



Introduction to the Topic and Definition of Research Hypotheses

Abstract This chapter introduces the critical theme of governance and its evolution in the tourism sector, with a specific focus on destination governance for conference destinations. It highlights how an effective territorial governance policy can provide a competitive advantage in the increasingly globalized and competitive tourism market, where competition occurs between territorial systems rather than individual companies. The MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Congresses and Events) industry is central to this analysis, given its significant economic impact and the need for adequate infrastructure and coordinated action. The chapter outlines the methodology and the research objectives. It underscores the importance of a managerial approach to coordinate and integrate offerings within a strategic systemic framework.

Keywords MICE industry · Strategic destination management · Competitive advantage

1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC

In recent years, studies on destination governance have multiplied and gained widespread attention (Hartman, 2023). Indeed, a broad and consolidated body of both theoretical and empirical results is now available.

In this work, the focus is placed on certain aspects of the governance and management of destinations that can be better understood through the lens of destination management.

Particular attention is given to the role played by territorial systems, characterized by specific resources (natural, cultural, social, economic-productive) and recognized not only as units of analysis but also as competitive units (González-Rodríguez et al., 2023). This is especially relevant in an increasingly globalized context that highlights the diversity and influence of peculiar aspects of different settings on the structures and dynamics that evolve within them.

For the purposes of this analysis, it is essential to consider the increasing variety and forms of production and organization, which now accommodate new specialized activities and institutional actors (public-private partnerships). These actors often operate in a cooperative and networked manner, demanding more complex and articulated strategic and operational management capabilities than in the past (George et al., 2024).

The evolution of the tourism sector reveals a trajectory toward a broader dissemination of relationships and collaboration among various stakeholders, deeper integration with the territory and closer interaction between local and global levels (Spadaro et al., 2023).

The international development of tourism and the changing competitive conditions have increasingly demonstrated that the game is no longer played between individual products or individual companies, but between territorial systems conceived as networks of resources, actors and activities that connect local and global dimensions (Bachinger et al., 2022). Due to the nature of the tourism industry, the range of involved actors is broad and heterogeneous, extending from those directly linked to the tourism supply chain to other economic and social entities operating in the same territory (Fong et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022).

Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that the competitiveness of tourism products is based on the combined resources and capacities a territory can mobilize and organize as a whole (Luongo et al., 2023). This translates

into the need to positively integrate the demands and objectives of the many stakeholders and decision-makers who, directly or indirectly, have responsibilities and interests concerning the destination: businesses, public administrations, various institutions and the resident population (Martín Martín et al., 2021).

As a result, it becomes necessary to define a collective dimension of strategic action for the network of actors operating in the territory and, consequently, to identify a possible governance, decision-making centers, structures and rules. In this sense, it is important to examine how an effective territorial governance policy can help overcome deficiencies in destinations and, at the same time, strengthen the destination brand image in the international arena.

More specifically, in a context where markets have become global, there is a growing demand for quality certification, continuous innovation is required and various local realities struggle to keep pace. To overcome these challenges, a stronger systemic capacity to respond is needed (Khater et al., 2024).

However, two significant obstacles persist: the strongly individualistic culture of entrepreneurs, leading to reluctance toward aggregation (Sibbritt et al., 2019) and the lack of managerial expertise to effectively manage both the development project and political consensus (Toubes et al., 2021).

Hence, the importance of the role that destination stakeholders can play in shaping a comprehensive strategic vision and action plan for the system, as well as in defining public policies for territorial governance through the mobilization of resources and investments.

To identify the functions and actors capable of achieving overarching strategic management in territorial settings characterized by interdependent but autonomous actors, the literature refers to the concept of meta-management. The philosophy behind meta-management is linked to identifying and selecting stakeholders to co-create innovative offers within a systemic framework.

The relational dynamics generated within the territory can foster the creation of governance structures capable of driving this innovative growth process (Luongo et al., 2023). This dynamic involves not only entrepreneurs and economic operators but also institutions.

Local governments play a key role that goes beyond simply coordinating and regulating the system; they act as catalysts for initiatives that promote the growth of opportunities for the private sector. Indeed, it is

often the integration of public and private efforts that forms the foundation for the economic and social development of a territory. Therefore, this process also has a strong impact on organizational governance models within destination management.

For the development of a destination, it is evident that there is a need for a governing body (pivot entity) that assumes a true leadership role in the system, especially in territorial marketing activities aimed at attracting investment, enhancing and promoting the area in a coordinated manner, building a destination brand and coordinating local actors (Sorokina et al., 2022). Thus, it becomes clear that managing a tourist destination requires an efficient and effective Destination Management Organization (DMO) that plays a central role in defining the mission around which sustainable territorial development plans can be built.

Due to the importance and centrality of the functions performed by such an organization within a territorial system, it is necessary to establish a governance policy framework capable of guiding the activities of all local actors who, in various capacities, contribute to the construction of the whole tourism product.

Following this line of research, particular attention is given to the study of the relationship between territorial governance and destination management activities within the MICE industry, acknowledging the close interrelationship between MICE tourism and destinations in terms of mitigating seasonality and generating revenue (Marchesani & Masciarelli, 2025).

The development of MICE tourism in a destination cannot be based on individual operators' strategies but must instead rely on enhancing the overall competitiveness of the destination through coordinated actions aimed at promoting the area nationally and internationally, fostering collaboration among operators and enhancing the area's cultural, natural and artistic attractions over time (Zazueta-Hernández & Velarde-Valdez, 2024).

The close connection between destination and the MICE industry can be observed in both the transformations that congress tourism brings to the environment, necessitating appropriate infrastructure and facilities and the economic impact it generates. Therefore, it is essential to verify the compatibility between the tourism vocation of a given area, as well as the services and infrastructure capable of supporting and meeting the specific needs of congress participants (Çakmak et al., 2024).

The MICE segment possesses unique characteristics that have quickly made it one of the central sectors in the activities of traditional tourism businesses. For instance, accommodations have increasingly hosted these new clients traveling to attend conferences, deriving significant economic benefits through the extension of the tourism season, employment stability and infrastructure improvement.

Regarding the issue of seasonality, it is important to note that the temporal distribution of demand for meetings is relatively uniform throughout the year and is almost always complementary to vacation demand. Therefore, the development of congress activities improves the utilization of capital invested in accommodation facilities, particularly in tourist destinations, stabilizing employment, enhancing the quality of human resources in tourism, increasing profitability and boosting added value (Zazueta-Hernández & Velarde-Valdez, 2024).

To ensure that the benefits produced by congress tourism are long-lasting and have a significant impact on the economy of a given destination, it must be planned and programmed not as a substitute or mere addition to other more traditional segments of the tourism offering but as a segment with equal dignity and importance.

Consequently, the existence of a governance body capable of effectively managing interdependencies and strategically designing the offering, in light of changing demand and evolving competitive contexts, is crucial. The entity responsible for overseeing the MICE segment is the Convention Bureau (CB), whose main tasks include coordinating the actions of the various local actors involved in building the “conference product” and promoting the destination’s image in national and international markets.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the high level of complexity in the tourism sector, particularly in the business segment, and the challenges posed by evolving demand now require innovative governance models aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of both businesses and destinations.

1.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

The theme of developing a competitive advantage for a territorial system through effective governance policies represents the guiding principle for the research methodology. The research methodology adopted in this study is based on the identification of the research streams related to the Stakeholder Theory and the destination governance processes with

specific reference to the conference product. The theoretical lens serves as the *leitmotif* of the entire analysis and the investigation of real cases related to destinations operating in the MICE sector. The study of real cases aims to demonstrate in practice what has been discussed in the theoretical part. The theoretical analysis shows that the study of governance policies in a destination is characterized by an underlying complexity that makes it difficult to apply the managerial tools developed in typical corporate contexts.

Indeed, they differ due to the diverse nature of resource control, relationships with human factors, the governance structure and a competitive context at a systemic and globalized level, where competition between destinations has replaced competition between individual tourism enterprises. The competitive strategies of individual local actors, from this perspective, are influenced by network, aggregation and interconnection schemes.

Competitiveness among destinations arises from the ability to express the potential of the offer and make it visible in the market through communication and information processes, both at the individual operator level and the system level. In this regard, the role of the DMO is crucial; this body must operate through co-design processes aimed at both defining standards and procedures for the system's functioning and guiding the creation and launch of new products and tourism initiatives.

Furthermore, theoretical research highlights how the development of a territorial system is linked to the ability to implement territorial strategies that integrate different components such as the economic, social and environmental contexts, where objectives are pursued through the identification and involvement of territorial actors, albeit differentiated by structure, size, role and relevance, whose interests are covered into a common evolutionary plan.

In conclusion, the research methodology adopted for this investigation consists of two main phases that can be summarized as follows:

- Studies, bibliographic and web-based research on theoretical topics.
- Illustration of real cases based on the theoretical background.

Accordingly, this book figures out the following objectives:

- Demonstrate the central role of the DMO in territorial systems. The systemic logic underlying the governance of a destination reflects the essential elements of network theories. From this perspective, the governing body (DMO) must correctly manage both the internal relationships that connect various public and private actors operating within the system's perimeter and external relationships with other stakeholders.
- Verify whether there is a link between governance choices and the creation of a competitive advantage for the destination's performance. Specifically, the goal is to understand how the integration of public and private competencies can serve as a foundation for economic and social development of destinations. The classical interpretation, which assigned the public sector the role of regulating and promoting tourism and the private sector the role of providing tourism services, is now largely outdated. In summary, the objective is to demonstrate how effective territorial governance models must necessarily shift towards forms of public-private partnerships, where cooperation occurs on multiple levels and where the initial driving force behind the destination's development process often comes from joint efforts by institutions (local authorities) and businesses (sometimes represented by Chambers of Commerce).
- Analyze the governance policies of MICE destinations and demonstrate how the presence of a Convention Bureau, as an entity responsible for promoting the conference product and coordinating the work of various local actors, can be the key element behind the destination's success. This objective is pursued by defining the tasks and main activities of this neutral entity throughout the study.

To better explain the objectives, a theoretical framework related to the Stakeholder Theory and Destination Governance and Management was first applied, followed by an analysis of the relationship between the MICE industry and the territorial system, considering the high added value that an effective overarching management policy of the conference product brings to the tourist destination.

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