



From Governance to Destination Governance

Abstract This chapter traces the evolution from general governance concepts to destination governance, emphasizing the shift from hierarchical government to more cooperative, networked models involving public and private actors. It defines Destination Management (DM) as the strategic process for sustainable destination development, managed by a Destination Management Organization (DMO). The chapter contrasts DM in typical business contexts with its complexities in territorial systems, noting challenges in resource control and stakeholder engagement due to fragmented ownership and autonomous operators. It highlights the DMO's central role in strategic vision, internal political processes and fostering entrepreneurial potential. Key DMO functions are detailed, including destination marketing (familiarization trips, advertising, brand management) and Destination Management (finance, research, quality control, human resource development). The chapter also discusses various configurations of pivotal entities (private, public, mixed) responsible for strategic planning and coordinating local actors, underscoring the necessity of a shared vision and participatory approaches for destination success.

Keywords Destination governance · Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) · Strategic planning

3.1 FORMS AND GOVERNANCE LOGICS OF TOURISM DESTINATIONS

Derived from old French, the term governance has undergone changes and integrations over the years. However, in general, it can be said that economists, political scientists and experts in international relations have used it primarily to distinguish and contrast it with government, understood as an institution, apparatus and organization.

To understand the origins and multiple interpretations of the concept of governance, it is necessary to analyze the historical evolution of both the business sphere and the capitalist system on the one hand, and the modern state on the other. Both have undergone deep transformations resulting from a crisis in the hierarchical model traditionally used to regulate relationships. A series of interconnected phenomena has contributed to the structural and ideological changes that underlie the contemporary importance of governance. These include the financial crisis of the state, the emergence of the New Public Management paradigm and the growing complexity of social and political processes.

The financial crisis that hit capitalist states starting in the 1980s, led public authorities to seek to play a role of “steering”, linking public resources to private ones. The concept of steering prompted a redefinition of the roles of public actors: political authority is tasked with operating at a strategic level, while political and administrative action is carried out through collaboration between the public and private sectors.

In this context, the theory of New Public Management spread, questioning the existence of a specific public administration culture and management forms and advocating for the application of private management principles and techniques (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2022). This has promoted the development of certain distinctive aspects of governance, such as stakeholder participation and coordination of different interests.

In order to establish a detailed theoretical background, it is necessary to accurately define the concept of governance, specifying the sector in which the term is used. Special attention has been paid to studies in the economic, social and political spheres (Cashore et al., 2021).

In the economic sphere, the concept of governance was first used by Ronald Coase (1937) in an article to refer to internal coordination mechanisms within a company that reduce transaction costs generated by the market.

The term was later revisited by Williamson (1979) with the Transaction Cost Theory, developed to describe organizational forms alternative to the market and hierarchy. According to this theory, governance refers to the mode of coordinating individual and not only organizational actions, different from hierarchies and markets, through which the construction of social order is achieved. Among these primary forms of social coordination, the author identifies clans, associations and networks.

In 1996, Rhodes coined the term corporate governance, understood as the set of procedures related to decision-making processes, business performance and control, as well as the development of systems capable of guiding the company as a whole to meet the reasonable expectations of external stakeholders with interests in it.

The specificity of the economic definition of governance is highlighted by a sociological approach, focusing on the relationships between actors.

Kooiman (2003) defines governance as the model or structure that emerges in the socio-political system as the common consequence or result of the efforts of all individuals involved in interaction. These interactions are based on the recognition of mutual interdependence, as no actor, whether public or private, has the knowledge and resources to address complex and diverse problems alone. In this view, governance is seen as a fluid and open network of actors acting at different levels of government, where no formal authority exists.

In the sociological sphere, governance refers to one of the ways in which a political community (nation, region, or city) pursues social order. The main mechanisms through which social order can be ensured are:

- Hierarchy, collective problems are resolved through vertical structures of public authority. This is considered an outdated, often ineffective and inefficient mechanism.
- The market, maximizes individual freedom and empowers citizens as service consumers.
- The network, the interaction between a variety of different actors (public administration, businesses, non-profit organizations, etc.) is crucial.

Networks are characterized by a high degree of autonomy from the control of public authority as a whole. Rhodes (1991), associating the concept of governance with “self-referential inter-organizational networks”, identifies their main characteristics as:

- Interdependence among organizations.
- Significant independence of the network from the state.
- Continuous interaction among network members, driven by the need to exchange resources and negotiate objectives.
- The possibility of describing these interactions as “games”, based on mutual trust and credibility and on the acceptance of behavior rules negotiated and agreed upon by all network members.

The active participation of different actors within the network of relationships formed around a specific policy changes their logic of action, predisposing them to a “cooperative game”. The cooperative logic that is established increases the motivation and interest of the various actors involved in achieving solutions and results satisfactory for the entire network, even at the expense of their initial positions and interests. More precisely, due to participation in the network, each actor partially redefines its objectives, thus favoring the rapid achievement of common solutions.

In the political context, the concept of governance is used in two distinct fields. The first relates to international relations and the intervention methods of global-level institutions (World Bank, United Nations, European Union, etc.). The second relates to the study of local powers, particularly regarding the role they play in defining and implementing public policies.

In reference to this second perspective, the concept of governance could be associated with democratization, sustainable development and participation. In this sense, governance qualifies as a public administration structure based on the rule of law, an equitable and efficient judicial system and broad popular participation in the governing process, both actively and passively. This requires the establishment of mechanisms that support the system and give citizens a real sense of ownership in the governing process.

The concept of governance thus conveys the idea that political institutions and public powers alone are no longer sufficient in the contemporary scenario to guarantee adequate modes of local development. What is

needed to complement local public power's action is a broader mobilization of different types of actors and the presence of a project capable of synergizing their initiatives through the construction of a shared representation, a common and desirable vision of the future. In this sense, an effective definition of governance could be that of a new style of government, distinct from the hierarchical control model and characterized by a higher degree of cooperation and interaction between the State and non-state actors within mixed public/private decision-making networks, with "game" interactions, based on trust and disciplined by negotiated and agreed-upon rules among participants.

The literature on governance has influenced research related to Destination Management and, particularly, the forms of destination governance.

Tourism and non-tourism companies operating in a destination are involved in a complex network of relationships that emphasize the importance of sharing management orientations with their stakeholders within a complex network. In this regard, each company should adopt a governance approach aimed at increasing its potential for creating sustainable value, exploiting opportunities and managing the economic, social and environmental risks it faces.

In general, the tourism system is composed of activities that belong directly to the tourism supply chain and other economic and social activities present in the same territory, constituting a heterogeneous and articulated mix of stakeholders and decision-makers. Therefore, the competitiveness of the tourism offer will depend on both the ability to organize, manage and strategically enhance the available resources and competencies and on the satisfaction of the demands of each stakeholder contributing to the system's development.

The integration and coordination of actors appear to be the enabling conditions for a destination to be configured as a system. A tourism system based on a network consisting of public actors, non-profit organizations and other companies (both tourism and non-tourism service providers) plays a well-defined role in its territory.

The emergence and development of the network found significant promotion in the consolidation of paradigms related to institutional modernization processes and strategic and organizational changes, represented by New Public Management. The latter expresses an approach aimed at collaboratively interconnecting actors capable of influencing the development of projects and public policies (specifically tourism-related),

directing their actions towards a common and shared vision of satisfying the interests of local community stakeholders.

There is a progressive shift in the way governance and decision-making systems are generally handled. The concept of “from government to governance” aptly summarizes and expresses this trend.

Regarding the governance of tourist destinations, it is crucial to consider:

- The growing role of the private sector and the third sector in governance and management dynamics of public services, alongside the traditional public institutional actor.
- The increasing attention to negotiation logics, both in terms of rules and objectives, to produce consensus and legitimize the choices made.
- The presence of multiple differently qualified stakeholders and the complex interactivity and dynamism of their links.

Adopting a destination governance model aimed at enhancing the network of relationships with various relevant actors seems to be the most appropriate way to safeguard individual companies’ autonomy while creating synergies. Destination governance has a dual responsibility: on the one hand, it should interact positively with all stakeholders in the system through coordination and integration processes aimed at creating consensus, sharing, and convergence of interests on issues, expectations, and solutions. On the other hand, it should develop a set of interventions and services aimed at providing concrete and consistent responses to tourists’ needs.

Given the close interrelationships between public, private and non-profit organizations’ interests in tourism services, a new concept of governance emerges, that of destination governance, which is critical for managing sectoral relations regarding the overall effectiveness of the tourism system.

Destination governance refers to the system through which organizations relate to each other and their interlocutors, as well as the integrated management of services and activities in the tourism sector, developed by network of stakeholders to optimize the performance of territories, destinations and the companies involved.

Thus, destination governance means a set of activities developed by the network to optimize results and meet the needs of stakeholders. The various actors of the destination are connected through relationships, connections and integrated governance processes aimed at enhancing the overall effectiveness of the tourism services provided by those involved in the destinations.

As highlighted in Fig. 3.1, destination governance involves a dual dimension of network:

- Network structure represents the entity responsible for governing, through coordination and integration logic, and developing a system of interventions in response to tourist needs.
- Network management concerns the decision-making processes activated to guide, manage and control the sustainability of destinations.

For the purposes of the methodological research conducted in this work, the study of the structural dimension, i.e., the network structure, is

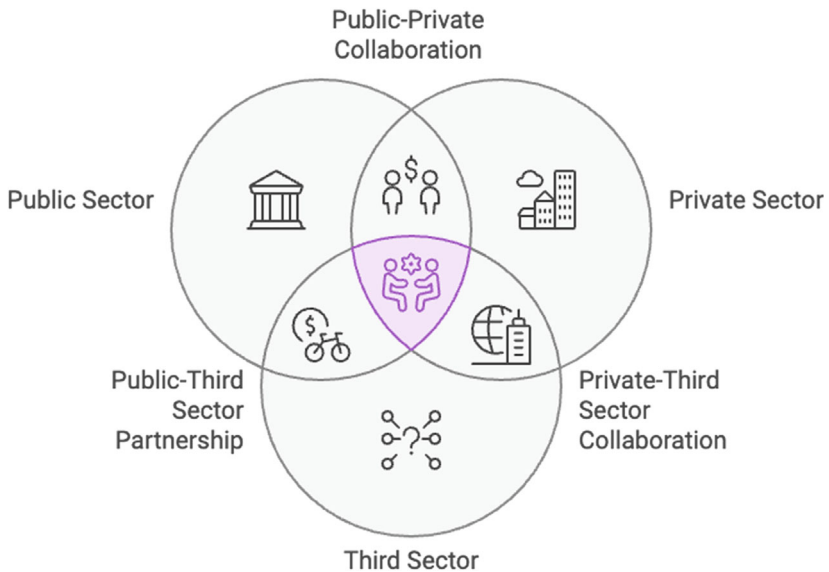


Fig. 3.1 Integrated governance in tourism (Source Authors' elaboration)

of primary importance. This dimension pertains to the governance form of the network and involves the entities responsible for making strategic and operational decisions, necessary for managing the entire process of structuring, promoting and commercializing the tourist products of a destination aimed at generating substantial incoming tourist flows.

Kenis and Provan (2006) assert that the network can assume various configurations depending on the actors involved, the network boundaries and the presence or absence of different types of connections. In particular, the authors identify the following types:

- Shared governance form, this is the most basic form, where multiple actors work collaboratively without a coordination mechanism. The strength of this model lies in the involvement and participation of all network members, its flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of the network participants. However, the weakness of this model is that it is suitable for small networks that are geographically concentrated, where the active participation of network actors is possible.
- Lead organization form, a lead organization coordinates the network and facilitates the activities of other actors in pursuing the network's goals. In this model, there is a strong and legitimate organization that assumes a decisive role. Network members share at least one common goal, and all interact and collaborate with one another. All key activities and decisions are coordinated by one actor of the network. The strength of this model lies in its efficiency, as the lead organization has problem-solving capabilities and is able to manage and coordinate network activities. The importance of the lead organization for external entities, particularly financiers, provides the other network participants with stability and credibility. However, the weakness of this model is that the lead organization can easily dominate other network members, leading to resistance and hostility, which may result in a loss of interest in achieving network objectives. Consequently, members might focus solely on their own interests, undermining the profitability of the entire network.
- Network administrative form, the basic idea is that a specific actor in the network is designated to manage and coordinate the activities carried out by all the members of the network. The NAO (Network Administrative Organization), which can be a public body or a non-profit organization, plays a key role by providing guidelines

for the development of the entire network. In this structure, network participants can interact and work collaboratively, but strategic decision-making is handled by an independent body. The strength of this model lies in the importance the network can assume in relation to the external environment, while its weaknesses are linked to the role of the NAO, which can adopt excessively bureaucratic decision-making processes.

With reference to the classification proposed by Kenis and Provan (2006) regarding the different types of networks, the network administrative form seems to fully realize the so-called network structure previously mentioned.

According to this approach, the network itself could express a legitimate leadership to guide coordination and make decisions necessary for structuring an integrated offer of the various services and performances proposed by the territory.

These forms of cooperation in management align with the model of the Local Tourist Offer System (SLOT), where a possible natural leadership facilitates collaboration and decision-making related to the reference area, ensures the flow of information and guarantees the pursuit and adherence to quality service standards (Taufik et al., 2023). This model values an offer that has strong ties to the territory and the local community, enhances and develops the skills and awareness of the internal network within the destination.

Proper management of the collaborative relationships characterizing the network requires the presence of a main decision-making body. This body must be able to understand the needs of all involved actors, select and share sustainable management policies with them and stimulate cooperation processes (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999).

Even when public administrations take on the role of leading and coordinating destinations, they still share the activity with various other key players, from businesses to associations, consortia and purpose-built entities.

In any case, for a system to function, there must be a form of governance. This governance can take different forms and characteristics, depending on the actors present in the territory and their respective characteristics. The observable models are both bottom-up and top-down (Della Corte, 2020; Luongo et al., 2023).

In the first case, these are aggregative forms that arise from the action of private entrepreneurs, in collaboration with local authorities, or, in some cases, driven by these authorities. These are realities that develop through cooperative formulas, stemming from associative initiatives promoted by local businesses, which govern relationships through central bodies appointed by the network participants themselves.

The pivot actor, in these cases, is represented by one of the local actors or is specifically established by them to coordinate the network and enhance and promote the territory (through private, public–private, or permanent coordination forums composed of the most representative actors in the area). This actor is legitimized by the same local actors, who perceive its necessity.

The territory as a whole, conceived as destination, is presented to the markets, with resources and activities spread among the various local actors.

In top-down approach, a pivot actor promotes and leads the whole process. This configuration is usually prevalent in contexts where the local business community is unable to generate effective spontaneous aggregation processes, due to limitations in entrepreneurial and managerial capacities or a lack of propensity for collaboration. In such circumstances, the pivot actor assumes a true leadership role in the system, particularly in terms of territorial marketing actions aimed at making the territory attractive for investments, coordinated valorization and promotion of the area, creation of a destination brand and coordination of local actors.

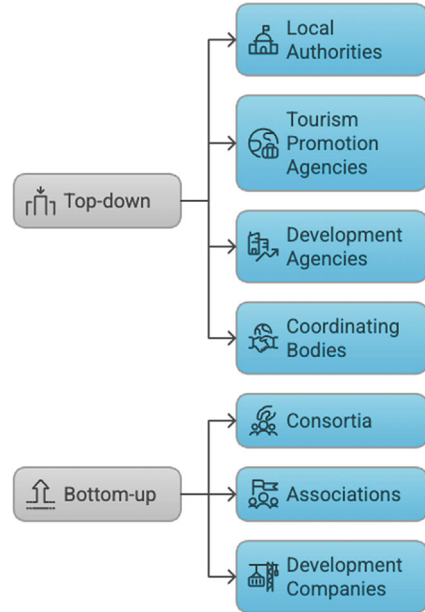
As shown in Fig. 3.2, the governing body can therefore be private, public or mixed in nature.

In some contexts, the Local Public Authority, for example, the municipality or province, may represent the promoter of territorial development.

The pivot entity, in this case, can develop strategic area plans, promote the territory and organize major events. In other contexts, a key role in the territory, for strategic promotion, is played by Tourist Promotion Agencies, which serve as a reference for entrepreneurial aggregations at the local level.

The importance of local and central authorities cannot be overlooked, as their decisions regarding tourism policies significantly influence the structures, key players of local tourism and the investment/disinvestment choices of operators external to the area (Alexandri & Hodkinson, 2025). Therefore, local authorities bear a great responsibility for their territory, as they are tasked with making tourism policy decisions aimed at

Fig. 3.2 The main configurations of pivot entities (*Source* Authors' elaboration)



enhancing the destination's competitiveness in an increasingly complex global competitive landscape.

When there is an entrepreneurial community that is proactive and dynamic, there are private associative forms (consortia, associations) that sometimes include the participation of institutional entities (such as chambers of commerce). These entities represent the key actors in implementing integrated marketing initiatives in the area.

Another type of configuration involves Development Agencies, which may be public or mixed and are responsible for the strategic management of the territory at the level of entire states, regions, provinces and municipalities.

Finally, there are other forms of territorial coordination, such as program contracts or territorial pacts, aimed at the development of specific areas (Klyuchnik et al., 2023; Ramella, 2010). These initiatives are designed to implement investments through a system of public fund incentives. The foundation remains public, developing through a top-down process primarily focused on creating necessary infrastructure rather than implementing strategic marketing initiatives.

It is essential to assess the actual functionality of the pivot entity and, consequently, to verify the existence of a systemic logic. In other words, it becomes crucial to verify the existence of a concrete Destination Management process. More precisely, the governance of destinations could be entrusted to a management and coordination body, represented by the Destination Management Organization (DMO) (Pechlaner et al., 2025). The structure of this organization could be influenced by the characteristics of the public institutional framework, the principles and the current regulations in the reference area.

In this regard it is suggested that Destination Management should properly emphasize the spontaneity of behaviors to preserve the authenticity of the location. The author argues that the pivot entity should avoid adopting excessively dirigiste approaches and should instead recognize the value of a collaborative approach and a holistic vision.

3.2 THE CONCEPT OF DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

The Destination Management, aimed at the harmonious and sustainable development of destinations, must consider some differences compared to the typical business context (Khan et al., 2021).

While a company controls its resources through conventional mechanisms such as ownership, contracts and governance structures—whose effectiveness depends on the design and implementation of efficient and often hierarchical organizational models—within a territorial system, resources consist of both public goods (which cannot be freely managed for strategic purposes) and private goods (which remain under the direct control of individual owners). In the latter case, strategic choices and key goals must be defined and shared jointly in order to develop a collective strategic vision.

Secondly, in a company, the relationship with the human factor is contractual; in a system, the relationship between actors escapes the contractual logic due to the innate need for autonomy of economic operators, who are unwilling to give up the freedom of their entrepreneurial choices. Therefore, their involvement, is based on socio-cultural elements present in the local context, the level of trust in and among the operators and the system.

Finally, a company has clear physical, legal and institutional boundaries, allowing for the identification of its elements, relationships and internal processes. A tourism system, however, has open and variable boundaries,

depending on administrative actions and the effects governance decisions may generate in other areas (Hartman, 2023).

In this perspective, DMO plays a central role. Indeed, the success of a tourist destination depends not only on a set of attractiveness factors inherent to the destination itself but also on the distinctive resources and competencies of the DMO (Martins et al., 2021). Through its managerial and relational capabilities, the DMO optimizes the exploitation of the tourist potential, thus increasing incoming tourist flows, improving tourist experience and ensuring sufficient profitability.

In the MICE industry, where competitive dynamics between territories are even more pronounced than in other sectors, significant coordination capacity at the territorial system level is required to enhance and strengthen local competitive advantage factors (Ciuffreda & Simonetti, 2024). These factors, on one hand, consist of complex externalities that arise not only from the infrastructural investments made but also from the interactions between these and the strategic and organizational context in which companies and local actors operate (Bernini et al., 2021).

On the other hand, these factors depend on the ability of local actors to generate and exploit such externalities (Yao et al., 2024).

In this context, the Convention Bureau, which is responsible for the overarching management of the congress product, can serve as a facilitator of cohesion and integration between productive, tourism and cultural realities (Baldo & Aureli, 2022). Indeed, the MICE sector is a complex supply chain that, by potentially activating a range of industrial and advanced service sectors, requires highly specialized managerial skills (Rogers & Wynn-Moylan, 2022). From this perspective, the Convention Bureau coordinates the different actors in the supply chain to develop synergies and create the conditions to attract segments of demand, sponsors and investors.

The theoretical framework outlined here forms the core of this work, as it provides the necessary guidelines to demonstrate, through empirical research, how an effective and well-structured territorial governance policy within the context of the MICE industry can generate a competitive advantage, in terms of performance, for destinations.

As previously outlined in the theoretical background, in tourism destinations, governance refers to a complex concept encompassing both the form and the logic of how a tourism-oriented territory is systemically managed.

While the form of governance draws attention to the principle of organization and the unity of a system of actors, where, in the tourism field, the interaction of stakeholders with divergent interests and objectives is necessary, the logic of governance seems to focus on the mechanisms and tools through which a specific combination of resources, stakeholders and actions can be bound to achieve a shared objective of tourism development in a given area.

Regardless of the perspective from which a destination is defined, the issue of management arises as a problem of decision coordination (Errichiello & Micera, 2021). Therefore, whether the primary concern is understanding the demand segments to be attracted or whether the central issue becomes how to structure the supply chain, the challenge is always to identify mechanisms that facilitate shared decision-making, taking into account the plurality of decision-making levels that exist in a local system (ranging from individual private operators to public institutions).

Accordingly, the management of a destination requires, starting from the territorial resources and competencies, overcoming competitive logics, reaching agreements between actors, both public and private, local and national, to create a shared vision and stimulate the participation of all those involved in the overall design of the destination (Sorokina et al., 2022).

In this sense, the strategy to foster the development of a destination, which includes the political decisions made by government bodies, is implemented through governance actions that involve local businesses and organizations across four main areas of intervention:

- Issuing norms and regulations that can guide the actions of local actors.
- Direct interventions on the territory to shape its vocation and define the stock of available resources.
- Establishment of bodies that serve as pivots for destination development, operating through the involvement of other actors by promoting the territory, defining strategic territorial project and providing the necessary financial support.
- Stimulating and supporting the formation of business clusters (either sector-specific or supply chain-based) and local entities dedicated to their management, through which local productions can be enhanced.

The concept can be used as a solution aimed at overcoming hierarchical models of political direction, in favor of fostering cooperative relations between public entities and private organizations.

Indeed, in the governance framework, the networks of cooperation among actors are characterized by a high degree of interdependence between public and private actors, with continuous interactions among network participants due to the need to exchange information and resources and to jointly build objectives by sharing a set of basic rules.

Based on these considerations, the management of a tourist destination involves the pursuit of consensus, cooperation and synergy among the actors in terms of participation in the definition and development of strategies, objectives and actions (Luongo et al., 2024).

Consequently, the creation of a structure that promotes governance actions, operating under a meta-management logic, becomes fundamental.

Models that ensure efficiency and effectiveness in the governance of a tourism destination can be conceptualized along a continuum, where on one end, spontaneous and self-regulating systemic forms are found, while on the other end, strongly hierarchical forms exist.

A weakly hierarchical approach is proposed by Brunetti (2002), who, assuming that a critical issue for destinations is to promote coordination among local actors, believes it is appropriate to assign the coordination task to lightweight organizations activated around concrete projects, perhaps of initially limited scope, around which consensus is built based on the results achieved.

Therefore, the author opts for a bottom-up approach to destination governance, focusing on finding solutions to tangible tourism problems within the destination, while avoiding the institutionalization of organizations that are often “more symbolic than substantive”.

However, according to Tamma (2002), it is impossible for any single entity to be considered in abstract terms as the reference center or authority capable of regulating and coordinating the destination development. The author argues that it is particularly important to understand the roles of public and private sectors in destination governance, a role that has historically evolved in such a way that the public sector was responsible for regulating, supporting and promoting tourism at the destination, leaving the production of tourism services to the private sector. Today, this division of tasks appears inappropriate and must, therefore, be revised towards a search for cooperation between public and

private sectors, balanced and differentiated depending on the type of organizational model existing within the destination.

A hierarchical approach to destination governance is proposed by Martini (2015), who asserts that Destination Management requires the existence of a structure responsible for overseeing the process through which a place is transformed into a destination, thereby becoming the meta-management entity that manages all activities needed to maintain the destination's attractiveness over the long term.

The role of architect and coordinator of the destination could be assumed by management arising from a mixed entity, composed of both public and private organizations.

The vastness and heterogeneity of the target audiences and the involved stakeholders within the systemic dynamics may also raise issues of compatibility among the various interests that need to be balanced.

Therefore, the governance body of the territory is called upon to prioritize certain interests over others, to benefit the overall functionality of the value-creation process.

It is clear that in the case of fragmented tourism destinations, it is much more complex to devise Destination Management interventions capable of expressing unified governance of the offer. Conversely, when cooperation prevails or leaders emerge, it is easier to identify destination managers and adopt unified Destination Management strategies (Go & Trunfio, 2012).

In general, it can be argued that in order for a territorial system to be established, there must be a governance body that acts as a catalyst for the interests of the various stakeholders involved in a given territory. This governance body should be impartial, dynamic and capable of coordinating and directing the various initiatives toward a common systemic goals that reconciles the multiplicity of interests.

In this context, recent literature has proposed three types of territorial governance bodies (Fig. 3.3):

- The ordering entity, usually institutional in nature, responsible for defining and implementing the overall territorial development strategy, with a broad but shallow vision of the territory.
- The coordinating entity, a mixed public-private body, which plays a decisive role in designing the physical structure of the territory based on its specific components and the consequent expanded structure,

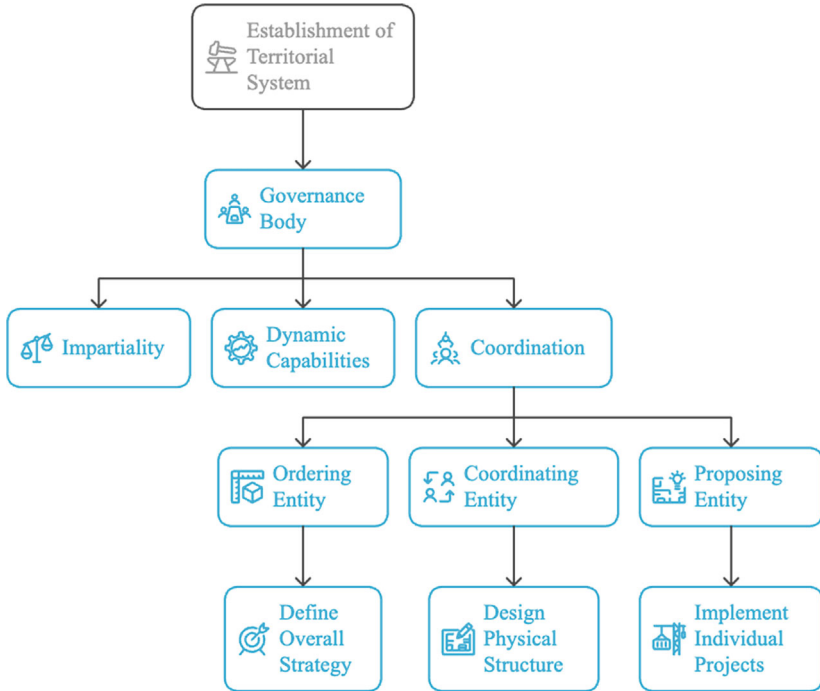


Fig. 3.3 Territorial governance bodies and their functions (*Source* Authors' elaboration)

due to a more detailed vision of the structural assets and external opportunities/threats.

- The proposing entity, responsible for defining and implementing individual projects that fall within the development lines defined at higher levels, typically of a private and non-territorial nature.

3.3 DESTINATION MARKETING AND DESTINATION IMAGE

In the contemporary landscape of global tourism and place competition, digital marketing has assumed a central role in shaping and managing the competitive positioning of destinations. The digital environment has redefined the modalities through which destinations communicate, engage with stakeholders and construct their image in the global marketplace. Particularly for urban destinations seeking to attract high-value segments, such as MICE, a robust digital presence is not only a promotional necessity, but a strategic asset embedded within broader destination governance and branding efforts.

The evolution of digital marketing has enabled destinations to move beyond unidirectional advertising toward dynamic, real-time and dialogical forms of communication (Confetto et al., 2023). Through a multi-platform approach, spanning official websites, social media, blogs, newsletters, video content and influencer collaborations, DMOs can construct narratives that are both coherent and emotionally resonant. These narratives are essential in communicating the destination's value proposition, highlighting not only physical attributes (e.g., infrastructure, accessibility, event facilities), but also experiential dimensions such as atmosphere, authenticity, sustainability and cultural richness.

At the core of this transformation lies the concept of digital destination image, which refers to the composite of beliefs, ideas and impressions formed by potential visitors through digital encounters with a place (Tavitiyaman et al., 2021). Unlike traditional destination image, shaped primarily through curated promotional materials, digital image is co-produced in a participatory and decentralized ecosystem. User-generated content, online reviews, peer recommendations and visual storytelling (especially via platforms like Instagram, YouTube and TikTok) now play a crucial role in shaping global perceptions of destinations.

As depicted in Fig. 3.4, for destinations targeting the MICE market, digital image becomes even more nuanced. Decision-makers in this segment, such as event planners, corporate clients and professional associations, evaluate destinations not only based on their leisure appeal, but also in terms of infrastructure readiness, service quality, organizational reliability and technological innovation (Baber & Baber, 2023). A strong digital image that conveys professionalism, connectivity and

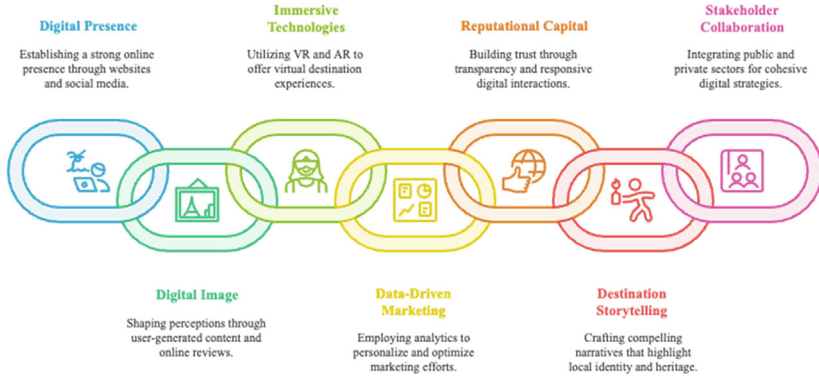


Fig. 3.4 Digital marketing strategies for destinations (*Source* Authors' elaboration)

a seamless experience can significantly influence destination choice and increase competitive advantage.

Moreover, the rise of immersive technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and 360-degree video tours, has opened new frontiers in destination promotion. These tools enable prospective clients and visitors to virtually experience meeting venues, hotels, urban district and cultural attractions before physical arrival. For destinations, this reduces the perception of risk, especially in the planning phases of large-scale events or group travel and strengthens consumer confidence.

The deployment of data-driven digital marketing allows for highly segmented and personalized communication strategies. DMOs and CBs increasingly rely on CRM systems, marketing automation tools, geotargeting and behavior-based analytics to identify audience segments and tailor messages accordingly (Sorokina et al., 2022). This precision marketing approach enhances engagement, optimizes conversion rates and supports the creation of long-term relationships between the destination and its various publics, ranging from tourists and residents to investors and event organizers.

Importantly, digital marketing also contributes to a destination's reputational capital. In an era where transparency, responsiveness and social accountability are paramount, the ability of a destination to manage digital interactions, such as responding to feedback, addressing negative

reviews and engaging in real-time dialogue, has become a proxy for trustworthiness and institutional competence. A well-managed digital image, reflecting a destination's values and commitments (e.g., to sustainability, inclusivity, innovation), reinforces brand coherence and shapes visitor expectations even before the travel experience begins.

Furthermore, the use of digital tools facilitates destination storytelling, a strategic process that leverages local identity, heritage and community narratives to create compelling, differentiated content. Storytelling in the digital space allows destinations to go beyond conventional branding to generate affective bonds with their audiences, enhancing memorability and emotional attachment. For MICE destinations, this narrative layer can add depth to promotional campaigns by embedding events within a broader cultural and spatial context.

Finally, the integration of public and private stakeholders in the co-creation of digital strategies is vital. Successful digital destination marketing is inherently collaborative, requiring the alignment of tourism operators, local institutions, media professionals and civil society. Through structured partnerships and digital ecosystem governance, destinations can harmonize messaging, amplify promotional reach and leverage collective intelligence for innovation.

In conclusion, digital marketing and digital image management have become core pillars of destination competitiveness (Deb et al., 2024). They transcend mere promotion to become instruments of strategic positioning, stakeholder engagement and sustainable brand development. In a globalized and digitally-mediated tourism environment, destinations that invest in sophisticated, integrated and responsive digital strategies are better positioned to attract not only leisure travelers, but also strategic segments such as MICE, thereby reinforcing their role as multifunctional, resilient and globally relevant urban nodes (see Box 1).

Box 1—Vienna as a Model of Digital Marketing in MICE Destination Strategy

Vienna provides a compelling example of how a destination can strategically leverage digital marketing to position itself as a leading MICE (hub in the international arena). Through its dedicated organization, the Vienna Convention Bureau (VCB), a specialized division within the Vienna Tourist Board, the city has implemented an integrated digital strategy

aimed at reinforcing its image as a technologically advanced, culturally rich and professionally reliable destination for business events.

A notable example of Vienna's strategic digital marketing efforts is the "Meeting Destination Vienna" campaign, which utilizes a blend of content marketing, SEO optimization, targeted social media outreach and immersive digital tools to engage event organizers, associations and corporate clients. The campaign articulates a value proposition that combines Vienna's strengths: its central European location, excellent infrastructure, political stability, high-quality venues and renowned cultural heritage. These attributes are presented not only through traditional website content but also through dynamic and interactive formats including 360-degree virtual venue tours, behind-the-scenes videos and testimonials from international event planners.

A key feature of Vienna's approach is its investment in data-driven marketing. The VCB employs advanced analytics to segment target audiences, track user interactions and personalize digital content delivery. For instance, newsletters and email campaigns are customized based on the user's industry, region or previous engagement behavior. This tailored communication ensures higher engagement and conversion rates, while also reinforcing the city's reputation for efficiency and professionalism.

Vienna has also capitalized on social media platforms, particularly LinkedIn, YouTube and Instagram, to enhance its digital presence within professional networks and visually showcase its event infrastructure and urban appeal. The use of storytelling, influencer partnerships (particularly with international event professionals) and behind-the-scenes looks at major congresses hosted in the city helps to humanize the destination brand and build trust among potential clients.

Furthermore, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the global event industry, Vienna was quick to adopt hybrid event promotion strategies, highlighting its technological capabilities for hosting virtual and hybrid conferences. The VCB launched initiatives to support event organizers with digital infrastructure and logistical guidance, thereby reinforcing its image as an adaptive and forward-thinking destination.

The outcomes of these digital strategies are measurable: Vienna consistently ranks among the top global cities in the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) and Union of International Associations (UIA) rankings and continues to attract high-profile international events. This sustained performance underscores the effectiveness of a digital marketing approach that is not only technically sophisticated but also aligned with long-term Destination Management and branding objectives.

3.4 THE ROLE OF DMO: RELATIONS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

From the above considerations, it is evident that the increasing importance of governance in tourism destinations entails the development of a higher-level management system for the local tourism offering. In this context, the analytical perspective adopted is that of meta-management, or Destination Management (DM).

The concept of DM is relatively recent. Della Corte (2020) defines it as a type of strategic management of tourism destinations through an adequate system of planning and control of activities aimed at boosting tourist inflows to a specific area. According to the author, an effective DM process involves a dual-level analysis, considering both individual businesses and the overall tourism offering system. The goal is to identify the sources of competitive advantage that distinguish a destination from its competitors, which depend on external resources intrinsic to the location, as well as the capacities and skills of local enterprises to promote a comprehensive offering based on both the quality of tourism services and the enhancement of local resources (Della Corte & Aria, 2016).

Similarly, Martini (2015) defines DM as the set of strategic, organizational and operational decisions through which the process of defining, promoting and marketing the tourism products of a given area is managed, with the aim of generating sustainable and economically viable tourist inflows.

The success of DM, as a decision-making process aimed at providing integrated service offerings and attractions, relies on creating the right mix of elements that compose the tourist experience, capable of meeting demand expectations (Morrison, 2023).

Moreover, DM must establish relationships within a destination, characterized by:

1. Relationships between local resources and actors, where policies and actions by entities in a specific area can transform resources into genuine attractions and distinctive features of a destination.
2. Business-to-Business (B2B) relationships within the tourism supply chain, where cooperation and interaction at various levels enable the creation of comprehensive offerings, composed of the individual products provided by each actor.

3. Business-to-Consumer (B2C) relationships, placing the tourist at the center of decisions to ensure their expectations are fully met through the creation and delivery of services.

These interactions, when supported by a well-executed DM process, can lead to a sustainable competitive advantage. In a market characterized by increasingly global dimensions, it is essential that any attempt at DM adopts the mission of creating value for the tourist. The objective is not merely to provide services but to deliver intangible benefits that meet the tourist's expectations and align with their values, thus bridging the gap between services and expectations.

As stated, it is crucial to consider the destination as an integrated open system, where the management process focuses on the study of external factors that influence, interact with and guide DM activities. As shown in Fig. 3.5, these factors can be categorized according to specific contexts:

- Consumer context, in today's environment, where consumers seek to satisfy a diverse range of needs and desires, the DM process must focus on creating a match between local resources, which, due to their configuration, a result of the mix of resources, capacities and systemic competencies, can fulfill tourists' expectations.
- Competitive context, currently, competition among destinations occurs within an international framework, making it essential to convey a strong sense of differentiation to the target tourist audience.
- Economic context, constant economic uncertainties render the reference context volatile. This necessitates the implementation of flexible strategic plans capable of anticipating future economic scenarios or adapting accordingly. Such an approach requires a high degree of strategic elasticity from the system.
- Technological context, the utilization of Information & Communication Technology has improved destination promotion and enabled reaching an increasing number of target tourists. It has facilitated the dissemination of information and content regarding tourist experiences within specific destinations. Such information is not solely produced by individual enterprises involved in the system but is also generated by tourists who have previously experienced the

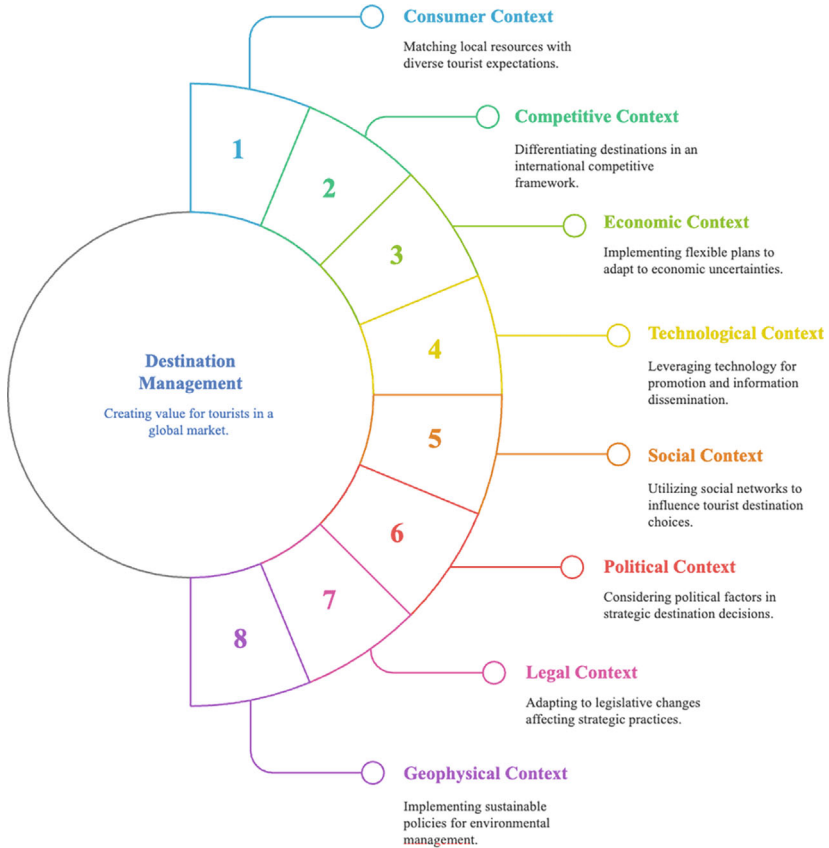


Fig. 3.5 Destination Management: objectives and reference contexts (*Source* Authors' elaboration)

destination, influencing consumer choice through word-of-mouth, including its online form (e-word-of-mouth).

- Social context, today's consumers are embedded in a vast social network where relationships among network participants (governing bodies, local businesses, local communities, current/potential tourists), despite geographical dispersion, are fostered through web tools. Tourists' use of these tools can influence their choice of a

particular destination, as they gather information through content generated by other tourists.

- Political context, political factors influencing strategic decisions concerning the destination must consider not only the political context in which the destination is situated but also that of the markets from which tourists originate.
- Legal context, this pertains to potential legislative changes that may affect the implementation of strategic and organizational practices.
- Geophysical context, the implementation of sustainable environmental policies is a key activity in the management process of a destination.

The significance and nature of DM actions depend on the configuration assumed by the type of destination. Martini (2005) distinguishes between two major categories of destinations:

1. Corporate destinations.
2. Community destinations.

According to the author, corporate destinations are places where the tourism offering is designed, managed and marketed according to a process-oriented and marketing-driven logic by a management company that directly owns or controls, through contractual agreements, the attractions that the destination can present to the market.

Corporate destinations are similar to a corporate organization in a holding structure:

- Existence of control units, these destinations are under the direct control of companies that manage the provision of tourist services according to a hierarchical organizational model. This characteristic allows the destination to achieve objectives in terms of unity and effectiveness of the offering, strategically manage the offering in relation to market trends and international competition and oversee product innovation.
- Activity configuration as business units, the various activities offered are structured as “business units”, managed through strategic and financial planning tools, with differentiated pricing policies and aggressive service offering strategies.

- Commercial and marketing strategies, these strategies focus more on brand loyalty than on the locality itself. This perspective reveals the destination's dependence on strategic choices made by the management company based on its business needs.
- Location strategy, the choice of activity locations results from specific marketing strategies based on analyses of locational factors (climate, physical conditions for site installation, available natural and artificial attractions, natural, economic and social accessibility, available supporting structures, land use regulations, government policies). Consequently, the geographic location of the destination serves as a mere container for activities and attractions, largely artificially created by the managing company, with limited economic impact on the resident population.

Franch et al. (2010) observe that the corporate model, often promoting exogenous territorial development, is characterized by limited benefits from tourism for local actors and the resident population, as the positive economic outcomes of the activities benefit investors, leaving minimal or insignificant spillover effects on the local economic system.

Community destinations are places that, collectively and through the interaction of multiple local actors, market themselves through a specific brand. Their main characteristics include:

- The territory as a whole presents itself in the tourism market, offering a system of natural and artificial resources.
- Resources and activities are dispersed, primarily owned by independent entrepreneurial units, often locally based. Each entrepreneurial unit pursues specific objectives regarding income generation and investment policies.
- The local public entity plays a decisive role in tourism activities, as it controls public assets and can support the offering through funding activities and/or performing direct functions by establishing specific structures.

Unlike corporate destinations, the management of community destinations does not fit into the multi-unit business model due to a complex array of causes and implications.

Firstly, due to the presence of a greater number of stakeholders (tourism supply actors, resident population, public and private local entities, trade associations and environmental groups) compared to corporate destinations, it is not feasible to establish management mechanisms that allow for straightforward command and control structures. Thus, discussing the management of community destinations necessitates identifying mechanisms that enable strategic and operational decisions, ensuring coherence in the offerings from a diverse array of operators with specific interests and objectives.

Secondly, the configuration of the offering is systemic, marked by significant complexity and challenging governance according to typical business management tools.

Thirdly, the issue of the role of the territorial entity (public, private or mixed) emerges, as it must assume the pivotal role in local tourism offering and its development and coordination according to precise managerial strategies. This aspect is significantly more complex than management schemes in corporate destinations.

In general, within corporate destinations, DM activities are inherent to the design and subsequent commercialization of the offering, as the business logic, enabled by the hierarchical nature of coordination, implies strategic management of the tourism offering. Consequently, it is in community destinations where DM assumes greater relevance in terms of impact and innovative capacity in the formulation processes of the offering.

In community destinations, DM activities are embedded in territorial contexts where a multitude of actors control tourism resources and services. In such cases, the fragmentation of decision-making confers on DM a typical meta-management nature, through the coordination, in a network logic, of various actors (individually organized) conducting their economic activities in the territory.

The objective of DM is to establish a strategic process that ensures systematic integration of the tourism offering in territories where resources are dispersed, entrepreneurial spontaneity prevails and the inclination towards cooperation is often limited.

This objective must be pursued through planning and managing a set of actions. These actions particularly concern the development of incoming tourist flows through the definition of a strategic development plan for the offering, identifying suitable product/market pairings;

managing and promoting the image and symbolic value of the destination, also through innovation and qualification of the offering and marketing activities; coordinating and managing relationships with stakeholders; and finally, evaluating the impact of tourism on the local territorial system along the dual path of tourism offering sustainability and coherence and integration with the territory's tourism policy.

In conclusion, DM represents the strategic governance process of the territory, with primary objectives being:

- Development of territorial strategies, particularly through the enhancement of local resources.
- Development of integrated marketing plans that facilitate the coordination of local actors' efforts and create synergies capable of stimulating collective actions that transcend the capacities and competencies of individual actors.
- Development of a culture of hospitality at the local level through the promotion of training actions in the territory, aimed at improving the overall tourism offering and achieving greater uniformity in service standards among businesses in the same sector and across the local supply chain.
- Construction of an appropriate image of the destination that genuinely reflects the quality of the local offering, both at the level of individual services and the overall tourist attractions and products created, capable of generating positive loyalty processes.
- Initiation of a sustainable development process through targeted actions aimed at promoting tourism development within a sustainability framework. Obviously, this process cannot disregard integration with non-touristic but also economic policies of the territory; in this regard, the entities responsible for DM must ensure that adequate resources are allocated to the tourism sector and that decisions on territorial policy are coherent with tourism objectives in areas characterized by a strong tourism vocation.

3.5 STRATEGIC PLANNING

As previously highlighted, a destination is defined by its ability to autonomously generate demand (Della Corte, 2020). This definition necessarily implies a planning of marketing policies oriented toward both

demand and supply perspectives. The articulation of the supply system must result from evaluating the resources, capacities and competencies present in the territory by the stakeholders operating within it, who must make decisions considering a dual objective (Della Corte et al., 2015):

1. To attract tourists to choose that specific destination (induced level).
2. To satisfy the tourist during the service delivery phase (organic level).

The series of decisions that local actors must make depends on the mix of resources and capabilities present in the destination and must be functional in responding to the needs and evolving demands of tourists.

From this perspective, activities initiated at the destination level must arise from an awareness of what can be offered in the market so that the target tourist chooses this particular destination over others (Pan et al., 2021).

At the induced level, management acts upon typical marketing mix policies, which create expectations in tourists, as this is how they ideally construct their own destination (Della Corte et al., 2015).

Moving to the analysis of the “4 Ps” at the induced level of marketing, it seems appropriate to formulate some considerations. If the destination is a complex tourism product, the product policy will be aimed at formulating offers that systematize the resources of the territory to meet the needs of target tourists. Specifically, at the destination level, it is essential to reference the previously highlighted “6 As” model (Della Corte, 2020). Elements such as access, attractions, accommodation, amenities, ancillary services and assemblage help clarify the aspects that should guide the strategic and operational choices of individual businesses and the local supply system.

What is crucial is the creation of a dynamic hospitality system in the territory, promoting sustainable development in tourism terms.

The promotion activity involves realizing a mix of interventions, ranging from more traditional methods to more evolved formulas. The former category includes:

- Workshops and roadshows, conducted by representatives of regional promotion offices through visits to the regions/countries of current and potential tourists to meet with operators with the goal of

promoting the destination and its products. When the workshop becomes itinerant with multiple stops in a country, it is referred to as a roadshow.

- Educational and familiarization trips, activities undertaken to attract the attention of operators who are part of the commercial chain connecting the destination with the market (tour operators, travel agencies, specialized journalists, tourism-cultural associations, opinion leaders, etc.). Even when a destination is already known, this form of promotion can be useful to reinforce knowledge of the tourism experiences the city offers.
- Tradeshows and sales missions, trade fairs and commercial missions for the development of B2B relationships.

More advanced formulas are related to the creation of networking proposals. An example of systemic promotion is promotional cards for visiting the main attractions in the city.

In the process of promoting the destination, Destination Marketing Systems (DMS) are becoming increasingly significant (Morrison, 2023; Sorokina et al., 2022). These are integrated information systems that provide all relevant information about a specific area, available tourism services, attractions and more general information. Furthermore, they serve as an important interface where local tourism operators proposing offers related to the destination can insert their offerings.

The DMS can provide local tourism stakeholders with various advantages, such as increased visibility in the global market and access to audiences in countries around the world; the opportunity to develop systems for constructing and processing visitor databases; the ability, through the establishment of forums and sections specifically dedicated to visitors, to verify the alignment between expectations about the destination and the actual experience lived; and the opportunity to foster the development of inter-business relationships through digital communication, speeding up processes of communication, dissemination and knowledge exchange.

The strategic relevance that the DMS can assume depends on the content and the degree of integration observable among the actors in the local tourism system. For the DMS to be effective, it is necessary to have relationships and networking strategies, which means the existence of a real systemic logic in the territory; the existence of a pivotal entity (a coordinating structure to which the DMS is accountable) and

the availability of adequate human and financial resources not only for the realization but also for the management of the system.

In line with the other marketing mix policies, also the pricing ones express the mission of the destination. The tourist's choice process is based on intangibility and virtuality, making it difficult to evaluate the price variable relative to the characteristics of the services offered beforehand.

Distribution policies represent the bridge connecting demand and supply. Generally, distribution follows a multichannel approach.

At the organic level, it is essential that tourists' expectations are met; otherwise, there is a risk of achieving the opposite effect, potentially leading to the construction of a negative image of the destination due to its failure to meet tourists' expectations.

These activities are characterized by high criticality because once the marketing actions at the induced level have convinced potential tourists to choose one destination over another, their expectations must be fully met.

Thus, it is necessary to adopt a holistic approach to both levels of marketing, as the process generated by the marketing strategy materializes in a set of connected and integrated activities.

At the destination, each company offers its specific product (linked to the intrinsic nature of its activity), which integrates with the products offered by other enterprises in the system. Consequently, the destination becomes a complex tourism product, reflecting the overlap between the specific product offered by individual enterprises and the overall product at the system level (Azmi et al., 2023; Luongo et al., 2023).

According to this logic, a genuine marketing orientation implies the implementation of effective marketing plans by the actors in the system, both at individual and destination level, particularly because this configuration is important from the tourist's perspective, who perceives the product as a whole rather than as a mere sum of individually considered services.

Consequently, in defining marketing policies, it is necessary to analyze the destination from an overlapping perspective regarding both demand and supply.

From the demand perspective, the destination is understood as a comprehensive tourism product, thus representing the globally experienced journey by the tourist.

From the supply perspective, it is a complex tourism product, resulting from the actions of the various actors operating in the territory according to an integrated and systemic logic.

In the integrated marketing process, the image and notoriety of the destination become very important. In this regard, it is essential that the destination receives adequate recognition and is positively perceived by potential tourists as well as by those who have already visited the place.

The image can be defined as the set of values, ideas and impressions that a destination generates in the minds of current and potential tourists (Li & Wan, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). This view, while referring to the mental associations that demand can generate regarding the destination, focuses on the impressions that the destination can and must induce, both in potential and current tourists.

Undoubtedly, creating and managing a unique image is not easy, especially when the area presents multiple tourism vocations, operating across various tourism products. Generally, in the process of creating and developing the destination image, it is necessary to emphasize positive aspects capable of generating perceived value that can outweigh any potential negative elements (Karri & Dogra, 2023).

However, it is advisable to distinguish between the phase of creating an image, which must be based on the existing and concretely valorizable set of resources, in order to generate expectations proportional to the actual standard of offer and the phase of consolidating or renewing the image. In such cases, it is important to evaluate the relationship between the image, the complex tourism product (in terms of the entire destination) and the specific products that characterize it (Guzman-Parra et al., 2021). Therefore, starting from the characteristics of the local offer in its various components, it is crucial to assess the benefits that these characteristics can generate for the tourist and, consequently, the psychological and emotional stimuli that the tourist receives, in order to arrive at the significant value for the tourist. Ultimately, through a strategic management process of the image, it is possible to create it and consequently establish a brand that is:

- Realistic, meaning it can express the reality of the promoted context.
- Credible, that is, capable of expressing characteristics that are not deemed excessive by demand.
- Appealing, in the sense of possessing strongly characterizing elements of the reference territory.

In other words, the image of the destination is merely the top of the iceberg of the local supply system: if the latter is capable of generating a competitive advantage, the image merely expresses that success and thus becomes, in itself, a source of further competitiveness. As highlighted in Fig. 3.6, the image of a destination not only reflects the qualitative level of the services and tourist products offered, but also represents the aggregate of attractive factors generated by industry actors within a systemic context.

Numerous scholars have emphasized the need for a central entity in the governance of tourist destinations, a body that performs meta-management functions (Vigliani & Calabrò, 2022). Consequently, there is a growing need for networking among businesses. The proliferation of systems among enterprises has led to the emergence of entities and institutions with meta-managerial roles. In this context, there has been increasing interest in Destination Management Companies (DMCs) or Destination Management Organizations (DMOs).

According to Martini (2005), for a tourist destination to effectively engage in a Destination Management project, it is essential to establish an organizational structure that optimizes coordination among the various subsystems involved. This structure acts as the meta-management entity that oversees destination marketing, handling a set of activities that influence the exchanges between tourist demand and supply. Similarly, Buhalis (2022) posits that destinations should be governed by a DMO, which is responsible for the planning and marketing of the destination and possesses the authority and resources to undertake actions aimed at achieving strategic goals.

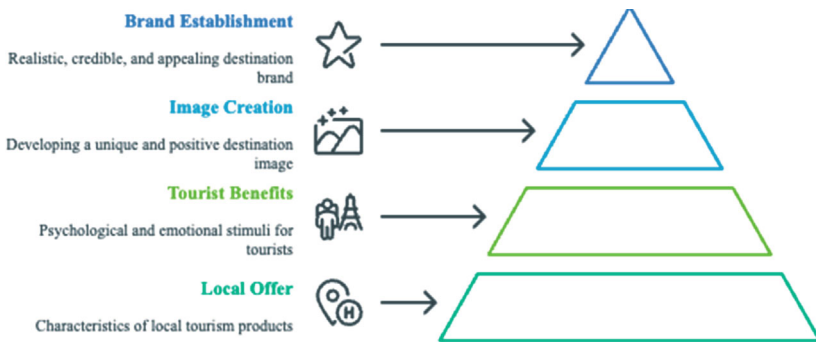


Fig. 3.6 Destination image management pyramid (Source Authors' elaboration)

Thus, the DMO can be regarded as an organization that guides the process of transforming a location into a tourist destination, intervening on all elements that facilitate tourist flows and ensuring high-quality experiences. It operates through strategic marketing processes, transforming attractive factors into competitive products.

Traditionally, DMOs have been defined as Destination Marketing Organizations; however, a deeper analysis reveals that their activities extend beyond mere marketing. The DMO is also conceived as a destination developer, with a role that can be articulated in three primary functions:

1. Setting a strategic vision for the long-term development of the destination.
2. Managing internal political processes, focusing on the redistribution of power and resources.
3. Creating favorable strategic and organizational conditions for fostering entrepreneurial and managerial potential.

Based on the insights of various scholars (Morrison et al., 1998), the DMO includes multiple functions:

- Economic driver, it generates new revenue and employment, contributing to local economic development.
- Community marketer, it communicates a unified image of the most significant attractions of the destination to a selected market.
- Industry coordinator, it guides local tourism development toward more focused strategies, encouraging systemic relationships among local tourism businesses.
- Semi-public representative, it acts as an intermediary between the interests of the tourism industry, the needs of residents, political choices and tourist demand.
- Builder of community pride, it supports initiatives that enhance the quality of life for both visitors and local populations.

In summary, the DMO serves as a meta-management organization that must create favorable cultural, strategic and organizational conditions for the development of the destination. Its activities can be classified into two macro-categories.

1. Destination Marketing, while the sale of tourism products and services is primarily the responsibility of individual hospitality businesses and intermediaries, the DMO plays an increasingly significant role in managing and promoting the destination as a cohesive package. Key marketing activities include:
 - Familiarization trips and educational tours.
 - Informative/formative workshops and roadshows.
 - Promotional publications.
 - Advertising, a crucial element for increasing awareness of the destination.
 - Participation in trade fairs, events and venues with high customer contact potential.
 - Co-promotion initiatives at regional, national and international levels.
 - Brand management, which plays a vital role in amplifying and strengthening communication efforts related to the destination.
2. Destination Management, this encompasses typical DMO activities such as:
 - Finance and venture capital, assisting tourism operators in accessing capital markets and attracting potential external investors.
 - Analysis and research, understanding market needs and expectations as well as the supply system's capabilities.
 - Resource stewardship, managing the destination sustainably, including assessing biophysical limitations (carrying capacities) and developing long-term programs to understand the potential impacts of tourism.
 - Quality control of the visitor experience, ensuring the attractiveness of the destination and the quality of individual services within the local tourism offer.
 - Human resource development, Indirectly addressing skill gaps within various types of tourism offerings.

Another crucial function of the DMO is the coordination of stakeholders, significantly impacting the competitiveness of the destination (Gretzel, 2022). The involvement of businesses in collective strategies

is heightened when the body responsible for implementation pursues policies that directly influence local actors.

For a tourism system to operate effectively, it requires not only the proper functioning of its individual components but also a high level of coordination and exchange among them. Thus, it is essential for the DMO to facilitate processes that enable the sharing of decisions, structures and resources, as well as to manage strategic interdependencies.

Creating a competitive advantage for a destination necessitates a stakeholder theory that links managerial choices to a broader perspective on business interlocutors, taking into account the interests of all involved groups.

In particular, in the management of community-based destinations, the ability to attract tourist flows over time depends not only on the attractiveness of the context but also on the level of agreement regarding the tourism development plan among key stakeholders (Mtapuri et al., 2022). Therefore, a fundamental task for DMO leadership is to map stakeholders, analyze their interests and assess their perceptions of tourism.

The most relevant operational functions that the DMO must assume to ensure stakeholder coordination include:

- Encouraging participation, promoting local actors' engagement for the implementation of collective strategies, credibly highlighting their benefits and overcoming individual resistance to collective initiatives.
- Formalizing relationships, establishing mechanisms for interaction between the central body and individual members, as well as among the members themselves.
- Member selection, managing the entry and exit of members from the collective.
- Control and sanctions, defining control mechanisms and identifying penalties for opportunistic behaviors.
- Transparent contribution mechanisms, establishing shared and transparent methods for contributions to the entity and the distribution of achieved results among stakeholders.

In conclusion, the DMO's role in facilitating the development of a tourist destination translates into its ability to interpret the needs and

expectations of all system stakeholders while simultaneously laying the groundwork for future collaboration among them.

Based on the preceding considerations, it can be firmly asserted that DMOs have the responsibility of defining strategic planning choices, with the contribution of various stakeholders, as they must provide the guidelines and tools necessary for a destination's success.

This implies that an effective Destination Management process must be capable, on one hand, of analyzing, defining and managing the attractiveness factors and various entrepreneurial components of the local system and on the other hand, of organizing all these elements into competitive offerings that adequately align with market demand and the destination's carrying capacity.

Strategic planning is a disciplined and well-defined process aimed at the detailed formulation of an organization's strategy and the allocation of responsibilities related to its implementation (Evans, 2024). The strategic planning process encompasses several hierarchical levels and a series of sequential phases that find application in the action plan. This plan represents a shared vision of resources, competencies and competitive challenges, serving as a communication tool for strategic choices directed toward internal and external stakeholders.

The development of strategic planning forms represents a response to the changing perspective advocated in territorial management, providing an opportunity to mobilize internal resources and facilitate new development through the involvement of individuals and groups that, in varying capacities, participate in the strategic project.

Territorial strategic planning constitutes a programmatic platform with the fundamental function of mobilizing territorial components toward specific general objectives, coordinating and integrating actors and resources in the realization of large projects that impact the territory's development process (Chembessi et al., 2025). Therefore, the primary aim of strategic planning is to define and activate the conditions that enable the mobilization of various actors toward the implementation of a common territorial development project. To this end, it codifies strategic choices to make them actionable in all respects; it breaks down the strategic orientation into ad hoc programs tailored to each of the territorial components involved; it defines the coordination measures among the various territorial entities necessary for the implementation of the pursued strategies; and consequently, it catalyzes the choices of these entities

toward a common direction. Additionally, it allows for the communication of strategic choices both internally and externally, thus becoming a tool for both competition and integration.

In this regard, the adoption of participatory strategies in territorial planning processes represents one of the fundamental tools. Participatory planning assumes that the objectives to be pursued can be defined and modified more effectively and efficiently through the knowledge and experience contributions of the recipients (Spadaro et al., 2023). In this sense, participatory processes serve as a technique for building consensus and, most importantly, for promoting the maximization of collective benefits. It is evident that the participation of institutions and thus the involvement of public entities with territorial competencies is considered indispensable. The goal is to guide the realization of a planning process open to negotiation and participation from the earliest stages of the plan's development.

The process of constructing the plan involves subsequent steps and focuses that require not only a strong technical commitment to analysis, forecasting, evaluation and monitoring but also continuous interaction with external entities, achievable only through the communication of ideas and the project proposals of public and private entities. In summary, the strategic planning process can be articulated in two phases:

1. The first phase consists of developing a “vision of the future”. Essentially, this involves defining a long-term framework that considers complex variables and phenomena such as economic globalization, challenges in new technologies and the territorial carrying capacity.
2. The second phase involves the “territorialization of the vision”, where the focus is on identifying spatial challenges and long-term strategic objectives for the relevant territory. The technique associated with this phase is the development of alternative scenarios, with the goal of identifying a desirable and shared scenario.

Therefore, the construction of the future vision and scenarios becomes a fundamental part of the planning process, engaging the entity responsible for planning, namely the DMO, both in terms of techniques (development of forecasting models and scenario-building techniques) and in communication and mediation (enhancing the informative moment and developing continuous and transparent interaction).

Ultimately, the outcome of strategic reflection through participatory planning should be the vision of the future, serving as a milestone around which consensus and a willingness to cooperate can be aggregated to implement successful strategic projects. This entails identifying the direction to be taken and the guidelines to follow in order to channel efforts toward realizing the vision, through participatory processes that foster the enhancement of the territory's specificities, environmental, economic and cultural characteristics, in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantages.

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