



## Destination competitiveness: A phenomenographic study



Margarida Abreu Novais<sup>a, \*</sup>, Lisa Ruhanen<sup>b</sup>, Charles Arcodia<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Griffith University, Australia

<sup>b</sup> University of Queensland, Australia

### HIGHLIGHTS

- An outcome space for destination competitiveness with three hierarchically related conceptions is presented.
- Previously overlooked elements of destination competitiveness are discussed.
- A unique research approach, phenomenography, is employed.

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### ABSTRACT

The destination competitiveness literature, while well established, is fraught with inconsistencies over its definition, measurement and its legitimacy as a topic of research. Given the divide that exists, this paper proposes a phenomenographic approach to the study of destination competitiveness. Specifically, the paper argues that efforts to advance destination competitiveness should be preceded by a better understanding of how destination stakeholders conceptualize the term.

This paper explores how destination stakeholders understand destination competitiveness. The findings reveal three distinct conceptions of destination competitiveness which are hierarchically related: destination competitiveness as *perception of a destination*, destination competitiveness as *performance*, and destination competitiveness as a *long-term process*. Additional features of destination competitiveness are discussed including the relationship between competitiveness and attractiveness, and the dynamic nature of the competitor set. This paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for advancing the destination competitiveness concept.

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## 1. Introduction

Intensified competition between destinations, concerns over limited resources, and the recognition of competitiveness as a critical success factor, have all contributed to an expanding body of literature on tourism destination competitiveness (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2004). Indeed, the past two decades have witnessed a multiplicity of efforts from tourism scholars, destination managers and international organizations alike to attempt to measure the competitiveness of cities, regions and even countries as tourism destinations, as well as identify the factors that can contribute to their enhanced and sustained competitive positions.

Despite its clear popularity as a topic of research, the study of

tourism destination competitiveness has been marked by controversy and confusion. At the root of this polemic debate are three important and interconnected causes. Firstly, there is the widely recognized complexity of the concept (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009; Li, Song, Cao, & Wu, 2013). Different perspectives have been employed to explore the topic including the original attractiveness approach (Bramwell & Rawding, 1996; Chon, Weaver, & Kim, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Faulkner, Oppermann & Fredline, 1999; Kim, 1998), the price level approach (Dwyer, Forsyth, & Rao, 2000, 2002), and recently more holistic multi-layered approaches (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). In addition to these approaches, the topic of destination competitiveness, given its scope and complexity, can and has been linked to an array of areas within the broader tourism destination management sphere including branding, image (Uysal, Chen, & Williams, 2000), marketing and management (Buhalis, 2000). Furthermore, given the destination as the unit of analysis, concepts such as place making and place branding which are inherent and implicit within the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [m.abreunovais@griffith.edu.au](mailto:m.abreunovais@griffith.edu.au) (M. Abreu Novais).

destination competitiveness concept, have been referred to (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003). As a result, a multiplicity of approaches and related constructs have been encompassed within the concept (Heath, 2003).

Secondly, the multifaceted nature of the concept has led to the lack of consensus around its definition (Azzopardi, 2011; Botti & Peypoch, 2013; Mazanec, Wöber, & Zins, 2007). A variety of definitions have been proposed and a recent review (Abreu-Novais, Ruhanen, & Arcodia, 2015a) revealed that these definitions generally entail the following dimensions: economics, attractiveness and satisfaction, and sustainability. The economic dimension, which is often regarded as the central facet of competitiveness (Li et al., 2013), includes “price differentials coupled with exchange rates movements, productivity levels of various components of the tourist industry” (Dwyer et al., 2000, p. 9), “objectively measured variables such as visitor numbers, market share, tourist expenditure, employment, value added by the tourism industry” (Heath, 2003, p. 9) and “ability to increase tourism expenditure” (Crouch & Ritchie, 2012, p. vii).

The second dimension commonly identified across definitions relates to the notion of attractiveness and satisfaction (Enright & Newton, 2004; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Here, it is recognized that destinations must strive to appeal to visitors and also offer a tourism experience that is superior to competing destinations (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Sustainability is the final dimension found in much of the academic discourse on competitiveness. While Crouch and Ritchie (1999) referred to ‘sustainable competitiveness’ as incorporating ecological, social and cultural stewardship more broadly, subsequent definitions have tended to adopt a resource-based and environmental focus of sustainability. Examples of this include “preserving the natural capital of the destination for future generations” (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003, p. 2), and “create and integrate value-added products that sustain its resources” (Hassan, 2000, p. 239). Or, as Buhalis (2000, p. 9) notes, “destination competitiveness must also recognize the sustainability of local resources for ensuring the maintenance of long-term success as well as the achievement of equitable returns-on-resources utilized to satisfy all stakeholders”.

Finally, and stemming from the absence of a widely accepted and clear definition of destination competitiveness, is the disagreement as to the most effective and rigorous way of measuring it. Once again, multiple approaches have been employed resulting in different and often conflicting answers to three essential questions: *What is measured? How is it measured? and Who measures it?* (Abreu-Novais et al., 2015a). Empirical attempts to identify and assess destination competitiveness remain constrained by the debates and contradictions in conceptualizing the term. Furthermore, although academic discourse on the topic broadly acknowledges the multiplicity of existing views (Abreu Novais, Ruhanen, & Arcodia, 2015b; Mazanec et al., 2007; Zehrer, Smeral, & Hallmann, 2017), it has yet to ‘take stock’ and explore these variations and relationships in understanding the concept. Arguably any further investigation of destination competitiveness should be informed by a more thorough understanding of the conceptualizations of the term from those stakeholders who are responsible for operationalizing the concept in practice; that is, supply-side stakeholders including government, business owners, associations and local residents, as well as tourists whose perspectives have long been recognized as important in any attempts to measure competitiveness.

Recognizing these limitations and gaps, and in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of competitiveness, this paper returns to the foundations of the concept by investigating what actually constitutes destination competitiveness and the spectrum

of perspectives on the concept. Accordingly, the focus of this paper is not to discuss how the tourist actually makes decisions about competing destinations, instead its aim is to investigate how individuals (representing different stakeholders) view the concept of destination competitiveness. The approach adopted, phenomenography, is an interpretive methodology recognized for its value in unveiling the qualitatively different ways of understanding and experiencing a phenomenon (Marton, 1981). It provides the opportunity for further investigation as it allows for an array of first person experiences of destination competitiveness therefore enabling a more holistic view that reflects stakeholders’ perspectives. As such, this paper provides a critical re-evaluation of the destination competitiveness concept. Utilizing phenomenography as a novel research lens provides the opportunity to extend existing literature on the topic by contributing new and insightful viewpoints and conceptualizations of the destination competitiveness concept.

## 2. Views on destination competitiveness

Academic interest in how destinations can succeed in a highly competitive market grew until the late 1990s with various tourism scholars highlighting the importance of this topic (Buhalis, 2000), while others focused on the competitive position of particular destinations (Haahti, 1986; Tsai & Wang, 1998). It was, however, Crouch and Ritchie’s (1999) seminal work that put destination competitiveness on the tourism research ‘map’. Their grounded-research approach, which entailed multiple modes of data collection, produced the first model of destination competitiveness. Following their work, the topic progressed to include various perspectives on the term, different conceptual models and the identification of a wide range of determinants and factors, as well as a multiplicity of measurement approaches.

Since the early investigations in this field, many researchers have attempted to define destination competitiveness. Being labeled as a vague (Hanafiah, Hemdi, & Ahmad, 2015) and complex (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009; Li et al., 2013) construct, defining the concept has proven to be a challenging task. Within the various available definitions and conceptualizations of the term, it is possible to recognize that destination competitiveness seems to be linked to the notion of “ability”. This has been one of the most commonly referred to elements in definitional statements (Abreu-Novais et al., 2015a) and refers to the capacity of a destination to achieve certain goals. The actual goals that a destination is aiming to achieve are wide-ranging but can be categorized into three dimensions: economic and the associated well-being of the population (Azzopardi, 2011; Bahar & Kozak, 2007; Dwyer, Mellor, Livaic, Edwards, & Kim, 2004; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003), attractiveness and satisfaction (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2004) and sustainability (Azzopardi, 2011; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Hassan, 2000).

Academics have also been concerned with the development of theoretical models that aim to identify and explain the forces that drive destination competitiveness. A considerable number of models have been proposed (Andrades-Caldito, Sánchez-Rivero, & Pulido-Fernández, 2014; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Goffi, 2013; Heath, 2003; Omerzel, 2006; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) and their impact has ranged from incremental contributions through to major advances that have included the development of complex models with exhaustive lists of indicators. Among the existing frameworks, again Ritchie and Crouch’s (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) model of destination competitiveness is regarded as the most comprehensive theoretical explanation of the concept (Boley & Perdue, 2012; Hudson, Ritchie, & Timur, 2004; Tsai, Song, & Wong, 2009), and has inspired the development of subsequent

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