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Research Paper

## Destinations' relational dynamic and tourism development

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## ABSTRACT

Social network analysis is a very useful tool for planning and management of tourist destinations. This paper applies it to 16 tourist destinations in Andalusia (Spain) with different levels of tourist development in order to establish the extent to which this development is conditioned by the relational dynamics of its tourist stakeholders. Results obtained show there is a direct increasing relationship between the network characteristics of stakeholders for a tourist destination and its level of tourist development. In other words, when the operation of the stakeholder networks improves, there is an increase in the level of tourist development at destination.

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is a dynamic, transversal, relational phenomenon. It must therefore be analysed and understood as a social phenomenon, understood from a systemic perspective. This requires tools to facilitate the analysis both of its different components and the relationships between them. However, this cannot be done from a single perspective, as tourism is such a complex phenomenon that such a procedure will depend on the objective of the analysis and study, always bearing in mind that the relationships between these components and dimensions should be considered key elements of the analysis.

Over the last two decades, social network analysis (SNA) has become one of the most used research methods in tourism studies. The network sciences approach is a useful tool for tourism destination planning and management because it facilitates understanding of the structure of the destination, can reveal the interactions between stakeholders, identifies leadership, allows the processes for the transmission of information and knowledge among stakeholders to be evaluated, can be used to build and implement simulation models to analyse possible changes in the interactions between stakeholders and, in short, can help to manage the social capital of a destination.

SNA is a theoretical-methodological framework which has been applied to research in the different social sciences (Requena, 2003)

and has become particularly important in analysis over the last 20 years. SNA has been applied in many different fields of social sciences, including health, public policy, economic development and business organisations. (Molina, 2001). Over the last decade, increasing research worldwide has resulted in similar suggestions for different aspects of the tourism phenomenon, including the work of Baggio, Scott, and Cooper (2010), Da Fontoura, Costa & Baggio (2009), Denicolai, Cioccarelli, and Zucchella (2010), Larsen, Urry, and Axhausen (2007), Merinero-Rodríguez and Pulido-Fernández (2009), Nash (2006), Racherla and Hu (2010), Rodger, Moore, and Newsome (2009), Saxena and Ilbery (2008), Scott, Baggio & Cooper (2008), Scott, Cooper, and Baggio (2007), Tinsley and Lynch (2001) and Van der Duim (2007).

The hypothesis guiding the research featured in this paper uses the conclusions from work by Merinero-Rodríguez and Pulido-Fernández (2009) and Pearce (2014) as a starting point, to establish that there is a direct relationship between the reticular characteristics of the stakeholder network in a tourism destination and the destination's level of tourism development. The aim of this paper is therefore to examine the production dynamics developed by the different tourism stakeholders in each of a number of city destinations in order to establish whether the operations resulting from the interaction of stakeholders has a direct relationship with their level of tourism development. The analysis was carried out in 16 medium-sized inland cities in Andalusia, Spain. These cities have similar socio-economic and spatial characteristics (making case comparisons easier) and operate as tourism destinations, some more consolidated than others. A qualitative leap is therefore proposed with respect to the studies carried out to date, which have tended to focus on specific destinations. The present study is

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an extensive, comparative study, making it possible to reach conclusions that can be generalised beyond the specific case analysed.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first details the theoretical framework by examining the different lines of research appearing in the relational perspective of tourism studies. Secondly, the methodology and analytical proposal used are detailed, focusing on the concept of destination, on the unit of analysis of the productive process and on the study of the characteristic interactions between tourism stakeholders. The third section discusses the results obtained in order to determine the relationship between the operation of the network of tourism activities and the level of tourism development in the 16 case studies. Finally, the main conclusion of the study is presented, together with some recommendations for the development of future research into the relational perspective in tourism studies.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The relational approach to tourism studies has been a frequently studied subject in the literature. However, it is notable different lines of SNA research have been used in the field of tourism as tools for studying and explaining that phenomenon. This has been reflected in the existence of different lines of tourism research from a relational perspective. These have been modified over time, becoming increasingly complex as a result of the advances and improvements in concepts, units of analysis, research tools and techniques that focus on the study of relationships.

Since the 1970s, different analytical approaches have been used to explain the relationships between the key elements that are essential to tourism (Merinero-Rodríguez & Pulido-Fernández, 2016). The first of these approaches (the 'social science' approach) established these relationships as conceptual elements of a framework of understanding (Hendee, 1975; Jafari, 1979), based on the premise that the tourism system is extremely complex, making it necessary to pay attention to the relationships established between the different elements of tourism.

An initial advance in the analysis of tourism from a relational perspective occurred in the 1980s through the introduction of a second framework, widely known as the 'community approach'. This is based on the consideration of the negative effects that tourism could have on the residents of tourist locations. Therefore, residents need to be taken into account when approaching tourism interventions and proposals. In this case, the relationships were used to study the interaction between the local population and the elements boosting tourism activity in a specific territory (Murphy, 1985).

The 1990s also saw an advance in the relational analysis of tourism analysis with the incorporation of the concept of a third 'tourism system' approach, which highlighted how tourism as a productive activity is the result of the interactions and combinations between the different components of the tourism product, and between these components and the tourists (Beni, 1993; UNWTO, 1994). The authors cited above (Merinero-Rodríguez & Pulido-Fernández, 2016) refers to a fourth line of research, which they call 'stakeholder approach'. According to these authors, the main advance made by this line of research is the integration of the concept of the stakeholder as a key element for sustaining an analytical strategy.

Another major analytical advance in the relational perspective of tourism took place at the beginning of this century. This advance was the concept of 'tourism cluster' and its main contribution is the consideration of the operation of tourism as a productive system, making it necessary to incorporate multidimensional

analyses of the relationships between the tourism stakeholders in a specific destination (Michael, 2007; Richards & Hall, 2003). This goes beyond the metaphorical content of the tourism system, and the relationships between the different tourism stakeholders of the area are associated with its productive operation.

The last decade has seen another analytical advance, relating to 'tourism networks' and is the result of the consolidated application of the theoretical-analytical framework of SNA to the study of tourism (Scott & Laws, 2010). Since approximately 2005, studies adopting this line of research have appeared in response to the application of the theoretical-methodological trends which have arisen in the field of social sciences in general and applied to tourism studies. In the case, it is the application of SNA to tourism studies, which in the last few years has become an important topic in the scientific literature on tourism (Scott et al., 2007).

In this respect, it can be argued that the application of theoretical, methodological and technical SNA principles to the study of tourism constitutes important scientific progress in terms of the use of relationships as a mechanism to explain the characteristics of the tourism phenomenon. It has made it possible to gradually incorporate the dynamic dimensions of relationships into the scientific field of tourism, in contrast with the static dimensions used by the other lines of research mentioned above. In other words, it has made it possible to identify the structural characteristics of the networks, not so much the factors or dimensions which make the existence of relationships possible, but the study and consideration of the relationships themselves as structural components of the network connecting the tourism stakeholders (Gibson, Lynch, & Morrison, 2005).

Incorporating the dimensions of relationships into tourism analysis that are not situated in the domain of stakeholders and their strategies for intervening in or producing relationships, is thus of less important. Rather, it is vital to consider the relationships themselves, their structures, the network as a group of components and indicators that can provide knowledge of the operation of the tourist interactions taking place in a specific territory.

There has therefore been a gradual incorporation of SNA approaches and indicators into tourism studies, such as the density of the relationships of the tourism networks (Dredge, 2006a, 2006b; McLeod, Vaughan, & Edwards, 2010); the centrality of the networks and the stakeholders who are part of tourism networks (Brás, Costa & Buhalis, 2010; Grangsjö, 2006; Lovelock, 2001; Pansiri, 2009); the degree of intermediation that facilitates the connectivity of the tourism networks (Bhat & Milne, 2008; Zach & Racherla, 2011; Ramayah, Lee, & In, 2011) or the importance of the cohesion of tourism networks measured through indicators of cliques and subgroups (Brendle & Patterson, 2010). Also, due to its special relevance to this research, it is important to consider how the characteristics of the networks of tourism actors are directly related to the behaviour and management of tourist destinations (Cooper, Scott, & Baggio, 2009; Scott, Cooper & Baggio, 2008).

## 3. Methodology

The main objective of SNA is the study of the structural properties of the networks, understood as a set of nodes (elements) and the connections between them: i.e. relationships (Wasserman & Galaskiewicz, 1994). It is a case, therefore, of making the reticular properties of the network, rather than the individual characteristics of the elements which make possible the relationships on which it is based, the centre of interest. Thus, the unit of analysis is the network and its properties, rather than the attributive characteristics of the elements forming this network (Marsden & Lin, 1982).

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