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Learning of Innovation Opportunities: Sources and processes of open innovation for sustaining SME hotels

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Abstract

Purpose

Open innovation is a critical source of competitive differentiation within the hospitality industry. However, open innovation remains underexplored in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and there is a dearth of knowledge about open innovation processes and mechanisms in the hospitality industry. This study addresses this lacuna by investigating how locally owned Ghanaian SME hotels source ideas for their open innovation practices and what open innovation processes they use to identify opportunities.

Design/Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study adopted a multiple-case study design using a purposive-homogenous sample of six two-star locally owned SME hotels. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings

The research found that Ghanaian SME hotels sourced ideas for open innovation through staff suggestions and manager observations (inside-out processes), customer feedback, competitor analysis, and public surveys (outside-in processes), and collaborative meetings with competitors (coupled process).

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Originality

Open innovation procedures in emerging countries and how SME hotels get knowledge for open innovation practices and processes are unexplored. This research identifies how SME hotels source open innovation ideas, providing a potential pathway for other similarly resource-constrained businesses to identify innovation opportunities.

Practical Implications

The results demonstrate the value of learning from a range of sources to identify opportunities to innovate products, services, and processes, and identify low-cost and easy-to-access information sources to support innovation identification.

Keywords

Open Innovation, Sourcing Innovation, Ghana, Hospitality, Small and Medium Enterprises, Innovation Processes

Introduction

Tourism is Ghana's largest industry, accounting for \$3.7 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2024). In Ghana SME hotels play an important role in the tourism industry, accounting for 56.5% of tourist accommodation available within Ghana (Ghana Tourism Authority, 2019). These locally owned hotels support the local community by providing employment opportunities and ensuring profit remains in the region (Lee-Ross & Lashley, 2010). However, many of these locally owned SME hotels struggle to grow and compete against increasing international competition, partly due to their low levels of innovation (Xuhua et al., 2018). A lack of innovation is a common challenge for Ghanaian SMEs, which often hinders their survival (Oduro, 2020). To support a healthy and sustainable tourism industry, it is important to ensure that hotels have a constant flow of business ideas and innovation (Streimikiene et al., 2021).

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are hindered by a liability of smallness and resource constraints, which can hamper their internal innovation practices and the resources they can commit (Hartono & Rafik, 2022; Parida et al., 2012). Open innovation opens-up the boundaries of the firm to collaborate with others to share ideas to support the development of new products, processes, and services (Escoffier et al., 2016). Thus is a particularly suitable option for resource-constrained SMEs to identify innovation opportunities, as they can look outward for opportunities (Desouza & Awazu, 2006). This can reduce the internal burden of identifying innovation opportunities through learning from external expertise (Chesbrough, 2010) which can reduce the liability of size (Jabeen et al., 2023). SMEs have a greater chance of becoming learning organisations, as they have more socialisation processes (Subramanian & Suresh, 2022), which can allow them to acquire external knowledge, facilitating open innovation (Ferrigno et al., 2022).

Despite the potential for open innovation to help reduce the resource limitations associated with SMEs (Jabeen et al., 2023), open innovation research is concentrated on large firms

(Masucci et al., 2020) and developed and industrialising countries (Oduro, 2020). This has led to calls for further research into the process of open innovation in SMEs in emerging economies (Oduro, 2020).

It has also been identified that open innovation is underexplored in the hospitality industry and therefore there is a lack of understanding about open innovation processes and mechanisms in the hospitality industry (Shin and Perdue, 2022). This paper addresses this dearth of research and meets calls to research the processes and mechanisms of open innovation in the hospitality industry by investigating how locally owned Ghanaian SME hotels source ideas for their open innovation practices, and what open innovation processes they use to identify opportunities. This addresses the lacuna in our understanding as to the open innovation processes adopted by organisations and how they learn about open innovation opportunities (Ferrigno et al., 2022). Understanding how locally owned Ghanaian SME hotels successfully source ideas for open innovation practices and the processes that they use, can provide guidance for other resource-constrained SME hotels as to how they can identify innovation opportunities to support their competitiveness, ensuring a sustainable hospitality industry.

Literature Review

Innovation and Organisational Learning in SMEs

Organisational learning is one of the strongest predictors of innovation, as it supports continuous learning and the identification of opportunities for the implementation of innovation to improve products, processes, and services (Achdiat et al., 2023; Gachanja et al., 2020). The link between organisational learning and innovation holds true in many industries including the hospitality and tourism industry, where it can support the development of innovative hospitality services (Chen et al., 2017). Open innovation where organisations access and acquire knowledge and learn from others outside of specific internal innovation functions

to support the identification of opportunities for innovation, is a valuable way for firms to learn of ways they can develop and enhance their products, services, and processes (Ferrigno et al., 2022). This approach to innovation requires organisations to learn from other members and actors within their networks (Mastio et al., 2019). SMEs are ideally located to learn through this approach as they have more socialisation with their networks and are willing to learn through these channels (Subramanian & Suresh, 2022).

Open Innovation in Small and Medium Sized Enterprises

Open innovation is characterised by the deliberate exchange of knowledge both inward and outward to bolster internal innovation efforts and broaden the reach of innovations created within the organisation (Chaudhary et al., 2022). Open innovation, as described by Marozzo et al. (2024), involves the strategic management of knowledge exchange beyond the confines of an organisation. It encompasses the practice of incorporating external ideas and technologies into an organisation's processes while also permitting unused technologies to be harnessed by external parties. Chesbrough (2010) acknowledged that open innovation gives weight to both internal and external sources of valuable ideas.

Due to limited access to resources, SMEs often need to rely on second-hand knowledge or through person-to-person communication. Only a small proportion of the resources within an SME can be devoted to the gathering and analysis of knowledge; mostly, by managers who, however, also have many other tasks to manage (Lowik et al., 2012). Thus, SMEs are more likely to depend on procedures such as meetings with suppliers and customers, rather than undertaking more formal, expensive, and systematic knowledge acquisition activities (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2007).

Even though SMEs have less ability to access external resources and have fewer technological assets (Huizingh, 2011), they can still derive benefit from open innovation activities (Lee et

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al., 2010; Varis and Littunen, 2010). However, most research into open innovation is focused on larger organisations (Masucci et al., 2020) and there is a tendency to focus on high-tech companies, leading to open innovation in lower tech industries being underexplored (Marozzo et al., 2024). This means that the process of how traditional SMEs develop open innovation in emerging economies remains underexplored (Oduro, 2020).

Open Innovation in the Hospitality Industry

Open innovation is a critical source of competitive differentiation within the hospitality industry (Shin & Perdue, 2022) and it has been highlighted that open innovation has improved organisational performance in the hospitality industry (Azhar Mohd Harif et al., 2022). Hospitality firms have transitioned to focus on external processes, which rely on knowledge created by others (Busser et al., 2019) and therefore relationships with those who can provide external knowledge can be useful to support effective open innovation (Robayo-Acuña & Chams-Anturi, 2025). Since hospitality heavily relies on service, open innovation is highly effective in enhancing service quality by utilising feedback from service users and providers to discover areas for improvement. Online methods of collecting data to support open innovation are increasingly valuable for the hospitality industry (Wu et al., 2023). However, such research has been focused on larger, often multinational hotels, neglecting SME hotels, particularly in emerging economies. Research into the open innovation in the hospitality industry is still limited (Lelo de Larrea et al., 2021) and there is a dearth of understanding regarding open innovation processes in hospitality (Shin & Perdue, 2022).

Open Innovation Processes and Sources of Open Innovation

Grimsdottir and Edvardsson (2018) identified the use of three open-innovation processes commonly mentioned in the open innovation literature: Outside-in open innovation process,

inside-out open innovation process, and the coupled open innovation process. These processes relate to where the knowledge underlying the innovation is drawn from. Subsequently, the source of the knowledge and learning which supports innovation can fit within one of these three processes.

Outside-In Open Innovation Process

Asseraf and Shoham (2019) conceptualised outside-in as a strategic orientation that makes use of a high-level of resources to reflect a firms' willingness to act in a certain way, with an orientation based on the premise that knowledge and resources reside outside the firm to include, but not limited to customers, suppliers, and competitors (Saeed et al., 2015). SME owners can develop innovative products to exploit opportunities arising from customer needs, business, and social networks (Neneh, 2018).

Customer satisfaction and competitor analysis are hence the focus of outside-in (Asseraf & Shoham, 2019). Outside-in proponents are externally oriented and so they focus on the market and tend to ask questions such as 'What do our customers need?', 'What are our competitors doing?' and 'What capabilities do we need to win?' and aim to adapt to the market (Asseraf & Shoham, 2019). Customers' requirements, insufficient market intelligence, and limited resources from the SME perspective, may have the potential to limit the outside-in process (Verbano et al., 2015; Parida et al., 2012).

Inside-Out Open Innovation Process

Inside-out has been conceptualised as a firm's capability to dynamically use less-abstract resources to reflect their ability to act in a chosen direction with an orientation (Asseraf & Shoham, 2019). It focuses on firm-specific internal resources and capabilities (Saeed et al., 2015). Inside-out proponents are internally oriented and hence focus on their unique

technological capabilities and tend to deal with questions such as ‘How can we invent the future?’, ‘How can we make innovative products?’, and ‘What can we do with our capabilities?’ (Asseraf & Shoham, 2019). SME cost fluctuations, managerial complexity, and insufficient managerial abilities may impede the inside-out approach (Verbano et al., 2015). The inside-out process is scarce within the hotel industry, with multinational hotels chains favouring outside-in innovation (Shin & Purdue, 2022).

Coupled Open Innovation Process

The coupled process combines the outside-in process with the inside-out process to jointly develop and commercialise innovation (Enkel et al., 2009). Therefore, a coupled open innovation process involves simultaneous inbound and outbound exchange of knowledge, forming a ‘coupled approach (Sims & Seidel, 2017). This simultaneous inbound and outbound exchange is normally situated within collaboration and reciprocity (Remneland et al., 2019) and requires strong social ties and networks (Sims & Seidel, 2017). Zhao (2023) suggests that the coupled open innovation process moves beyond the outside-in and inside-out processes, by acknowledging that sometimes there is a collaborative, intentional, and interactive two-way exchange facilitating innovation. This involves collaboration with other actors within a network, providing challenges for SMEs in finding the right partners for collaboration and managing a time-consuming synergistic relationship, limiting their engagement in the coupled process (Verbano et al., 2015).

Whilst the open innovation processes are well defined, limited understanding exists as to how businesses learn about open innovation opportunities (Ferrigno et al., 2022). As innovation opportunities are highly contextual, the focus of open innovation research on larger organisations (Masucci et al., 2020), and the lack of exploration into the service sector and hospitality industry (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Lelo de Larrea et al., 2021), means that our

understanding of how SME hotels source ideas for their open innovation practices and what open innovation processes they use to identify opportunities is limited. Little is known about the hospitality industry's open innovation and the processes and mechanisms which support it (Shin & Perdue, 2022). This is despite innovation being an important prerequisite for a healthy and sustainable tourism industry (Streimikiene et al., 2021). This research addresses these gaps by furthering the understanding of open innovation in the hospitality industry, and how businesses learn about open innovation opportunities, by investigating how locally owned Ghanaian SME hotels source ideas for their open innovation practices and what open innovation processes they use to identify opportunities.

Methodology

In alignment with the exploratory aim of this research, we chose to utilise a qualitative case study design. Qualitative data is effective in answering questions focused on understanding 'how' and 'what', as these are open-ended, and are evolving and non-directional (Creswell, 2013). The research adopts a multiple-case-study research design, with each case acting as a single unit of analysis (Yin, 2017). This allowed an in-depth study of the phenomenon of the open innovation practices within each case (Bell & Warren, 2023).

Authors obtained ethical approval from the lead institution and the research adhered to all applicable ethical standards and guidelines throughout the research process. Prior to commencing data collection, written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed of the study's aims, the right to refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any time, and the authors confirm that the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were maintained and respected throughout.

A purposive sampling technique was adopted, which enables access to reliable data, from a sample with the requisite information to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013). The

sampling criteria was locally owned 2-star SME hotels in the Northern Region of Ghana, which had started modestly and have been engaged in significant expansion supported through open innovation. Ghana's second-largest region, the Northern Region, is one of the least developed and relies on agriculture. However, tourism and ecotourism have become an area of economic growth in the region (Oteng-Ababio et al., 2017). The region was selected as it represents a developing region, which has a fast-growing tourist economy, supported largely by locally owned hotels. The pace of growth in the industry has necessitated locally owned hotels to innovate to remain competitive in the face of increased competition. The hotels in the sample had all started modestly and have all been engaged in significant expansion and innovation. These have been termed successful hotels as they provide quality hotel service, provide national and international conferencing facilities, and have been engaged in innovation. Those criteria selected represent a business pathway which many locally owned hotels seek to emulate. In accordance with past research, only businesses that were comfortable discussing and providing detailed information regarding their innovations and innovation processes were sampled, to ensure open and honest answers and research reliability (Pham et al., 2019).

Table 1 provides a summary of the descriptive features of the six SME hotels, which represented the cases within the multiple-case study design. Six cases were selected for the sample, which is consistent with other open innovation research employing a multiple-case study design (e.g. Jabeen et al., 2023). Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) argue that rigour improves with at least four cases and Creswell (2013, p. 101) suggested using not too many more than four cases in a single piece of case research. Following these recommendations, the inclusion of six cases in this study was considered appropriate.

Table 1: Features of Sampled Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Ghanaian Hotels

Hotel	Year Established	No. of Staff	Capacity at Inception (rooms)	Current Capacity (rooms)	Form of Business	Facilities and Services
1	2013	10	20	100	Sole proprietorship	Accommodation, restaurant, swimming pool, Wi-Fi, and conferencing services
2	1998	41	10	32	Sole proprietorship	Accommodation, restaurant, bar, laundry, swimming pool, Wi-Fi, and conferencing services
3	2009	12	5	43	Private company	Accommodation, restaurant, bar, Wi-Fi, and conferencing services
4	2008	70	14	127	Private company	Accommodation, Restaurant, bar, laundry, swimming pool, gym, Wi-Fi, and conferencing services
5	2004	62	27	61	Private company	Accommodation, restaurant, bar, laundry, swimming pool, night club, Wi-Fi, and conferencing services
6	2010	30	7	41	Sole proprietorship	Accommodation, restaurant, bar, laundry, roof top swimming pool, car rental, car washing, Wi-Fi, business, and conferencing services

Source: Authors own work

Data were collected through in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the hotel owners, who in each case were also the founders. The interviews lasted, on average, one hour, with the conclusions fed back to the interviewees through a member-checking process to support the credibility and transferability of the research (Creswell, 2013). Shorter follow-up interviews were also undertaken to help clarify and answer questions arising from the initial interviews. The interviews were conducted in English, which were recorded with permission and later transcribed with additional notes taken during the discussions. Opening questions explored the SME's profiles and service provision whilst key questions focused on the various ways innovative ideas are generated to identify innovative products and services. The semi-structured nature of the interviews and the different types of, and approaches to, innovation within the cases being researched, led to different pathways of questioning and discussion in the interviews. The concluding part explored questions and clarifications from both the researcher and the interviewees. Table 2 provides a summary of the six SME hotel managers, which represented each of the cases, and provides participant codes, which link to the quotes presented in the Results section.

Table 2: Profile of Sampled Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Hotel Owners

Code	Academic Qualification	Age Bracket
HM-1	Master's degree	40-45
HM-2	HND	50-60
HM-3	First degree	50-60
HM-4	Master's degree	35-40
HM-5	First degree	35-40
HM-6	First degree	35-40

Source: Authors own work

To facilitate the process of analysing the data and extracting meaningful insights, NVivo software was used for thematic coding. The data analysis process involved identifying codes and locating recurring patterns derived from the interview experiences and observations (Ruane & Wallace, 2013). In line with the guidance provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) for

identifying themes, the researchers conducted a systematic, step-by-step thematic analysis. This involved a careful exploration of the interview transcripts, with the aim of uncovering recurring patterns and common themes within the responses as to where they sourced ideas for their open innovation practices. To enhance the robustness and credibility of the results drawn, the researchers exchanged their respective transcripts and independently reviewed the same data, aiming to converge on the same themes (Lazaraton, 2017).

Results

The six case studies supported by managers accounts were analysed to reveal how the Ghanaian SME hotels source ideas for open innovation practices and what open innovation processes are used to identify open innovation opportunities. Six sources of innovation were identified from the data analysis, which are presented next.

Customer Feedback

Customer feedback was identified as one of the idea sources for open innovation used by Ghanaian SME hotel managers to innovate their services. Hotel staff engage and interact with customers at the front desk before, during, and after their stay to source information on their customer experience during their stay. This was highlighted by comments such as:

“.... I have a customer who loves good food, and whenever he comes here for a meal, he will say to us, why not add this to the menu or dish, it will be nice, and through his suggestions, we have added two signature drinks to our services” (HM-1).

“..... We have quite a reasonable level-headed guest who we accommodate, and they make suggestions to us after their stay” (HM-2).

“.... The ideas are what are dictated by our customers. They will tell you for example, why don't you do this, or do you have this facility?” (HM-3).

“.... It is mainly based on feedback from customers. These are incorporated into our service provisions” (HM-4).

“...we distribute questionnaires to our clients and customers, to source ideas on how we can serve them better” (HM-5).

“.....every stage of the hotel life comes with a particular class of guest. Their feedback and requests define our services which helps us to innovate” (HM-6).

As evaluation of customer needs is essential in the proposition and creation of value for customer satisfaction, reviewing customer feedback to provide the required service for their satisfaction enable SME hotels to innovate their services and stay competitive. This builds on the work of Abrokwah-Larbi (2023) who found that customer-focus has a positive impact on learning and growth of SMEs. This also furthers our understanding of the work of Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) who stressed the need to specify the needs of customers in the innovation process to be able to propose and create value using various sources of information. Bell (2024) highlighted the importance of customer feedback in supporting innovation in high tech industries, this research highlights the value of customer feedback as a source of innovation in the hotel and hospitality industry. The result also builds on the findings of Kapiki (2012) who argued that the most crucial factors for a hotel's future are guest satisfaction and guest retention which is achieved through the provision of quality service in the form of value for money, comfortable rooms, friendly staff, and tasty food. As these factors are all customer perceptions, understanding the perception of customers through customer feedback is valuable information to learn from and develop products, services, and processes accordingly. Listening and learning to customer feedback can lead to collaborations between organisations and customers to help develop new value propositions (Sabia et al., 2023).

Staff Suggestions

Staff suggestions during staff meetings were another source of innovative ideas for innovation among Ghanaian SME hotels. Staff frequent interaction with hotel guests and knowledge of their demands enables staff to give valuable feedback suggestions at staff meetings. It was mentioned that:

“..... if a staff approaches me with a great idea, I will take it on board, after considering it. You might underestimate someone’s idea, but that idea can turn out to change your business” (HM-1).

“... flexible leadership also allows staff to make inputs. They will suggest what to put in the rooms or what services customers ask for frequently” (HM-3).

“... we sit with staff and discuss how the year went, what we need to improve which will lead to innovation in our services” (HM-4).

“... we innovate sometimes using ideas from employees regarding what can be changed to serve customers better” (HM-5).

“.....staff interact and ask questions about guest comfort, note their complaints and then pass it on to management to address” (HM-6).

As most staff are on the frontline in the hotel industry, their frequent interaction with customers opens the desires and demands that satisfy customers. They are therefore able to provide appropriate information which can be used to innovate services in the hotel. Results also highlighted that employees are encouraged by management to suggest innovative ideas in all the sampled case study SME hotels. Baumgart et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of creating honest and open communication between employees and managers and Zhang et al. (2022) found that in hotels a climate and culture that supports and communicates effectively with employees can stimulate innovative behaviours. Our research extends this by identifying

employee feedback as a source of ideas for innovation within the hotel industry. This supports Lee and Wong's (2017) recommendation for management, to get staff involved in the innovation process. It also builds on Chen (2011) who acknowledged that management encouragement of hotel staff is a crucial factor in innovation. Consequently, the findings corroborate the proposition of Vladimirov and Williams (2018) who recommended that tourism innovation should be employee oriented. However, our research suggests that this is only one source of ideas for open innovation practices.

Competitor Analysis

Competitor analysis was another source of innovative ideas adopted by Ghanaian SME hotels to innovate their services. The value of competitor analysis as a source for developing open innovation was highlighted through the following comments:

"..... I have an empowered team of consultants who assess competitor services and give me ideas on how to innovate my services" (HM-1).

"..... I analyse our competitors' services for network purposes, and this informs our innovative ideas" (HM-3).

"..... We allow our competitors to critique our services, which pushes us to innovate in those lines" (HM-5)

"..... our idea for innovation also comes from researching our competitors' services and acting upon the recommendations of industry regulators" (HM-6).

SME managers analyse the services of their competitors and use that as a source to innovate their own services in line with those of their competitors. Previous research has suggested that assessing competitors and their strengths can support ideation, generate new ideas, which can lead to inspiration for innovation (Hatzijordanou et al., 2019). However, most research in this

area is focused on larger organisations that adopt competitor intelligence, through business process re-engineering using big data (Guo et al., 2017). This research finds that SME hotels can also benefit from analysing competitors to support open innovation using less sophisticated means. The focus of competitor analysis as a source of open innovation lies in grasping external knowledge to be used in innovating services. Roberts (2015) equated competitor analysis to the acquisition of external knowledge and our research finds that SME hotels in our sample used such competitor analysis as a source of external knowledge to develop ideas for innovation opportunities. Whilst reviewing competitor's practices is a reactive measure, it allows for firms to learn and develop their offering in relation to what is already in the market. This is likely to be particularly valuable in our case where locally owned hotels can learn from international competitors which have greater experience to draw on.

Manager Observation and Input

The industry experience, knowledge, and intellect of SME hotel managers have also been highlighted as a source of open innovation ideas. The resource capabilities of the SME however drive the implementation of these ideas. The value of manager observation and input to supporting open innovation was highlighted through comments such as:

“..... I started an African market, and a live weekend music band based on my own observation of customer demands and this has increased our customer base” (HM-1).

“.... The manager of the hotel is a think-tank of knowledge, so most of the innovations you see here, are his brainchild” (HM-2).

“.... Sometimes, the ideas to innovate comes like a dream. But this also goes with available resources” (HM-3).

“..... we are constructing a roof-top swimming pool and the first of its kind in the Northern region. The idea came from the Director who travelled to Dubai, UAE, and the experience of this innovative idea” (HM-6).

Managerial understanding of the hotel and industry value-creation activities is a source of innovative ideas for SME hotels. Consequently, SME hotel managers propose new innovative ideas based on their experience and trends in the industry for implementation. The focus on observation is reactive, rather than proactively making decisions based on forecasting. Abecassis-Moedas et al. (2016) found that culinary entrepreneurs learn to innovate vicariously through observation and identifying what is popular and on-trend. This research highlights this finding to the wider hospitality industry and suggests learning about the market through observation and experience therefore laying the foundation for sourcing innovative ideas. Learning through observation can be a low-risk strategy for SMEs, as it involves committing less resources and reduces the potential of forecasting error (Pauluzzo, 2021). However, manager observation commonly leads to an emergent strategy, based on observing opportunities for innovation (Liu & Bell, 2019). Relying on observations to develop a business can be risky, as it assumes that observations can lead to business development in a timely manner which assumes a robust managerial understanding of the business and its offering (Martins et al., 2015). However, this research indicated that our sample relied on multiple sources to identify and learn of opportunities for innovation, which can reduce the risk of missing opportunities through management observation alone.

Collaborative Meetings with Competitors

Collaborations between hotels were also identified as an information source for open innovation among SME hotels. The role of collaborative meetings with competitors acting as source of open innovation was addressed and presented within the following comments:

“... I have connected with most government agencies and even went to a hotel owner in South Africa for a collaborative meeting on how to improve our services” (HM-1).

“..... overbookings or overflows make us collaborate with other hotels and give us ideas regarding their services and what we need to innovate” (HM-2).

“..... I use networking as well. I team up with other nearby hotels for example, when I have an overflow. So, we tap into some of their services for our innovations” (HM-3).

“..... we try to share ideas both within and outside the region through partnerships and networking with our sister hotels, and we learn from their services to innovate ours” (HM-6).

Through collaboration with other hotels, SME hotel managers can identify services that are lacking in their own hotels when there are overflows, and guests are transferred to other collaborative hotels. This finding adds additional depth to the suggestion of Neneh (2018) who posited that SMEs could exploit opportunities arising from network ties. Collaboration with stakeholders and competitors has been highlighted as being at the heart of open innovation (Jha, 2022), however, finding collaborative partners can be a challenge for SMEs (Verbano et al., 2015). The findings suggest that this is not an issue for our sample and the SME hotels engaged and benefited to some degree from collaboration with competitors. This research found that the SME hotels built collaborative networks to support each other collectively. Similar collaboration between competitors has been found in craft and artisan industries, where firms commonly collaborate for mutual benefit and is borne out of a shared passion

(Cunningham & Barclay, 2020). Our research builds on this finding, whilst our sample was not built from craft and artisan firms, the SME hotels engaged and benefited from collaboration with competitors. This might stem from the shared goal of developing local sustainable business and the emerging market context.

Public Survey

Hotel managers also identified the use of public surveys as an information source for open innovation among SME hotels. This was highlighted and outlined by comments such as:

“..... we normally ask people in town about our services for feedback which helps us to innovate our services” (HM-4).

“..... sometimes we innovate our services through surveys, using questionnaires” (HM-5).

“... we obtain new trends in the industry through our public survey, which informs us of what to bring in new or improve” (HM-6).

Feedback from the public and service users are an important source of developing innovation to remain competitive in fast moving industries (Bell, 2024) and this research found that public surveys by SME hotels bring out suggestions from the public regarding customer expectations, preferences, and new trends in the hotel industry. This source of ideas for product, service, and process innovations is wider than customer feedback, as it includes not only customers, but also potential consumers. It has the potential to identify opportunities from a wider pool to enhance the hotels offerings rather than learning only from people who currently use the business, which might limit the scope for new innovations. Open innovation can be effectively developed and supported through both customer feedback and obtaining plausible recommendation and solutions from the public (Jha, 2022). Understanding the market through

mechanisms such as public surveys can increase the level and relevance innovation, which in turn improves its likelihood of success (Bašić, 2021). This is particularly important for the businesses within our research, given their limited resources. In the case of our sample, public surveys were used as an information source to propose improvements, or new services, to create value.

Discussion

The sources of ideas for open innovation practices were derived using all three of the open innovation processes. The outside-in process was the most popular, with three of the sources involving this process. The cases sourced their ideas from customer feedback, public surveys, and competitor analysis, which came from knowledge and sources residing from outside the firm. The significance of the outside-in open innovation process, aligns with the findings of Battistella et al. (2017) who found that European SMEs mostly used external information and knowledge to support the development of open innovation. This highlights that these Ghanaian SME hotels adopted similar processes to European SMEs, suggesting that despite the difference in geographical context, the firms followed similar processes to their European counterparts. The sources used within the outside-in process allow market information to be obtained at a low cost, which can help the hotels overcome insufficient market intelligence and limited resources (Verbano et al., 2015; Parida et al., 2012). These data position the hotels as being largely reactive in the market, following customers' needs and competitors' actions, but has the advantage of reducing the liability of smallness and ensuring that the local SME hotels can compete with larger international competitors.

The inside-out innovation process was utilised through staff suggestions and manager observations. These represent knowledge derived internally within the organisation and bring an understanding of the organisation's competencies, capabilities, and unique features (Saeed

et al., 2015). The use of an inside-out open innovation process within our sample of SME hotels, challenges the assertion made by some researchers, that a lack of managerial competencies and resources limits SMEs ability to engage in the inside-out innovation process (Verbano et al., 2015). This finding also contradicts the assertion made by Shin and Purdue (2022) that the inside-out innovation process is scarce in the hospitality industry. This finding might be different in this research which studied SME hotels, which might be more willing to learn from employees and whose managers take more ownership of strategic direction, compared to multinational hotels described in Shin and Purdue's (2022) research. Again, it can be noted that the sources used by the sample within the inside-out innovation process in the form of staff suggestions and manager observations are accessible and likely incur little cost. This makes them accessible for the SME hotels and offers a way for the firms to link knowledge of their unique context and capabilities to innovative ideas and opportunities.

The coupled innovation process was the least used by the sample, with only one of the sources of open innovation falling within this process. Collaborative meetings with competitors were identified as a source for open innovation practices and this involves combining both inside and external knowledge to generate ideas (Enkel et al., 2009). Previous research has found that SMEs can find it challenging to identify collaborative partners (Verbano et al., 2015), but this research found that SME hotels in Ghana found this possible and collaborative meetings were a useful source for this innovation to take place. Again, this can be a low-cost method to support open innovation.

Table 3 provides a summary of the sources of open innovation identified in this research and the corresponding open innovation process.

Table 3: Sources for Open Innovation Practices and the Related Open Innovation Process

Sources for Open Innovation Practices	Open Innovation Processes
Customer Feedback	Outside-In Open Innovation
Public Surveys	
Competitor Analysis	
Staff Suggestions	Inside-Out Open Innovation
Manager Observation	
Collaborative Meetings with Competitors	Coupled Open Innovation

Source: Authors own work

Conclusions

This research explored Ghanaian SME hotels sources for open innovation and the open innovation processes they used to innovate their products, services, and processes. These addressed calls for further research into open innovation in SMEs, the hospitality industry, and emerging markets (Lelo de Larrea et al., 2021; Masucci et al., 2020; Oduro, 2020). Specifically, the research addressed the need to further our understanding of open innovation processes and mechanisms in the hospitality industry. The findings contribute to the literature by furthering our understanding of the open innovation processes adopted by SME hotels and how such hotels learn about open innovation opportunities. Learning and identifying opportunities for innovation is essential for the survival of locally owned hotels in emerging markets (Xuhua et al., 2018) and a healthy and sustainable tourism industry (Streimikiene et al., 2021). This research details how locally owned Ghanaian SME hotels that have successfully implemented open innovation practices, learnt, and sourced ideas for their practices and the open innovation processes they employed. It was found that the hotels sourced ideas for open innovation practices from six sources, which were customer feedback, public surveys, competitor analysis, staff suggestions, manager observation, and collaborative meetings with competitors. These sources of knowledge for innovation, were located within the outside-in, inside-out, and coupled open innovation processes. The outside-in open innovation process was the most used process, with customer feedback, public surveys, and competitor analysis fitting within this

process. Listening to customers through customer feedback and surveys can support the identification of potential new value propositions and recommendations for solutions and service improvements (Jha, 2022; Sabia et al., 2023). Competitor analysis can support the development of extending knowledge to support the development of new initiatives (Roberts, 2015).

Manager observation and staff suggestions fit in with the inside-out innovation process. Managers can be well placed to identify potential innovations based on resources and opportunities as they emerge, on a day-to-day basis (Liu & Bell, 2019). The proximity of staff to the frontline in the hotel industry, can provide a valuable resource as a source of innovation, to support customer satisfaction and needs (Vladimirov & Williams, 2018). The use of the inside-out innovation process appears to be unique to such SME hotels, as Shin and Perdue (2022) have highlighted that the application of the inside-out process is scarce in the multinational hospitality industry.

Finally, collaborative meetings with competitors fit in with the coupled innovation process and can open new opportunities for open innovation (Jha, 2022). The hotels were able to find low-cost sources of knowledge which could be easily accessed. Plus, they were able to find collaborative partners to support a coupled innovation process, which previously has been posited as a challenge for SMEs (Verbano et al., 2015).

Practical Implications

The findings provide practical implications for hotel owners and managers and begin to provide a guide as to where SME hotels can turn to learn about potential opportunities for innovation. The results identify low cost and easy to access ways of obtaining knowledge that can be used to identify innovation opportunities. This highlights the value of SME hotels embracing learning from a range of sources to innovate their products, services, and processes.

The results highlight that there is value in seeking external information, listening to actors within the company, and collaborating with competitors, and using this information to develop new opportunities. The findings highlight competitor analysis and customer feedback as some of the practices adopted by Ghanaian SME hotels to source ideas for open innovation. Consequently, the establishment of extensive cooperative relationships with customers, educational and research institutions, and industry associations is therefore vital. Interactions with customers could be strengthened by engagement with online platforms (Shin & Perdue, 2022) and developing relationships with external stakeholders, providing external knowledge to support innovation which can be valuable within the hospitality and tourism industry (Robayo-Acuña & Chams-Anturi, 2025). The adoption of inside-out open innovation processes highlighted that there is value in creating time for employees and managers to think and reflect on what they have seen and learnt in their daily jobs. Finding such time can be challenging as these roles can be busy in a SME hotel, but proximity to the front line can offer value knowledge as a source of innovation. Employees can be well placed to see emerging issues and challenges and creating an effective chain of command which facilitates good communication between employees and management can help to address issues and solve potential crises quickly (Butsch et al., 2025). The development of employees in their respective roles will also enable staff to contribute more ideas for open innovation due to their proximity and constant interaction with guests and other functions. Job rotation of staff can extend their understanding of business operations and identify potential areas for improvement (Majd et al., 2024). However, it is important to identify employees who can make such a contribution, as delegating the responsibility of identifying innovation opportunities is not suitable for all employees (Butsch & Bell, 2025). Collaborative meetings with competitors were identified as a valuable source for open innovation ideas. Seeking to build and develop a network with likeminded

competitors for mutual benefit is a low-cost way to increase knowledge and learn of opportunities.

In short, learning and developing open innovation can help to support and sustain SME hotel businesses with limited resources by developing and improving their competitiveness.

Online feedback can be an effective source of knowledge to support open innovation in luxury hotels (Wu et al., 2023). However, the case organisations within our sample, did not identify this as a source of knowledge which they used. This could be due to the context of our sample, although it might offer opportunity in the future.

The findings of the research provide implications for policy and government support. As the research identified the role of collaborative meetings with competitors in supporting open innovation, relevant government departments could help to facilitate such meetings to strengthen the innovation potential of locally owned SME hotels.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study was conducted among Ghanaian SME hotels, so the results might be applicable across the hospitality industry in Africa and potentially other emerging economies. Additionally, the results might benefit other domestic hospitality businesses which find themselves in fast growing markets where they need to remain competitive, in similar contexts to those cases researched (Warren & Bell, 2022). Finally, some of the findings might be of benefit more widely to SMEs with limited resources in emerging economies but are seeking to learn about opportunities for innovation. However, further research would be useful in determining the limits of transferability to other industries and geographic locations.

The research collected data at one point in time rather than longitudinally, which required participants to reflect and recall on their open innovation processes. Such an approach could

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potentially be impacted by recall bias, therefore future research could focus on the longitudinal learning, identification, and implementation process of specific innovations.

Collaborations among Ghanaian SME hotels were one of the open innovation practices adopted to source ideas. Since collaborations and networking have the tendency to reveal and reflect the innovative practices of competitors and might generate rivalry analysis among the collaborators, future research could explore the effect of collaborative or networking-based innovation on the competitive reactions among Ghanaian SME hotels.

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