Tourism SMEs, Global Value Chains and Innovation:  

Studying the influence of tour operators

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In tourism, an industry of persistent change, one of the main constants during more than the last 60 years has been the important role and resilience of tour operators. It is therefore clear that tour operators have been and are a major agent in the tourism industry (Holloway, Humphreys & Davidson, 2009; Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert & Wanhill, 2013).

Nevertheless, recent years have witnessed a vertiginous transformation of this sector. In particular, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have revolutionized all business processes and tourism Global Value Chains (GVCs), as well as all their agents and their interrelationships (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Cantoni & Xiang, 2013; Romero & Tejada, 2011). According to Buhalis and Licata (2002), tourism intermediaries were particularly affected by these changes. Thus, the structure of intermediation has been affected by the emergency of new intermediaries and new distribution channels (Fletcher et al., 2013; Kracht & Wang, 2010).

On the other hand, practitioners, academics and policymakers have long been interested in understanding the factors that influence innovative behavior in tourism SMEs (Rodríguez, Hall & Williams, 2014; Thomas & Wood, 2014; Tejada & Moreno, 2013). In this respect, there are different views about the influence that tour operators exert on innovation in SMEs. Some authors have pointed out that tour operators can stimulate innovation in other tourism agents (Rønningen, 2010). Other works have observed a possible negative influence of tour operators inhibiting innovation in the SMEs that operate with them (Bastakis, Buhalis & Butker, 2004).

Accordingly, the main objective of this paper is to investigate the tour operators’ influence on the innovative performance of tourism SMEs and to test whether this influence varies across innovation typologies and localizations (coastal or inland destinations).

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