

Unpacking KM Challenges for Building Resilient Destinations: A Qualitative Study from Poland

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Abstract: Purpose: The tourism industry is fundamentally defined by volatility and exposure to diverse shocks. Considering its vulnerability, tourism requires a robust understanding of resilience to accelerate post-crisis recovery. With knowledge management established in the literature as a vital element in navigating crises and fostering long-term resilience, this study aims to explore KM challenges as emerging difficulties during crises on the pathway toward organisational resilience. Methodology: This study employs a qualitative in-depth analysis of data gathered from Polish destination management organisations (DMOs). The research involved semi-structured interviews with 13 key representatives. Following the analysis, identified KM challenges were mapped against a resilience framework, consisting of absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities. Findings: The results indicate that absorptive capacity of the organisations was primarily undermined by informational chaos, disrupted information flows, and inconsistencies, which complicated knowledge management in the face of high volatility. Regarding adaptive capacity, KM challenges pertained to the necessity of unlearning standard operating procedures, managing emergent knowledge, and generating novel ideas under crisis conditions. Finally, KM-related challenges for transformative capacity stemmed from a lack of codified post-crisis knowledge (lessons learned) and a deficiency in translating crisis experiences into strategic organisational protocols. Research limitations: As this is a qualitative study based on the analysis of a limited number of organisations, its findings cannot be generalised and do not represent the sector as a whole. Furthermore, the research was conducted within a single country and in the context of two specific crises, which limits its broader applicability. Practical implications: This study offers valuable insights for practitioners into the challenges arising during a crisis, serving as a baseline for proactive preparation and building the organisational resilience before a new crisis emerges. Originality/value: By integrating KM challenges with the resilience framework, it offers a more nuanced understanding of the role of knowledge management within the tourism crisis context and provides a food for thought for researchers focusing on KM and resilience.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Tourism crisis, DMO, Resilience

1. Introduction

The tourism industry is fundamentally defined by volatility and exposure to diverse shocks (Borazon et al., 2023; Pappas et al., 2023). The rise of emerging disruptions has intensified the need to analyse and fortify organisational resilience, making it a paramount objective for contemporary research and practice (Haider & Cleaver, 2023). Given its systemic vulnerability, the tourism industry requires a robust understanding of resilience to accelerate post-crisis recovery and ensure its enduring sustainability (Ramos Jesus et al., 2026). With knowledge management established in the literature as a vital element in navigating crises and fostering long-term resilience (Bhati et al., 2016; Paraskevas et al., 2013; Yanuarni et al., 2024), this study aims to explore KM challenges as emerging difficulties during crises on the pathway toward organisational resilience.

Despite the significant role of KM in the tourism sector, literature on this topic remains limited (Anand et al., 2023), and existing studies are often narrow and primarily descriptive (Hallin & Marnburg, 2008). A similar situation occurs regarding the study of knowledge management in the context of organisational resilience. Current research addresses public institutions, industrial enterprises, micro-enterprises, rural communities, travel agencies, and tour operators (Aunchistha, 2025; Chen et al., 2025; Fani, 2015; Ghaka et al., 2026; Mafabi et al., 2012; Morong et al., 2025; Umoh & Amah, 2013). However, to the best of the author's knowledge, there is a lack of research focusing on KM in the context of destination resilience in the face of crisis. Applying a resilience-based perspective to KM challenges, specifically through the three-fold capability model, provides insights into the mechanisms of knowledge gathering and utilisation, as well as the forgetting under crisis conditions. The author of this study contends that a deeper understanding of this phenomenon will enable DMOs to develop methods and practices, that will serve as countermeasures positively influencing the cultivation of organisational resilience within the sector.

This article develops as follows. First, it discusses the theoretical background of KM challenges and resilience, followed by the methodology. Subsequently, the results and discussion are presented. The paper concludes with conclusions and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Knowledge Management Challenges

Knowledge management entails the strategic oversight of organisational knowledge (Uit Beijerse, 2000). In the face of crisis situations, it plays a pivotal role in supporting tourism organisations, serving as a fundamental instrument for their managerial strategies (Stolarek-Muszyńska & Zieba, 2025). Yet, in the process of managing knowledge, organisations struggle with multiple difficulties. Notably, the literature lacks a universal conceptualisation of KM challenges. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the author defines the knowledge management challenge from a process-oriented perspective as *the difficulty an organisation encounters in identifying, acquiring, developing, sharing, and applying knowledge within both internal and external environments*.

The literature offers extensive deliberations on knowledge management challenges across various domains, including the public sector, new business development, the construction industry, consulting firms, and NGOs (Asoh et al., 2002; Berends et al., 2007; Carrillo et al., 2004; Dunford, 2000; Siامي-Namini, 2018; Smith & Lumba, 2008; Yusof et al., 2019). Of these, the following KM-related challenges can be highlighted:

- managing tacit knowledge and the integration of information technology in capturing such knowledge;
- cultural adaptation which requires from organisations the transition toward a knowledge-oriented culture;
- human resources management that facilitates the seamless flow and exchange of employee expertise;
- regular update of internal knowledge repositories alongside the systematic monitoring of industry trends;
- preservation of expertise amidst high employee turnover, where the lack of formal codification processes leads to the erosion of organisational memory;
- managing collaborations with external experts;
- navigating intensifying competition which requires the adoption of agile response frameworks (Bolisani et al., 2023; Denizhan Kalkan, 2008; Gupta et al., 2000).

However, to the best of the author's knowledge, there is a notable absence of research focusing on KM challenges specifically within the context of tourism crises. While certain KM difficulties may be universal across different contexts, the unique nature of a crisis situation acts as a differentiating factor, often rendering standard solutions no longer applicable.

2.2 Resilience

As defined by Béné et al. (2012), resilience is the ability to maintain functional continuity while effectively mitigating the adverse effects of the unforeseen disruptions. It constitutes a vital crisis management mechanism for organisational stability, enabling companies to navigate and adapt to various risks (Sharma et al., 2021). Organisational resilience describes the proficiency of the companies in restoring standard functions following a disruption (Borazon et al., 2023).

According to Béné et al. (2012) resilience emerges from three distinct functional capacities: absorptive capacity, which enables persistence; adaptive capacity, which facilitates incremental adjustments; and transformative capacity, which drives fundamental systemic change. The resilience framework by Béné et al. (2012) serves for operationalising and understanding the process of "strengthening resilience", and was used within this study as a contextual framework for the analysis.

Absorptive capacity is essentially the measure of a system's ability to withstand and neutralise sudden external shocks (Haider & Cleaver, 2023). According to Cohen & Levinthal (1990), a firm's absorptive capacity is built on its existing knowledge base, which allows it to identify the worth of new data, integrate it into current operations, and leverage it for competitive advantage. Zahra & George (2002) conceptualise absorptive capacity as a series of interconnected organisational workflows, consisting of four distinct capabilities: acquisition (finding information), assimilation (understanding it), transformation (integrating it), and exploitation (using it). Similarly, Tu et al. (2006) state that absorptive capacity refers to the internal processes that allow an organisation to recognise valuable knowledge, circulate it through the right channels, and successfully assimilate it into the business.

Widely regarded as a driver of resilience, adaptive capacity allows an organisation to remain functional while adjusting to diverse external pressures (Haider & Cleaver, 2023). Adaptability is the power to learn and integrate diverse forms of knowledge and experience into a cohesive response (Folke et al., 2010). Through adaptive management, organisations can proactively navigate volatility by testing new practices on a limited scale; and this systematic approach uses real-time monitoring of shock-responsive elements to turn every disruption into a learning opportunity for future policy adjustments (Holladay, 2018). According to Walker et al. (2004), adaptability denotes the ability of individuals within a system to impact its resilience, and it represents the collective human capacity to manage and maintain systemic stability.

When a system's ability to adapt is finally overwhelmed by the scale of required change, incremental adjustments are no longer enough; this triggers a complete transformation (Béné et al., 2012). Transformation is a conscious move toward a new systemic reality (Haider & Cleaver, 2023). It drives multi-level change that breaks from the status quo. As stated by Walker et al. (2004), transformability refers to the capacity to architect a completely new system when the current ecological, economic, or social frameworks become unsustainable and can no longer be maintained.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative in-depth analysis of data gathered from Polish tourism organisations which operate within a destination management organisations (DMOs) framework. These institutions are responsible for the oversight and promotion of tourism destinations. As noted by the UNWTO (2007), they serve as vital coordinators for a diverse network of industry stakeholders. Their unique position as a central communication link within the industry makes them essential for maintaining stability during a crisis.

This study aims to identify the knowledge management challenges encountered by these organisations during crisis situations and to understand the role they play on the pathway toward achieving organisational resilience. This leads to the following primary research question, namely: what is the role of KM-related challenges in the pursuit of the organisational resilience among tourism organisations navigating crises?

To facilitate a detailed exploration of the phenomenon, this study applied a multiple case study framework (Yin, 2018). The research involved semi-structured interviews with 13 key representatives from seven local and regional tourism organisations at two organisational positions, i.e., decision-makers and staff employees. In their responses, the interviewees referred to specific crisis contexts experienced during their tenure in the DMO sector. Of the thirteen participants, twelve identified COVID-19 as their primary reference point, while one respondent focused on the war in Ukraine. Consequently, the following conclusions are situated within the context of these two specific crises.

Data were collected between November 2023 and January 2024. Selection criteria for the informants included both their functional role within the organisation and a professional tenure commencing no later than 2020. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in Polish (Poland, 1995), followed by a translation into English. Data were analysed through the thematic analysis (TA) approach as conceptualised by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2012). The analytical process was guided by their six-step framework, facilitating a comprehensive identification and refinement of themes. MAXQDA software was employed for data coding. Following the analysis, identified KM challenges were mapped against a resilience framework, consisting of absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings based on mapping the knowledge management challenges encountered by tourism organisations during crises against the three resilient capacities.

The results indicate that KM challenges at the absorptive capacity level pertained to both the operations of the organisations and their employees, while also impacting external stakeholders. Based on the data, it can be concluded that the primary threats included information chaos, manifested by a lack of access to critical information during the initial phase of the crisis. This was followed by information overload and disrupted communication flows as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Knowledge-related absorptive capacity challenges

Aspect	Quotation
Absence of information	"Primarily, it was access to information, in many places it turned out that the information is difficult to access or not available at all." – Organisation F, CEO
Constant changes and informational chaos	"there was uncertainty and a lot of informational chaos at times. Everything was changing like in a kaleidoscope." – Organisation F, Tourism Specialist
Disrupted information flow	"So I have the impression that the transmission of information failed somewhat at the [place]-us and government-[place] level, because this information was already reaching the Internet and people already knew [...]" – Organisation A, Product Specialist
Verification of information	"A big problem was certainly the selection and verification of what is real, what is actually available for our entities, and what is, [...], sector-dependent." – Organisation C, CEO
Lack of broader perspective	"[...] it seems to me that it was only fragments that we looked at and what was missing was a broader perspective." – Organisation E, Vice-Director

From the organisational perspective, securing access to critical information proved problematic, especially during the incipient phase of the crisis when such data was often unavailable or if they appeared, they remained difficult to interpret. This presents a critical barrier to the development of absorptive capacity. As Murovec & Prodan (2008) posit, this capacity relies on the exploitation of external information and resources for problem-solving. In the absence of access to relevant knowledge resources, absorptive capacity remains constrained.

Disrupted communication and information flow between the government and the organisation was indicated by respondent from Organisation A as another challenge. The participant noted a breakdown in the rhythm of information circulation, where the public received news ahead of the tourism organisation. Furthermore, the absence of informational alignment across local and central government authorities introduced significant ambiguity.

Fragmented and inconsistent reporting across diverse channels resulted in widespread informational turbulence, necessitating careful selection of reliable information (Representative of Organisation C). Fani (2015) in his research proved a positive relationship between knowledge acquisition and organisational resilience. Consequently, it may be argued that a compromised acquisition process may influence on the entity's systemic resilience.

Knowledge transfer to collaborative partners presented a further challenge. Despite preliminary verification by the organisation, stakeholders were inundated with such a vast volume of information that it hindered their ability to navigate it effectively.

The absence of a comprehensive overview of the crisis constituted another significant challenge. As noted by the Vice-Director from Organisation E, the institution received only fragmented data, which impeded a holistic understanding of the situation. The literature provides a "sensemaking" concept which entails constructing a rational framework to understand and communicate complex realities (Duchek, 2020). As Duchek (2020) notes, in crisis situations, this process is critical, as situational awareness and comprehension are the essential precursors to any meaningful organisational action.

Regarding adaptive capacity, KM challenges pertained to the necessity of unlearning standard operating procedures, managing emergent knowledge, and generating novel ideas under crisis conditions which presents Table 3.

Table 3: Knowledge-related adaptive capacity challenges

Aspect	Quotation
Unlearning standard ways of acting	"It was somewhat new knowledge that had to be managed, right? On one hand, we were accustomed to certain actions, somewhat standard you could say" – Organisation A, CEO
Transition to remote work	"It was complicated because you had to catch the other person outside working hours [...] someone had to stay with the kids in the morning, someone worked more in the evening" – Organisation F, Tourism Specialist
Managing personal challenges	"knowledge management [...] also became management of knowledge about the team, meaning who has what challenges, also how they deal with such [...] personal challenges in this crisis" – Organisation A, CEO

Aspect	Quotation
Establishing own guidelines	"based on those general guidelines we created our own guidelines." – Organisation C, Tourist Office Employee
Creating new ideas	"A challenge was somewhat also in creating new ideas. " – Organisation G, CEO

A significant challenge involved the departure from established standard practices, as the crisis necessitated the management of entirely new, emergent knowledge. In this context, the transition to a remote work model constituted a significant difficulty, as it was previously unfamiliar to the study participants. Numerous barriers emerged, including a lack of infrastructural support, as well as difficulties in maintaining communication, the speed of information transmission, and effective knowledge sharing among employees (Representative from Organisation F). As Wang et al. (2021) affirm, these issues were systemic rather than isolated. Most workers possessed minimal remote work experience before COVID-19, and organisations were largely ill-equipped to facilitate or sustain this transition (Wang et al., 2021).

From a managerial perspective, it was crucial to identify and address the specific challenges faced by individual staff members, as certain employees required heightened attention during the crisis, which was highlighted by CEO from Organisation A. Additionally, the interpersonal dynamics presented a significant challenge, as individuals exhibited diverse behavioural responses to the crisis. This necessitated a process of mutual learning to align disparate perspectives and coping mechanisms. As the literature indicates, the adaptability of an entire organisation is predicated upon the individual capabilities of its employees; thus, safeguarding human capacity becomes pivotal to the overall resilience of the organisation (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007; Walker et al., 2004).

As indicated by Representative from Organisation C, due to the insufficient clarity of central instructions, the organisation found it necessary to establish independent operational protocols. This represents proactive measures at the intersection of adaptation and transformation, moving beyond a mere attempt to comply with general guidelines. The conceptualisation of new initiatives and ideas presented another challenge for organisations, as they sought to align their strategies with the shifting realities of the crisis environment as depicted by CEO from Organisation G.

Finally, KM-related challenges for transformative capacity stemmed from a lack of codified post-crisis knowledge (lessons learned) and a deficiency in translating crisis experiences into strategic organisational protocols as depicted in Table 4.

Table 4: Knowledge-related transformative capacity challenges

Aspect	Quotation
Loss of valuable lessons learned	"So, from that perspective, it seems to me that Covid hasn't taught us anything and I speak very broadly here" – Organisation A, CEO
Lack of codified lessons learned	"there is nothing formal, it is informally established. We try to adhere to this to prevent another crisis" – Organisation D, Tourism Specialist

According to CEO of Organisation A, the crisis did not serve as a transformative catalyst for the tourism sector at large, and the potential lessons from this period remained largely unlearned. This so-called "organisational amnesia" was also observed in another evidence indicating that no formal procedures were integrated into the organisation post-crisis; instead, only certain informal operational patterns persisted.

This absence of lessons learned implemented at a strategic level was recurring aspect across data. These findings can be examined from two perspectives. On one hand, the organisation generated knowledge based on its crisis experience, however it failed to transfer this knowledge effectively enough to permanently alter behaviours and operational procedures in the post-crisis context, a phenomenon frequently documented in the literature (Duchek, 2020). Furthermore, the failure to codify acquired knowledge within the internal knowledge base prevented it from being preserved in institutional memory. Given that resilience is contingent on the existing stock of organisational knowledge, developing a broad knowledge base is necessary for the proactive anticipation of both internal and external shifts (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Duchek, 2020). Fani (2015) demonstrated that the knowledge storage process is correlated with organisational resilience. Thus, it can be concluded that any disruption to this process adversely affects the organisation's overall resilience.

On the other hand, the establishment of certain informal activities within the organisation may indicate the presence of reflective practices that can facilitate experiential learning (Daudelin, 1996).

5. Conclusion

In addressing the primary research question regarding the role of KM challenges in the path toward achieving organisational resilience, it is necessary to focus on several key issues. These challenges arising at various stages of a crisis influenced the resilience capabilities of tourism organisations to varying degrees. Regarding absorptive capacity, the most significant challenge was the lack of adequate information resources, particularly during the initial phases of the crisis. Despite active environmental scanning (Duchek, 2020) and efforts to acquire knowledge, organisations faced difficulties to leverage external information for real-time crisis resolution. As research by Umoh & Amah (2013) indicates, while the knowledge acquisition process is vital for building resilience, it may be concluded that a scarcity of knowledge resources effectively constrains an organisation's capabilities in that matter.

Regarding adaptive capabilities, examining KM challenges sheds light on the mechanisms impeding an organisation's ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Central to this process is the unlearning of old operational methods and protocols that are no longer viable. Crises demand managing new knowledge and implementing new responsive actions, which often necessitates moving away from established practices. From a management perspective, focusing on individual-level challenges is vital, given that organisational adaptability is built upon the adaptive potential of its personnel (Walker et al., 2004). Therefore, securing the well-being of staff during a crisis and proactively developing their adaptive skills beforehand is of critical importance.

The challenge of codifying lessons learned and updating internal knowledge with crisis experience may constrain the organisations transformative capabilities. Without transferring this knowledge into operating procedures, crisis experience remains limited to the tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) of individuals, which could hinder the company's response to future crises. This also refers to the phenomenon of organisational amnesia (Othman & Azuan Hashim, 2004), whereby the organisation loses valuable lessons in its haste to return to a state of "normal" activity.

Future studies could employ quantitative methods to examine these preliminary findings on a larger scale. Additionally, comparing DMOs across various cultural contexts remains a compelling area for research. As this is a qualitative study based on the analysis of a limited number of organisations, its findings cannot be generalised and do not represent the sector as a whole. Furthermore, the research was conducted within a single country and in the context of two specific crises, which limits its broader applicability. This study offers valuable insights for practitioners into the challenges arising during a crisis, serving as a baseline for proactive preparation and building the organisational resilience before a new crisis emerges. By integrating KM challenges with the resilience framework, it offers a more nuanced understanding of the role of knowledge management within the tourism crisis context and provides a food for thought for researchers focusing on KM and resilience.

Acknowledgements

The author greatly acknowledges the financial support from the National Science Centre, Poland, within the grant no. UMO-2022/45/B/HS4/02631, entitled "Knowledge management in tourism organisations in crisis."

Ethics Declaration: The author reports there are no competing interests to declare, and ethical clearance was not required for the research.

AI Declaration: The author reports that AI tools assisted in the translation process to improve readability. The output has been critically evaluated and revised.

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