

The Maturity of Tourism Networks: An Exploratory Study

*Francesca d'Angella**, *Manuela De Carlo***

Abstract

Networks in tourism are a growing phenomenon worldwide and tourism literature has devoted considerable space to networks' policies, governance forms, competitive advantages and activities. Literature that focuses on networks' operations generally analyzes what kind of activities are put in place without examining how they are carried out and whether they generate a competitive advantage. To fill this gap, our paper provides a notion of network maturity and introduces a taxonomy of the maturity levels of a network's operations.

The three-stage maturity model contributes to tourism literature by exploring how networks can evolve from basic to more sophisticated operations. From a managerial perspective, the paper contributes to evaluating network effectiveness and defining paths to improve it.

Keywords: Tourism Networks; Maturity Model; Network Maturity; Network Advantage; Global Tourism

1. Tourism Networks

Networks in tourism are a growing international phenomenon. In Italy business networks, particularly those bringing together firms from different industries, are a privileged way to overcome the limitations arising from the fragmentation of tourism players, the systemic nature of the tourism product, functional complementarities, territorial interdependencies, share of common local resources. Overcoming these limits is particularly urgent because the tourism system is currently characterized by intense evolutionary dynamics induced by the spread of ICT and its effects on the demand and the supply of tourist services; the development of managerial skills in the field; the vocational tourism which requires more customization of the product; the skilled and demanding customers.

Tourism management literature has dedicated ample space to business networks, exploring: the organizational structure; network policies and governance; the competitive advantage generated by the network; network operations (Merinero-Rodríguez & Pulido-Fernandez, 2016; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2015). The literature focused on networks' operations shows the existence of primary (promotion,

* Adjunct Professor of Marketing, University of Milan Bicocca (francesca.dangella@unimib.it)

** Full Professor of Management, IULM University (manuela.decarlo@iulm.it)

product development, booking and sales) and support (selection, coordination, planning, control) activities, but doesn't analyze them in terms of sophistication and effectiveness. This study aims to address this issue through an exploratory analysis that highlights the existence of different level of maturity and effectiveness of a network's activities (De Bruin et al., 2005; Kazanjian and Drazin, 1989).

2. Literature Review

The discussion on what networks are is still open (Rullani, 2010) as there is no univocal definition in literature (Grandori & Soda, 1995; Nohria & Eccles, 1992). However, the common denominator among the numerous definitions is the idea that a network is a set of nodes – organizations – linked by a set of relations (Fombun, 1982). The network concept has been developed by organizational studies focusing on inter-organizational relations (Aldrich and Whetten, 1981; Barabasi-Lazlo, 2002; Granovetter, 1983; Gulati, 1998; Knoke & Yang, 2008; Levin & White, 1961; Newman et al. 2006; Van de Ven, 1976). These studies provided theories on the antecedents and mechanisms behind network formation and on the economic and non-economic benefits springing from their implementation (Grandori & Soda, 1995).

Studies based on social network analysis explored the morphological and structural features of networks through the study of the density and centrality of relational links.

Studies based on a managerial approach instead centered on the competitive and cooperative strategies enacted between the actors, the network's roles and institutionalization, power relations and the variations of these variables over time (Atkinson & Coleman, 1992; Howlett & Ramesh, 1998).

The "network" concept used in this study is in line with the managerial approach and it may be defined as a form of organization of the economic activities between companies. It coincides with the "cluster" concept proposed by Porter (1998): *"Clusters are geographic concentrations of interconnected companies and institutions in a particular field. Clusters encompass an array of linked industries and other entities important to competition"*.

2.1 Networking Advantages

Numerous managerial studies analyzed inter-company aggregations as a source of competitive advantage for their members (Jarillo, 1988; Porter, 1998; Ritter *et al.*, 2004). According to Porter (1998), through networking each member enjoys the same benefits it would have if it was larger in size or if it had established formal, permanent links with other businesses, but without losing its flexibility. Networks may affect the competitiveness of their members in various ways: by increasing their productivity (Tresca, 2013), by improving their access to supply and labour markets and to specialized information, or by enhancing their operating processes (Vurro, et al. 2014). Moreover, the complementary services provided by the members increase the richness of each product. Lastly, networks enhance innovation and stimulate new businesses (Asheim & Isaksen, 2003; Brondoni, 2015, 2010; Rullani, 2010;

Wang & Scuotto, 2012). An additional benefit of networks is the relational dimension that increases participating firms' social capital (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Koka & Prescott, 2002; Morieux, Blaxill & Boutenko, 2005).

The issue of the advantages generated by business networks has also been explored by tourism studies (van der Zee & Vanneste, 2015), which confirm the three advantages described above. In addition, there is a fourth benefit, related to specific aspects of the tourism industry: the creation of a link between the product or service sold by the company and the destination.

Table 1: *Network Advantages for Members*

Advantages for network members	Reference studies
1. Economic advantages (lower costs or greater value for customer) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expansion/higher quality of supply - Product personalization in line with the needs of target segments - Increase of sales - Brand visibility - Inclusion in new markets (and sharing of connected risks) 	Mitchell and van der Linden, 2010; Braun, 2005; Morrison, Lynch, Johns, 2004; Porter, 2003,1998.
2. Process advantages <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Greater access to information - Greater efficiency in production processes (purchases, product development, marketing and sales) given by the optimization of costs (scale and volume economies, synergies due to sharing of technical, human and financial resources) - Innovation 	Paget, Dimanche and Mounet, 2010; Ricciardi, 2010; Novelli, Schmitz and Spencer, 2006; Bell, 2005; Asheim and Isaksen, 2003; Porter, 2003, 1998.
3. Relational advantages <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trust between operators - Knowledge & capability sharing - Efficiency of organizational resources - Value sharing - Increased contacts with new customers and institutions (important network stakeholders) 	Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014; Fait, 2012; Breukel & Go, 2009; Saxena, 2005; Morrison, Lynch, Johns, 2004.
4. Brand advantages / land identity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - customer's perception of the specificity of tourism products deriving from the link with the destination (product-destination relation) - customer royalty creation 	Hall, 2005

2.2 Networks Operations

Within the management literature on networks, a considerable number of papers focuses on networks' operations. As for companies, the networks' activities may be split into (Porter, 1985): primary activities, related to product development, and support activities, focused on managing the network's operations to enhance its effectiveness.

Primary activities include the development of integrated products, the promotion of both services provided by network members and integrated products, reservations and sales (Denicolai, et al. 2010; Mitchell & van der Linden, 2010; Novelli et al. 2006). The implementation of one or more of these activities is

generally the motivation which leads to the institution of the network (Zehrer & Raich, 2010), and they are a source of competitive advantage for network's members.

The support activities include members' selection, control and support and coordination of the network. Those activities regulate the network's functioning and they guarantee network stability (Lemmetyinen & Go, 2009; Pesamaa et al. 2007; Romiti & Sarti, 2013; Zehrer & Raich, 2010).

Table 2: *Tourism Network Activities*

Activities undertaken by tourism networks	Reference studies
1. Promotion	Lemmetyinen & Go, 2010; Cawleya, Marsatb & Gillmor, 2007; Pforr, 2006; Braun, 2003; Telfer, 2001
2. Product development	Sfandla & Bjork, 2013; Novelli, Schmitz & Spencer, 2006; Mitchell & van der Linden, 2010; Petroua, Pantziou, Dimara & Skuras, 2007; Pavlovich, 2003
3. Booking and sale	Pencarelli, 2003; Braun, 2002
4. Coordination	Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Lemmetyinen & Go, 2009; Zucchella, 2007; Dredge, 2006
5. Selection, control and support	Pesamaa, Ortqvist & Hair, 2007; Huang, 2006; Ingram & Roberts, 2000

The majority of tourism contributions identify networks activities without examining "how" they are carried out, which is, however, an important factor in achieving a sustainable competitive advantage (Porter, 1985). This paper therefore aims to identify the ways in which tourism networks carry out their primary and support activities, highlighting various levels of sophistication through the empirical research described in the following sections.

3. Methodology

The methodology is based on an analysis of academic studies focusing on networking and a desk analysis of a sample of national and international business networks.

The international literature analysis on tourism networks aims to define the network concept, to identify the activities carried out by business networks and to pinpoint the main advantages that network strategies may offer to tourism companies. The analysis considers all the articles published in the two most prestigious international tourism reviews: *Annals of Tourism Research* and *Tourism Management*. These studies have been integrated by a keyword analysis of the articles published in other leading tourism journals, carried out on EBSCO, Google Scholar, and Science Direct data banks. The analysis covers the decade 2004-2014. Several articles published previously, comprising a reference for

theoretical studies on networks or presenting an empirical analysis of special interest¹, were also considered.

The empirical analysis is based on a mix method that combine quantitative and qualitative research (Brewer & Hunter, 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). It was carried out from January to April 2014 on a sample of 100 tourism business networks set up in the top 20 regional destinations for tourist overnights, plus the Italian Regions not included in that list (Veneto, Tuscany, Lazio and Lombardy had already appeared/been listed in the top 20 world tourism regions).

Network identification is based on a desk analysis of the official tourism websites managed by the regional destination management organization (hereafter DMO). If the regional website showed no networks, we checked on the Province portals, plus a desk study through keywords. The table below shows the sample composition and a descriptive of the quantitative results.

Table 3: *Descriptive Analysis (frequencies)*

Participants	47% homogeneous networks - composed of a single category of subjects (e.g. hotels), 53% heterogeneous networks
Composition	54% only private organizations, 46% private and public actors
Nationality	60% Italian, 40% European
Activities	promotion 100%
	product development 82%
	booking and sales 32%
	coordination 100%
	selection, control and support 100%

The sample includes a balanced mix of homogeneous (47%) and heterogeneous networks (53%). Even regarding the nature of the bodies involved, the sample includes a balanced mix of aggregations of private organizations (54% of sample) and aggregations of private and public actors (46%). Looking at the activities carried out by the network, support activities are present in the 100% of the sample, while primary activities show different frequencies. Promotion is a key activity, always present in tourism networks and in some cases it is the reason why they have been set up. Product development is quite present (82%), while booking and sales is carried out only by the 32% of the sample.

4. Qualitative Results

The different ways networks carry out primary and support activities has suggested the existence of three levels of maturity corresponding to growing levels of ability (elementary, intermediate, evolved) in carrying out operations.

Table 4: The Network's Maturity Model

Primary activities	Sophistication in network's operations		
	Basic level	Intermediate level	Advanced level
Reservation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Just a list of members' contacts (eg. link to their websites) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reservation without the possibility of buying online (eg. quotations and redirection of requests) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct sales through own tools or provided by third parties (eg reservation systems embedded in the site) Sales through intermediaries (TO, AdV, OLTA)
Product development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer of basic tourism products and services without any form of integration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presence of services directed at specific targets and / or thematic offers Possibility to design customized products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposal of experiential tourism offers Integration of not tourist industries (eg, agriculture, trade, handicrafts and other manufacturing activities)
Promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> List of the services offered by the network members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion of integrated tourism products through tools and dedicated channels (website, brochures, etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion of integrated tourism products through dedicated tools (website, brochures, etc.). Development and promotion of the network brand Presence of a communication/ marketing plan marketing
Support activities			
Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Informal coordination mechanisms Communication mainly unidirectional, from management / coordinator to members of the network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal coordination mechanisms (regular meetings) Formal coordination structures (eg board of directors and shareholders, etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal coordination mechanisms (regular meetings) Structured planning activities Dedicated full time managers with specialization of roles Institutional Communication to the territory (eg local communities, associations, public institutions)
Selection, control & support to members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aggregation operators on the basis of a feature / theme Generic requirements for membership No disciplinary Self-certification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Certification of the presence of specific services or requirements (eg, quality brand, disciplinary) Verification of the compliance with requirements only when entering the network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular Monitoring of compliance with the Support for the companies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training Coaching Dynamic disciplinary (Progressive increase of the services' level of quality) In heterogeneous networks, presence of a specific disciplinary for each category of subjects

Advanced reservation activities are based on third-party platforms (eg. reservation system embedded in the site), own platforms or through intermediaries (tour operators, travel agents, OTA). Although they can generate distribution costs, these platforms afford individual companies “process advantages” due to greater efficiency and “economic advantages” due to increased visibility and accessibility to the products, which results in higher market coverage and sales.

The product development activities, if operated on an advanced level, enable companies to enjoy the benefits of “relational advantages” due to more contacts with customers and partners in the destination; “process advantages” related to a joint product development; and “economic advantages” attributable to higher value for the customer. Indeed, they allow the network to create products characterized by a significant concept expressed in a brand/logo/theme that communicates a

unitary and consistent fruition experience, and which adds value to its components (services and attractions). Moreover, evolved product development activities generate coordinated price systems (e.g. cards) and customers' dynamic involvement in the choice of the product components according to their needs and preferences.

Finally, advanced promotion activities generate for network members both "process and economic advantages" due to promotion cost optimization and a greater brand visibility. Besides, they generate "advantages of brand/ land identity" as they increase the customers' perception of the unique features of the product, also in relation to the territory.

As for the support activities, if carried out with high levels of sophistication, they guarantee an efficient and effective network operations in the long term, which is a necessary condition for the development of the primary activities described above.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the academic literature proposing a taxonomy of the maturity levels of a network's operations, which corresponds to different levels of sophistication in performing network activities. Regarding managerial implications, the paper helps evaluate existing networks and define pathways to improving the effectiveness of the network in the long term. As networks put in place by DMOs are quite diffused worldwide, the findings of this study could be of interest not only for network managers, but also for destination managers in charge of network development.

The empirical study has some limitations related to the empirical research methodology, which relies only on secondary data, potentially incomplete but able to retrieve the behaviours actually existing. Moreover, to ensure greater objectivity in the results, each network was analyzed independently by two researchers.

This exploratory study should be strengthened by further research based on larger samples. The hypothesis is that advanced business networks offer greater advantages to their members compared to basic networks. The evidence presented in this paper represents only a first step in a process of ongoing research, which will focus on the measurement of the network effectiveness.

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Attachment 1: The Tourism Networks included in the Sample

Region	N. networks	Network name
Abruzzo	1	Provincia del benessere
Alto Adige	6	Vitalpina Hotels, Gallo Rosso - Osterie contadine, Bikehotels Südtirol, Belvita Leading Wellnesshotels, Familienhotels Südtirol, Südtirol privat – affittacamere
Basilicata	8	Bike Hotel Basilicata, Walking Hotel Basilicata, Sapori di Basilicata, Mountain bike hotel Basilicata, Vacanza attiva Basilicata, Family hotel Basilicata, Ospitalità Glamour, B&B Qualità
Emilia Romagna	4	Unioni di prodotto: Città d'Arte, Costa Adriatica, Appennino e Verde, Terme
Friuli Venezia Giulia	6	L'Italia della Grande Guerra, Terre di Aquileia by Bike, Family Hotels & Campings, Dimore di charme, Terra dei Patriarchi, Albergo diffuso
Lazio	1	Strada del vino cesanese
Liguria	2	Club Hiking, Club Biking
Lombardy	1	Strada del vino/sapori della Valtellina
Piedmont	3	Club Sapori Torinesi, Bed&Bike, Residenze Reali di Torino e del Piemonte
Sardinia	1	Domos Historicas
Tuscany	1	Strada del Chianti Classico
Trentino	10	Osterie Tipiche Trentine, Dolomiti Walking Hotels, Vitanova wellness, Giocovacanza family hotels, Cuore rurale, Trentino Charme, Trentino in moto, B&B di qualità, Club Appartamenti, Qualità parco adamello-brenta
Umbria	6	Umbria Experience, Strade del vino e dell'olio, Umbria Benessere, Umbria Bike Hotel, Umbriamore, Umbria Convention Bureau
Valle d'Aosta	6	Saveurs du Val d'Aoste, Bike Valle d'Aosta, Wellness Valle d'Aosta, Slow holiday, Viva Vda, Route des Vins
Veneto	4	Associazione Ville Venete, Treviso provincia dello sport, Strada del vino dei colli euganei, Club AgriCycle Veneto
International networks		
Andalusia (E)	7	Caminos de Cultura, Naturaleza y paisajes, Caminos de los Sentidos, Caminos de la Tradición, Caminos de Emoción, Caminos de lo Auténtico, Andalusian Wilderness
Aquitaine (F)	1	Destination Vignobles
Balearic Islands (E)	3	Club de Producto Náutico, Club de productro gastronomico Menorca, Mallorca Golf Island
Canary Islands (E)	4	Volcanic Experience, Water Sports Experience, Wellness Delight, Family Welcome
Catalunya (E)	8	Destinació de Turisme Esportiu, Cultura Catalunya, Turisme Gastronòmic, Actiu-Natura, Turisme de Golf, Programa Turisme Accessible, Programa Turisme Rural, Destinació de Turisme Familiar
Valensian Communities (E)	2	Club de Producto Turismo Náutico, Club de Producto Turismo de Salud y Calidad de Vida
Lingua d'Oc (F)	2	Cercle Prestige, Club Business
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (D)	1	Familienurlaub MV – Geprüfte Qualität
Oberbayern / Baviera (D)	3	Fahrradfreundlichen Hotel- und Gaststättenbetriebe, Alpen-Kulinarik Gasthöfe, Motorradfreundlicher Hotel- und Gastronomiebetrieb
Provence Alps Cote d'Azur (F)	3	Golf Tourism PACA, Destination Prestige Provence, Bistrot de Pays
Tyrol (A)	6	5 tirolergletscher, Climbers Paradise Tirol, Nature watch tirol, Wander Hotels, Familienhotels Tirol, Vacanze in fattoria

Notes

ⁱ Tourism journals: Annals of Tourism Research, International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, Journal of Destination Marketing and Management, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, The Service Industries Journal, Tourism Management, World Journal of Tourism Small Business Management.

International management journals: Harvard Business Review, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Organization Science, Strategic Management Journal.

Italian journals: Amministrazione e finanza, Impresa progetto, Sinergie.