

THINKING TO GROW OR TO PRESERVE: mental models in hotel entrepreneurship

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Introdução

Entrepreneurship is key to innovation and strategic renewal, especially in hospitality, where services are intangible and experience-based. Mental models, as internal cognitive structures, shape how entrepreneurs perceive, decide, and act. However, little is known about their influence in small hospitality businesses. This study explores this gap by analyzing the mental models of entrepreneurs in Tapejara-RS, a growing regional hub in southern Brazil.

Problema de Pesquisa e Objetivo

This study investigates how the mental models of hospitality entrepreneurs in Tapejara, RS, influence their practices and strategies. It aims to identify these models and analyze how their cognitive, symbolic, emotional, and functional elements impact innovation, relationship management, technology use, and competitive strategies, including cooperation. The central question is: how do these mental models shape entrepreneurial action in this context?

Fundamentação Teórica

Entrepreneurship involves innovation and strategic action, influenced by cognitive, emotional, symbolic, and functional elements known as mental models (Craik, 1943). These internal structures guide how entrepreneurs perceive opportunities, assess risks, and make decisions. In the hospitality sector, where services are experiential and relational (Alves et al., 2020), mental models play a central role in shaping practices, fostering innovation, and building competitive advantages. Understanding these models helps explain entrepreneurial behavior in dynamic contexts (De Toni & Milan, 2008)

Metodologia

This study used a qualitative, exploratory case study to analyze how mental models influence entrepreneurial practices in hospitality SMEs in Tapejara, RS. Two businesses with over five years of activity were selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic content analysis. The analysis followed De Toni & Milan's model to identify cognitive, symbolic, emotional, and functional elements present in the entrepreneurs' narratives and their impact on strategy and decision-making (Gartner, 1988).

Análise dos Resultados

Interviews with two hospitality entrepreneurs from Tapejara, RS, reveal distinct mental models influencing their practices. Entrepreneur A values stability, tradition, and customer care, emphasizing legacy and internal resources. Entrepreneur B focuses on growth, innovation, and strategic vision, using technology and market trends. Their cognitive, symbolic, emotional, and functional elements shape different strategies, yet both succeed in their niches, showing how mental models guide entrepreneurial action in regional contexts.

Conclusão

This study analyzed the mental models of two hotel entrepreneurs in Tapejara, RS. One focused on stability and tradition, prioritizing operational efficiency and customer loyalty. The other emphasized growth and innovation, investing in technology and strategy. These differences shaped their competencies and strategies. The research highlights the importance of cognitive factors in entrepreneurial success in the hospitality sector.

Contribuição / Impacto

Highlights the role of mental models in shaping entrepreneurial action within hospitality, validating prior theory and offering a holistic analytical lens. Demonstrates how cognitive, symbolic, emotional, and functional elements influence strategies. Guides entrepreneurs, managers, and policymakers in tailoring decisions and support programs to cognitive diversity, enhancing competence development and fostering more effective practices.

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