

Editorial

Competitiveness and Sustainability in Tourist Firms and Destinations

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Abstract: Tourism is a major activity in the global economy, not only in terms of its economic impact but also its social and environmental implications. The management practices and processes adopted by tourist companies and destinations are very heterogeneous and have variable impacts on the triple-bottom-line sustainability (people, profit, planet) of the ecosystem. However, there is still only limited available knowledge about the value of different practices for promoting both sustainable development and greater competitiveness. This Special Issue includes papers that present new ideas, theories, advancements, experiences, evidence or methodologies that support the convergence of economic, social and environmental competitiveness, the factors that help ensure their alignment, and the obstacles to complementarity between sustainability, responsibility and competitiveness in the tourism industry.

Keywords: tourism; competitiveness; sustainability; tourist firms; tourist destinations; environmental and competitive strategies

Tourism worldwide is currently facing notable environmental and economic challenges, and tackling these challenges requires tourist companies and destinations, as well as public officials in the field, to make complex adaptation decisions. The problem is that tourism has become a gigantic industry based on a growth model that has a high impact on the natural environment. Moreover, its current design is unsustainable in the face of climatic and environmental pressures. It is worth noting, for example, the relentless increase in the carbon footprint caused by tourism activities, which has gone from representing 5% of the world total in 2005 [1] to 8% in 2013 [2], with a forecasted increase of 40% by 2025 if the historical trend continues. The commitment to mass tourism with a linear growth model has not only led to intensive consumption of water and energy and the proliferation of waste and polluting emissions [3], it has also led to overtourism with negative repercussions on biodiversity, cultural heritage and local quality of life [4,5]. The situation is especially acute in destinations such as those in the Mediterranean, whose hosting capacity has been overwhelmed.

The growing public awareness—and therefore consumer awareness—of these issues puts the tourism sector at a crossroads: companies and destinations can remain competitive by shirking their environmental responsibility and implementing short-termist policies even at the cost of degrading natural capital; or they can take responsibility for the long-term sustainability of ecosystems by adopting green strategies, even if they increase the cost of services. This dilemma is not solved simply with well-intentioned statements about seeking the compatibility of economic, social and environmental sustainability. The question is precisely how to manage this combination of seemingly conflicting interests. The literature has said relatively little about the issue, and there is still limited available knowledge about the value of different practices for promoting both sustainable development and greater competitiveness. The current emphasis is placed on sustainability [6], perhaps forgetting that without competitiveness: (a) many green-minded tourist companies and destinations may fail to

survive the difficult journey towards the generation of low elastic demand for ecological considerations if they involve higher prices; (b) a good part of the tourism offer anchored in the “use and throw” paradigm can be lost if the tourism demand increasingly values environmental attributes when selecting products and destinations.

Tourism therefore requires balanced reflections on how to achieve sustainable and competitive tourism models. The academic literature must assume the responsibility of investigating ways to make the competitiveness and sustainability of the offer compatible, both at the microeconomic level and at the level of territorial agglomerations in the form of tourist destinations. Indeed, this Special Issue is a call for the dissemination of useful experiences, cases and reflections for the purpose of reconciling competitiveness and sustainability in tourism. The aim of this Special Issue is to include papers that present new ideas, theories, advancements, experiences, evidence or methodologies that support the convergence of economic, social and environmental competitiveness. The call received an interesting response from academia in terms of the quantity and variety of research focused on the various topics proposed. In the end, nine papers have made it through the exacting review processes of the journal to make up this Special Issue. These contributions are summarized and discussed below, contextualizing them within a coherent narrative of the different discourses and highlighting how they fit into the state of the research at the academic level.

The first feature to note about the review of the papers published in this Special Issue is their balance, in two respects. On the one hand, this is reflected in the care with which the authors have approached the delicate thread joining competitiveness and sustainability, offering thoughtful reflections on the need to safeguard the financial sustainability of the firms without jeopardizing the strategic viability of the business model, or damaging the natural environment that constitutes one of the most valuable attributes of the tourism product. The second area in which an interesting balance has been achieved is between the attention paid to organizational problems and territorial complexity. Four of the papers have focused their research on management and strategy problems of the combination of competitiveness and sustainability in tourism organizations. Three others take very different types of tourist destinations as their unit of analysis. The two remaining studies provide reviews of the state of the research, applying complementary approaches, which enriches their joint reading.

Beginning with this third block of papers, we must highlight the bibliometric study undertaken by professors Luis Seguí-Amortegui, José Antonio Clemente, Rubí Medida, and Melanie Grueso (the first two from the International University of La Rioja and the other two from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia and the University of Valencia, respectively). This group of Spanish academics has carried out a valuable review of the existing literature on sustainability and competitiveness in tourism, which constitutes the first known bibliometric study that has simultaneously considered both facets. While the analysis confirms the growth of research on both topics, it also reveals a progressive widening of the gap between the two, with researchers showing a preference for the problem of tourism sustainability. The most noteworthy conclusion is that there is still much to be discovered on how to implement sustainability policies that simultaneously contribute to the competitiveness of the tourism industry. The work has also identified the most renowned authors (measured by recognition in terms of the number of citations) and networks of researchers on the two areas studied. The main source of knowledge in these subjects comes from Spanish universities, followed by Chinese and Italian universities.

The concept of sustainable tourism has its theoretical framework in the paradigm of sustainable development. Although this is a well-established approach supported by a large scientific community, it is not free from controversy. Malgorzata Kiezel, Pawel Piotrowski and Joanna Wiechoczek, professors at the University of Economics in Katowice (Poland), provide the second theoretical review of the concept in this Special Issue. Firstly, they review the nature and specificity of the definition of sustainability applied to tourism and synthesise the factors determining its adoption. Their theoretical review follows a narrative structure, which is the major alternative to sociometric techniques such

as meta-analysis, but entails a much stronger component of subjectivity and personal interpretation. The study also delves into the main edge of this paradigm: the choice of methodology for empirical research. The work sets out a critical analysis of the existing literature on sustainable tourism in terms of data collection and analysis practices. From this analysis, the study deploys an exploratory research of qualitative or case-based observation on the research methodology followed. Its main conclusion is that researchers working within the sustainable tourism paradigm use research methodologies that prioritize an interpretivist approach (associated with qualitative research) over a functionalist approach (linked to quantitative research).

The second block of four papers focuses on research into tourist firms' strategies and practices for environmental adaptation. The much-needed reformulation of the tourism paradigm inevitably includes issues such as the climate challenge and companies' environmental responsibility. The environmental competitiveness of a tourism system is the result of the "green" competitiveness of its constituent businesses. Although the economy in which the tourism firm operates can influence its environmental efficiency through the provision of public capital services (territorial infrastructure, protection and planning, socio-political and economic stability, training, etc.) under ideal conditions, a tourism firm's adaptation to the challenges related to the natural environment will ultimately depend on its environmental competitiveness. Indeed, this was the criterion set out in the *Spanish Tourism Competitiveness Framework Plan (FUTURES)*, when it stated that "competitiveness is not a quality that can be attributed generically to a country or sector; these will be competitive to the extent that most of the companies that are based in them are. Consequently, the basic unit of analysis for studying competitiveness is the firm". Therefore, the analysis of sustainability and competitiveness in the tourism sector requires an in-depth study of the company as an organization whose competitiveness and adaptation strategies for the protection and improvement of the natural environment will be decisive for the environmental quality of the global system. The *Spanish Tourism Plan Horizon 2020* agrees with this analysis, stating that the common goal is to ensure that "in the year 2020, the Spanish tourism system is as competitive and sustainable as possible, providing the maximum social welfare." To that end, it aims to promote a new strategic orientation in public and private agents' decisions and investments, which will allow Spain to maintain its position as a world leader in tourism while at the same time fostering its sustainability. It is therefore not surprising that the diagnostic framework establishes competitiveness, offer and products, and management models and human resources as priority areas, together with the environmentally-responsible revitalization of mature tourist destinations. Furthermore, the challenges that are considered critical in order to improve environmental quality within this time horizon include the adaptation of tourist companies' management systems in response to the need to protect and improve the natural environment.

The contributions of the literature at this level are questionable because, on a business level, the imbalance between the interest in sustainability and competitiveness contradicts the findings in the literature. Favouring business strategies and practices that link and reconcile the two dimensions would significantly help to improve both the environmental quality of the tourism offer and its competitive strength in the markets. Although the dominant thesis at the firm level is that the contribution to sustainability should benefit the long-term competitive environment, we still need comprehensive analyses and cases studies that support this view and provide a scientific basis for public-private strategies undertaken by tourism firms seeking to become socially responsible and environmentally efficient organizations.

Given the environmental costs inherent in a linear growth model of tourism, together with the weight of tourism in the economic structure and employment in both developed and developing countries, this sector plays a special role in reorienting the economic model towards sustainable solutions that ensure the survival of humanity in an environment of healthy competition and prosperity. In particular, the hospitality industry has always been seen as one that generates adverse impacts on the environmental sustainability of tourist destinations due to its intensive consumption of non-renewable resources and its extensive production of waste. The concept of the circular economy

emerges as a new model that seeks to copy the cycles of nature itself, converting the waste from all processes into raw materials for other related businesses in the same value chain, thus allowing better use of resources and lessening the environmental impact [7]. Therefore, this alternative seeks to decouple economic growth from intensive and growing consumption of resources and environmental deterioration [8]. Its principles [9] are not restricted to the conservation and improvement of natural resources, but also seek to minimize polluting emissions [10] and achieve zero waste [11]. Against this backdrop, the article by José Miguel Rodríguez Antón and María del Mar Alonso-Almeida, professors at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, focuses on the degree of dissemination of circular economy practices in hospitality. It is an exploratory study of four cases of large international hotel chains: British InterContinental Hotels Group, Accor, Meliá Hotels International and NH Hotel Group. The most salient result of their research is the observation that the most typical practices are those of reduction, recycling and reuse, in that order, while the other three principles of circularity (redesign, replace and rethink) are much less frequently employed. In light of leading tourism chains' lack of progress in the circular approach to environmental management, the authors highlight the need to promote the circular economy in the hotel industry, especially among independent hotels.

Observing the behaviour of the business world reveals different policies for adapting to climate change, including coercive policies based on command and control, those based on economic instruments, as well as those voluntarily implemented by organizations [12–14]. The Special Issue includes another three papers that focus on the determinants and impact of the adoption of different environmental strategies and practices on organizational performance measures in both the environmental and economic order. Two of these papers investigate the determining factors of sustainable practices and the possible technological and organizational innovations that hotel companies can introduce. The first of these articles, written by two professors from the Universidad Técnica Federico Santa María (Cristóbal Fernández and Paulina Santander) and two from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Marisol Celemín and María del Mar Alonso), explores this issue using data collected in a primary study of 24 independent hotels, divided equally between Spanish and Chilean units. The analysis employs a contingent approach to examine the effect of a wide list of potential inducers or depressors of the spread of green practices. The results of the research are consistent with the contingent predictions and point to the environment in which the company operates and the size of the establishment as the main predictors of the commitment to sustainable development. The second article is the work of two professors from the Universitat Jaume I, Montserrat Boronat and Alexandra García. Its focus is again on the Spanish hotel industry, whose problems it approaches with a primary study based on a sample of 306 companies, applying logistic regression and bootstrapping techniques. In this case, the dependent variable is the degree of adoption of environmental management systems (ISO 14001 and EMAS). The hotel's participation in alliances and its organizational ambidexterity are identified as the key drivers of environmental management systems adoption. Especially critical is the firm's capacity to deal with conflicting demands, as this has both direct and indirect effects on environmental innovation by helping to transform the benefits of participation in cooperation agreements into the adoption of this green change. The last paper of this section is written by another professor from Universitat Jaume I, Beatriz Forés. Here the focus shifts from environmental innovation to environmental performance. The study handles a wealth of information from 446 tourism firms, with data drawn from both a primary study and SABI (Spanish Balance Analysis System). Building on the Natural Resource-based View and the Dynamic Capabilities Theory, the research offers a pioneering model of the relationships between environmental adaptation practices, business strategy and green performance at the company level. The results confirm that the relationship between the integrated use of green technology and environmental performance is non-linear. The adoption of a proactive environmental management system and the application of a prospector strategy (according to the typology proposed by Miles & Snow, 1978) are key factors moderating those relationships. These results are of great interest because they rule out the deterministic hypotheses, so common in the environmental literature, and venture an explanatory framework for the environmental adaptation

of the contingent nature of tourism firms. The company's strategic decisions regarding its way of competing and the type of environmental management strategies introduced are decisive in modulating the impact of green technologies on environmental performance.

The third group of contributions to this Special Issue deals with the problems of social and environmental sustainability at either the macro level or at the level of the tourist destination. Three papers were presented, two of which refer to the sustainability of destinations within the cultural tourism segment and a third which addresses the mass sun-and-sand tourism market. Along with protected natural areas, World Heritage Cities are the main attractions that a tourist destination can exploit in the international scenario. Both contingent and strategic theories take into consideration the specific problems of the type of environment in which the tourist destination competes when explaining the nature of its environmental adaptation process. These three contributions offer insightful reflections on the state of the literature on this topic.

The concept of a Heritage City was put forward as a development of cultural heritage and tourism in 1993. Focusing purely on the market of cultural tourism, World Heritage Cities constitute products that are being marketed under a brand image focused on protecting and enhancing this inimitable historical-artistic heritage. As assets that require special protection in the face of multiple threats from both natural erosion processes and human action, their sustainability is of paramount concern. However, the justification for sustainable tourism does not lie solely in the needs intrinsic to their status as historical property; there are also sound economic reasons for it. Carlos Jurado and Marcelino Sánchez, both professors at the University of Extremadura, provide empirical evidence in their study of the Spanish city of Cáceres. This city was declared a World Heritage City in 1986 and, since 1968, the third Monumental Ensemble of Europe after Prague and Tallinn. It is part of the Jewish Quarters of Spain Network, and one of the best preserved monument sites from the Middle Ages and Renaissance in the world. All this heritage, together its rich and varied gastronomy and an interesting cultural offer, make Cáceres an important tourist destination. But the city does not have problems with tourist saturation, as indicated by its ratio of tourists to local inhabitants, with an average value of between 26% and 30%. Therefore, as the paper confirms, sustainability in this case is not a matter of overtourism or an environmental question, but rather an objective linked to the vision of the tourist industry as a development strategy. The eco-friendly management of cultural heritage sites such as Cáceres opens up interesting opportunities for charging a premium price on some tourist products in exchange for making them more sustainable. This research quantifies the willingness to pay an extra amount for services using the contingent valuation method, and it identifies notable statistical differences in the hypothetical increase in tourism prices in relation to sociodemographic factors such as the tourist's age or educational level.

The definition of non-saturated tourist destination used by Carlos Jurado and Marcelino Sánchez is endorsed in the following paper in this Special Issue, which is dedicated to the topic of urban planning that seeks to ensure the conservation of the heritage of historical cities from the perspective of sustainability. Min Yin, Jiangang Xu and Zhiongyuan Yang—the first two professors at Nanjing University and the third at Chaohu University—provide interesting conclusions in this respect, bolstered by the ideas provided in the literature on the urban planning of historical and cultural cities, and the study of the case of Tingschow County, located in the Chinese province of Fujian. This enclave is one of the 134 state-listed famous historic and cultural cities defined by China, a similar concept to the Heritage City. Their guide to urban planning for these urban centres considers it advisable to reduce the upper limit of resource space bearing capacity at 20%-30% of the resident population, and to control the tourist flow at below 12,000 per day.

The research into the problems and experiences of environmental sustainability is much more developed than that on social sustainability. This dimension of sustainability is achieved when the processes, systems, structures and relationships in a territory support the ability of present and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities where human well-being flourishes [15]. An interesting contribution to a better understanding of the expected role played by tourism in social

sustainability is the article by Martín Aubert Hernández, Carla Carolina Pérez and Francisco Jesús Ferreiro, the first two professors of the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo and the third from Universidad de Santiago de Compostela. This study explores the link between the economic diversification of tourism-specific products and human development (defined as a key element of social sustainability), taking data from the Mexican state of Hidalgo. The confirmatory results of the research emphasize the importance of sustainable tourism as a means of social development of a region.

Although the dominant thesis in the academic literature is that ensuring sustainability should contribute to long-term improvements in competitiveness, we still need comprehensive analyses and case studies that support this approach and that provide a scientific basis for public-private strategies undertaken by tourism organizations in order to become socially responsible and environmentally efficient institutions. This Special Issue represents an interesting step in this direction, providing stimulating studies of the interrelationships between competitiveness and sustainability in tourism from a broad range of perspectives.

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