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# An Empirical Model of University Talent Management

How to enhance student employability



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# Abbreviations

ANVUR	National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes
AVO	Self-Evaluation Occupability – Adaptability
CfE	Centre for Employability
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CM	Career Management
CMS	Career Management Skills
CSM	Career Self-Management
DMGT	Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EIASM	European Institute for Advance Studies in Management
ELGPN	European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GTM	Global Talent Management
HCCI	Hope-Centered Career Inventory
HCMCD	Hope-Centered Model of Career Development
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resource Management
IHRM	International Human Resources Management
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
KM	Knowledge Management
MNC	Multinational Company
MTMM	Multi-Trait Multimethod Matrix
OB	Organizational Behavior
OCM	Organizational Career Management

OCSE	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSE	Personal and Social Education
RBV	Resource-Based View
SCSS	Subjective Success Career Scale
SHRM	Strategic Human Resource Management
TD	Talent Development
TM	Talent Management
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America

## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

### 1.1. Introduction

The term talent was prominent in music, science, or sport, but, since McKinsey's proclamation of the 'war for talent' in the 1997 (Michaels *et al.*, 2001), talent has also started to be in the strategic agenda of organizations. In the past ten years, talent management (TM) has become a key management issue. In the same period the business environment has gone through a significant expansion with the falling of trade barriers and the globalization (Silzer and Dowell, 2010). There has been a shift from the commodity-based economy to the knowledge-based economy, where intangible organizational assets are increasingly important. The present post-industrialized knowledge-driven economy places increasing demands on the workforce and necessitates new forms of work-related skills (Hassard *et al.*, 2008; Porschitz *et al.*, 2016; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017). At the same time, the dynamic nature of labor markets and the changing nature of work has resulted in major transition in the shape of careers and their management within and outside organizations. In the last two decades the topic of talent management has received a remarkable degree of practitioner and academic interest, it is at the top of critical Human Resources (HR) issue list. This relatively recent emphasis on talent management represents a paradigm shift from more traditional human resource management (HRM) (Huselid *et al.*, 1997) towards the management of talent specifically suited to today's dynamic competitive environment.

Talent management and talent are at the center of big debate both in practitioners and academic literature, internet, and social network. In spite of this growing popularity the TM and talent lack of clarity. Numerous authors attribute the ambiguity inherent to TM to the inadequate operationalization of the underlying construct talent (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013a). Quite surprisingly, TM scholars are rarely precise about what exactly they mean by talent, probably because they widely assume implicit theories about what talent is (Barab and Plucker, 2002). In fact, in many articles (e.g., Collings and Mellahi, 2009; O'Reilly and Pfeffer, 2000) and books (e.g., Cappelli, 2008; Lawler, 2008) about TM, talent is considered as an underlying construct which is taken for granted and thus not defined explicitly. In



the human resource management (HRM) literature, both academic and practitioners, it is possible to find a great deal of organizationally specific definitions of talent, highly influenced by the type of industry or nature of work occupational field (Tansley *et al.*, 2007).

However, the quest for talent is timeless. It goes back to the ancient Greeks. Originally, talent represented economic value and it was an equivalent of capital. The term ‘*tálon*’ represented a unit of weight of precious metals (silver or gold). Later on, still in ancient Greece, talent indicated a unit of money and talent became a coin (Tansley, 2011). One talent was equivalent to the value of a large house and therefore talent was something exclusive that only rich people could possess. While, in the Middle Ages the term talent acquired new meanings in Europe (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013a): a shift from economic capital to human capital became apparent, but the exclusive character of talent was maintained. At first, the behavioral components of talent were highlighted; indeed, the meaning of talent was will and desire. Later, in the fifteenth (15<sup>th</sup>) and sixteenth (16<sup>th</sup>) century, talent was interpreted as a special ability, aptitude or even a gift from God that needed to be used and developed. This interpretation of talent holds in the seventeenth (17<sup>th</sup>) century, although the link with divinity became weaker. From the nineteenth (19<sup>th</sup>) century talent was also referred to a person, and those considered as talented were able to demonstrate outstanding accomplishments in mental (the ‘genius’) and physical domains (Tansley, 2011;). Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2013a) identify the rise of the ‘talent scout’ (or spotter) in the 1930’s, referring to a person searching for new sport or acting talent. It was at this moment that the first principles of talent management became apparent.

Literature upon talent is mainly US centered, and with a focus on private organization and multinationals (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen, 2016). Nonetheless, there is a scarcity of scientific literature about the empirical implementation of TM process, both generally speaking and in a public organization, more specifically. There has been a big debate among scholars about TM whether it is just new label of HRM (Lewis and Heckman, 2006) as the title of Chuai *et al.* (2008) article underlines “Is talent management just ‘old wine in new bottles’?”. Moreover, the discussion about the maturity of this field of research is still open, as Thunnissen *et al.* (2013a) highlight with the paper “A review of talent management: ‘infancy or adolescence?’”. TM seems a relative poorly developed research subjects and lacks a clear distinct meaning. In actual fact, accordingly with the recent work of Gallardo-Gallardo (2015), that adopted a phenomenon-driven approach, this field is in a growth stage, facing the challenge of evolving in a more mature field of study.

However, we can conclude about some limitations in the TM field. First, it lacks a stable theoretical foundation, as literature on talent and TM is highly conceptual (Lewis and Heckman, 2006; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017) and build on a broad range of academic traditions, including international HRM, strategic HRM, and

Organizational Behavior (OB). And, despite the fact that, on one hand, these different disciplines contribute to apply multiple lenses and approaches to TM, on the other they imply little consensus in the TM domain given the diversity in approaches. However, this does not imply that all scholars have the same perspective on TM. Theoretical approaches are rarely integrated or linked and consensus on TM principles is therefore hard to find (Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Nijs *et al.* 2014). According to Dries (2013b, p. 3) ‘vague but appealing rhetoric’ even causes critics to question whether TM is not just a management fashion.

Moreover, as a second limitation, this criticism is endorsed by the lack of empirical evidence for the conceptual models and ideas (Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Dries, 2013b): only recently the number of empirical studies has increased, and the qualitative research is prevalent (McDonnell *et al.*, 2017). According to Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2015) this is quite normal in an emerging field of study. Third, the current TM literature reflects a biased view on talent and TM. In most publications discussing TM the organizational perspective is adopted (e.g., Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Ulrich and Ulrich, 2010). The prevalent organizations’ interest is also evident in empirical research on TM, in which HR professionals, managers and executives are the commonly targeted research population (Stahl *et al.*, 2012). This emphasizes a little attention in experiences and opinions of talent or talented employees, although they are the central subjects in TM. Just a few empirical studies examine TM from an employees’ perspective (e.g., Björkman *et al.*, 2013; Dries and Pepermans, 2008; Dries, 2011). Fourth, the TM literature mainly focuses the talent issues for a select category of organizations. There is a strong focus on TM in private sector organizations, multinationals and organizations in the US-context (Collings *et al.*, 2011; Powel *et al.*, 2012). Many scholars present their theoretical frameworks as universal models, suitable to explain TM in all kinds of organizations. Actually, the characteristics and the environment of private sector organizations differ from those in, for example, public or non-profit sector organizations (Christensen *et al.*, 2007), and hence the current concepts and assumptions in the TM literature rooted in context of US-based, private and multinational organizations are probably less than adequate to describe and study TM in organizations in other contexts. The number of publications on TM in continents other than North America has recently been increasing, such as publications on TM in Europe (e.g., Festing *et al.*, 2013; Oltra and Vivas-López, 2013), Asia (e.g., Preece *et al.*, 2013) or the Middle East (Sidani and Al Ariss, 2014). Although the Anglo-Saxon countries emerged as important it is worthy to note that 5 out of the 10 most ‘productive’ countries in terms of TM research are European, non-English speaking countries: the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Spain and Finland. However, TM issues in non-profit, public or voluntary organizations, such as health care institutes (e.g., Groves 2011; Powell *et al.* 2012; Tyskbo, 2019), education institutes (e.g., Davies and Davies 2010; Van den Brink *et al.*, 2013) or public sector organizations (e.g., Glenn 2012; Harrisr and Foster 2013; Kravariti and Johnston, 2020), remain under-explored.

## 1.2. Aim of the research

Many business leaders, practitioners and academics consider talent and TM as key issues but there is little know about how and how well TM works in practice. In addition, current assumptions, viewpoints and actions appear to be based on a narrow and biased TM ‘paradigm’. This research aims to identify and explain what happens in practice, with the attempt to contribute to the building of a broader and more balanced theoretical framework for TM. At this aim we implemented a TM process at the publicly Italian University of Pavia, Faculty of Pharmacy, with students as targeted research population. Hence, we stated our definition of talent, we operationalized the talent identification and we implemented the talent development initiative adopting an experimental design to measure the effectiveness in terms of students’ employability. To achieve these objectives also an ongoing process of theory building and gathering data will be conducted, as suggested by the analytical approach to HRM of Boxall *et al.*, (2007).

Boxall *et al.*, (2007) claim that ‘the fundamental mission of the academic discipline of HRM is “not to propagate perceptions of ‘best practices’ in ‘excellent organizations’ but, first of all, to identify and explain what happens in practice” (Boxall *et al.*, p. 4). This perspective come along with the phenomenon-driven approach to the TM as opposed to theory-driven (von Krogh *et al.*, 2012; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2015). Traditional theory-driven research follows a process whereby hypotheses are developed based on gaps detected within the current knowledge of a field – guided by established definitions, operationalizations and measures. Therefore, the analytical approach to HRM starts from descriptive research addressing the ‘what, why, how and for whom’ questions that underpin the activity (Boxall, 2013). In order to get a rigorous understanding of what actually happens in practice and why, emphasize the point that the impact of the broader organizational context has to be considered in both the theoretical frameworks and in empirical research (i.e., contextually based research). In order to clarify how TM might work in practice, models and theories from related academic subfields need to be integrated in the process. Moreover, to get a clear understanding of the chain of processes that make TM work well or poorly, Boxall *et al.*, (2007) argue that thorough evidence-based research is required. Finally, to get an answer to the questions of ‘for whom?’ and ‘how well?’, analytical HRM is concerned with assessing outcomes at multiple levels: ‘it is examining the extent to which employer and worker outcomes are mutually satisfying, and, thus, more sustainable in our society over the long run’ (Boxall *et al.*, 2007, p. 7).

### 1.3. Research questions

The research follows the research question:

*What factors affect the design, implementation and effectiveness of TM at the University. To what extent university students' employability is affected by TM process?*

In order to answer to this research question, we first need to gain insight into the lessons learned in TM so far, and to increase our understanding of the context in which the study takes place. Therefore, the following conceptual and contextual sub questions will be answered:

1. What are the dominant themes and the leading assumption in the current TM literature?
2. What are the dominant themes and the leading assumption in the current Employability literature?
3. Which is the connection between these two concepts?

Subsequently, in the empirical study, the following more specific sub questions will be answered:

1. What/how is the definition of talent in the research context?
2. Which is the content of the TD?
3. What are the design, implementation and effectiveness of the TD process implemented?
4. Which is the external evaluation about the effectiveness of the TD implemented?
5. Which are the perceptions of implemented TM activities and outcomes by (a) the organization, (b) the talented students and (c) external stake holders?

### 1.4. Book structure

The overall study can be characterized as an explorative and descriptive study, in which several aspects of TM are profoundly examined in a continuing process of theory building and gathering data. In particular the research focus is on the Talent Development (TD) phase with an experimental design, during which students have been trained on a set of career management skills, with the aim to measure its effect on their employability. In this exploration a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research activities is used. The book starts with a general exploration of the meaning of talent and TM. *Chapter 2* offers a review of the academic TM literature in HRM to provide a clear understanding of the lessons learned so far (research

sub-question 1). In the discussion the one-dimensional and narrow approach to the topic is identified as a main limitation of the existing TM literature.

*Chapter 3* considers the contextual relevance of TM, and, after the second conceptual chapter, it represents the attempt to get a profound understanding of the research context (as formulated in the 2nd and 3rd research sub-questions). It describes the academic organization context and its inter-relation with the labor market at the light of recent reforms both in the internal and external environment. The information is gathered through a study of academic literature on Higher Education (HE) and policy documents on the Italian HE system. In this chapter a deep investigation of employability concept and related models is conducted, emphasizing that the link between employability and talent is represented by the competences. A description of the concept of competences, skills, soft skills, employability, and career management skills is outlined. The theoretical framework developed in *chapter 3* lays the foundation for further theoretical and empirical explorations in the empirical chapters/part, in which new theoretical ‘building blocks’ are added to identify and clarify what happens in practice in more detail. Indeed, the conceptual and the contextual chapters offered significant input for the design of the empirical study.

The empirical part of the present study starts with *chapter 4*, in which a synthetic overview of the empirical study is given. The preceding chapters also made it possible to identify the key issues which needed further empirical investigation, including the more specific theoretical ‘buildings blocks’ necessary to complement the rudiments. Therefore, *chapter 4* represents the introduction of the empirical part in which we described the research method, setting and time frame. The research design of the present pilot study is the experimental design, but different research methods are added and applied for each different phase of TM implementation at the University.

The empirical work starts in *chapter 5* with the definition of talent (and its meaning) and of the relevant soft skills for neo-graduates in order to be employable. The attempt is to overcome the limitations and the narrow approach, managerial and unitary, to TM and talent, described in *chapter 2*. At this end the research follows twofold paths. On one hand a multidisciplinary literature review integrates divergent streams of literature: giftedness, positive and vocational psychology. The aim is to obtain new and broadened perspectives on the concept of talent that are useful for the definition of talent in our context and its operationalization (sub-question 1). On the other hand, a multilevel explorative qualitative research study adopting the inductive rigor qualitative method. We interviewed twenty-seven representatives in the internal (University) and external (labor market) context. This represents the content of the TD in order to make the students employable (sub-question 2).

*Chapter 6* regards the implementation of the TD with an experimental design. Two online surveys, that serve as pre- and post-treatment tests, measured some

dimensions through scales, validated and not, and adjunctive questions in order to assess the talent of the students (i.e., the potential in terms of employability). An in-depth description of the research setting, the dimensions measured, and the related scales and questions is conducted. Furthermore, the analysis and the discussion of the results lead to the conclusions that the treated group has increased values in terms of talent (sub-question 3). The effectiveness of the TD initiative in terms of students' employability is described in *chapter 7*. External HR professionals evaluated a randomized sample of CV and conducted job interviews within both groups (treated and control) in order to assess eventual differences (sub-question 4). Furthermore, this chapter also analyzes the feedback part of the overall TM process with a multilevel approach, involving actors at individual (students), organizational (University-professors and pro-rectors) and community level (representatives of the labor market) (sub-question 5).

In the final chapter of the book, *chapter 8*, findings and conclusions of the previous chapters are connected with each other. We answer the aforementioned research questions and discuss the usefulness of the added theoretical 'building blocks' we have used in the study. At the end we give directions for future research, and practical implications are presented.

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## CHAPTER 2

# A review of talent management

### 2.1. Introduction

The term Talent Management (TM) erupted into the management scene and became a key managerial issue since McKinsey and Company group coined the phrase the War of Talent at the end of 90's (Michaels *et al.*, 2001). In the same period the business environment went through a significant expansion with the falling of trade barriers and the globalization (Silzer and Dowell, 2010), shifting to a post-industrialized knowledge-based economy, which is characterized by the increasing demands on the workforce and necessitates new forms of work-related skills (Hassard *et al.*, 2008; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017). This knowledge-based economy is characterized by new structures, new and continuously changing demands (Barnett, 2000; Brown *et al.*, 2003; Sennett, 2006) with increasing competition of firms and with fast change of markets. Thus, physical assets are no longer seen as the unique key differentiator and the modern world is characterized by talent: 'The value of thinking-intensive workers is derived from the value of their minds – the ideas they develop and the decisions they make – and from the intangible by-products of that work, such as the knowledge, reputations and relationships they create' (Bryan and Joyce, 2007, p. 7). The challenge of maximizing the competitive advantage of an organization's human capital is even more significant in the recessionary climate of the latter part of the first decade of the twenty-first century. At the same time, the dynamic nature of labor markets and the changing nature of work has resulted in major transition in the shape of careers and their management within and outside organizations. In the last two decades the topic of talent management has received a remarkable degree of practitioner and academic interest (Kravariti and Johnston, 2020), it is at the top of critical Human Resources (HR) issue list (Sandler, 2006). This relatively recent emphasis on talent management represents a paradigm shift from more traditional human resource management (HRM) (Huselid *et al.*, 1997; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017) towards the management of talent specifically suited to today's dynamic competitive environment.

As the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2011) states,

in these times of great economic and social changes it is strategic for organizations, private and public, and for individuals to focus on talent and on talent development as a key competitive advantage factor.

These talent challenges have been intensively debated in popular and practitioner-oriented literature, internet magazines and on social networking sites. At the end of 2014 LinkedIn has nearly 1500 professional groups discussing the ins and outs on TM.

However, despite its growing popularity, the concept of TM remains unclear (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013). Lewis and Heckman posit that “[i]t is difficult to identify the precise meaning of ‘talent management’ because of the confusion regarding definitions and terms and the many assumptions made by authors who write about TM” (2006, p. 139). Accordingly, to Tansley *et al.* (2007) focusing on “the lack of a universal definition of talent or an established set of concepts and common language to refer to when talking about talent management” (p. 67) could be considered as one of the reasons for TM being a complex research area.

## **2.2. Research method**

The methodological approach of this review is the quality narrative overview of the literature synthesizing the findings of literature gained from searches of computerized databases, hand searches and authoritative texts (Green *et al.*, 2006). The review adopted criteria to allow rigorous analysis and synthesis of related literature. The review process followed the three main steps of literature review as articulated in Galvan (2006), which are searching, reviewing and writing the literature review (Gikandi *et al.*, 2011).

We started our search for academic literature on TM with a query in the Google Scholar search engine. The number of hits was too large to review (over 400,000 hits for publications on TM between 2001 and 2015). This first search gave an insight into the broad range of publications and sources on the subject. The authoritative electronic databases ‘Scopus’ and ‘Web of Science’ were searched for a more detailed search to collect academic literature on TM. These databases were chosen because they are multidisciplinary, and they give access to a broad variety of academic journals and publications.

Keywords were identified in our search: ‘Talent’ and ‘Talent Management’. The search was bound within the 2001, when appeared the first peer-reviewed publication, and the 2015. We restricted our search to English-language publications in peer-reviewed academic journals that mentioned ‘talent management’ and ‘talent’ in their title, abstract or keywords. We excluded specific types of publications such as brief communications and commentaries, editorial notes and book reviews. We

initially focused on the most cited publications according to Google Scholar, Web of Science and Scopus.

Although our focus was on scholarly peer-reviewed literature we also included some recent and not-yet-cited publications because the field is relatively young, and we can gain interesting insights and different viewpoints on this argument. Then, we supplemented our review of the academic literature in the Management domain with a search into the linguistic origins of the term talent. We used the reference lists of the assembled publications to gather interesting documents that did not appear in our search in the databases, applying the ‘backtracking’ method (i.e., review of the reference lists of the selected articles). We limited the number of publications on global TM that overemphasize the international or multinational context, however, we included the most cited articles.

Our search procedure generated list of 278 articles, all published between January 2001 and May 2015. In total, we collected 53 documents on the subject. Forty-three of the documents are (peer reviewed) articles from international journals. The other documents are conference papers, dissertations and books (or book chapters) on TM. The number of publications is sufficient to accomplish the aim of the chapter, that is the description of the dominant themes, leading points of view and omissions (Green *et al.*, 2006). The aim was to obtain an understanding of the general characteristics of the publications. The results of these analyses will be discussed in the next section.

### **2.2.1. Findings: mapping the field of TM**

Before discussing the TM literature, we give a broad outline of the 54 publications we analyzed. Most of these documents were articles published in peer-reviewed journal. We found that articles are present not only in typical HRM journals (e.g., Human Resource Management Review) but also in international management journals (e.g., Journal of World Business), business journals (e.g., Harvard Business Review) and journals for specific sectors of industry (e.g., Health Care Management Review). The wide variety of journals evidenced that TM field does not yet have established outlets for publishing its research, that is a typical indication of it being in a growing’ state (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2015). In other words, the TM literature is built on a broad range of academic traditions, including international HRM, strategic HRM and Organizational Behavior (OB). These different disciplines contribute on one hand to apply multiple lenses and approaches to TM; on the other, they imply little consensus in the TM domain given the diversity in approaches.

The literature review also highlights a wide variety of authors provenience. The majority of scholars is situated in the United States of America (USA), that is why TM is often being accused to be US-centric (Collings *et al.*, 2011; Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016). Considering the affiliation of all the authors listed on a TM

publication, the United States of America are at the top of the rank, closely followed by the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland and the Netherlands, and Australia. Although Anglo-Saxon countries emerged as important, it is worthy to note that 5 out of the 10 most 'productive' countries in terms of TM research are European, non-English speaking countries: the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Spain and Finland.

The whole body of the literature claimed, as Lewis and Heckman (2006) and Collings and Mellahi (2009) proved, that TM lacks empirical research. However, since 2010 there is a growing number of empirical research paper (McDonnell *et al.*, 2017; Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen and Buttiens, 2017; Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). Qualitative research in the empirical articles is the most prevalent, as it can be easily expected in an emerging field (von Krogh *et al.*, 2012). Quantitative research is less frequent and was not found at all prior 2010. Among the empirical articles, mixed-method studies have been the least present. We found case studies which analyze practices in a single organization or in a certain region and country (Makela *et al.*, 2010). A lot of studies consisted of surveys or interviews to HR managers to investigate their organization's talent management practices and their underlying rationale (Stahl *et al.*, 2007). The most often-cited articles on talent management are rooted in a human capital/resource-based view (RBV) framework (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Dries, 2013b), although in recent years some works have focused on the experiences of individual employees (as well as groups of employees) from a more psychological/organizational behavior (OB) perspective (Björkman *et al.*, 2013; Höglund, 2012; Dries, 2013b).

There are signs, however, that the field is rapidly growing. As a recent bibliometric analysis, conducted by Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, (2015) demonstrates, there has been an upsurge of research activity around the topic of talent management since 2010. Especially when conference presentations and symposia are included in the analysis, we observe that more and more authors and research departments from around the world are doing 'something' relating to talent management (Dries, 2013b).

A number of reviews have been published in recent years, each approaching the TM literature from a different angle: Lewis and Heckman (2006) focus on the definition of TM based mostly on the practitioner literature; Collings and Mellahi (2009) develop a conceptual model of strategic TM, positing the centrality of 'pivotal positions'; Tarique and Schuler (2010) make advances in research on global talent management (GTM); Dries (2013a) identifies a number of discrepancies, tensions, and taken-for-granted assumptions based on a multidisciplinary review of TM literature; Thunnissen *et al.* (2013) work is a critical review, drawing attention to the economic and noneconomic (i.e., social and moral) value that TM can generate at three levels: individual, organizational, and societal; and Cappelli and Keller (2014) review the challenges and uncertainties for TM theory and practice in the present labor market; Meyers *et al.* (2014) analyzing the underlying philosophies of TM; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2015) make a review adopting the approach to TM as a phenomenon-driven field with through a bibliometric and content analysis.