A, D, and F). Established in 1972, Wintop incrementally expanded until 2005, when a new management team initiated significant changes. Its trajectory reflects historical, geographic, and temporal context influences (Garud et al., 2014) that triggered strategic actions leading to entrepreneurial innovation. The Marketing Department Head explained:

> Guest arrivals [to Kenya] have always been increasing and had even tripled until 2012. Then, security issues concerning terrorism resulted in travel warnings and bans by many Western countries, fewer tourists came here, and many smaller hotels closed down. [As of 2017], there were indications that it was returning to normal levels, but then came COVID-19, and things ground to a stop… However, since the end of the pandemic, the government has been waiving taxes for chartered flights landing in tourist regions, and international travel advisory restrictions have been lifted (Marketing Department Head, Wintop Hotel, Kenya).

Despite these liabilities, the entry of multinational hotels intensified competition. In 2019, six new multinational hotel chains opened in Nairobi, while 24 new hotels opened in 2022, and 25 were under construction and set for completion in 2023 across Kenya. This increased competition across the tourism industry supply chain. Wintop's post-entry strategic response to these industry dynamics is consistent with the need for entrepreneurial innovation, in terms of being simultaneously entrepreneurial and innovative. The General Manager emphasized:

> We saw multinational hotel chains marketing Kenya in their home (Western) countries and getting increasing visitor enquiries. While we [SMSHs] often viewed multinationals as bad for smaller businesses, we decided to engage them

> as complementary partners. Our team examined their up, mid, and low market segments and developed a strategy to connect with the chain and attract customers from across the three market segments. Whenever there is a visitor overspill, the multinational hotel [MNH] staff will come to us and say look, we've got this number of guests. What is the best rate you can give them? There is competition, but we focus on the complementarity (General Manager, Wintop Hotel).

Unlike many SMSHs that succumbed to pressure, Wintop adopted a coopetitive strategy (Damayanti et al., 2017; Kallmuenzer, 2018). Wintop not only formed collaborative arrangements but also undertook major service upgrades, diversified offerings, and strengthened human resources to deliver on these upgrades. Elected staff-led committees were created to drive revenue generation, cost reduction, and enhance welfare. These innovations reflect both mandatory and voluntary innovative behaviour (Edghiem & Mouzughi, 2018). A similar intervention (Figure 1: D) was observed at GSN Hotel in Cameroon, which introduced new HR strategies to counter staff poaching by multinationals:

> They [multinational hotel chains] come with a higher pay package for staff. You find them poaching your best staff. Many local staff feel better working for a multinational for prestige and job security (General Manager, GSN, Cameroon).

Entrepreneurial innovations in response to changing market opportunities

Wescent Hotel in Nigeria provides an example of repositioning towards a niche premium market (Figure 1: B). Management shifted its focus to long-stay business travellers, particularly in aviation and oil and gas (above 3 weeks), and short-stay transit visitors (1-2 nights). As the Marketing Director explained, following tourism industry context factors necessitated innovations:

> Dated facilities frequently broke down. Our regular customers were not as wowed as before. We noticed an increase in shorter stay visitors in our region, with high expectations. New and bigger players came into the market, such as Sheraton, Protea, Intercontinental, and Hilton, with better brands and newer facilities. They made us look very outdated. It became clear that we needed more than simple renovations and fittings (Marketing Director, Wescent Hotel, Nigeria).

This recognition of liability led to risky but transformative innovations: capital investment in a multipurpose conference and leisure center, multi-sports facilities, expanded marketing via online travel agencies, and introducing special events (e.g., Valentine's Day specials). Management also introduced mandatory staff training, hiring external experts to provide in-house training to staff, and thereby addressing what the co-owner described as a *"shortage of industry experience and skills of many hotel employees in Nigeria",* an open communication channel between frontline staff and management for feedback was instituted (e.g., Martínez-Ros & Orfila-Sintes, 2012), prioritised timely salary payments of workers before senior management, and free staff meals to reduce pilferage. These changes illustrate how tourism context can act as both a liability and an asset (Welter, 2011), enabling SMSHs to build capacity for niche markets while boosting staff performance. Similar innovations were observed at Junction Hotel in Cameroon, opened in 2008 as a hotel with a nightclub, bar, restaurant, and room services. Management converted the declining nightclub/bar section into additional bedrooms (Figure 1: B) in response to shifts in domestic visitor demand, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, although financial considerations were unavoidable (Jaafar et al., 2011), tourism-specific factors (visitors' travel preferences and expectations) (Kallmuenzer, 2018) necessitated this context-specific strategic adaptation.

Entrepreneurial innovation through third-party contractual arrangements

ExHotel in Nigeria represents a novel form of entrepreneurial innovation— outsourcing management to a third-party company (Figure 1: A). This move represents an entrepreneurial innovation because the use of hotel management companies by independent SMSHs is nascent in Nigeria. The Operations Director explained:

> We run, manage, and maintain the hotel on behalf of the owners. There is a written agreement with terms and conditions. Basically, we are paid what has been agreed by both parties, and so the business belongs to the managers while the building belongs to the owners. [ExHotel] is one of several hotels that we currently manage (Operations Director, ExHotel, Nigeria).

The management contract included a requirement to transform the poorly managed and loss-making hotel into a profit-making and efficient SMSH, consistent with being simultaneously innovative and entrepreneurial (risk-taking in pursuit of profit targets) (Garud et al., 2014; Hung & Mondejar, 2005). The management contract required addressing six interlinked context-specific liabilities, including inadequate infrastructure (power supply, access road, recycling facilities), security concerns, volatile currency, and high operations costs; issues which reflect the multi-dimensionality of an industry context (Autio et al., 2014). Innovations included facility upgrades, improved HR systems, and membership in Hotels and Personal Services Employers Association (HOPESEA). Furthermore, the entire supply chain was brought in-house. By internalizing supply chains and bypassing middlemen, ExHotel reduced costs and improved quality. This case illustrates the multi-dimensionality of contextual liabilities and the capacity of entrepreneurial innovations to mitigate them.

Entrepreneurial innovations in smaller under-resourced hotels

Smaller hotels such as IC Hotel, Junction Hotel, RANC Hotel, DT Hotel, Sapphire Hotel, Pearl Hotel, Horizon Hotel, Ashanti Hotel, and Guest House exemplify how successful small hotels (positive cash flows and making profits) can, with limited resources, move beyond entrepreneurship (new business creation) (Jaafar et al., 2011) to undertake meaningful innovations. Their strategies centred on 1) staff capacity building, and 2) responding to changing visitor trends. Guest House in Ghana illustrates this well. Launched in 2004, it is reputed for its authentic Ghanaian experience (traditional food served, dress code of hotel staff, in-house arts and craft shop/gallery). The hotel faced significant human resource constraints (inadequate capacity and capability of hotel staff), a recognised liability for smaller hotels in resource-scarce destinations such as Ghana (Kimbu et al., 2021). The historical or temporal influence of industry context (Garud et al., 2014) is evident in how the owner-manager learned from previous episodes in the hotel's life cycle (Kallmuenzer, 2018).

> Staff was the biggest issue, and it's pretty multifaceted. I found very low levels of competency. I don't employ anyone less than a high school graduate. Even these often have difficulty writing a complete order. Some waiters come to work at a table who have actually never sat down and eaten at a table, with a plate, knife, and fork… Employees took advantage of any opportunity for pilferage. It was almost an entrenched cultural thing. But they are nice people (Co-Owner-Manager, Guest House, Ghana).

The entrepreneurial response involved introducing staff incentives such as direct service charge distribution, free meals, gifts, annual and staff birthday celebrations, and certified training (Figure 1: F). Though risky given financial constraints, these innovations boosted morale and productivity, demonstrating how small hotels can transform liabilities into assets (Jaafar et al., 2011; Edghiem & Mouzughi, 2018). Similar adaptive responses were observed at DT Hotel, Ghana, during the Ebola crisis:

> We had a very difficult year [2015] because of Ebola. Even though there was no recorded case in Ghana, tour companies and many of our visitors cancelled. We knew there was a UN flight on the Accra-Monrovia route once a week. We struck a deal with the World Health Organization to bring some of their health workers here for rest and recuperation. While many hotels were avoiding them, we saw an opportunity. Our staff were prepared for this temporary situation (Owner-Manager, DT Hotel, Ghana).

Such cases illustrate how SMSHs, even with limited resources, can strategically innovate to ensure survival and resilience during turbulence (Ribeiro et al., 2021; Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2016). Other hotels employed ad hoc innovations such as boreholes to address water shortages, standby generators for power outages, and special discounts to retain customers. While less transformative than entrepreneurial innovations, these activities underscore the resourcefulness of SMSHs in hostile environments (De la Peña et al., 2016).

Discussion and conclusion

This study makes two main contributions to the theory of entrepreneurial innovations in tourism. First, it develops a theoretical framework that illustrates how small and medium-sized hotels (SMSHs) in Africa use entrepreneurial innovations as strategic responses to resource scarcity in competitive destinations (Figure 2). Derived from qualitative case studies, the framework demonstrates how innovation emerges from managers' decision-making in response to the destination or context-specific opportunities and challenges. The multidimensional context of resource-scarce destinations triggers awareness within SMSHs, shaping whether conditions are interpreted as opportunities (context as asset) or challenges (context as liability). These interpretations, in turn, influence the types of entrepreneurial innovations pursued. In this way, the study contributes to understanding how industry context shapes innovation pathways in tourism. This framework complements existing research on contextual influences on innovation, which has largely focused on science and technology sectors (Autio et al., 2014; Nelson, 2014). Our findings show how the tourism industry context directly informs strategic decisions in SMSHs, leading to distinctive innovations aligned with owner-managers' interpretations (Welter, 2011). While earlier studies examined the innovative attributes of tourism firms (De la Peña et al., 2016; Arasli, 2002; Ribeiro et al., 2025; Kallmuenzer, 2018; Hjalager, 2010; MartÍnez-Ros & Orfila-Sintes, 2009), this is among the first to explicitly link context interpretation to entrepreneurial innovation. The evidence demonstrates that innovativeness is not only central to entrepreneurship but also critical for SMSHs to adapt to shifting market dynamics, enhance productivity, gain a competitive advantage, and respond to evolving customer needs. Secondly, the study applies a sociological perspective to explore how tourism industry contexts shape opportunities and challenges for owner/managers of SMSHs seeking to reinvent and sustain the competitiveness of their businesses. Responding to Bramwell & Rawding's (1996) call for more qualitative critical sociology in tourism exploring the extent to which place or geographic context, offers useful investigatory tools for opening up new avenues and shedding new theoretical insights into the production of knowledge about the practice of tourism (see also Shelton, 2010; Stanworth & Curran, 1999, our findings highlight how entrepreneurial innovations can empower SMSHs, a sub-sector often marginalized relative to multinational hotel chains in Africa. In line with Lynch's (2005) notion of emancipation, innovations enable SMSHs to coexist as complementary service providers alongside multinational hotel chains through coopetition (Damayanti et al., 2017; Ibrahim et al., 2023), rather than being crowded out (Sharma & Upneja, 2005; Mohammad, 2016).

From a managerial perspective, the framework offers practical guidance to managers to decide which type of entrepreneurial innovations to undertake when faced with industry-specific opportunities and/or challenges requiring major

strategic decisions or investments, irrespective of the size of the firm. It shows that SMSHs in resource-scarce environments pursue innovations comparable to those in other destinations (Nicolau & Santa-Marí, 2013), and that managers' interpretations of industry context—as either asset or liability—determine their innovation strategies. This insight underscores the importance of adaptive decision-making for sustaining competitiveness, not only in Africa but across the global tourism sector.

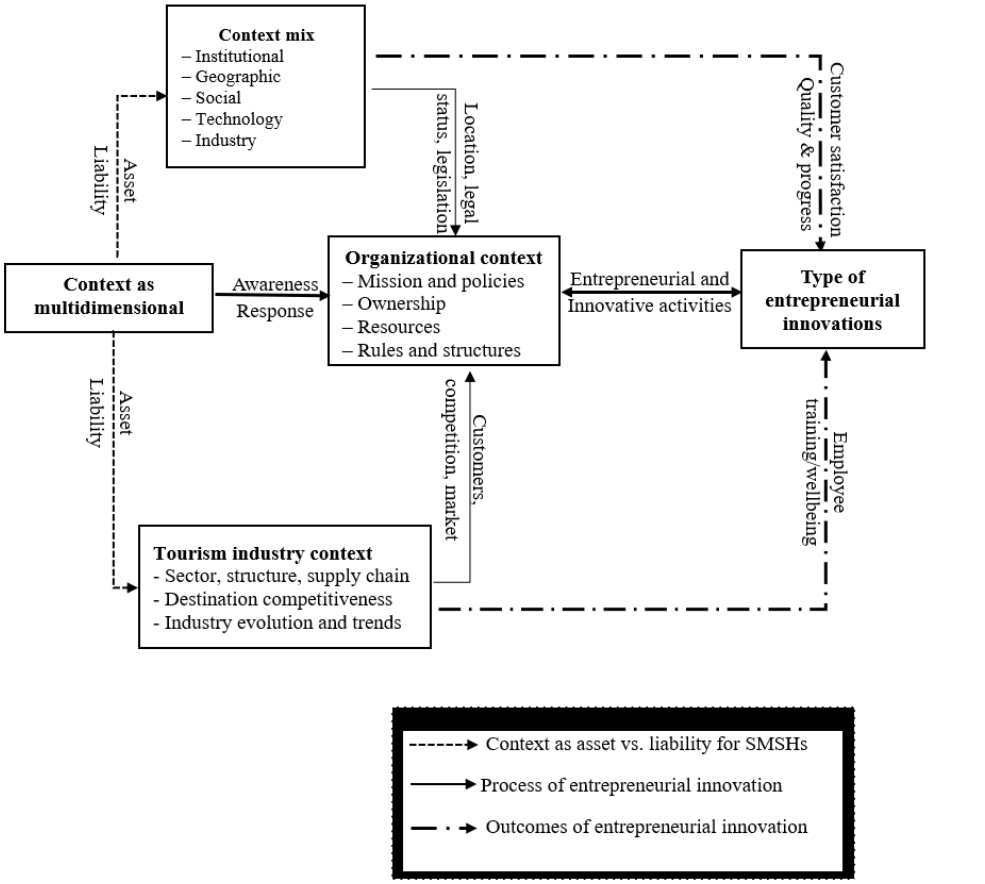

Figure 2. Entrepreneurial innovations as strategic responses by tourism SMEs to resource-scarcity

Implications and future research opportunities

The findings of this study have several implications for both new entrants and established businesses in the tourism industry. Strategic decision-making in SMSHs should be informed by investments in human capital development (Haber & Reichel, 2007; Nieves et al., 2014; Kimbu et al., 2021), physical and digital infrastructure (Chu, 2003), and stakeholder relationship management (Ribeiro et al., 2021). Entrepreneurs and managers would benefit from adopting a medium- to long-term view, enabling them to anticipate diverse industry context factors and incorporate these into entrepreneurial strategies. Furthermore, recognizing whether contextual conditions represent assets (opportunities) or liabilities (challenges) can help owner/managers of SMSHs align their responses and increase the likelihood of successfully implementing innovations. Our evidence shows that the most successful SMSHs are those that monitor industry changes, invest in well-trained and motivated staff, and creatively reframe contextual liabilities as opportunities. These strategies are particularly crucial in the post-COVID-19 landscape, where multiple crises affect the tourism sector, undermining employee well-being and commitment in resource-scarce destinations (Kimbu et al., 2021; Adam et al., 2025). Government policy also plays a pivotal role. In the four destinations studied, initiatives include accelerating SMSH legalization, promoting networking through national hotel associations, and offering limited financial support (Ngoasong et al., 2021). Such measures can help SMSHs overcome barriers such as poor access to international markets and inadequate business planning due to regulatory ambiguity. Yet, risks remain: SMSHs may be marginalized within professional networks dominated by large hotel chains (Mohammad, 2016). Notably, managers in Kenya cited targeted policies such as national hospitality schools, whereas those in Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana highlighted the underdevelopment of specialized training. This gap is significant since employees are essential to realizing innovations (Garud et al., 2014; Edghiem & Mouzughi, 2018; Kallmuenzer, 2018) and ensuring hotel competitiveness within the broader visitor economy (Adeola, 2016; Martínez-Ros & Orfila-Sintes, 2009, 2012). Governments could support SMSHs further by incentivizing employee development and strengthening local tourism supply chains (Kimbu et al., 2021; Baum, 2015). From a research perspective, the diversity of SMSHs and entrepreneurial innovations uncovered in this study supports cross-case analysis and theoretical elaboration. However, several limitations warrant future investigation. First, our dataset, based on 16 SMSHs across four African countries, constrains generalizability. Broader studies could explore additional contextual

dimensions and other tourism sub-sectors. Second, our analysis focused primarily on managers' perspectives, leaving internal organizational dynamics—such as culture, governance, and operational practices—relatively underexplored (Nelson, 2014). Finally, given that much of the data was collected before and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic, future research should examine how SMSHs adapt and evolve in the current polycrisis environment, taking cognizance of the increasingly important role of digitalization, smart technologies, and artificial intelligence in fostering innovations in SMSHs operations. This would also require incorporating the voices of owners, employees, and external stakeholders to better capture how individual and team-level decisions contribute to entrepreneurial innovation in tourism with the support of these technologies.

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