

Indicators for Tourist Destinations: A General Assessment

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The assessment and monitoring of tourist destinations is now more than ever a prerogative of governments around the world. The contiguous situation caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is pushing local destinations to adopt new standards that have never been considered until now. In addition, the collapse of tourist demand and the partial recovery of tourist activities could, in the medium term, affect tourist flows, but more importantly the tourist supply, which still suffers from suppliers and producers damaged by the blockage of services and production. The work aims to provide a general assessment of sustainability and competitiveness indicators, describing the work carried out and providing a summary. To do this, a general assessment of the existing literature was implemented with the goal of providing a general overview of the studies conducted from an indicator perspective. Ideally, the indicators were divided into three groups, methodological, sustainability, and competitiveness. The results of the study suggest that tourism destination indicators are many and varied but what is lacking is the monitoring and evaluation of them in the European scenario.

Keywords: monitoring, competitiveness, sustainability, tourist supply, tourist location

Introduction

The contiguous situation caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is pushing local destinations to adopt new standards that have never been considered until now. For example, consider the new health regulations and all these tools and products that a tourist expects to have when arriving at a holiday destination.

These new requirements, accompanied also by the need to stimulate the recovery of tourist flows, are also associated with destination management and their transformation with a new management of the internal dynamics of destinations. For this reason, the resulting new tourism product and more generally the tourism offer must be accompanied by new perspectives and points of view, hence the need to propose an article highlighting the indicators used for tourist destinations.

The purpose of this work is to understand where we are in the evaluation of a tourist destination in terms of indicators, to clarify the various monitoring and evaluation systems and, finally, to evaluate any useful guidelines for a more homogeneous discipline. To achieve this objective, the topic of “tourist destination and indicators” is studied, with the aim of determining what is known about a given topic, how consolidated this knowledge is and, what future directions can be taken to better direct and intensify this knowledge (University of Melbourne, 2013).

The aim of this work is to collect, analyze, and synthesize the main works in the international literature that have dealt with indicators for the evaluation of a generic tourism destination, in terms of sustainability and competitiveness.

The work is organized as follows: After a brief description of the concept of tourist destination, the second section is related to the analysis of the principal articles in the scientific context. This part is ideally divided into three parts: A first part is devoted to the description of the methodological papers, then, a second part related to tourism competitiveness, and finally, the synthesis of the articles related to the sustainable indicators.

Tourist Destination

The evaluation of a tourism destination is now more than ever one of the most important aspects to classify a destination as competitive and sustainable. The concept of tourism destination started to emerge since the 1990s (Giansanti, 2020, pp. 109-137) and over time, there have been many definitions of this concept including the one provided by UNWTO: “physical space where the visitor spends at least one night [...] includes tourism products, such as services, attractions and tourism resources within a daily trip. It has physical and administrative boundaries that define its management [...]” (UNWTO, 2007).

Giansanti (2020, pp. 109-137) also discusses four typologies useful to overcome “a single synthetic view” on the definition of tourist destination:

(1) Economic geography: territory and objective dimension.

(2) Marketing principles: management and organization.

(3) Marketing of services: central role of the consumer-tourist.

(4) Socio-cultural basis: “constantly evolving context reflecting the cultural dynamics of the territory” (Giansanti, 2020, pp. 109-137).

These approaches are complementary and allow for a full understanding of both the objective dimension of the tourist destination and the subjective dimension, characterized by the users’ perception of the destination (Giansanti, 2020, pp. 109-137).

Cooper et al. (2005, pp. 76-87) define four characteristics common to all destinations: They are amalgams, they have a cultural value, they offer a product that cannot be separated from the place, and they are used by both tourists and consumers in general.

The components of the destination amalgam are attractions (other than infrastructure), services (hotels, restaurants...), accessibility (transport systems), and finally auxiliary services (of local organizations).

As far as cultural value is concerned, a destination is considered interesting to visit when it presents defined cultural characteristics (Cooper et al., 2005, pp. 80-82). Inseparability, on the other hand, is the third characteristic common to all destinations, which means that tourism is consumed where it is produced, i.e., the product resulting from the destination which can only be used and consumed in the destination itself. Finally, multiple use as the last common characteristic means that the destination is not only a tourist destination, because it is a product that can be considered by users who are not necessarily tourists.

The studies supporting the evaluation of a destination as competitive or sustainable are numerous and most of them focus mainly on two relevant aspects, which are: the intense competitiveness as the capacity of the destination to be “touristy” and popular in the medium and long term, compared to other destinations with similar characteristics; sustainability instead, from the environmental and territorial point of view and from the point of view of the administrative and economic management that the destination determines for the various stakeholders involved.

Literature Review

Destination management is a much-debated topic in the scientific literature. The tourism indicators that have been organized over time have provided useful guidance to policy makers and other actors involved in terms of management, evaluation, and monitoring. This section is devoted to assessing the issues related to the tourist destination indicators: The first part is related to methodological papers; the second one is about competitiveness; and finally, the last part is about sustainability. To do this, a general overview of the articles published during the last years is conducted to implement a synthetic literature review.

Methodological Issues

Some authors have dealt with composite indicators in terms of methodological improvement for general indicators system, useful for the evaluation of a tourist destination (Blancas, Lozano-Oyola, González, & Caballero, 2016; Pulido-Fernandez & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2016; Mendola & Volo, 2017; Gómez-Vega & Picazo-Tadeo, 2019).

Blancas et al. (2016) use composite sustainable tourism indicators, divided into economic, social, and environmental, and apply them to some European destinations. Mendola and Volo (2017) through a review of a set of competitiveness indicators in the literature provide guidelines for their construction through a methodological protocol. Using composite indicators, Gómez-Vega and Picazo-Tadeo (2019) also assess the competitiveness of European destinations, seeking to improve on the World Economic Forum's competitiveness index, noting that political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics are significant determinants of destination competitiveness. Pulido-Fernandez and Rodríguez-Díaz (2016) use a set of environmental indicators to construct composite indices of tourism sustainability, divided into: driving forces, pressures, state, and responses. OECD defines a generic composite indicator as the set of individual indicators, grouped together based on a reference model. Thus, thanks to this indicator, it is possible to measure multidimensional phenomena that would not be possible to measure with a single indicator (OECD, 2008, p. 13).

Tourism Competitiveness

Starting from the concept of tourism competitiveness, as reported by Cronjè and du Plessis (2020), studies on tourism competitiveness began in the 1990s (Cronjè & du Plessis, 2020 p. 257). The competitiveness of tourist destinations is a topic that has taken up a lot of space in the literature in the last decade, especially with respect to the evaluation of certain factors (Pulido-Fernandez & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2016). The importance of assessing, measuring, identifying, and systematizing certain variables that contribute to the determination of the competitive position of a destination has increased in recent years because, on the one hand, competition has increased and, on the other hand, knowing these aspects means involving destination managers and policy makers (Pulido-Fernandez & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2016).

In tourism literature, there are various definitions of competitiveness (Cronjè & du Plessis, 2020). Taking into consideration the literature study made by Cronjè and du Plessis (2020, pp. 257-258), the definition provided by Ritchie and Crouch (2003) is the one most taken into consideration. The authors define competitiveness as

ability to increase tourism expenditure, to increasingly attract visitors while providing them with satisfying, memorable experiences, and to do so in a profitable way, while enhancing the wellbeing of destination residents and preserving the natural capital of the destination for future generations. (p. 2)

OECD (2008) identifies a list of indicators that can be applied in the assessment of a country's competitiveness. The aim of the work was not to classify countries according to competitiveness indices, but rather to provide a guiding tool for countries to analyze tourism. At sectoral level, few initiatives exist on monitoring competitiveness in the tourism sector.

National initiatives for the development of competitiveness indicators remain partial and not homogeneous in terms of content. Over time, the OECD has supported both national and international initiatives on the measurement of tourism competitiveness.

The OECD definition of tourism competitiveness is as follows:

It concerns the ability of the place to optimize its attractiveness to residents and non-residents, to offer quality, innovative and attractive tourism (e.g., providing value for money) services to consumers and to gain market share in national and global markets, while ensuring that the resources available to support tourism are used efficiently and sustainably.

The indicators are organized into four categories:

- Indicators that measure the performance and impacts of tourism.
- Indicators that monitor the capacity of a destination to offer quality tourism and competitive services.
- Indicators that monitor the attractiveness of a destination.
- Indicators that describe policy responses and economic opportunities.

Measuring competitiveness can be done in different ways. In general, the models underlying this concept seek to identify the drivers of competitiveness (Cronjè & du Plessis, 2020). One of the most frequently used models is those classified as conceptual models, and they are the most important and prominently used. A conceptual model can be considered as the representation of a system with concepts and ideas within it that contribute to the formation of the representation itself.

Since the 21st century, national and international bodies have been trying to conform certain standards and to monitor the situation of the various tourist destinations in terms of competitiveness. For instance, in 2007 the World Economic Forum published the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index, providing information about the position of the various European countries on competitiveness (Pulido-Fernandez & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2016). This index is structured through a set of indicators grouped into pillars. Due to methodological problems, some authors have made improvements over the years (Pulido-Fernandez & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2016; Gómez-Vega & Picazo-Tadeo, 2019) with new standards and alternative indices in line with the changes in the tourism scenario. Improving destination management requires strategies in line with the needs of the destination itself. In this sense, the UNWTO department of Tourism Market Intelligence and Competitiveness aims to support tourism destinations allowing them to “become more competitive and improve destination management through efficient policies and governance” (UNWTO, 2020).

Work conducted in 2003 by Dwyer and Kim (2003) developed a destination competitiveness model, allowing for a series of comparisons between countries and tourism industries. These indicators included objective and subjective measures with the main aim of being able to develop a competitiveness model that identifies key success factors for the tourist destination. The review of the literature on competitiveness provided by the authors revealed that none of the models that have been proposed to date are entirely satisfactory because they do not provide a 360° view of the various aspects related to the concept of “competitiveness”.

Tourism Sustainability

As far as sustainability is concerned, this requires in-depth knowledge of tourism systems and the specifics of individual destinations (Franzoni, 2015). The concept of sustainability deserves to be discussed. It began to take shape in the 1970s, with the aim of reducing environmental impact in a way that did not compromise the future of the earth. The relationship between environment and tourism is present in all phases of the activity, starting from production as there is the aspect of environmental planning and organization of space, to consumption which depends on the available resources (Giansanti, 2020, pp. 28-29). Moreover, the tourist space is a resource that cannot be considered renewable, as all natural tourist resources are (Giansanti, 2020, pp. 28-29), which has created quite a few problems in terms of classic management of this activity. For this reason, the correct use of the tourist environment, respecting the minimum standards of sustainability, should be part of a tourist offer that on the one hand integrates attention to the reception of tourists in the places of arrival, and on the other hand integrates sustainability in terms of accessibility, reachability, and organization (Giansanti, 2020, pp. 96-97).

At European level, there is a system of indicators that assess sustainable tourism. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2017) defines sustainable tourism as:

Tourism that meets the needs of today's tourists and host regions while anticipating and enhancing opportunities for the future. All resources should be managed in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be met while maintaining the cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life systems of the area in question. Sustainable tourism products are those that act in harmony with the environment, the community and local cultures, so that they are the beneficiaries and not the victims of tourism development.

For this reason, the European Community is committed to defining a system of tourism indicators to enable destinations to relate to sustainability on an ongoing basis. ETIS is a tool that can be defined as:

- (1) Management: because it supports destinations in their approach to sustainability.
- (2) Monitoring: because it allows the collection of data and information useful to evaluate performance.
- (3) Information: for companies, stakeholders, and destination managers.

ETIS indicators have been used by many authors. For instance, McLoughlin, Hanrahan, and Duddy (2020) applied them to the sustainability of the Irish destination County Clare.

A review carried out in 2007 (Schianetz, Kavanagh, & Lockington, 2007) examined a few tools aimed at assessing the sustainability of tourism destinations in economic, environmental, social, and cultural terms. The aim of the work was to make it easier to select the tool (or tools when a combination of them is necessary and possible) and use it for the specific destination. In the work conducted by Schianetz et al. (2007), a distinction is made between a concept and an evaluation tool: The concept is the idea of achieving sustainability (e.g., considering an environmental strategy to prevent energy consumption in the production of a given good); the evaluation tool, on the other hand, defines a systematic procedure to implement a given concept. The assessment tool defines a systematic procedure to implement a concept: eco-tourism, clean production, environmental management, ecolabelling, and tourism transport capacity. Regarding the tools for assessing the sustainability of tourist destinations:

- (1) Assessment of environmental, socio-cultural, and economic implications.
- (2) Monitoring of progress.
- (3) Analysis of implications and impacts at national and international level.

(4) Design of new products.

In a work conducted in 2012 (Rio & Nunes, 2012), the need to monitor and evaluate the sustainability of rural areas as tourist destinations emerges. A tool based on indicators analyzing natural resources, the local community, and the tourism industry in Ukraine was developed by the authors. In a work conducted by Pulido-Fernandez, Andrades-Caldito, and Sánchez-Rivero (2015) the authors question whether economic performance can be hindered in any way by strategies and policies to maintain the sustainability of destinations. Indeed, it is the authors' opinion that sustainability is now a relevant strategic objective for tourism destinations.

Much of the existing literature agrees that sustainability contributes to cost reduction and supports market differentiation. Less widespread, however, is the view that sustainability is an obstacle to competitiveness and that it generates a general reduction in business profits in the short term (Pulido-Fernandez et al., 2015). Indeed, for a long time the economic effects of tourism development were the only indicator of success for tourism activities (Bošković, Vujičić, & Ristić, 2020). However, it has been shown, to the detriment of the latter claim, that economic indicators are not negatively affected by sustainability and that supporting sustainability is not a "luxury" of rich countries but instead can contribute to the economic-political performance of many countries (Pulido-Fernandez et al., 2015).

Managing sustainability means managing the territory and the tourist destination in general. A study conducted by Fernandez-Tabales, Foronda-Robles, Galindo-Pérez-de-Azpillaga, and García-López (2017) implements this concept by referring that there are many studies conducted on sustainability indicators but few of them focus on territorial governance. According to the authors, this is since many studies are theoretical studies that lend themselves poorly to measurement and practice. In fact, the need to measure both tourism performance and economic-social impact is an ever-growing need that has recently prompted many to re-evaluate indicator systems and models (Fernandez-Tabales et al., 2017). Indeed, as specified by Bošković et al. (2020) economic indicators can be a good basis for measuring and quantifying, whereas environmental and social indicators also describe the qualitative aspect of destinations.

One of the most relevant issues that has driven governments and the tourism industry to adopt sustainability standards is the increasing number of tourists that has generated the phenomenon of unconditional mass tourism and "overtourism". As defined in the review by Dodds and Butler (2019), the term overtourism is a new expression that stands for a concept as old as the world: too many tourists in a specific place. Overtourism, the authors report, causes negative impacts on residents and the destination itself.

Sustainable tourism is not a specific form of tourism; rather every form of tourism must be sustainable to live in the long term (Bošković et al., 2020; Sharpley, 2004). According to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, sustainable tourism aims to minimize the negative impacts of tourism and maximize the positive ones. In particular, the article considers as negative impacts "economic leakage, damage to the natural environment and overcrowding to name a few"; on the opposite, within the positive impacts are mentioned "job creation, cultural heritage preservation and interpretation, wildlife preservation landscape restoration, and more" (GSTC, n.d.).

The promotion of responsible tourism is supported by the UNWTO which, with the membership of 156 countries, aims to promote "tourism as a driving force towards economic growth, inclusive development and environmental sustainability" (UNWTO, 2021). According to Fernández-Tabales et al. (2017), one of the most important challenges of sustainable tourism is to overcome the gap between the designation of methodology

and models and the actual use of these in terms of design by policy makers and tourism businesses. Before measuring sustainability, it is necessary to know what level of sustainability the destination has achieved (Fernández-Tabales et al., 2017). Franzoni (2015) proposed a system of indicators to measure sustainability performance. The author proposed three dimensional levels (community, tourist destination, and autonomous organizations such as hotels) which correspond to social, competitive, and economic indicators. This framework is useful because it supports destination planning and control, prevents negative environmental and socio-economic outcomes, and provides indications on how the destination can be improved (Franzoni, 2015).

A destination is competitive when it manages to produce something: The debate between competitiveness and productivity is almost non-existent in tourism literature (Knežević Cvelbar, Dwyer, Koman, & Mihalič, 2016). The authors (Knežević Cvelbar et al., 2016) refer to the concept of competitiveness as the total tourism contribution to GDP per tourism employee.

Conclusions

The work provided a general overview of the indicators used for tourist destinations. The cornerstones were competitiveness and sustainability. These are often intertwined and interchangeable, but despite this, there is a great deal of work being done on these two issues, some of which is applied and some of which is more qualitative. The paper discussed the concept of tourism destination and how there was no single definition. We refer to the tourist destination because studying competitiveness and related indicators means understanding when a destination is “tourist” and “attractive”; we study sustainability to understand how it is managed and how long it will last.

In the second part of the work, we discussed about the tourist indicators, in terms of methodology, sustainability, and competitiveness. We discovered that the literature is rich in content but poor in the homogeneity of the topics covered, and the methods adopted. We also know that what is missing is practical feedback on these indicators, because the monitoring systems proposed so far do not allow for a general evaluation of the indicator systems that are applied.

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