



## Conceptual tools for evaluating tourism partnerships

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### ABSTRACT

Network and stakeholder analyses in tourism studies typically offer schema, typologies, and frameworks that contribute to the conceptual development of the subject area. What has been lacking is the managerial application of network research in tourism. This paper offers a method for investigating and conceptualising network relationships in a regional tourism district. The fieldwork was undertaken in the Australian wine region of the Hunter Valley. The findings are analysed using four different approaches to the conceptualisation and classification of interorganisational relationships in a tourism region: (1) the application of a value net to the region's stakeholders, (2) the generation of a partnership-activities matrix, (3) an ecological approach using Budowski's (Budowski, G., 1976. *Tourism and conservation: conflict, coexistence or symbiosis. Environmental Conservation*, 3(1), 27–31.) typology and (4) by identifying the competition for scarce resources among tourism stakeholders. Managerial implications for each approach are described.

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### 1. Introduction

The quality of the experience offered by a tourist destination is more than the sum of its parts; it depends in important ways on how the organisational parts are interconnected, the way they act and interact and the relations between the actors involved. Tourist destinations are conceptualised as industrial districts – geographic areas that can be defined at various levels of aggregation from narrowly defined tourist destinations to towns, cities, regions and countries. Whatever the level of aggregation, they comprise many different types of organisations and people that, together, create the value offering for tourists visiting the area. The organisations involved include more than those directly offering tourist services and experiences, such as accommodation, transport, entertainment and activity providers and tourist booking information and other services. They include those involved in providing general amenities available in the areas such as local government authorities, local business operators (including retailers and service providers and other local producers) and the local community generally. Value is created and delivered to tourists by a complex network of interacting and interdependent actors. The actors include those directly interacting with tourists in planning and delivering various types of tourist experiences and those actors who directly and indirectly support and facilitate such interactions. The tourist is also an active player in the co-production of the tourist experience.

The paper is organised as follows: First we examine the role and significance of interorganisational relations and networks is generating, enabling and constraining customer value and how this relates to the tourism industry. Next, we describe the results of an in-depth study of the organisational relations and networks involved in a particular tourism region in Australia. We then discuss the implications of our research and theory regarding the nature and role of relations and networks for tourism practice and research.

### 2. The role of organisational relations and networks in creating and delivering the tourism experience

Individuals, organisations and firms are not isolated, independent actors separately contributing their piece to the total value created for customers; they are parts of value chains and networks through which value is co-created and co-delivered. Recognition of the important role of relations and networks in business and marketing is growing fast. People, organisations and firms depend on other people, organisations and firms in important ways in carrying out their tasks and achieving their goals. They rely on key inputs from others in the form of various products and services, including material goods, personal and professional services, information and funds; they depend on others to use, transfer, transform and combine their outputs into meaningful goods and services for others; they depend on regulators, communities and industry bodies to protect and sustain them and their workers; they depend on competitors to challenge and inform them about new possibilities and threats.

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An individual firm's performance, therefore, depends on more than what it does; it depends on the behaviour of others that it is connected to directly *and* indirectly. This is no more obvious than in the case of a tourist destination that comprises many types of firms and other organisations contributing to the experience and satisfaction of tourists and to the general economic success of the region. Some of these are located in the tourist destination; others are located elsewhere but play an important role in linking it to sources of tourists, including other tourist destinations, as well as to other types of inputs required by a tourist destination to function effectively and efficiently. The performance of a tourist destination depends in important ways on the links between these various component actors, not just on their individual characteristics.

Relations and networks enable and constrain what firms and organisations can see, know, think and do (Wilkinson, 2008). They play two basic roles in business. The first arises from economies of specialization – relations and networks are the *means by which the benefits of division of labour and specialization are realized*. Here they play a role “in accessing, combining, recombining and coordinating the activities, resources and outputs of people and firms specializing in different parts of the overall process of value creation and delivery” (Wilkinson, p. 23). The second basic role is in *shaping the dynamics and evolution of business* through their impacts on innovation and learning. Knowledge and ideas diffuse through business systems via the relations and networks connecting economic actors and, as a result, they enable and constrain what individual actors can and do, know and think. They also enable and constrain what we can do with our knowledge and ideas. “They are the means by which the knowledge, skills and resources required to develop, exploit and commercialise new ideas are marshalled and coordinated” (Wilkinson, p. 25).

These two roles underlie the various types and functions of business relations and networks identified in the literature (e.g. Anderson, Hakansson, & Johanson, 1994; Walter, Muller, Helfert, & Ritter, 2003; Walter, Ritter, & Gemunden, 2001). These functions include: (a) dyadic or direct functions, such as being a major input supplier, a major customer or distributor for a firm's outputs, or a safeguard source or outlet; and (b) indirect or network functions, such being a source of information, advice, referrals, introductions and support. Dysfunctions can arise when relations and networks limit what a firm or organisation can know and do, because of the burdens and commitments of the past and the patterns of links established.

The development and management of relations and networks presents considerable challenges for firms and organisations (Ritter, Wilkinson, & Johnston, 2004). Relations and networks are not owned and controlled by individual actors, though some may exert considerable influence. Rather, they are co-produced by the actors involved and develop or not in productive ways (or not) based on the interactions taking place over time, including both economic and social dimensions. The role of collaborative relations has been the subject of much research interest in management and marketing of late, as attention has focused on collaborative advantage as a key determinant of a firm's competitive advantage (e.g. Davis & Spekman, 2004; Dyer, 2000; Wilkinson, 2008).

There is also evidence of increased attention being given to the role of business relations and networks in improving tourist industry performance. For example, collaborative marketing alliances between public and private sector organisations have become increasingly popular in regional Australia. Attracting more tourists can benefit not only the narrow financial objectives of tourism operators, but also the more diverse social objectives of the public sector. The benefits of collaboration in tourism have been investigated for two decades (cf. Boivin, 1987; Gunn, 1988; Stevens, 1988). Local government organisations, for example, have three compelling reasons for being involved in the promotion of tourism:

(1) increased tourism generates additional revenue for the local authority, by creating more local jobs and thus lowering unemployment. Increased expenditure on tourism may also improve the image of an area and encourage further tourism and non-tourism-related investment; (2) in regional areas, in particular, the private sector is unlikely to have the necessary financial (or managerial) resources to allocate for effective destination marketing; and (3) local government organisations are responsible for providing vital elements of the tourism experience, such as interpretation of cultural and historical sites, visitor information centres and upkeep of infrastructure such as signage, parks and gardens, street cleaning, car parks, and retail districts. Palmer (1996) identifies three ‘marketing practices’ that local government associations (LGAs) could implement to enhance the quality of the tourist experience in the destination: first, regular tourism-related training for council staff not directly employed in tourism (e.g. car park attendants, street cleaners); secondly, regular consultation tourism department/planning department on matters of planning and conservation; and thirdly, regular consultation between the tourism officer(s) and technical services department on matters of car parking, street cleaning and public convenience provision.

In Australia, policy initiatives aimed at generating greater economic wealth through the creation of industry networks or clusters has typically ignored tourism. Roberts and Enright's (2004) overview of industry clustering in Australia makes no mention of tourism, even though the authors examine, ironically, the Hunter region in detail. Tourism destinations lend themselves well to network analysis, since they comprise multiple suppliers from a range of businesses and sectors. It is the quality and complementarity of these suppliers and other tourist services available that will determine the appeal and ultimate satisfaction of the destination experience for the visitor just as the successful leveraging of interorganisational relationships will largely determine the effectiveness and efficiency of, among other things, collaborative marketing activities that stimulate awareness and ultimately demand for the destination.

At the regional level, the typical tourism network is a nexus between state tourism organisation, the regional tourism organisation, the local council(s), local tourist associations and tourism operators. These networks operate more efficiently and effectively in some regions than others. Organisations in a network can be regarded as economic actors, which are inter-related through a web of resources and activities. Value is created by actors who perform and control activities that are based on control over critical resources, and include social content by developing relationships with each other through exchange processes (Axelsson & Easton, 1992; Hakansson and Snehota, 1995). Though these critical resources are often physical, it is knowledge-intensive intangibles such as effective organisation and leveraging of relationships that add significant value to firms.

Though one of the key determinants of the sustainable growth of the tourism industry in regional areas is the development of effective networks and partnerships between actors, research on the topic has been sparse. Pforr (2006) investigated network formation and the organisational influences in the formulation of a tourism development plan for the Northern Territory in Australia. The analysis highlighted the dominant position of political-administrative actors in the process, with the only other players able to gain access to the “exclusive circle” being the regional tourism associations. Earlier, Pforr (2001) employed a five-stage policy cycle model – agenda setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation and review – as a tool to analyse the process of tourism policy formulation and decision-making. The application of the analytical tool was useful, offering destination policy-makers a ‘roadmap’ for tourism planning. Tourism policy related to destination development is, however, not the

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