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INFUSION OF THE INTERNET AND INDIGENOUS TOURISM: AN AUSTRALIAN FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Innovations in the fields of Information and Communication Technology, Transport, and Human Resources Management have transformed the structure of the global tourism and travel industry. The Internet has enabled tourism and travel firms to tap into new domestic and international markets while availing regions in developing countries the opportunities to publicize their unique tourism products and services. The premise of this article is that Information Technology (IT) influences the extent of adoption and infusion of innovative tourism practices as tourism and tourism-enabled networks become increasingly intertwined. Whilst the use of IT and the Internet has resulted in the preliminary unification of practice (as Internet adoption amongst developing tourism destination matures), Technological Institutionalism posits that tourism managers can make strategic choices in the scale and scope of adoption of global tourism practices. From this perspective, the economic possibilities of the Internet and IT are proposed to be the development of strategic differentiation in tourism planning which appreciably improves tourism managers' ability to develop a strategic niche. This means that indigenous tourism operators and indigenous entities engaged in developing tourism in the region can use the Internet to introduce, publicize and promote their unique characteristics. The increased exposure engenders the development of a truly indigenous experience, yet another opportunity for indigenous tourism entities. Accordingly it is proposed that, as far as indigenous tourism is concerned, initially Internet-assisted entry into global tourism is seen as the process of mimicking tourism practices established by developed regions. However, later the adopters' practices evolve to include indigenous strategies in developing region-specific tourism development initiatives as firms experiment with IT and Internet-enabled business operations.

Key words: Institutionalism, Indigenous Tourism, Global Tourism, Internet, Niche, Strategic choice, Australia.

1   INTRODUCTION

Information Technology (IT) and the Internet are phenomenons that have created access to new local and international markets. Although the use of the Internet in developing countries has appreciably impacted the way travel agents perform their functions, in principal the core functions themselves have remained unchanged. In many instances the Internet has been used primarily as a tool to communicate more effectively with the end customer in addition to providing information about one's services.

In general, the Internet has allowed national tourism organisations (NTO) and the private sector promoting region-specific tourism to adopt the best practices of travel companies in developed nations thereby resulting in unification of global tourism practices. However, as the global model of tourism matures and incumbent tourism providers become more skilled at managing and developing their own tourism resources, then differentiation occurs. In essence it is proposed that while a major event like the advent of the Internet would appear to have had a homogeniser effect, it can in fact act as a catalyst for the development of indigenous tourism models and will further result in differentiation amongst local and indigenous service providers. Thus the growth of tourism can be attributed to the ability of the Internet to unify practices by allowing tourism in less developed regions to emulate best practices of well developed tourism models, whilst at the same time it permits differentiation in practice where the said regions can develop indigenous tourism initiatives (in this case regional and/or tribal-specific). This also enables the indigenous tourism firms to reduce competition from mainstream generalist tourism service providers.

Theoretically speaking, the uptake and infusion of innovation can be explained by Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory (1983), where the process of change is seen as the outcome of a multi-level and sequential communicative practice across an industry. The adopters basically mimic the best practices from the first movers and this in turn will result in unification of practice and dominance of "best practices" across an industry. However, as will be explained later in the paper, the process of infusion of innovation, at least as far as the case of local and indigenous tourism firms are concerned, should be seen as a process of selective absorption after an initial stage of unification. Firms are allowed to strategically select the innovative possibilities of the technology they are faced with. This approach is very relevant in the case of the indigenous tourism firms where the differentiation is very much based on the uniqueness of tribal and regional attributes as opposed to the mainstream tourism products offered to all customers. Within this agenda, both classical Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) and a institutionalist approaches are examined and a framework is developed that outlines the dynamics of infusion and form selection in the tourism industry, as firms go through a multiple of change levels. These levels from a unification of practice and later evolves to encompass differentiation and niche-specific growth.

2   THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING:

2.1   Institutional infusion: The process of selection and imitation

Infusion is a special type of communication concerned with the spread of messages that are perceived as new ideas. Rogers (1983) defines this phenomenon as the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system. Rogers (ibid) also states that patterns of uptake of innovation are influenced by characteristics specific to the innovation and the adopter as well as being influenced by opinion leaders. The Individual Innovativeness theory (Buhalis, 1998; Burgess, et al. 2001, Rogers, 1983) states that individuals who are predisposed to being innovative will adopt an innovation earlier than those who are less predisposed. In this approach to diffusion, three important ways of adoption of interactive

communications are suggested. They are; (1) a critical mass of adopters is needed to convince the "mainstream" to adopt the new change; (2) regular and frequent use is necessary to ensure success of the diffusion effort; and (3) communication technologies are tools that can be applied in different ways and for different purposes and are part of a dynamic process that may involve change, modification and reinvention by individual adopters.

In the case of the indigenous tourism, the trajectory of growth and uptake of innovation is seen as a combination of various steps. These steps start from a generalised unification of practice as outlined by traditional DOI model (Buhalis, 1998; Burgess, et al. 2001, Rogers, 1983). At the preliminary stages of the infusion process, firms, in order to be allowed to exist in the industry, are forced to adhere to a set of rules and regulations imposed by the governing bodies of the industry in this case being the various tourism and travel bodies in Australia (e.g. International Air Transport Association (IATA) and Australian Federation of Travel Agents Limited (AFTA)). Upon adherence to the prescribed rules and regulations, firms are allowed to differentiate themselves when it comes to sales and promotion of their product and services. The choice and extent of differentiation is directly proportional to the level of available financial resources available to the indigenous tourism firms and the benchmark or the accepted norm that acts as an institutional base for the travel companies. As far as the finance resources are concerned, this means the greater the amount of available resources, the higher the chance of proliferation of indigenous tourism firms. In Australia, various Commonwealth and State authorities support initiatives for Internet and communication technology to be made assessable to indigenous communities to engender community-based tourism ventures based on the unique tribal and regional characteristics.

Once the benchmark has been selected, by using the communicative abilities of the Internet in order to survive and innovate, all tourism regions enter into a web of strongly complementary technical relationships thus reinforcing the uptake of the benchmark. This gives rise to networks where issues such as compatibility and standardisation become pertinent. Such a process is continuous and diffusion spreads through the mimicking of the practices of others. This is in line with the institutional approach of Havemann (1993a) where diffusion of global tourism practices occurs at two levels: firstly at the national economy level where the emphasis is on the macro aspect of industry change and later when development of the argument to encompass firms and entities offering tourism services within networks of firms contributing to the finalised tourism service in that region. From this perspective, organizations are strongly influenced by their environments. But not only are competitive forces and efficiency-based forces at work, socially constructed belief and rule systems also exercise enormous control over organizations namely in the way that they are structured and how they carry out their work (Scott, 1990). In this regard national economy level globalisation does enforce global values and business practices; however, these practices later evolve into a more localized version encompassing localized values and norms, thus allowing differentiation amongst regions.

3 THE PROCESS OF INFUSION OF GLOBAL TOURISM PRACTICES

Trade in tourism services and tourism activities in general have the potential to become an engine for growth and economic development. Tourism can also be a driving force in efforts to combat poverty. But it is also a highly vulnerable economic activity affected by several risk factors, including global events related to international politics, health-related problems and climate changes. A major challenge for developing tourism is the growing control of a few global tourism operators and travel distribution networks over many aspects of world tourism. These include organized travel, international booking, and the marketing and sales of tourism and related activities. This concentration of power reduces the benefits that developing regions can reap from the liberalization and expansion in world tourism (OECD 2002a; OECD, 2002b).

The Internet, as far as developing regions is concerned, has increasingly been incorporated into cultural, educational and outdoors vacations. The sector is therefore offered an important opportunity to better exploit the Internet in building customer relationships by gathering information from customers and potential clients to create customer profiles. This assists in making niche identification, development and maintenance more effective.

3.1   Indigenous tourism in Australia

Indigenous performers and graphic images representing or suggesting Aboriginal culture have been essential aspects of the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympics and Para-Olympics in 2000. In developing an indigenous tourism scheme, the Commonwealth Government of Australia has set an agenda for developing an indigenous type of tourism. By doing this, the aim has been to provide:

- A choice for indigenous people to be involved in the tourism industry thus promoting community involvement and ownership, and
- The development of community ownership of the indigenous tourism products by the indigenous peoples with appropriate support from the mainstream tourism industry (ATSIC, 2003).

The indigenous population of Australia is mainly made up of two groups: Aboriginal and Torres Strait islanders. Within each main group there are a number of tribes and communities, each distinct and offering very unique experience. These differences between different groups of indigenous Australians can be a very promising opportunity in developing specific market niches and the use of the Internet will not only promote indigenous tourism but also educate, train and develop the international profile of indigenous tourism in Australia far more effectively. To date, promotion has typically relied on indigenous themes which portray a single Indigenous culture - one where boomerangs, didgeridoos, dot or X-ray style painting and stereotyped imagery are predominant. Indigenous cultural industries, particularly arts and crafts, are very popular with tourists. The value of these arts and crafts sales far exceeds the current value of Indigenous cultural tourism, and it represents the main form of contact that most tourists have with Indigenous cultures at present. This represents a considerable economic strength that can be built on, to benefit both tourism and cultural industries (ATSIC, 2003).

A fundamental undertaking of indigenous tourism authorities in Australia is the provision of basic training and skills necessary to develop a skills base in aboriginal areas so that they can in turn get into contractual relationships with mainstream tourism companies in Australia in promoting their unique tourism experience. Indigenous entrepreneurs are encouraged and supported to attend a TAFE (Technical and Future Education) Aboriginal Tour Guide Program that encourages them to form businesses and cooperatives specializing in indigenous tourism. This course familiarizes the participants with basic tourism management skills. As a starting point in developing national and international awareness and interest, cultural tours are provided. These tours include the Upper Hunter Valley, based on four main sites. Gringai Cultural Tours offer full and half day tours of Aboriginal sites which provide a distinct contrast to the wineries, fine food and arts and crafts venues of the region (ATA, 2004a; 2004b).

Training and support of the indigenous businesses and cooperatives is also complemented with exposure to the mainstream tourism industry there are growing linkages with the regional tourism body. Mainstream tourism providers also see this as an opportunity to provide authentic indigenous experience by cooperating with the indigenous entities in marketing the packages worldwide and therefore new cooperative linkages are formed. Finally the indigenous tourism providers are assisted with international marketing campaigns where promotion is actively pursued through schools and existing tourism business in the region such as the vineyards and the mineral mines (ATA, 2004a).

In addition to the above training schemes the Australian State and Federal tourism authorities provide financial and logistical support to indigenous tourism firms. Financial assistance includes audits and performance evaluations to maintain a standard quality (ATSIC, 2003). Since the introduction of the Internet and especially after the Sydney Olympics, indigenous tourism firms have used the Internet to

a larger extent to establish a presence in global tourism trade whilst at the same time most have used this medium to communicate with potential customers. As pointed out by Anckar and Walden (2001), firms offering tourism services in a region learn about the effectiveness of the Internet in promoting their tourism services globally and subsequently acquire the Internet to integrate it in their Sales and Marketing (S&M) portfolio as a strategic move to transform their businesses into entities offering services to very distinct groups of customers. To achieve this, the first move is to offer the big suppliers such as the international travel and tourism providers, wholesalers, and local partners, services as a middleman. By doing this, firms have to acquire and infuse certain globally recognised practices in order to be compatible with the requirements of the wholesalers in the developed world. In this regard, the Internet becomes a very cheap tool in searching and acquiring ideas and practices that firms normally use. It also allows exposure and so the firm in the developing region, either in the context of a cluster or by itself depending on its size and uniqueness of its offering, can also negotiate with all the new suppliers of products and the other services offering them access to new clients. Secondly, it can also take advantage of communicative abilities of the Internet in allowing connectivity in geographically dispersed locations by allying itself with a tourism hub that serve small regional communities and in return provide the technological platform for the regional tourism hubs thereby offering them access to information and resources that they need to continue their previous operations. Therefore it is safe to assume that IT and the Internet provide a number of options as far as partners and the potential customer base are concerned. As the firm links with each of the partner, each partnership is a structural option where the firm is allowed to focus on a specific niche; therefore each of these options is a way for each firm to differentiate itself from the rest of the firms offering the same type of service.

Besides the direct intervention of the Federal and State Governments, local and national indigenous support bodies play a key role. As far as travel and tourism is concerned, one of the examples of the regions specific indigenous hubs is the Aboriginal Tourism Australia (ATA). It is the foremost national organisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism within Australia working with Aboriginal communities in tourism development to benefit the community and build cultural, environmental and economic sustainability whilst maintaining cultural values. In addition to developing and promoting indigenous tourism, it also works with non-indigenous operators and publishes numerous brochures which help visitors understand how to respect indigenous communities. (ATA, 2004a; 2004b; 2004c). Besides providing exposure ATA provides training and infrastructure support for its members and uses the websites as a source for exposing firms specialising in Aboriginal tours. As far as the Aboriginal tourism is concerned, besides the mentioned supports and training, the tourism board has helped establish indigenous tourism areas to which the tour operators and other tourism-related companies take the travellers interested in such experiences. There are currently three regions that are main starting points in promoting indigenous tourism.

Gringai Aboriginal Cultural Tours, based at Singleton in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales (NSW), is one of the regions being promoted. This area is developed and maintained by the NSW Tourism Commission and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). By working together these two government bodies are responsible for developing and maintaining the parks and reserve system, and conserving natural and cultural heritage in the state. Although indigenous tourism is being promoted as a means to develop self-sustainability of the indigenous populations of the Gringai Aboriginal areas, nonetheless the Government of the NSW acts as the monitoring mechanism in maintaining a specified standard of service via enforcement by the Tourism Commission of NSW. The mandate of the Tourism Commission is to safeguard protected native flora and fauna in NSW, and also to protect and manage Aboriginal sites, objects and places of special significance to Aboriginal people (NPWS, 2004).

In Western Australia (WA), there are two regions that are developed as regional hubs in developing indigenous tourism. Karijini National Park Visitors' Centre in the Pilbara region and Kimberley Regional Tour in the Kimberley region are two specific regional hubs that are being developed by the state authorities. The Industry Development and Visitor Servicing Division of the West Australian

Tourism Commission ensures that the appropriate product is in place for visitors to enjoy and that destination and product information services and booking facilities are provided throughout WA to enhance visitor experiences and increase the likelihood of them increasing their length of stay. In addition, the said body will facilitate the dynamic development of indigenous tourism through raising the profile of nature-based tourism and developing niche sector product, such as indigenous, cultural, educational and health tourism as well as cruise shipping. In addition it provides the managerial framework for visitor servicing to operate efficiently and effectively throughout the State via the WA Tourism Network, enabling the provision of information and bookings to be made using telecommunication and internet technology, including data collection and distribution (KBT, 2004).

In addition to the above efforts, the activities of the Kimberley Regional Government provides a good example as to how the Government Agencies have acted in providing service and training whilst at the same time have encouraged differentiation based on cultural and tribal backgrounds. The Kimberley region is the home to one of Australia's famous aboriginal parks which was later developed into Kimberley regional tours and tourism packages. In partnership with the West Australian Tourism Commission, the Kimberley Board of Tourism manages the training and development of regional tourism and also promotes indigenous development and economic self-sufficiency by focusing on the unique attribute of the tribes that inhabit the Kimberley region (KBT, 2004). Each of the abovementioned national parks acts as a tribal area where a tribal or community specific tourism is developed. The packages highlight unique aspects of the region where the national park is located and the tribes that inhabit the said parks. The tours focus on:

- Indigenous cultures of each region.
- Unique flora and fauna of the region.
- Food and beverages unique to the region.
- Plants and herbal remedies specific to the region.
- Tribal oral history, songs and dances that signify the differences between each individual tribe.

This specific differentiation based on regions coupled with the Internet-enabled communication can allow indigenous tourism not only to promote indigenous tourism but also to enlighten tourists and highlight the diverse facets of indigenous life in Australia and to enhance the tourist pull factor. The indigenous tourism in Australia lends itself well to the following proposed framework.

4 THE PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

A review of the literature (Anckar & Walden, 2001; Bloch, Pigneur & Steiner, 1996; Buhalis & Main, 1998; Buhalis & Licata, 2001; O'Brien, 1998, Van Rekom, Teunissen & Go, 1999, Wober & Gretzel, 2000) suggests that industry factors affect the uptake of innovation in the global tourism industry and its influence in developing countries acting both singularly and in concert. These factors include:

- The trigger for the introduction of the ICT (Internet was a cheaper tool to learn what other regions are doing in terms of developing their tourism and later marketing one's own services also became cheaper via the Internet); and
- The inter-firm relationships (an organization's ties to other organizations can either broaden or restrict its awareness of environmental trends and may also expose it to various adaptive responses employed elsewhere in the industry).

The above factors each contribute to the extent and scope of uptake of innovation. In general, becoming members of the tourism industry requires a close adherence to rules and regulations of the governing authorities in the industry. Figure 1 is a framework indicating the dynamics of macro level changes and micro-level strategic choice. As Figure 1 shows, the change in the industry starts with unifying diffusion of new technology at macro level where the new comers potentially mimic or are forced to duplicate the practices of the incumbents so as to be allowed to operate and survive. However, at the macro level where each firm is viewed in terms of its value chain, after

accommodation, and generalisation aim to differentiate themselves based on type of service an the experience which they bring to their customers.
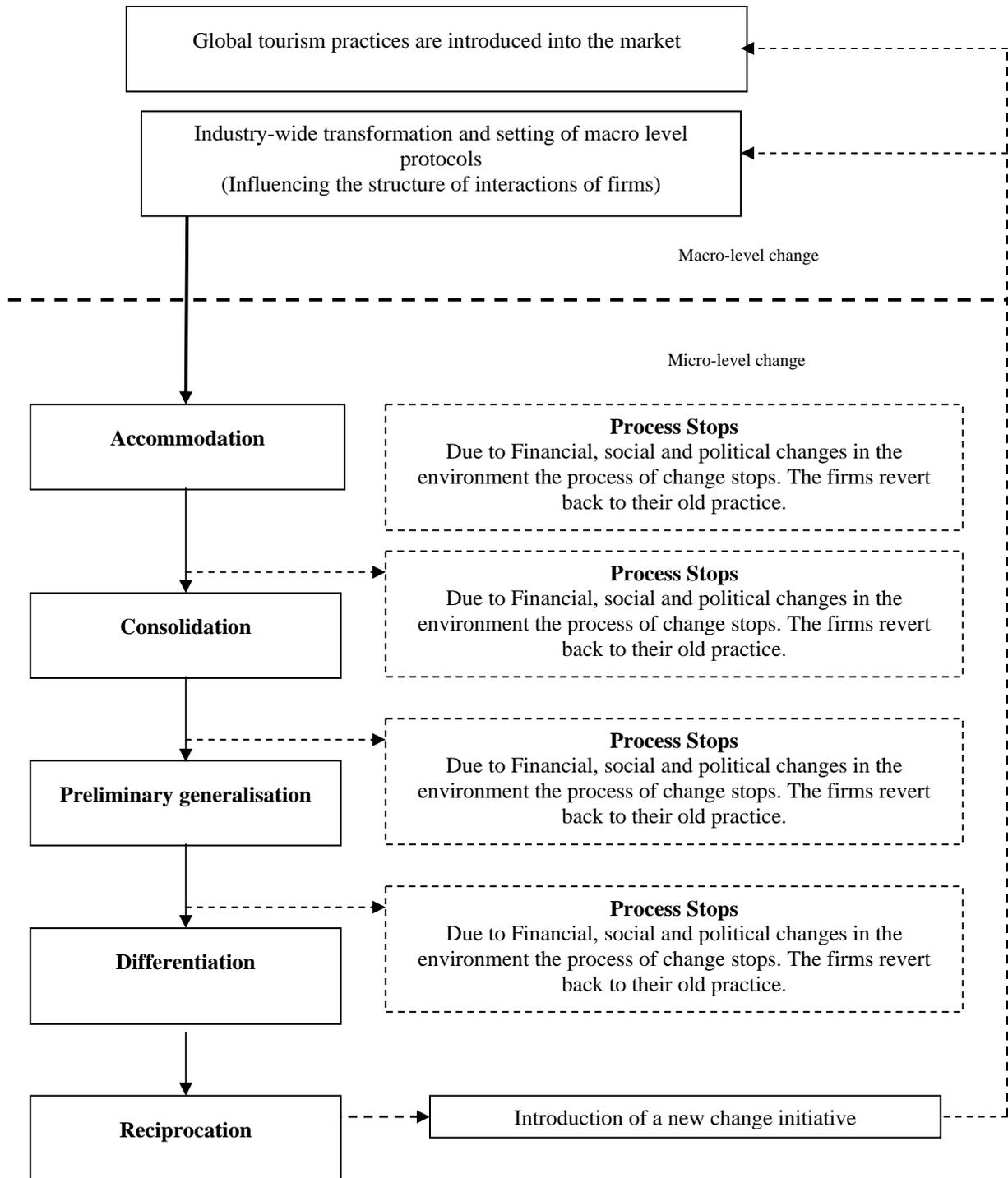

Figure 1: The proposed ICT innovation uptake framework showing dynamics of uptake at macro and micro levels.

At each stage a firm may be able to go on and develop further but since the financial resources of firms are rather limited, depending on the availability of resource, firms go to the next stage or back out. Firms that have backed out will either be deemed illegitimate by the industry and forced to move out of the industry, or they carry on with their previous business practice, however knowing that they are running their business at a risk of either being set aside, taken over or operate at lower margins compared to other firms in the industry offering services with the new technology. Usually the travel agents upon the setting of macro protocols go through a five process namely:

- Accommodation: in order to be able to operate, each tourism firm must conform to the regulations set by the local travel authority plus the regulations of IATA. If a travel agent has not accommodated to these regulations, it cannot operate and therefore cannot exist as a travel agent in the industry;
- Consolidation: this refers to the structural changes that tourism companies make in order to mainstream their operations to ensure compatibility to the industry regulations and norms, and in the case of travel agents, system infrastructures. For example, if the tourism companies all use a certain system, it make sense to also use that very system to be compatible with the suppliers and also other agents that are part of one's value network;
- Preliminary generalization: the above compatibility will undoubtedly lead to similarities in operations and unification in practice. At this stage technology has not evolved yet and therefore agents are more of a generalist than a specialist;
- Differentiation: technology is about to mature and therefore it is possible for agents to carve a specific niche out of the market and focus solely on that specific population in that niche rather than be a generalist;
- Reciprocation: this refers to strengthening of the relationships between agents and also their own value systems as the Internet allows cooperation amongst partners at a higher speed and with a much more improved effectiveness. Bonds between firms become stronger and this also strengthens the institutional grip on the inter-organizational networks.

5   DISCUSSION

As the framework (Figure 1) illustrates, from a macro perspective, the initial trigger for change results in setting a uniform working platform that sets the boundary within which change can take place. In the case of the developing indigenous tourism, the government has a role of initial training and development of the sector and also acts as a primary networking platform between the indigenous-focused tourism firms and the mainstream tourism providers. By doing this the government agencies in charge of promoting and developing tourism becomes the unifying agents between this new type of service and what traditional mainstream tourism provides. Through alignment of the indigenous tourism providers with mainstream tourism companies, established tourism practices are replicated in the indigenous tourism service providers and this isomorphic change imposes the quality controls that are standardised throughout the industry. In terms of cluster level change, diffusion occurs in a predetermined set of norms. In a sense the industry has already chosen the right path for the firms, and the "right way" of operating is predetermined for its entire members. However, within these predetermined norms, firms have the strategic choice of being selective to ensure their differentiation from other participants in the industry.

With regard to the role of the legal as well as professional regulations on the way the firms are structured, Dobson (2002, p.39) developed an alternative approach in explaining the change and final "structuration" and form selection of firms regarding outsourcing and the role of State Government in the outsourcing decision. This approach as been used and further developed to show the process of structuration across the indigenous tourism providers in Australia. As the framework indicates from a macro perspective, the initial trigger for change results in the setting of a uniform working platform that acts as a limit or a barrier to being different. This means the external structure is important and

members of the industry have no say in the scope and extent of the uptake of innovation. This is highlighted by an initial shift from fashion perspective to forced selection perspective. However, once the macro trace or the uniform technology is in place, firms actively seek to differentiate themselves. One way is to develop a cluster-like cooperation where the firms offering indigenous tourism packages act as a go-between the players in the industry by providing services at a lower cost. In the past, these services had to be developed in-house at a higher price by the brokerage houses. The inter-firm cooperation and networking can later give rise to the mutualism, a new paradigm of interaction among organizations. This is different from the competition only paradigm. This is often referred to as pooling of resources (Thompson, 1967) where firms cooperate at the macro level in order to compete for a bigger share of their niche. This is equivalent to the shift from the forced selection perspective to efficient choice perspective as indicated by arrow number 2 in Figure 2 below.
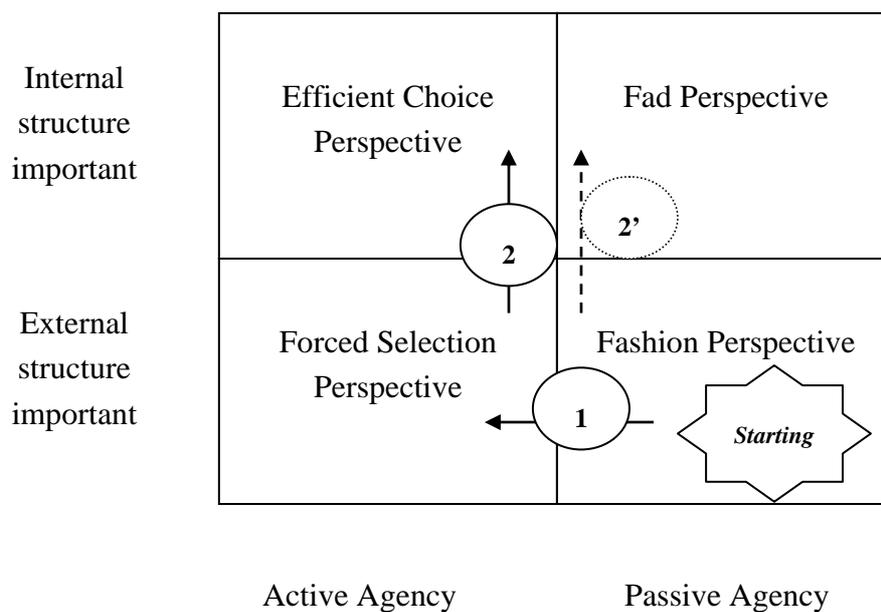

Figure 2: Development of the model proposed by Dobson (2002).

Where uptake of the innovation is based on an experimental short-term basis in which firms are not sure about the future of an innovation, the uptake takes the form of the dotted arrow 2'. In this regard, diffusion of innovation is not always a push mechanism in a sense that the way industry is run is always pushed down the chain of command and adhered to by all the members. Rather in some cases and especially with the usage of IT smaller firms can shift the balance of power to themselves and thus the players in the network need to change their role and strategy from a push to pull (McMater et al., 1997).

In the case of indigenous tourism, the evolution of the business model can be traced as a primary move from "fashion perspective" to "forced selection perspective". At this stage the Commonwealth Government, through financial and managerial support and training of potential managers in the communities, set up layers of limit or normative boundaries where the initial modelling of business is based on a standardised prescription. However once the initiative starts, indigenous groups such as the ATA provide training and support for the communities whilst having in mind the unique cultural and regional and linguistic characteristics of those communities. Therefore the initial push to the "forced selection perspective" is later followed by a move to "efficient-choice perspective". At this stage unlike the mainstream tourism service offerings, the service is intended to be enriched by indigenous

culture, values, spiritual connection to the land and the people inhabiting the community. This results in the promotion and development of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders employment and training within all facets of the tourism industry and also ensures representation of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders on key industry bodies. At the same time continuous support from the Indigenous bodies means that the Federal, State and Local Governments are pursuing a responsive strategy to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders and domestic Australian and inbound tourism. The role of technology in this regard is to facilitate the above processes and act as a driver for a more involved community action in developing regional potentials and promoting those potentials worldwide.

6   CONCLUSION

This paper looks at the consequences and opportunities created as a result of IT diffusion in the global tourism development, from an institutionalist perspective. As mentioned earlier, IT creates an environment where the old ways of operating no longer applies and new rules have to be developed. These new rules set the conditions within which organizations can operate and within which management can make strategic choices. The proposed framework examined the structure and governance mechanism of the industry by examining the role of the Internet as a facilitator in learning, unifier of practice and later on as a tool to differentiate one's practice from competition. It also acknowledges the social context (i.e. role of technology and change in the niches) and the economic outcome of change where competition forces differentiation as a tool of survival. It is suggested that the IT diffusion framework for the tourism development in the global market presented can be used by the industry leaders to actively shape the adaptive trajectory of their firms. These industry leaders can in turn define the way the industry is and should be. They provide blueprints for organizations by specifying the forms and procedures an organization of a particular type should adopt if it is to be seen as a member-in-good-standing of its class.

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