

Considering tourist perceptions and network configuration in destinations management

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Abstract

The competitiveness of tourism destinations is a relevant issue for tourism studies, moreover, is a key element on the daily basis of tourism destinations. In this sense, the management of tourism destinations is essential to maintain competitive advantages.

In this article tourism destination is considered as a relational network, where interaction and cooperation is needed among tourist agents, to achieve major levels of competitive advantage and a more effective destination management system.

In addition, the perceptions of tourists are obtained from two main sources. The first one is the social construction of a tourism destination previous to the visit and the second one is obtained from the interaction between tourists and tourism destination agents during the visit. In this sense, the management of tourism destination to emit a homogenous and collective image is a factor that can reduce the gap of dissatisfaction from the previous and real tourist perception.

The discussion is centered on the relationship within a destination, between the supply network and the targeted demand, considering these two approaches jointly, to benefit destination management. The main result is a conceptual model that shows how tourism agents and tourists in the tourism destination interact to improve the destination competitiveness.

Keywords: *tourism image, relational network, destination management, agent, competitiveness, market*

Introduction

Each tourism destination can be considered a market in itself. At these destinations tourism suppliers (i.e., accommodations, restaurants, museums, and tourism offices, among others) interact simultaneously with the tourists who consume these products or services. For that reason a market approach is more appropriate than a supply or a demand one.

A tourism destination is the geographical area where a set of tourism agents interact and intervene in tourism activities. These interactions, from a supply point of view, help develop a relational network at the destination. A relational network is the set of economic and personal relationships established among a number of agents who share goals, cooperation systems, knowledge, reputation, and image, among other elements, in common. These elements help the destination network generate collective learning and knowledge, and consequently, achieve greater levels of competitiveness than individual agents would.

In addition, from the demand point of view, these interactions within the destination help minimize

the existing gap between perceived and real images. All tourists have a socially constructed image of a destination (Urry, 1990; Galí & Donaire, 2005; Larsen & George, 2006), which conditions their decision-making, and it is important for the tourism agents involved in the network to control the image of a destination.

This control has two simultaneous benefits. The first one, related to the tourism demand, is the potential to influence tourist decision-making. The second one is related to the tourism supply chain: the competitive advantage brought to tourism destinations by adapting the projected image to the real one.

This article will discuss the attainment of these two benefits using the tourism image and social network theories to clarify how supply and demand interact in a tourism destination. A conceptual model will be proposed as part of a theoretical market approach to tourism destinations, which integrates supply and demand, explains interactions between them and highlights the relevance of this scope of analysis to better understand the dynamics of a tourism destination and the possibility of improving its competitive advantage.

Finally the article demonstrates the necessity of using this integrated approach for planning and managing a tourism destination to improve its competitiveness and highlight this theoretical view, which opens up a way to do future empirical research around this issue.

This article is organised in four main sections. The first explains the process of tourism image formation and how the tourism agents that intervene in this process affect the image tourists have of tourism destinations, from the perspective of the social construction of tourism images. The second focuses on the network configuration of the destination, taking into account the tourism agents who take part in the tourism system and how networking can generate competitive advantages. The third part presents a theoretical model of an integrated market approach to tourism destinations. Finally, the conclusions based on the theoretical model are drawn, the model's limitations are considered and proposals for future research are made.

How tourists perceive destinations

Social Construction of Tourism destination Images

Images have been used in a number of contexts and disciplines: psychology perceives the image as a visual representation; thought behavior geography emphasizes the association of impressions, knowledge, emotions, values and beliefs; and marketing focus on the relationship between image and behavior of consumers (Jenkins, 1999). The majority of academics from the 1970s to the present day agree that tourism image is “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979).

Gunn (1972), in her main academic study mentions that “all of us have images of destinations, whether or not we have travelled to them. These images may be sharp or vague, factual or whimsical, but in all cases they are indicative of likes and dislikes”. This means that all places have an image, which has not appeared out of nowhere, but they have consciously or unconsciously been created by “somebody”. In this sense, one needs to think about how a tourism destination image is constructed.

From the realization of a task and its reiterated repetition by people in a society, this task ends up being institutionalized by this society. The acceptance of this task as habitual makes it “settle” in this society and form part of its traditions, so in that sense, the reality of this society has been constructed collectively (Berger & Luckmann, 1968). Using this approach to tourism image, it could be contemplated that a tourism image is constructed socially in the same way as a task is accepted as a normal way to do something in a society.

Tourism images are full of visual elements and signs that evoke socially constructed images (Urry, 1990), for example a couple of lovers in Paris suggest romantic Paris. In this sense, “the image construct implies some overriding impression or stereotype” (Mazanec & Schweiger, 1981). However, this tourism image does not always reflect the reality, because “the tourism image is, at the same time, a subjective construction (that varies from person to person) and a social construction, based on the idea of collective imagination” (Galí & Donaire, 2005).

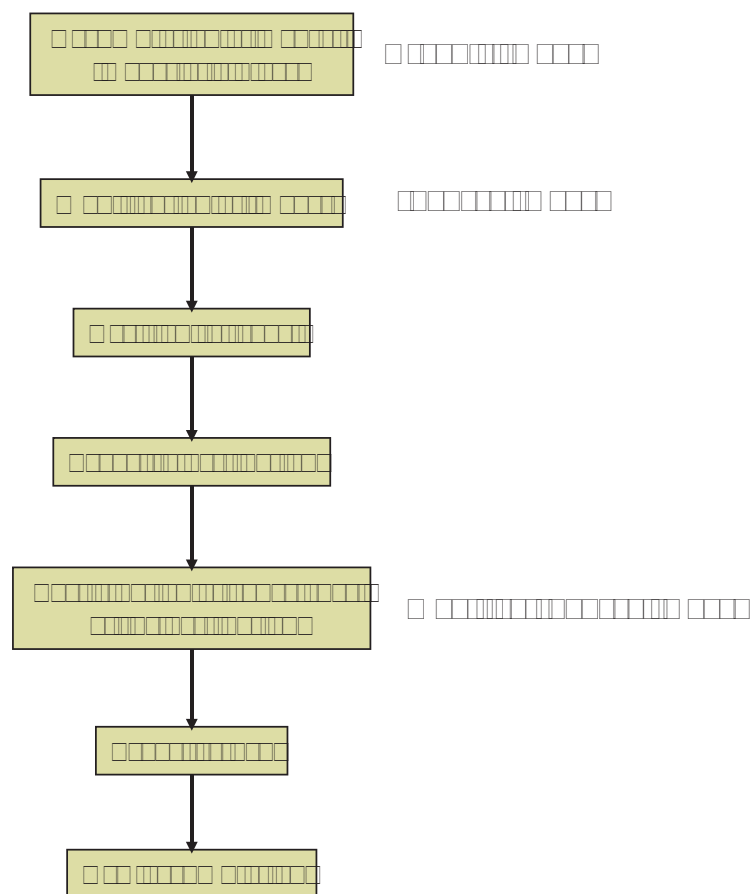
Variations in tourism image are complex if one considers how these images are formed, a little bit at a time. As Gallarza et al. (2002), have exposed “image is not static, but changes depending essentially in two variables: time and space”. The influence of time on image is demonstrated in a number of studies on tourism image (Gartner, 1986; Gartner & Hunt, 1987; Chon, 1991; Selby & Morgan, 1996), especially if one considers its formation as a process (Gunn, 1972). At the same time, the space variable also influences the image of a tourism destination. Some studies in this field show that the distance between potential tourists and the tourism destination affects the perceived image of the place (Gallarza et al., 2002; Talisman-Kosuta, 1989, Miossec, 1977). Considering the dynamic nature of tourism, image is useful if the effect of marketing actions on time and space variables (Gallarza et al., 2002; Talisman-Kosuta, 1989) is taken into account. In this manner the periodic evaluation of tourism image is relevant (Talisman-Kosuta, 1989).

How is the image of a tourism destination formed?

Accepting as valid the fact that tourism image is socially constructed (Urry, 1990; Galí & Donaire, 2005; Larsen & George, 2004), some studies point to the existence of factors or components that form part of every tourism image and influence its formation process (Gallarza et al., 2002; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004). In this sense, Gartner (1993), mentions that some authors have systematized the elements that influence the process of tourism image formation in different conceptual models. At the same time, it is possible to find a number of authors who focus on the existence of a formation process of the tourism image, which is made up of different stages that contribute to how a tourism image is formed (i.e., Gunn, 1972; Govers & Go, 2004).

One of the most important models that show how a tourism image is formed is the seven-stage process of tourism experience, which has been developed by Gunn (1972). This model shows that images

Figure 1. Seven-stage model of a tourism experience



Source Gunn (1972)

held by potential visitors, nonvisitors, and returned visitors differ (Gunn, 1972).

At stage one, potential tourists assimilate general information, such as, newspapers, television documentaries, books, and school lessons. This process generates an organic image of the destination; this is because the mere mention of these places evokes images which are not necessarily tourism images.

The second stage implies a modification of perceived images based on consulting tourism information (i.e., tourism posters, guides, articles in specialized reviews, etc.). These changes in perceived images are influenced by induced images, which are the result of a conscious effort to develop, promote, and advertise a destination.

When the potential visitor has a perceived image based on the organic and induced images of the place, then they are prepared to make a decision. Other factors such as previous experience or the money available are also taken into consideration.

Travel to the destination may condition the image that a visitor has, but the key factor of a new change in a visitor's perceived image is their personal experience at the destination, as well as their participation in different activities, such as, visiting museums or the use of tourism services such as accommodation. At this stage, visitors have a modified-induced image, which is the result of the balance between the perceived image before visiting the destination and the perceived image after the visit.

Returning home after travelling, visitors evaluate and make reflections about their experience and discuss it with other travellers. At the final stage, tourists accumulate new information if one considers that this is a circular process. In this sense, it is widely recognized in academic literature that experienced tourists will become a "source of information" for other potential visitors, which will be based on their experience at the destination (Balogru & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004).

As is noted in this model, the creation and modification of tourism images are constant and demonstrate the dynamism of the tourism image. The space variable shows these phenomena through the contact of visitors with tourism destinations.

Image Management as a competitive advantage

Academic literature recognizes the need to manage tourism image, as it is one of the most important factors that influences the decision-making process of tourists that choose a destination to spend their holidays (Gartner, 1993; Govers & Go, 2004). Gunn (1972), in her model explains that tourism images are conditioned by the actions of a number of agents that influence the creation of tourism images. Although it is agreed that the tourism image is socially constructed, agents intervene in this process emitting images, which end up being consolidated and accepted as valid in a specific society.

According to Gartner's (1993), agent classification, there are four types of agents. The first, Over Induced is a kind of agent who promotes the creation of a specific tourism image of the tourism destination in a conscientious way, to influence a tourist's process of decision-making. Gartner (1993), makes a distinction between these agents, who are of two types. On one hand, Over Induced I are "the promoters of the destination [that] construct an image of the salient attributes of the destination in the minds of the targeted audience" with the traditional forms of advertising (i.e., television, radio, brochures, etc.). In this case, one could also include tourism businesses of the destinations, such as, accommodation, restaurants, activities, and so on. On the other hand, Over Induced II are usually "tour-operators, wholesalers or organizations who have a vested interest in the travel decision process, but which are not directly associated with a particular destination area". As Gartner (1993), mentions "destination area promoters do have some control over the images projected through tour operator" because if the tourism image does not conform with the reality of the destination it could create dissatisfactions to both locals and visitors (Govers & Go, 2004).

The second, Covert Induced are agents that apparently emit a tourism image that is not induced. In this case the author also defines two types of Covert Induced agents. The first is called Covert Induced I, who is related to a recognizable spokesperson who recommends a destination to support a higher level of credibility of tourism destination advertising. The second is Covert

Induced II, this category corresponds to people or organizations who write articles, reports or stories about a particular place. Often this published information is a result of a familiarization tour for travel writers or special interest media groups. These actions increase credibility and allow destination promoters to project a specific image.

The third kind of agents is called Autonomous. These agents are people or organizations who produce reports, documentaries, movies, and news articles independently without the specific aim of creating a tourism image of a place.

The last group of agents that Gartner (1993) identifies is called Organic, and is related to information and opinions about a place that a person receives from other people, from their previous experience in this place, Unsolicited Organic corresponds to people who give information about a destination where they have been, without having been specifically asked by the other interlocutor, for example, when this is a topic of conversation with friends in colleges. The existence of Solicited Organic agents implies that individuals actively search for information about a destination and somebody informs them using their own experience. Friends or relatives usually constitute these kind of agents, who have a high level of credibility and are an extremely important part of the destination selection process.

When people visit a destination they become an Organic (pure) agent, having the capability to give information in a solicited or unsolicited way.

This model shows that the task of Over Induced agents, in this context, is undeniable, especially if one considers the sustainable competitive advantage of the destination. Sustainable competitive advantage is generally based on either core competences or unique resources that are superior to those possessed by competitors and are difficult to imitate (Aaker, 2001; Johnson & Scholes, 1999). Govers & Go (2004), established that superior resources for a tourism destination “are generally to be found in either its unique and natural environment (climate, wildlife or landscape) or its cultural heritage” and also mention that “competitive advantage might be created through core competences, such as, the host community’s existing unique capabilities in attracting visitors from outside.” (i.e., destination’s

ability to stage world class events, festivals or exploit its folklore and prevailing traditions).

Following these considerations, the management of tourism image is viewed as a management tool (Ritchie, 1993). Govers & Go (2004), propose that it is necessary “to formulate a plan for projecting the ‘right’ image” as one of the essential parts of tourism development strategy. Gartner (1993), mentions the importance of considering the “image mix”, as a continuum of factors that have to be taken into account to decide which agents will intervene in the formation of tourism image, as well as, the amount of money budgeted for image development, characteristics of target market, and demographic characteristics or timing. This task is obviously attributed to promoters of the destination who can select the right mix of image formation agents to maximize their scarce resources (Gartner, 1993).

The network configuration and a tourism destination

Tourism Destination agents

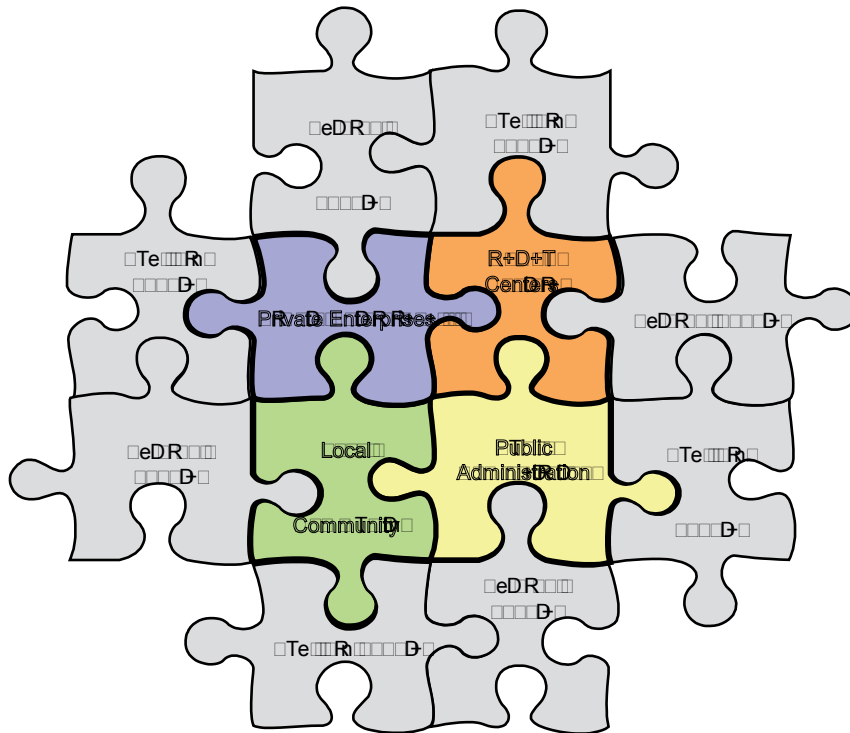
Tourism agents are an essential part of the system and of any destination, therefore they have been identified. Some definitions that are more applicable to industrial destinations, like innovation systems, clusters, milieux innovateurs, or industrial districts, always consider three main types of agents. Moreover, it is considered that tourism specificity needs another main agent who helps to define the situation of the system and therefore needs to complete it.

Two other types of agents support these main agents at all times and are also necessary to maintain the main set of agents stable. Figure 2 illustrates these agents in detail.

Following this scheme, those organizations that take part directly in generating the tourism experience are private companies. These include basic tourism companies, and also others whose main activity is related to tourism.

Public administrations are those organisms of governmental function that take part in the tourism processes and whose intervention can generate new legislations, give incentives for research, planning, and others.

Figure 2. Tourism destination agents



Research, development, and training centres (R+D+T) are the essential elements capable of generating specialized training and/or research in the scope of tourism, such as, universities, research institutes, or consultants.

These three main agents appear in the academic literature on innovation systems (Lundvall, 1992; Nelson, 1993), as well as, in clusters and industrial districts. In addition, the tourism scheme proposed by Gunn (1997), and later adapted by the OMT (1999) is taken, and the tourism industry as a functional tourism system (Prats & Balagué, 2005) is conceptualized. They demonstrate that the local community also has an essential role in the development of tourism activity, and consequently of the system. The local community is defined as the inhabitants of a territory. These people are individuals or organizations without economic aims, such as, NGO's, civic organizations, or others. The relevance of local community in tourism is emphasized, seeing that civic movements have been able to modify important decisions in city-planning, ecological subjects, or others, restraining or impelling tourism.

After describing the basic elements, the tourism auxiliary agents can be defined as those agents

who do not have activities directly related to the tourism industry, but who support the main agents. Looking at the economic theories, the auxiliary agents are some of the receivers of the multiplying effect (McIntosh et al., 2000). And the external agents are those tourism agents who are part of other destinations, but who interact with one or more internal agents.

The set of agents in a tourism destination is basically located in the same geographical territory. However, a territory by itself does not have enough conditions for their collective coordination, and also the proximity does not generate synergies by itself, but it can contribute to their effectiveness with other dimensions shared between the agents (Zimmermann, 2001). A good example of an agent who belongs to a distant destination could be a specialized tour operator who commercializes destinations, which are geographically distant but relationally close.

Relational networks

The use of relational networks in the analysis of a company's competitive advantage can be related to several approaches in the fields of economics or sociology, among others (Sorensen, 2004). Therefore,

in the most static frame, this analysis has appeared within the network of individual companies who have useful and important connections with other companies, becoming more than just a unit inside an atomized market (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). In this sense, these companies must be analyzed considering their relationships with other companies outside the network and also the existing relationships among other companies within the network (Holmen et al., 2005).

In relation to the most dynamic frame, it is observed that it was contemplated not to see the innovation process as a linear and consecutive process, meaning that the result of the initial stage brings up the following one and so on. Innovation is considered an intensive activity in both knowledge (Sundbo, 1998; Roberts, 2001) and learning. It is also totally accepted as a key element in the innovation process. Thus, innovation also arises and takes place through the interactions between companies (Sorensen, 2004), and between these companies and other relevant actors who are important for their activity (Prats & Guia, 2005). These ties must be understood as intense flows of knowledge and, therefore, essential for innovation, and also for competitiveness.

However, Sorensen (2004), presents a definition that considers networks as the set of conscious and accepted business relationships, whether formal or informal, with transmission of resources, immaterial or material, within the company's scope. In any case, it is useful to adopt the perspective of social network analysis, which studies specific relationships between a defined series of elements, like people, groups, organizations, countries or events, among others (Molina, 2001). It is necessary to consider that social network analysis is based on relationships and not on the attributes of elements. Then, a social network can be defined as the group of people, organizations or other social entities connected by a set of significant relations (Wellman, 1997).

Granovetter (1985) and Hite (2003), affirm that the existing relationships within social networks influence economic actions, and Hite (2003), distinguishes seven different types of ties that can take place inside a social network: the main three are business ties, personal ties, and hollow ties, and the other four types are formed as a result of the relationship between the main types.

Porter (1990), with his five forces model and his later approach to clusters, universalized the necessity to maintain the business or commercial ties that had been previously valued by Becattini (1979), and other authors. Other theories such as the industrial districts theory show that personal relationships have to be considered as a value that contributes to empower the agents' ties making them more efficient and trustworthy (Becattini, 1979). Hollow ties appeared only recently in network theories and have become very common, because they represent all those ties that you accept with the mediation of a third person, so your trust in the relationship is not with the agent to whom you are related, but with the agent who did the mediation (Prats et al., 2005).

It seems evident then, that a tourism destination, where relationships exist among its agents, can be considered a relational network, considering the specificities of the tourism product, and the existence of the different types of ties able to generate an active and beneficial set of agents and relationships.

Networking as a generator of competitive advantage

If different agents interact among themselves, it can be argued that these interactions often allow the agents to have joint benefits from infrastructures, common engineering, and transfer of tacit knowledge. It also makes productive combinations and interactions more difficult to carry out in atomization or individual isolation.

Belonging to a destination or relational network involves interacting with other members, which is usually transformed into routines of the organization. This is what Rallet and Torre (2004), have named as the belonging logic. This logic and interaction will be easier a priori if there is a common knowledge; this is called logic of similarity.

The interaction of these agents generates a number of factors that determine if a destination or local innovation system is successful or not in all scopes. A first and fundamental factor is the internal and external relationships that take place in the system. These relationships can be very different and they have been summarized into two characteristic groups.

On the one hand, depending on the relational structure that is adopted in a system, the degree of success will vary. In this factor the key element is the degree of connectivity that is obtained, understanding that the better the connectivity between the agents is, the closer it will be to “the ideal” system. It is understood that good internal connectivity will contribute to a more fluid circulation of knowledge between the agents, and this will increase the trust among them. But at the same time, an excess of internal connectivity can make the trust on external agents decrease to such an extent that they are considered intruders (Zimmerman, 2001). The lack of trust between external agents could have serious consequences in the new knowledge generation, because the closure of relational networks in itself could limit information flows that come from outside, blocking the possibility of generating new knowledge and collective learning (Lazerson & Lorenzoni, 1999).

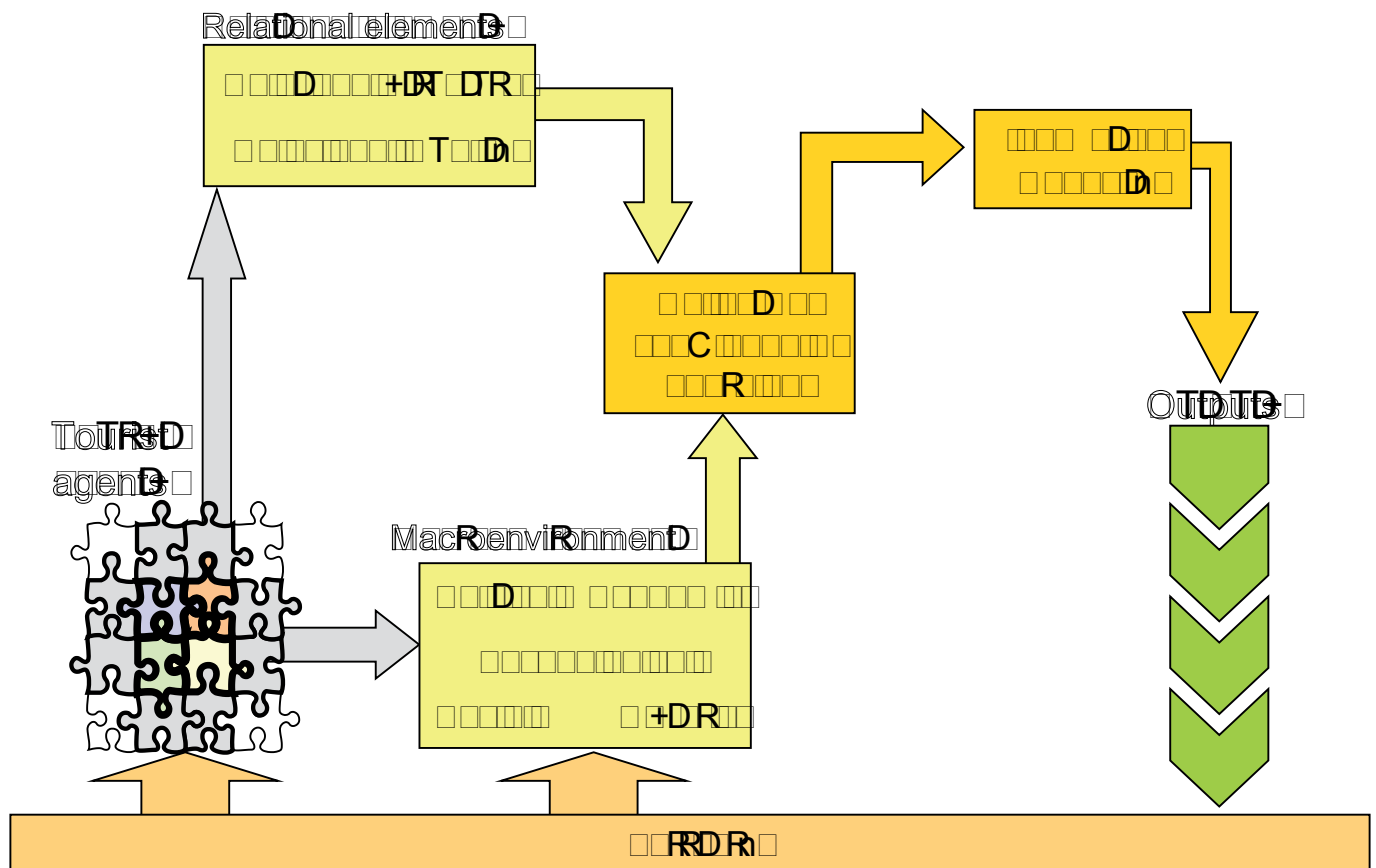
On the other hand, however, it must also be observed

that the quality of relationships within a system such as this, affects its success. The key element in this factor is trust, as a greater trust between the elements of a system will transmit more relevant information, and greater benefits for the whole destination will increase.

Another determining factor is the macro-environment, which is divided into five elements: (1) political, such as, decisions or political elements that affect the system; (2) economic, for instance economic situations that affect the system; (3) technological, which has two levels: (a) the hard level such as the automation level, and (b) the soft level such as the training level of the population; (4) social, this contributes to the system culture, for example the degree of associationism or the cultural level; and finally, (5) historical macro-environment, which gives perspective and historical experience, such as, political periods or natural disasters.

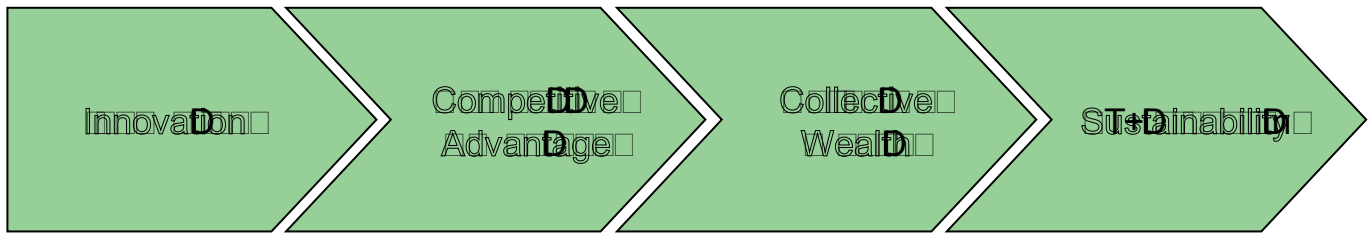
Using the agents’ interactions and macro-environment variables, tourism destinations should

Figure 3 Tourism Local Innovation System model



Source: Prats and Guia (2005)

Figure 4 Tourism Local Innovation system Outputs



Source: Prats and Guia (2005)

be able to generate essential collective knowledge and learning for the evolution of the system. The main purpose of this collective knowledge and learning is being able to generate a constant innovation capacity that will bring dynamism to the system as shown in Figure 3.

This innovation capacity allows the system to obtain four successive outputs, which can be observed in Figure 4. Each stage must be achieved to obtain the desired results. If an “ideal” configuration of the system is obtained, the four outputs will also be obtained, and this will revert again to the tourism destination.

The first unquestionable output of the innovation capacity is innovations in any of their modalities. In the opinions of Prats and Guia the innovation must allow the system to generate a competitive advantage, allowing the destination to satisfy the needs of the tourists better than the competitor’s destinations.

The competitive advantage, consequently, must contribute to the system’s collective wealth, which in turn increases the wellbeing of all the agents who join it. Wellbeing is understood to be an improvement of the quality of life of all the elements, which is not based solely on the economic, environmental, or social benefits at an individual level, but is a perfect balance between all of them at a collective level.

This balance allows the system to become sustainable and generates a new and better situation that is a territory improvement, and which also feeds the agents and the macro-environment, varying the behavior of the system constantly, forcing it to reframe itself, and be constantly dynamic.

Destination tourist perception & network configuration: a theoretical proposal

The tourism image perceived by tourists and represented in Gunn’s model (1972), has a close connection with tourism destinations, and in particular, with agents that interact in the promotion of the destination.

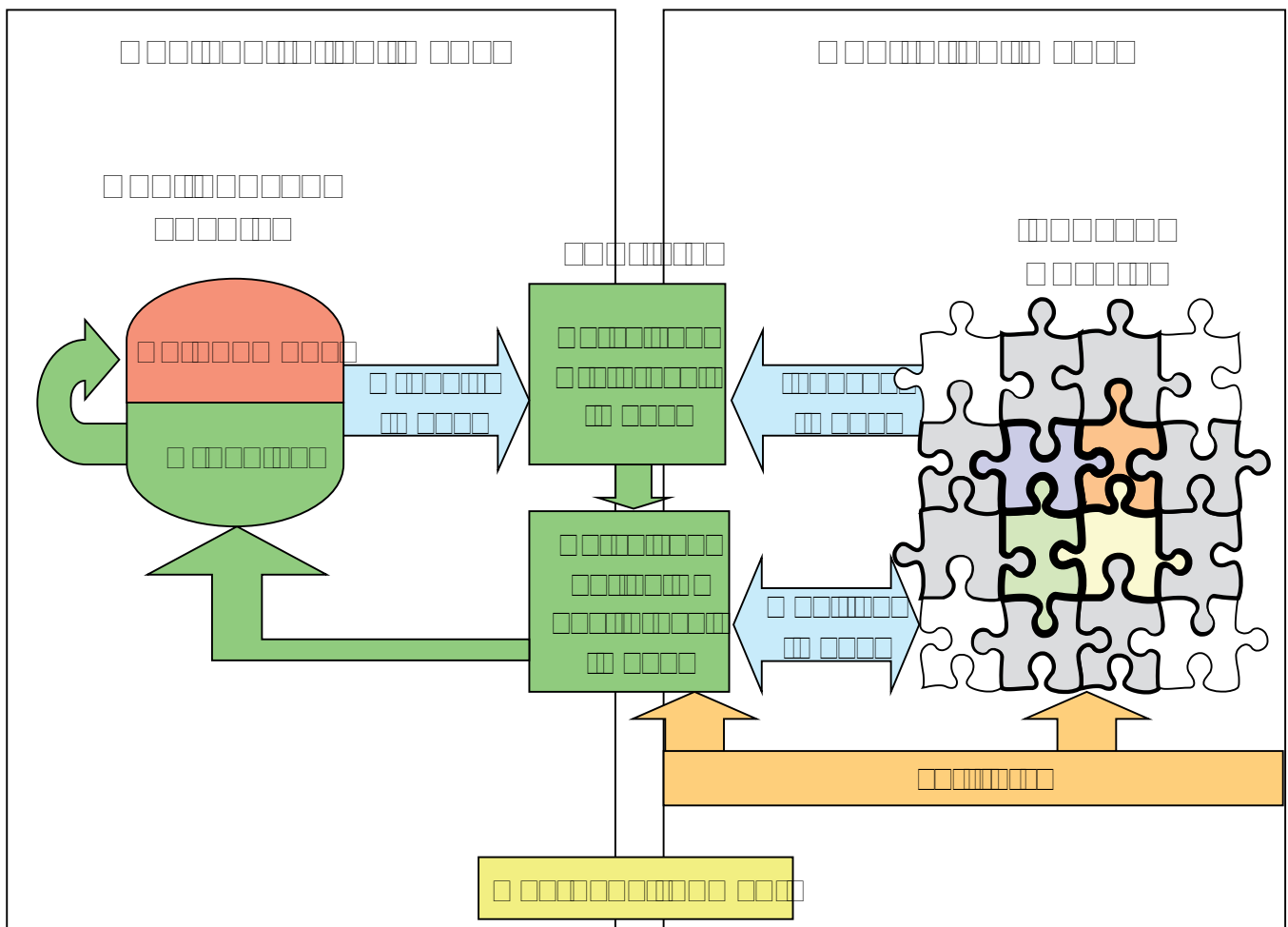
The seven-stages of tourism experience (Gunn, 1972), show interactions between tourists and tourism agents. This materializes, initially, in the process of searching for information, which is done voluntarily by tourists; and later, if tourists travel to the destination the tourism image is again modified by direct contact with tourism agents.

In this context, direct contact and coordination among internal and external agents of the tourism destination are also necessary, so that tourists can perceive a real tourism image of the destination both before and after travelling to the destination. If this situation occurs, it will be easier for tourism destinations to maintain their competitive advantage in a sustainable way.

Therefore, tourism destinations, which are established as a network and based on trust among its members, can better guarantee a unique tourism image, which is more coherent with the reality of the tourism destination. This configuration has a close relationship with the structure of network, the quality of ties, and its macro-environment. Moreover, the innovation capacity generated has to be useful to adapt the induced image to the tourism product.

Figure 5 shows a market approach model, which focuses on demand and supply simultaneously and

Figure 5 Market approach of tourism destination: Conceptual model



explains the relationship between them, taking into account the multiple factors that affect the behavior of tourism agents. As a consequence the competitive advantage of tourism destinations is explained.

In this model the interaction between tourism agents and tourists is highlighted, giving an overall picture of what happens in a destination. In this context, those tourism agents who interact frequently with tourists tend to be public administrations, private companies, and the local community.

First, public administrations have a direct relationship with tourists through the promotional actions of tourism destinations. These agents act as induced agents of tourism images by acting as promoters and developers of destinations. In this case, following Gartner's classification (1993), public administrations act as over induced agents I, who emit an induced tourism image, which influences both the tourists' perceived image of a destination

and the decision-making process at the moment of choosing a destination (Garner, 1993).

Second, tour operators, as they form part of the private companies of a destination, also act as over induced agents II, because they have a clear interest in influencing the decision-making process of tourists at the time of selecting a destination. Public administrations, as well as tour operators, influence the "perceived pretravel image" of tourists.

When the potential tourist travels to a destination and becomes a real tourist a direct interaction between tourists and tourism companies takes place, and this influences the perceived image of the place that tourists had before going there, creating a new image of the place (Gunn, 1972).

Finally, the local community has a strong relationship with the tourist and usually the tourists real image is strongly modified by this kind of contact. In

the author’s opinion a key factor at this level is the perception the local community has of the tourism activity and the benefits that the inhabitants receive from it, because if a local community thinks that the benefits and damages that tourism causes are in perfect balance or in a more beneficial situation for the local community, these inhabitants will contribute to the tourists well-being, otherwise they will behave to the contrary.

Tourism research and training centers play a secondary, but fundamental role, especially as they might condition the induced tourism image through research projects, and simultaneously, they could also influence perceived tourism images indirectly by training the tourism workers who help tourists during their stay.

Therefore, the influence on “perceived post-travel image” comes from tourism companies, as well as the local community and research and training centers.

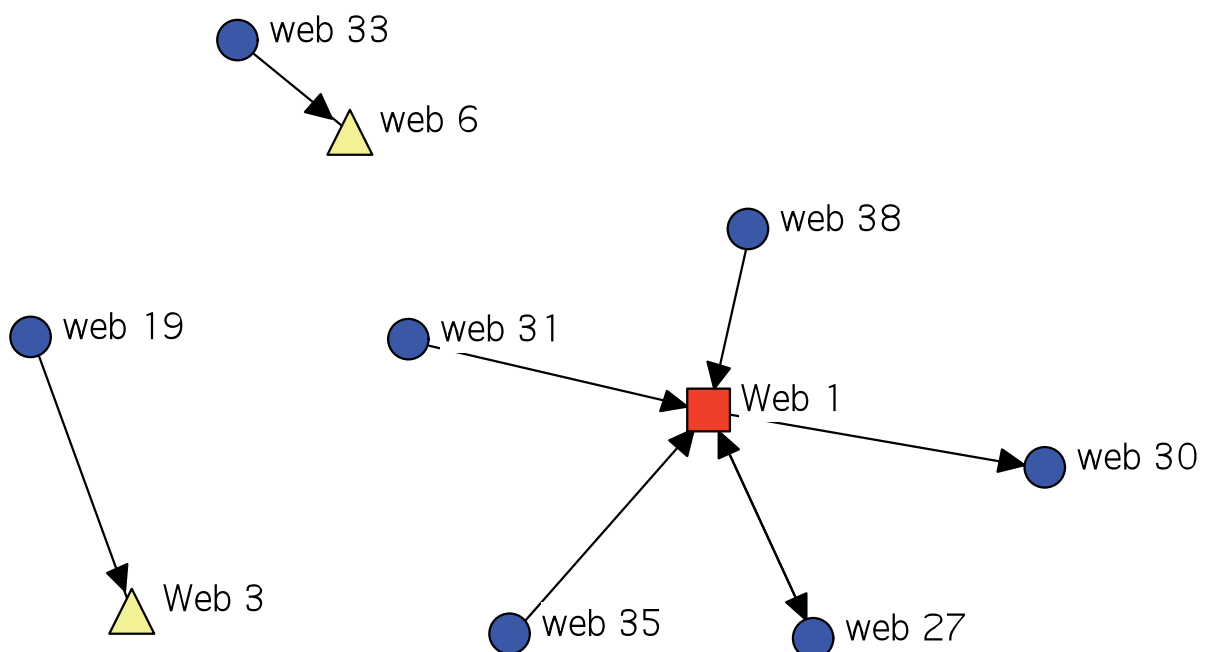
This model shows that, the relationships between tourists and tourism agents are systematic and necessary throughout the whole process. This means that this interaction is essential both before a tourist travels to a destination as well as during his/her stay.

If tourists do not go to a destination, this might mean that tourism agents cannot control the factors that generate the appropriate knowledge and transmit the right image to convince tourists. However, other uncontrollable factors exist, such as, the travel time needed, the distance to the destination, the money available or to what extent a tourism product fulfils tourist needs.

When tourists are dissatisfied with their visit because the “perceived post-travel image” is extremely different from the “perceived pretravel image”, there is another scenario where the agents have not transmitted the reality of the destination. In this situation tourism agents had the innovation capacity, but they had not used it in the correct way to obtain the desired image outputs. This context shows the importance of communication and coordination among all the tourism agents of a destination, to induce a real and homogenous image.

Case Study

As we mentioned before, tourism products and even more evident tourists doesn’t understand political boundaries, but regional and local governments use it to divide the territory. This situation causes



Advanced Compelling	Video	Sound	Photographic galleries	Interactive maps	Total
18	2	1	11	4	36

management and commercialisation problems that don't help to emit a coherent image of the whole destination to the possible tourists. These scenarios can be avoided developing networks for product commercialisation that includes all the over induced I agents. Is one of the easiest way to start a network, because in that sense they can share marketing costs entering to scale economies.

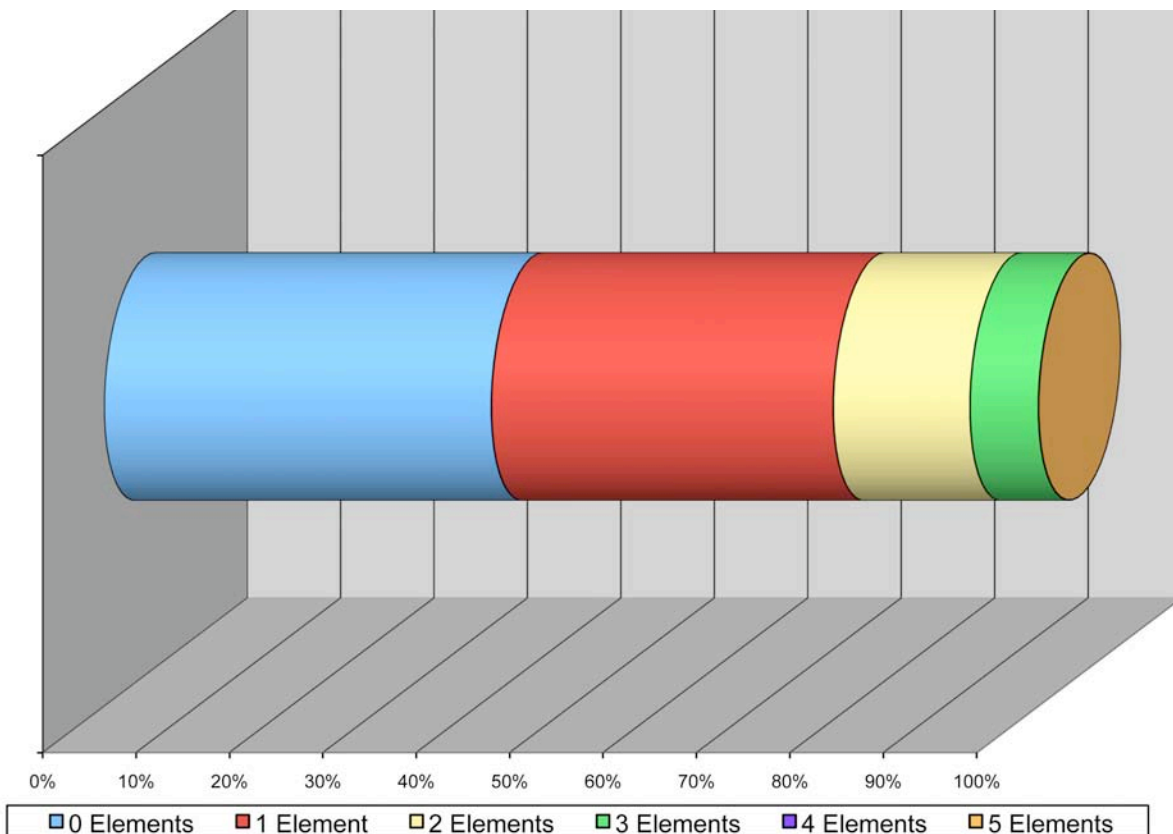
We analyzed the web pages of the local, regional and destination public institutions in order to know if they promote the webs of other colleagues within the destination. This can help us to understand the level of image coherence.

Observing the network that can be drowned after the analysis, is possible to assure that don't exist a common commercialisation network in the Costa Brava destination. From the 41 analyzed webs only 10 have direct links with other promotion agent. The main problem is that only one of these links is bidirectional. This means that the rest maybe are not well developed links.

Another element to extract from this relational map is the fact that only 2 of 8 regional institutions appeared on it, and always as link receiver and not as a link creator, which means that they promote the tourism elements independently from the municipalities that they represent.

Jumping to the technological elements included into the webs that can help to emit a better image five different types of them were analyzed, the type of compelling web system, the multimedia systems divided into sound, video and photography galleries, and finally the interaction with the tourists represented by interactive maps.

What is really shocking is that the main Catalan destination, only have little technological and interactive elements to attract tourists. This is done by the historical tourism tradition of the destination when an intensive promotion to attract tourists never was needed. Most of the mature tourism destination have a similar problem.



One third of the tourist web pages of the destination don't have any of the mentioned elements and nearly half of them only have one. This situation sorts out that the emitted image through web pages and technological elements are really poor. At least one of the webs that have three of these elements is the one of the main DMO maybe the most visited site. The problem is that in this site there is not all the information related with destination as we can imagine for the link system showed before.

Conclusions

Discussion

Initially, it has to be mentioned that it is important to observe demand and supply in an integrated way. This integrated vision gives a greater innovation capacity, in particular, regarding the destinations' tourism agents; who have a broader view of the possibilities of maintaining and improving the sustainable competitive advantage of the destination. It also allows one to consider the tourists' key role and how the tourism agents' interact with them, as well as when this interaction takes place, and what the basic tools that maintain this relationship are.

In this context it is assumed, as justified earlier, that a tourism destination's image is constructed socially during a complex process in a seven-stage tourism experience. Moreover, the necessity to manage this image is accepted as a method that influences the tourists' process of decision-making and for that reason it is necessary to pay special attention to the agents who take part in this.

Then, taking for granted that a tourism destination is a natural agglomeration of tourism agents, it is considered that a tourism destination can be analyzed as a system. A range of tourism agents such as private companies, research and training centres, public administrations, and particularly the local community, as well as external and auxiliary agents have also been identified. In addition, it is possible to match the tourism destination agents with the image destination agents, putting together producers, image inducers, and consumers. This helps to draw up the market vision of a destination.

In the authors' opinion, social network analysis is a perfect approach for studying tourism destinations.

In this sense, they have highlighted the interaction among tourism agents to create a tourism product or service adequate to tourists' needs, as one of the most important factors. They also consider that the innovation capacity generated has to be useful to obtain results. These results can increase the wellbeing of all the agents of the tourism destination, including the tourists, who will be satisfied pre-, during and post-travel.

As can be seen, this conceptual model, which presents tourism destinations as a market, gives one a broader view of the system's performance. According to these considerations, this model can easily identify the possible dysfunctions of the system, and help with destination planning and management.

Limitations and future research

The work that has been presented in this article is basically theoretical and this is one of its main limitations. Nevertheless, this opens a wide field of future research using real data. This empirical analysis contemplates if having a whole picture of the market will contribute to really improving the planning and management of tourism destinations, as discussed.

In this first conceptualization the autonomous and organic agents from Gartner's model (1993), who generate an uncontrolled tourism image by induced agents, have not been considered. In future research, it would be necessary to revise the conceptual model and include autonomous and organic agents, to have a better proxy, taking into account that tourists also interact with autonomous and organic agents before travelling to the destination.

In the authors' opinion, it could also be interesting to consider the difference between real and potential tourists in future revisions of the model. This reflection could have relevant implications, especially for observing the induced tourism image and searching for explanations for a tourist's reasons to travel to a specific destination and not to others.

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