

# Strategic Decision-making in Tourism, Events, and Hospitality SMEs: A Scoping Review

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**Abstract:** This study explores how strategic decision-making (SDM) is addressed in tourism, events, and hospitality research and how contextual factors shape the understanding of strategy. While strategy remains a recurring topic in the field, only limited attention has been given to explaining how strategic decisions are actually formed, negotiated, and realised in practice. Drawing on the strategic management literature (Mintzberg, 1987; Eisenhardt, 1999; Elbanna et al, 2020), strategy is here conceptualised as a contextually embedded and iterative decision process rather than a fixed plan or analytical outcome. The aim is to identify how SDM appears in recent strategy-labelled studies and what kinds of contextual assumptions guide its interpretation. A scoping review framework (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al, 2020) was applied to map the fragmented research landscape and clarify how SDM has been implicitly examined across the tourism and hospitality domains. A total of 183 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025 in 15 SJR-ranked journals were systematically reviewed. The analytical framework consisted of three tiers: SDM types (deliberate, emergent, reactive), approaches to uncertainty, and decision-making contexts. This design enabled a structured synthesis of conceptual emphases and revealed how different streams of literature define and position strategy and decision-making under uncertainty. The findings indicate that strategy is mainly understood as an organisational activity with a short-term, operational orientation. Uncertainty is often considered a controllable variable rather than an inherent and generative aspect of strategic behaviour. Small and medium-sized enterprises, despite their centrality to the sector, are commonly described as reactive instead of proactive decision-makers. Digital, hybrid, and data-driven contexts remain underexplored, indicating a conceptual gap in understanding how strategic choices are shaped in service-oriented environments. The study contributes to the strategic management discourse by systematising how SDM has been studied in recent tourism and hospitality research and by identifying directions for future studies focusing on context, uncertainty, and strategic decision-making processes in dynamic service settings.

**Keywords:** Scoping Review, Strategy, Strategic Decision-making, Context

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## 1. Introduction

The tourism, events, and hospitality industries have undergone rapid and unpredictable changes in recent years. Many organisations have had to make high-risk decisions to adapt their operations. Alongside these changes, organisations operate in an environment of tightening sustainability requirements, increasing climate awareness, and changing customer expectations (Seidel et al, 2021; Salem et al, 2023). The short-term changes and long-term trends have challenged established business models and forced organisations to reconsider their strategies.

Strategic decision-making (SDM) refers to the process through which organisations define, evaluate, and implement strategic choices in uncertain environments (Mintzberg, 1987; Shepherd and Rudd, 2014). SDM has received limited attention in tourism, events, and hospitality research. Previous reviews in the field (e.g., Aladag, 2020; Okumus et al, 2020; Köseoglu et al, 2019) have studied the development of strategy research broadly and noted that the field tends to approach strategy as an outcome or a static state rather than as a dynamic process. As a result, understanding of mechanisms and contexts shaping strategic action remains fragmented.

SMEs are central to the transformation of the tourism, events, and hospitality sectors, yet research on their strategic activity also remains limited. Their flexibility and resilience have been particularly important, as SMEs form the backbone of the industry (Asthana, 2022). SDM often occurs in real time, with limited information and a strong reliance on managerial judgement (Elbanna et al, 2022). These conditions make SMEs an interesting context for examining how contextual factors shape the ways strategies develop.

The main objective of this study is to explore how SDM and its contextual settings are addressed in tourism, events, and hospitality management research, based on recent strategy-labelled publications (2020–2025).

**Research question:** *How is SDM described, and what contextual settings can be identified in strategy-labelled publications in tourism, events, and hospitality management research?*

The study employs a scoping review approach suitable for mapping fragmented research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al, 2020). Its purpose is to clarify how SDM is implicitly addressed in strategy research within the tourism, events, and hospitality sectors. By focusing on studies where SDM is present but not explicitly defined, the review reveals how strategic decisions are interpreted in practice and how this implicit focus shapes the understanding of strategy formation in the field.

## 2. Research Background

Recent work in strategy research (Jarzabkowski et al, 2025) emphasizes dynamic and contextually embedded understanding over earlier static orientations. Strategy is an ongoing, situated activity rather than a fixed plan. Mintzberg (1987) distinguished between intended, deliberate, emergent, and realized strategies, arguing that strategy forms as an evolving pattern through organizational actions rather than solely through planning. Realized strategy represents the cumulative outcome of these processes, often diverging from original intentions.

From a practice-based perspective, Jarzabkowski (2005) defines strategy as “a pattern in a stream of goal-directed activity over time,” identifying strategizing practices as institutionalized routines through which strategic conduct is reproduced and adapted. Later studies further develop this socially enacted view by highlighting the interplay of actors, practices, and context (Hautz, Seidl, & Whittington, 2017; Jarzabkowski et al, 2025). Also in research, strategy should not be viewed as a stable or objective construct but rather as a continuous process of meaning-making. It remains under construction as actors interpret and respond to situated contexts (Suchman, 1987).

Collis and Rukstad (2008) propose an instrumental framework in which effective strategy articulates three elements: objective (ends), scope (domain), and advantage (means). This model positions strategy as a concise structure linking intent, focus, and capability. Khalifa (2021) expands this integrative orientation by defining strategy as “a cohesive core of guiding decisions” and “an entity’s evolving theory of winning high-stake challenges.” This framing underscores the analytical nature of strategy as a response to uncertainty. Eisenhardt (1999) brings these perspectives together by framing strategy as strategic decision-making (SDM), arguing that strategies result from the accumulation of fast, iterative decision processes rather than from formal planning. In dynamic environments, effective strategies are constructed through real-time choices and adaptive reasoning.

### 2.1 Strategic Decision-making (SDM)

Strategic decision-making is a contextually embedded process shaped by interdependent actions, cognitive biases, and persistent uncertainty, rather than a sequence of discrete choices (Seidl et al, 2024; Rau & Bromiley, 2025). Mintzberg and Waters (1990) note that isolating discrete decisions can hinder understanding of organizational processes, as actions often occur without formal decisions and instead reflect responses to environmental conditions. Shepherd and Rudd (2014) model SDM as a process influenced by interacting managerial, organizational, and environmental factors. Their framework links attributes such as rationality and intuition to contextual variables, suggesting that outcomes stem from complex and non-linear interactions. At the individual level, Musso et al (2022) show that overconfidence and reliance on intuition shape strategic outcomes in internationalization decisions.

The strategic decision process involves the formulation and implementation of decisions, including the selection of goals, means, and their deployment over time (Noorderhaven, 1995; Elbanna, 2006). This perspective prioritizes mechanisms of enactment over decision content, focusing on how managerial cognition and contextual constraints guide the trajectory from problem recognition to action. Rather than following a linear path, strategic decision processes involve iteration, feedback, and adaptation to evolving conditions (Elbanna et al, 2020).

Although the triggers of strategic decision-making remain underexplored, complexity and uncertainty are intrinsic to the process (Elbanna et al, 2020). Uncertainty therefore constitutes a fundamental condition of SDM rather than an external disturbance. Brozović (2018), by contrast, conceptualizes uncertainty as an external challenge that requires active organizational response. He links uncertainty exposure to strategic flexibility—the capability to respond to change while maintaining strategic intent—which emerges through the continuous adaptation of decision processes.

Despite these differing conceptualizations, uncertainty remains a core condition of managerial decision-making (Sniashko, 2019). However, inconsistent measurements across the business literature have produced fragmented findings regarding organizational behaviour. Strategy can be understood as an entity's chosen way of interacting with its environment in pursuit of survival and prosperity (Elbanna et al, 2020).

## **2.2 Strategy Research in Tourism and Hospitality**

Okumus (2002) questioned whether hospitality researchers could contribute to the strategic management literature. He observed that most studies in the field address strategic management as a linear process consisting of analysis, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Nearly two decades later, Okumus et al (2020) proposed several future research directions in which strategy was mentioned only in the form of strategic planning. Harrington and Ottenbacher (2011) reviewed strategy research in hospitality from 2005 to 2009 and identified ten main themes, including strategy and uncertainty, internal organization, and strategy implementation. Although the thematic scope had expanded, they noted that much of the research approached strategy through tactical or operational methods rather than engaging with its theoretical foundations.

Okumus et al (2017) highlighted the conceptual fragmentation of strategy research in tourism and hospitality, pointing to the lack of shared definitions and an integrated understanding of strategic management mechanisms. Aladağ et al (2020) reviewed research on strategy implementation in tourism and hospitality and identified four main clusters: success factors and impediments, organizational characteristics, management of external relationships, and implementation performance. Within these clusters, research has primarily focused on internal determinants and functional aspects of strategy implementation. This focus is evident in studies that emphasize the structuring and prioritization of strategic factors, such as the use of hierarchical A'WOT analysis (Lee et al, 2021) and data-driven approaches aimed at improving decision accuracy (Song, 2025). As a result, the dynamic and contextual nature of strategic decision-making has received limited attention in tourism and hospitality research (Aladağ et al, 2020).

Köseoglu et al (2019) identified a gap in systematic discussion on the advancement of strategic management research in hospitality and tourism. The field has largely adopted a content-oriented approach emphasizing competitive advantage, with limited focus on process-oriented perspectives addressing how and when strategies are formed and implemented. Kalıpçı and Yay (2018) stated that most studies in the tourism-related strategy literature concentrate on senior managers, overlooking the perspectives of other stakeholders involved in the strategic management process.

## **3. Research Methodology and Analysis Framework**

This study applied a scoping review approach to examine how SDM and its contexts were addressed in tourism, events and hospitality research. Scoping reviews are considered suitable for determining the scope and coverage of an existing body of literature, providing a clear indication of the volume and thematic distribution of studies within a given field (Munn et al, 2018). The scope was defined using the PCC (Population, Concept, Context) framework by Peters et al (2020): the population consisted of strategy-labelled articles published in tourism, events and hospitality journals between 2020 and 2025; the concept focused on SDM and its contexts and the review context referred to the tourism, events and hospitality research domain.

The review followed the five-stage framework of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), complemented by methodological refinements proposed by Peters et al (2020). These stages included identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, selecting studies, charting the data, and collating, summarising, and reporting the results. The review followed the PRISMA-ScR framework (Tricco et al, 2018) with minor adaptations. Phases such as protocol registration (no protocol applied) and critical quality assessment were excluded, as Pham et al (2014) noted that such evaluation does not form part of the scoping review methodology.

The literature search was conducted between 3 September and 15 October 2025. Fifteen SJR-ranked tourism and hospitality journals to which the authors had access were selected as information sources. Searches were carried out directly within the publishers' databases (Elsevier, EBSCO, Emerald, SAGE, and Springer). Only English-language, peer-reviewed research articles containing the term *strateg\** in the title were included, while editorials, review papers, book reviews, and expert opinion pieces were excluded. A total of 194 records were identified, of which 11 were excluded due to ineligibility, including process-related and indexing errors. Eight records were available only as titles and abstracts because the full texts were not accessible due to contractual restrictions. After screening titles and abstracts, 175 articles were reviewed at the full-text level. In individual

articles, details such as objectives, methodological choices, research findings, and conclusions were excluded from the full-paper analysis, which focused solely on the defined scope of the review. Detailed search results by journal and database were summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Information sources and search results**

Journal Name	Database	Literature search conducted	Number of articles found	Included articles	Excluded Articles	Reviewed articles based on title abstract	Reviewed full articles
Annals of Tourism Research	Elsevier	3.9.2025	4	4	0	4	4
Current Issues in Tourism	EBSCO	3.9.2025	11	11	0	11	11
Event Management	EBSCO	15.10.2025	5	5	0	5	5
Information Technology & Tourism	Springer	3.9.2025	3	3	0	3	3
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	Emerald	3.9.2025	15	15	0	15	15
International Journal of Hospitality Management	Elsevier	3.9.2025	52	50	2	50	50
Journal of Destination Marketing & Management	Elsevier	3.9.2025	5	5	0	5	5
Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research	SAGE	3.9.2025	7	6	1	6	6
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management	Elsevier	3.9.2025	24	23	1	23	23
Journal of Hospitality & Marketing Management	EBSCO	3.9.2025	5	5	0	5	5
Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	EBSCO	3.9.2025	8	8	0	8	0*
Journal of Travel Research	SAGE	3.9.2025	12	12	0	12	12
Tourism Management	Elsevier	3.9.2025	21	19	2	19	19
Tourism Management Perspectives	Elsevier	3.9.2025	12	11	1	11	11
Tourism Review	Emerald	3.9.2025	8	6	2	6	6
<i>Process related errors</i>			2	0	2	0	0
<b>Total</b>			<b>194</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>175</b>

Data extraction was conducted using an Excel-based framework table initially structured around seven preliminary categories capturing article-specific characteristics. The table was refined iteratively to ensure consistency and transparency. Extracted data were then organised into three analytical tiers summarised in Table 2: strategic decision-making types (strategy type, actor, focus), uncertainty (locus, type), and decision-making contexts (macrocontext, contextual characteristics). The descriptive analysis mapped and categorised how the studies addressed these tiers, aiming to identify the range, nature, and extent of concepts represented in the literature rather than interpret relationships between them.

**Table 2: Analysis Framework**

Tier → Sub-elements	Description	Analytical subquestions	Key sources
Tier 1: Strategic Decision-Making Type	The act through which uncertainty is addressed.		Mintzberg (1987), Eisenhardt (1999), Elbanna et al (2020), Khalifa (2021)
→ Strategy type	Strategy domain	How is the strategy defined or described?	Mintzberg (1987), Elbanna et al (2020), Suchman (1987), Jarzabkowski (2005), Khalifa (2021)

Tier → Sub-elements	Description	Analytical subquestions	Key sources
→ Actor	The level or entity responsible for decision-making	How is the decision-maker specified?	Elbanna et al (2020), Musso et al (2022)
→ Focus	The object or domain of the decision	What is the decision about?	Collis & Rukstad (2008), Khalifa (2021)
Tier 2: Uncertainty	Uncertainty is the condition that makes decisions necessary.		Sniazhko (2019), Brozović (2018)
→ Locus of Uncertainty	The level or domain in which uncertainty resides or is experienced	In whose domain is uncertainty primarily located or perceived?	Sniazhko (2019), Brozović (2018), Musso et al (2022), Elbanna et al (2020)
→ Type of Uncertainty	Internal, business environment, macroenvironment	How is uncertainty defined or classified?	Sniazhko (2019), Brozović (2018), Elbanna et al (2020)
Tier 3: Decision-Making Contexts	The structural and situational conditions in which uncertainty arises and decisions are made.		Shepherd & Rudd (2014); Elbanna et al (2020)
→ Macrocontext	The broad external environment where the decision is made.	How is the macroenvironment specified?	Shepherd & Rudd (2014), Eisenhardt (1999)
→ Contextual characteristics	The characteristics of the decision situation shape how uncertainty is interpreted and managed.	What decision-specific conditions are described?	Elbanna et al (2020)

#### 4. Findings

**Strategy types:** A total of 183 distinct strategy terms were identified in the dataset. Of these, 80 were mentioned more than once. The most frequently used terms were crisis management (11), pricing (8), brand (6), competitive (6), marketing (5), social responsibility (5), coping (5), customer relationship (5), business (4), service recovery (4), innovation (4), and sustainability (3). Terms mentioned twice included language, stress and coping, asset-light, affinity-seeking, response, mitigation, and adaptation. In total, 103 terms were mentioned only once. These single occurrences cover a wide range of themes, including tourism, responsibility, digitalisation, resources, communication, and marketing.

**Strategic actor:** A total of eight main actor categories were identified in the reviewed articles. The most frequently studied strategy-related actor was the organisation (133), followed by customers (18) and society (15). Employees appeared in eight cases, while management (4), policy (2) and managers (2) were mentioned less often. Individual occurrences included external stakeholders.

**Strategic focus:** Seven main focus categories were identified in the material. The most frequent focus was on customers (85), followed by the industry level (63). Performance-related focuses appeared in 13 cases, while society (9) and employees (7) were mentioned in several studies. Stakeholders (4) and individuals (2) occurred occasionally. Across the material, the identified focuses varied from external targets, such as customers and industries, to internal or societal perspectives, including performance, employees, and society.

**Strategic locus of uncertainty:** Seven main loci of uncertainty were identified in the material. The most frequent references related to business (118), followed by communication (38) and society (13). Innovation (7) and performance (6) appeared in several studies, while management (1) was mentioned only once.

**Strategic uncertainty type:** Three strategic uncertainty types appeared more than once: crisis response (2), sub-strategic choice (2), and response to reviews and comments (2). The remaining 177 items were mentioned only once. These referred to customers, employees, communication, branding, marketing, technology, environmental aspects, and financial or operational themes. Several articles addressed the tourism and hospitality sector, while others related to broader business and organisational contexts.

**Strategic macrocontext:** A total of 19 macrocontext categories were identified within the general tourism and hospitality field. The most frequently mentioned strategic contexts were hotels (47) and tourism and hospitality (45), followed by restaurants (24) and hospitality (18). Other recurring contexts included destinations (15), events (8), and airlines (6). Less frequent references appeared in tourism (4), food delivery platforms (3), and hotels and restaurants (2). Single occurrences included cities, space travel, education, cruises, tourism companies, travel platforms, travel agencies, museums, food, and online services.

**Strategic context characteristics:** Altogether, 157 different context characteristics were found in the reviewed material. Nineteen additional cases explicitly referred to COVID-19, while China was discussed three times, and both Airbnb/homestay and conceptual studies appeared twice. The remaining contexts were diverse, ranging from country- and region-specific settings such as Pakistan, Vietnam, rural China, Iran, and the Cape region in South Africa to thematic perspectives including service recovery, crowdfunding, ethical restaurants, and drone food delivery. Generally, these contexts align with predominantly reactive and control-focused framings of strategic decision-making, centred on organisational actors in conventional service settings.

## 5. Discussion

The studies reviewed use "strategy" inconsistently and often lack grounding in established frameworks. In the dataset, strategy often refers to tactical or operational choices rather than to a process of strategic decision-making, which reinforces conceptual fragmentation. The findings show that the organisation is generally framed as the main strategic actor, while managers, employees, and customers are seldom mentioned. This framing presents strategy as an inherent organisational property rather than a practice shaped by human agency. It conceptualises the organisation as an impersonal actor, which simplifies how strategy develops within and between organisations and neglects the individual and context-specific perspectives highlighted in earlier research. While many studies include small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), this context is typically embedded rather than explicitly analysed, resulting in limited insight into how SMEs enact strategy. It also suggests that the SME perspective often serves as a convenient empirical setting rather than constituting a central theoretical concern.

Most studies describe the focus of strategy as being directed toward external targets, such as customers or industry-level factors, while internal or societal aspects receive little consideration. This external emphasis contrasts with the types of strategies described, which are largely reactive. The dominance of tactical strategy labels, the perception of the organisation as the main decision-making entity, and the externalisation of uncertainty collectively create the impression that strategic decision-making is primarily reactive and control-oriented.

Uncertainty is predominantly framed as an external threat to stability, prompting control-oriented and risk-avoidance responses. Such an interpretation reduces uncertainty to a variable to be managed, as reflected in the frequent use of structured and hierarchical decision-making approaches that score and rank strategic options under uncertainty such as A'WOT-type models (e.g. Lee et al, 2021). As a result, strategy is presented as an effort to maintain continuity and restore balance rather than to explore or experiment. Uncertainty is often treated as an external variable rather than as inherent to strategising. This separation hinders understanding of how different types of uncertainty interact and what their implications are for strategy. Studies generally frame uncertainty as negative, providing limited insight into how organisations identify, interpret, and use it in their strategic work.

The macrocontext category reveals a decoupling between broad environmental descriptions and narrow analytical focuses. While studies describe industry-level changes extensively, the actual analyses often target specific, isolated cases, failing to link systemic shifts to strategic action. Furthermore, research remains anchored in traditional settings like hotels and restaurants, underrepresenting structural transformations such as digital platforms and the sharing economy (e.g., Song, 2025). This creates a significant lag in the literature, where the strategic implications of emerging service ecosystems and their long-term effects remain largely unexplored.

Finally, the characteristics of research contexts illustrate how strategy is tied to specific empirical settings, such as COVID-19, social media responses, ethical consumption, and destination crises. These contexts indicate where strategic relevance is presumed to lie rather than clarifying what strategy itself entails. They also reveal the underlying assumptions about the level at which strategy is understood and required in tourism and hospitality research.

Despite its interesting findings, this study has some limitations. First, the analysis is confined to 183 articles published in 15 top-ranked journals (SJR) over the past five years, which may not capture the full diversity of research on strategy in tourism and hospitality, as these journals may not consider strategic themes to be particularly interesting or current. Second, the review relies on the content reported in the selected studies, and some nuances of SDM, particularly at the SME level, may not have been explicitly analysed or described. Third, the focus on published academic literature excludes practitioner perspectives and management literature, which could provide additional insights into strategic processes.

## 6. Conclusions

The scoping review reveals that the role and formation of strategic decisions in tourism and hospitality organisations—especially SMEs—remain poorly understood. Extracting coherent knowledge from the existing research is difficult, as strategy is mainly depicted as reactive adaptation to external pressures or changes, with limited attention to its cognitive, individual, and forward-looking dimensions.

The conceptual fragmentation indicates a persistent gap between empirical research and established strategic frameworks. Strategy often functions as a descriptive label for outcomes rather than as a construct that explains underlying processes. The limited attention to individual-level perspectives and the narrow view of uncertainty weaken the field's capacity to explain strategic decision-making in complex environments. Although SMEs are frequently included, their role is usually implicit rather than examined in depth, offering little understanding of how they practise strategy and further contributing to conceptual fragmentation.

Future research should shift the focus from viewing strategy as an inherent organisational property toward investigating it as a practice shaped by human agency. This requires adopting integrative approaches that link strategic intent, individual cognition, and contextual complexity. Uncertainty should be reconceptualised as a source of renewal and experimentation rather than merely an external threat to stability. Future studies should move beyond traditional settings to explore the strategic implications of structural changes and emerging service ecosystems in the decision-making process.

## Ethical Declaration

This study did not involve the collection of primary data from human participants; all data were derived from published articles. Therefore, no ethical approval or participant consent was required. The review followed standard ethical practices for secondary research, ensuring accuracy, proper citation, and methodological transparency.

## AI Declaration

Language editing and minor text refinement were supported by AI-assisted tools (DeepL, Microsoft Copilot, and ChatGPT-5). These tools were not used for content creation, data analysis, or interpretation. All conceptual and analytical work was conducted by the authors.

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