

Managing rural destinations in an evolving society: an empirical research[♦]

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Abstract

Due to the current complex socio-economic and ecological challenges, there is an urgent need in tourism literature and practice to rethink destination management models. Thus, this paper draws on the conceptualisation of the tourism destination as an ecosystem and develops a co-evolutionary destination management model that allows grasping the relationships and temporal dynamics between destination key actors. The study investigates the Castelli Romani rural destination comprised of 16 geographically proximate municipalities near Rome. Then, the proposed model is applied to this destination by mainly looking at the dynamic interplay between its key actors and underlying ecosystem evolution towards (un)sustainability. Results show the crucial role of sustainable entrepreneurship in this dynamic and the importance for destination management organisations (DMO) to involve sustainable and innovative entrepreneurs, reinforcing the entrepreneurial vision of destination development. From that, both theoretical and practical implications are derived.

Keywords: entrepreneurship; destination; co-evolution; management; ecosystem; case study.

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Sommario

A causa delle attuali complesse sfide socio-economiche ed ecologiche, vi è un urgente bisogno nella letteratura e nella pratica del turismo di ripensare i modelli di gestione delle destinazioni. Pertanto, questo articolo - attingendo dalla concettualizzazione della destinazione turistica come ecosistema - sviluppa un modello co-evolutivo di gestione della destinazione che consente di cogliere le relazioni e le dinamiche temporali tra gli attori chiave della stessa. In particolare, lo studio esamina la destinazione rurale dei Castelli Romani, vicino Roma, composta da 16 comuni. Il modello co-evolutivo proposto viene applicato a questa destinazione osservando l'interazione dinamica tra i suoi attori chiave e l'evoluzione dell'ecosistema verso la (in)sostenibilità. I risultati mostrano il ruolo cruciale dell'imprenditorialità sostenibile e l'importanza per le Destination Management Organization (DMO) di saper coinvolgere gli imprenditori sostenibili e innovativi, al fine di rafforzare la visione imprenditoriale della destinazione. Da tutto ciò emergono rilevanti implicazioni teoriche e pratiche.

Keywords: imprenditorialità; destinazione turistica; co-evoluzione; management; ecosistema; caso studio.

1. Introduction

There is an urgent need in tourism literature and practice for rethinking destination management models due to the current complex socio-economic and ecological challenges (UNWTO, 2022). In particular, as emphasised by Guerreiro (2022), what seems to be missing is a management model through which destinations can: *i)* adequately respond to the challenges in place and *ii)* play a crucial role in the recovery process of the tourism industry. In this regard, it is evident that none of the key destination actors (i.e., tourism firms, institutions, local communities, and tourists) – individually considered – can face these challenges and fill this role (Kamata, 2022; Paniccia *et al.*, 2018).

Therefore, a major need is to develop new destination management models according to holistic approaches (Fyall & Garrod, 2019) to increase knowledge and awareness of the dynamics of the relationship between these actors and how they can be appropriately managed to promote sustainability (Agapito *et al.*, 2022; Sigala, 2020).

Hence, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: *What management model can a destination adopt to consider all its actors and foster its sustainable development holistically?*

Thus, this article aims to answer this question by adopting a co-evolutionary lens that allows grasping the relationships and temporal dynamics among destination key actors. To do so, firstly, a co-evolutionary model is developed, drawing on the conceptualisation of the tourism destination as an ecosystem. Secondly, the paper presents the Castelli Romani rural destination (located near Rome) according to key actors' stories. Then, the proposed model is applied to the destination, mainly looking at the dynamic interplay between its key actors and underlying ecosystem evolution towards (un)sustainability. Results show the crucial role of sustainable entrepreneurship in this dynamic and the importance for destination management organisation (DMO) to involve sustainable and innovative entrepreneurs, reinforcing the entrepreneurial vision of destination development.

By doing so, this paper provides interesting theoretical and practical contributions. Concerning the former, this study advances destination management studies by adopting a co-evolutionary approach (e.g., García-Cabrera *et al.*, 2016; Leoni & Cristofaro, 2021; Paniccia & Leoni, 2019). In fact, the provided co-evolutionary model contributes to the debate on destination management that calls for a more holistic and inclusive approach (e.g., Fyall & Garrod, 2019; Guerreiro, 2022), especially regarding the sustainability and competitiveness of destinations (e.g., Agapito *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, this paper expands previous co-evolutionary tourism studies (e.g., Cristofaro *et al.*, 2020; Paniccia & Leoni, 2019) by considering multiple destination actors simultaneously; thus, confirming the co-evolutionary lens as a fruitful approach for holistically and dynamically studying relationships in the tourism field. Lastly, the results of this research furtherly emphasise the crucial role sustainable entrepreneurs play in destination development (e.g., Sørensen & Grindsted, 2021), proposing that their practices – when mindful of environmental and social concerns alongside economic ones – can foster ecosystems' sustainability (Agapito *et al.*, 2022).

Concerning the *practical implications*, the provided co-evolutionary destination management model suggests tourism entrepreneurs and policymakers to *i)* enhance local sub-systems identities; *ii)* innovate the tourism offering through start-ups and digitalisation; *iii)* identify specific tourist targets; and, *iv)* invest in advanced training courses.

2. Tourism destination as a co-evolutionary ecosystem

Over the last decade, the need to manage destinations holistically, considering key relationships among numerous actors at multiple levels, has

been increasingly acknowledged (e.g., Hillebrand, 2022). Paniccia and Baiocco (2020) emphasise that such interplay can be better understood in the context of complex adaptive *ecosystems*. In fact, every tourism destination is made by a plurality of local sub-systems, each characterised by its specific interacting factors and relations of power and proximity. Conceived in this way, tourism destination needs to be wisely managed (Buhalis & Cooper, 2022) to effectively integrate the various resources, services, and stakeholders and create a seamless tourist customer experience with positive effects on sustainability (Fyall & Garrod, 2019), especially in the current post-pandemic contest (e.g., Li et al., 2022).

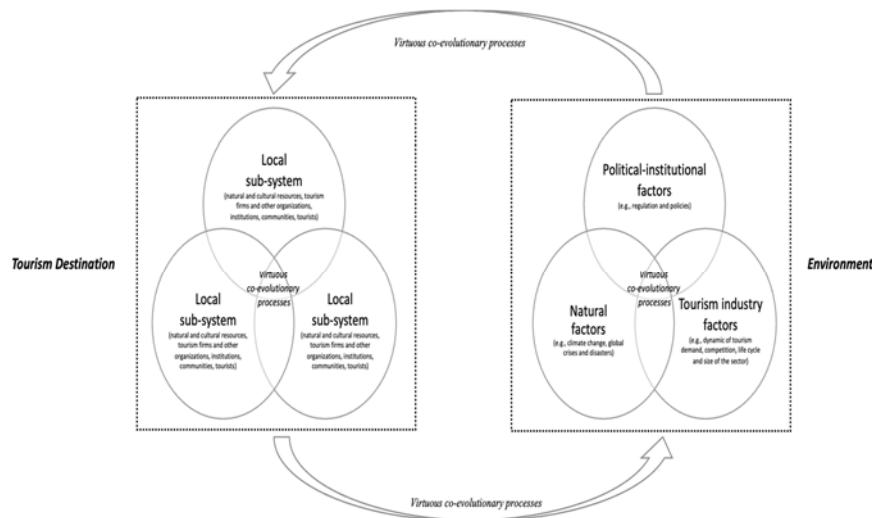
In this regard, as emphasized by Guerreiro (2022), tourism destinations are called – now as never before – to reconsider their current management model considering the dynamics of the relationship between the different actors (i.e., multistakeholder) at different levels (i.e., multilevel) within the destination and how they can progress toward sustainability (Sigala, 2020).

To do so, the co-evolutionary approach seems appropriate for holistically exploring the complex and dynamic relationships within the destination (i.e., ecosystem) and its external environment. Co-evolution, in fact, has made its way into tourism studies of the last decade as a useful lens to explain the interdependencies between destinations and their external environment and their temporal dynamics (Paniccia & Baiocco, 2020; Paniccia & Leoni, 2019). In other words, the co-evolutionary perspective constitutes a suitable interpretative lens for an exhaustive and balanced analysis of the complex dynamics connected to the multidimensionality of the tourism phenomenon, favouring the overcoming of partial analyses focused either on organisations or their environments, observed as separate units of analysis. In fact, it stimulates systemic, circular, and dialectical thinking in the interpretation of phenomena and the continuous adaptation of organisations to their environments (Abatecola et al., 2020; Esposito De Falco, 2023). Therefore, it responds well to the need to rethink the traditional tourism destinations management models in a holistic view. According to the co-evolutionary perspective, there is a circular relationship between tourism destination key actors (i.e., tourism firms, institutions, local communities, and tourists) that co-define the tourist offering, emphasising the identity of the places, and ameliorating the quality of life (Bramwell et al., 2017).

Following this reasoning, this study proposes a co-evolutionary destination management model able to grasp the relationship and the temporal dynamics between destination key actors (see Figure 1). According to Figure 1, in a tourism destination – conceived as an ecosystem – there are various local sub-systems, each characterized by different interacting factors: natural and cultural resources, tourism firms and other organizations,

institutions, communities, and tourists (Paniccia & Baiocco, 2020). These factors, together with all the local sub-systems and the destination, constitute the micro, meso, and macro spatial-organizational levels on which to focus the analysis of key relationships. In fact, the dynamics of interactions and mutual feedback between these three levels drive the development of (un)sustainable tourism paths within the destination.

Figure 1 - The co-evolutionary destination management model



Source 1: own elaboration.

By doing so, co-evolutionary processes – hopefully virtuous – occur among the three levels, determining their co-evolution. This interdependence and reciprocal functionality require mutual adaptation, expressed according to an evolutionary circular relationship of a dialectical nature, with systemic influences (Norgaard, 1994). Furthermore, the destination co-evolves with the larger natural and socio-economic system (i.e., the environment). When this relationship is positive, it leads to the co-determination of sustainability-oriented practices and policies, with inevitable implications for the development of sustainable tourism paths and, therefore, for the competitiveness of both destination and the natural and socio-economic system.

Moreover, as already demonstrated by previous studies (e.g., Cristofaro et al., 2020; Paniccia & Leoni, 2019), the virtuous co-evolutionary processes take place according to specific determinants, which are: *a) tourist experience*, understood as the ability to interpret social evolutions and to

grasp their emerging values, as well as to critically evaluate, in a holistic key, possible repercussions on the relationship between tourists and local communities (Prebensen & Foss, 2011); *b) systemic approach*, understood as the ability to organize and manage the different actors and the system of complex interactions within a destination (Cafferata, 2016); *c) multistakeholder decision-making processes*, based on public-private cooperation and aimed at integrating different points of view in joint strategies perceived as crucial for the success of all the actors involved (Beritelli, 2011); *d) inter-organizational knowledge transfer processes*, based on the sharing of knowledge, ethical and moral values on a local scale (Paniccia et al., 2018); and, *e) social responsibility*, understood as a tourism firms and destinations attention to emerging values from contexts in evolution and in line with the community concept (Brouder & Fullerton, 2015).

According to the above, tourism destinations' sustainable development and competitiveness depend on the implementation of a co-evolutionary destination management model capable of activating synergies between a multiplicity of actors and taking into consideration the dynamics of the interdependencies between natural and cultural resources specific to the different local sub-system included in the destination.

3. Methodology

To successfully reach the paper's aim, an exploratory case study has been developed (Cucari *et al.*, 2020). This methodology is mainly used when researchers seek an in-depth understanding of causal and complex mechanisms within a particular case (Yin, 2018). In this vein, the Castelli Romani destination¹ has been chosen as unit of analysis. In particular, from a methodological point of view, the choice of the Castelli Romani as a single case was driven by the aim to find a representative tourism destination characterised by the presence of multiple local sub-systems, each with its specificities. Moreover, its destination management model has undergone profound changes (and is still changing) over the last decade, making it an interesting case to verify if and how the co-evolutionary model proposed by this study can support the destination toward sustainable development and competitiveness. Lastly, the empirical analysis focused on the Castelli

¹ The Castelli Romani destination is located a few kilometres southeast of Rome and comprises the following 16 municipalities (i.e., local sub-systems): 1. Albano Laziale, 2. Ariccia, 3. Castel Gandolfo, 4. Colonna, 5. Frascati, 6. Genzano di Roma, 7. Grottaferrata, 8. Lanuvio, 9. Lariano, 10. Marino, 11. Monte Compatri, 12. Monte Porzio Catone, 13. Nemi, 14. Rocca di Papa, 15. Rocca Priora, and 16. Velletri.

Romani also due to the close physical distance between the research area and the authors, which allowed for more precise data collection, enhancing the results' reliability and validity.

The Castelli Romani case has been investigated through semi-structured interviews, involving private and public stakeholders from the destination's different municipalities (i.e., local sub-systems). In particular, 27 interviews were carried out over 15 months between January 2022 and March 2023: 12 interviews with local tourism firms, 3 interviews with local policymakers, 4 interviews with the local DMO, 5 interviews with residents, and 3 with tourists.

Interviews were conducted both in person and online, using mobile phones or laptops to record them. The recorded interviews were transcribed and translated from Italian to English; in Table 1 the key details for each individual interview are reported.

Table 1 – Interviews details

N. of interview	Type of Informant	Type of Interview	Interview duration
1	Local tourism firm	In person	1h 31m
2	Local tourism firm	In person	58m
3	Local tourism firm	In person	1h 16m
4	Local tourism firm	Online	49m
5	Local tourism firm	Online	1h 26m
6	Local tourism firm	In person	1h 12m
7	Local tourism firm	In person	1h 37m
8	Local tourism firm	In person	1h 30m
9	Local tourism firm	In person	1h 31m
10	Local tourism firm	Online	1h 21m
11	Local tourism firm	Online	1h 34m
12	Local tourism firm	In person	1h 4m
13	Local policymaker	In person	1h 25m
14	Local policymaker	In person	37m
15	Local policymaker	Online	1h 30m
16	Local DMO	In person	52m
17	Local DMO	Online	1h 35m
18	Local DMO	Online	56m
19	Local DMO	Online	34m
20	Resident	In person	1h 53m
21	Resident	In person	57m
22	Resident	Online	38m
23	Resident	In person	52m
24	Resident	In person	27m
25	Tourist	In person	48m
26	Tourist	In person	1h 00m
27	Tourist	In person	57m

Source 1: own elaboration.

The interviewees were asked to explain the changes that occurred over time in the destination by describing – from their point of view – the roles played, and responsibilities taken by different stakeholders in terms of destination evolution towards (un)sustainability. Additionally, the interviewees were asked to provide an evaluation of the existence of cooperation strategies to understand if and how multistakeholder and multilevel virtuous co-evolutionary processes are in place within the destination.

Interviews have been analysed through an inductive thematic analysis, which allows coding the patterned meanings across the various interviews to identify main themes (Braun *et al.*, 2016). In other words, inductive thematic analysis does not stem from theory but is grounded in the empirical data acquired by researchers. So, in this paper, inductive thematic analysis has been used to see what themes emerge from the conducted interviews.

Two authors coded the interviews independently, and then they met to discuss the overarching themes across all coded interviews and to resolve any discrepancies between identified themes.

Furthermore, to strengthen the confidence in and the validity of the case study findings, the results emerging from the inductive thematic analysis were triangulated with data from the following sources: *i*) historical documents, *ii*) information from the DMO website, and *iii*) information from other local, regional, and national websites (e.g., Istat, Lazio Region, local associations).

4. Findings

In line with the proposed model, findings show the relationships and temporal dynamics between natural and cultural resources, tourism firms, institutions, communities, and tourists of the Castelli Romani destination. Findings have been categorized into three sub-paragraphs, namely: *i*) the importance of natural and cultural resources, *ii*) the role played by tourism firms and local institutions, and *iii*) barriers to virtuous co-evolutionary processes.

4.1 *The importance of natural and cultural resources*

The Castelli Romani area has always attracted some form of tourism, since ancient Roman times, due to its position particularly close to Rome, its favourable climate, and its many natural and scenic beauties. Over the

Renaissance, popes, ecclesiastical dignitaries, and the most influential Roman families spent their time in the area for their summer stay and built monumental villas on ancient ruins and abbeys, sanctuaries, and fountains of considerable artistic value. According to historical documents, in the eighteenth century, the very wealthy gentlemen, intellectuals, and artists and the sons of the English, German and French aristocrats were sent for an educational trip to Italy (the so-called Grand Tour), of which the Castelli Romani became a fundamental destination.

Direct expression of the natural and cultural heritage of the destination are also the numerous typical local products and related festivals and events organized in the different municipalities. All this contributes not only to attract tourists but also to strengthening a sense of community among the inhabitants. In fact, the first forms of aggregation and collaboration were born – as the interviews testify – precisely to protect and simultaneously make known the typical local products.

According to the above, the Castelli Romani represents a rural destination potentially able to offer various tourist experiences satisfying a multiplicity of tourist segments.

«Here we have always welcomed some form of tourism. When I was young, in the 1980s, VIPs from the world of cinema came here, like Sofia Loren, Anita Ekberg, Anthony Quinn, Michael Ende, Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn. Their presence was a source of pride for us and pushed many to visit our municipalities and their beauties» [Inhabitant]

Despite its rich natural and cultural heritage and proximity to Rome, the Castelli Romani destination attracts limited tourism flows. According to Istat (2022a), pre-Covid-19 tourist arrivals (i.e., 2019) accounted for 1% of the total arrivals in the region and 1.3% of those in Rome. Interestingly, these percentages increased in 2020 during the pandemic period to 1.4% and 2.1%, respectively (although obviously, the values in absolute terms have drastically reduced). The general inability of the Castelli Romani destination to attract (numerous) tourists is something that even Goethe noticed – in a letter from Velletri municipality, in 1787, he wrote *‘It is certainly inexplicable that these treasures should be within so short a distance of Rome, and yet not be more frequently visited; but perhaps the difficulty and inconvenience of getting to these regions, and the attraction of the magic circle of Rome, may serve to excuse the fact’*. Nowadays, this inability seems to be attributable to three main causes: 1) initiatives in the tourism field are numerous but fragmented, 2) the heritage is little known outside the destination boundaries, and 3) it presents several barriers to accessibility.

4.2 The role played by tourism firms and local institutions

The destination's rich heritage has always represented an opportunity for firms, especially those in the tourism sector. To date, there are 2,353 firms related to the tourism sector and its supply chain (Istat, 2022a). Interestingly, in most cases, firms such as restaurants and hotels have been opened inside pre-existing historic buildings to enhance that cultural heritage. Other firms have instead exploited and enhanced the natural heritage and, in fact, over the years, the number of accommodation establishments excluding hotels (e.g., agritourism and B&Bs) grew by 91%, from 163 in 2014 to 311 in 2021 (Istat, 2022a).

Moreover, several interviewees highlighted the crucial role played by local entrepreneurs in the sustainable and innovative use of the destination's resources. In fact, to adequately address the current complex socio-economic and ecological challenges, some tourism firms have started rethinking their role and services more innovatively and sustainably. In innovative terms, many restaurants, hotels, and agritourism have introduced new e-commerce services to sell ready meals and organic products. In other cases, more flexible booking (e.g., self-check-in and check-out) and long-stay offerings for remote working have been implemented. In addition, virtual experiences – such as online wine-tasting sessions and cooking classes – have been proposed. In sustainable terms, much more attention has been paid to practices (e.g., e-mountain bikes for rental and the adoption of renewable sources) that provide socio-economic and ecological benefits not only for local entrepreneurs but also residents and tourists.

Among the various virtuous initiatives, it is worth mentioning that one historic villa in the area, which has been home to a hotel for years, has revised its business model by adding agritourism and holiday house accommodation offerings and by hosting a hotel management school, a humanities-focused high school, and a kindergarten.

«We reorganize our hotel thanks to the adoption of new digital technologies that allow us to provide our guests with digital key-rooms» [Hotel owner]

The crucial role of local entrepreneurs also emerges through the numerous associations (e.g., Castelli Romani hospitality Association, Winemakers Association in Grottaferrata, Association of the New Castelli Romani) born on their initiative and scattered throughout the destination. The main aims of these associations are to create a point of reference for the local entrepreneurs, and promote and encourage knowledge of the Castelli Romani, both nationally and internationally. In reaching these aims, they

closely interact with local communities and strongly believe in the importance of knowledge sharing with them. In this vein, they involve young university students, hiring them for stage periods.

In parallel, over the years, destination tourism potential has also been increasingly recognized by public entities, leading to the birth of various public associations and organizations (e.g., Castelli Romani Park, DMO Castelli Romani). Among them, it is worth mentioning the DMO Castelli Romani, founded by the Consorzio Sistema Castelli Romani in 2015, that – since 2018 – has been expressly involved in the production and management of tourist services for destination development. In 2021, the DMO was legally recognized by the Lazio Region as the reference public body for tourism in the area.

«The strategy we are implementing, based on a synergistic collaboration between public and private, is based on a high level of professionalism and entrepreneurship»
[DMO Member]

However, most of the interviews highlight the marginal role of these public entities in terms of destination sustainability and innovation. Concerning the DMO, this marginal role is probably due to its recent creation and, therefore, its activities will hopefully produce positive effects in the next few years. Concerning the other local institutions of the 16 municipalities, the interviewees point out that, over time, a lot of public money has been invested in the recovery and enhancement of the natural and cultural heritage of the area but that this heritage today is often left closed and/or in a state of neglect. Moreover, even some attempts in terms of technological innovation – for example, through the creation of apps – aimed at improving the tourist use of the heritage of the area do not seem to have been successful.

«I stayed in Genzano for a week and tried every day to visit Palazzo Sforza Cesarini, but I always found it closed» [Tourist]

4.3 Barriers to virtuous co-evolutionary processes

From the participants' narratives, four interconnected barriers to virtuous co-evolutionary processes (i.e., cooperative relationships) between destination key actors emerge. These barriers mainly arise because sustainable tourism paths within the destination are planned without holistically considering the five determinants identified in the proposed co-evolutionary model.

In fact, the first barrier concerns the lack of systemic management (i.e., *systemic approach*) of the various local sub-systems and the related specific characteristics and needs. In this regard, despite the destination having its DMO, there is another one called 'DMO Around Rome', led by the Parco dei Castelli Romani, which comprises the 16 Castelli Romani municipalities plus others.

«In this area, two DMOs have been legally established in just one year: one refers only to the Castelli Romani, and the other also includes other areas. I honestly don't understand the meaning of this; they seem to be uncoordinated actions taken only to obtain public funding» [Local policymaker]

Moreover, as a second barrier, the local entrepreneurs point out that they do not feel actively involved in the DMO decision-making processes (i.e., *multistakeholder decision-making processes*), which are still mainly top-down.

The third barrier reported by interviewees is the absence of both digital tools and sufficient infrastructure (especially in terms of public transport), which negatively affects the possibility for the Castelli Romani destination to be better known and reached by local communities and tourists (i.e., *tourist experience and social responsibility*).

The fourth and last barrier concerns the lack of knowledge-sharing processes (i.e., *inter-organizational knowledge transfer processes*) to collaborate for destination sustainable development properly. These processes are crucial to *i*) increase the knowledge (also of the local community) related to the Castelli Romani heritage and *ii*) develop innovation-oriented entrepreneurial skills, also of the local institutions.

5. Discussion

According to the proposed co-evolutionary model, the above findings show that Castelli Romani is a destination with a high tourism potential largely unexpressed because the five determinants are not adequately considered. In other words, in the destination, the relationships between natural and cultural resources, tourism firms, institutions, communities, and tourists are not always effective (i.e., able to produce virtuous co-evolutionary processes). In other words, the destination is not providing an integrated tourism offering able to express a cohesive tourism vocation capable of contributing to its market position and recognition. In this perspective, and in line with Casado-Montilla and Pulido-Fernández (2021), the ability to attract tourists presupposes that the services offered by the local

tourism firms and institutions are appropriately managed. Moreover, to design and build an integrated tourism offering, the Castelli Romani should recognise the tourist segments that can find the highest satisfaction according to the specific municipalities' resources. In this vein, it should not be forgotten that – at least as long as the Covid-19 consequences persist – uncrowded places rich in natural and cultural resources represent a fruitful market segment (Park et al., 2021). It is also desirable that the exaltation of local identities is realised innovatively through the application of new technologies (such as video maps, GPS, tag clouds, Apps, and QR codes) and the birth of sustainability-oriented start-ups (UNWTO, 2021). Innovations are also important for guaranteeing adequate mobility, safety, and urban decorum services, with beneficial effects for both local communities and tourists.

All of this is possible if the various actors of the destination adopt integrated actions and have shared priorities regarding what to develop and sustain (Hillebrand, 2022). Thus, the ability of the DMO to involve and motivate the different stakeholders in collaborative processes is crucial. This is particularly true when referring to the sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs operating in the destination. In fact, their involvement may strongly reinforce the DMO entrepreneurial vision by extending the capacity building, responsibility, care for the environment, dissemination of knowledge, and networking development. In other words, the current DMO has to redefine and reinterpret its role, involving and guiding all the stakeholders within the destination towards a sustainable development strategy (Bachinger et al., 2022). This will positively affect – according to the circular relationships of the proposed co-evolutionary model – the wider natural and socio-economic system. This latter, in turn, will contribute to extending the destination's sustainable development, thus, its competitiveness.

6. Conclusions

By adopting a co-evolutionary lens, this study has addressed the question, “What management model can a destination adopt to consider all its actors and foster its sustainable development holistically?”. This allowed to provide a co-evolutionary destination management model that promotes sustainable development by grasping the relationships and temporal dynamics among destination key actors. This study suggests that the sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs operating in the destination need to be actively involved in the DMO to reinforce the entrepreneurial vision of destination sustainable development. This can be done according to the five determinants of virtuous

co-evolutionary processes (i.e., tourist experience, systemic approach, multistakeholder decision-making processes, inter-organizational knowledge transfer processes, and social responsibility), bringing out the local quality system through integrated and dynamic management of all local resources at multiple levels and creating value for everyone. All of this provides interesting theoretical and practical implications.

Concerning the *theoretical implications*, this article advances destination management studies by adopting a co-evolutionary approach. This allows answering the call by Guerreiro (2022), developing new tourism destinations management models able to consider – holistically and dynamically (Fyall & Garrod, 2019; Hristov & Petrova, 2018) – the complexity of the relationships among multiple actors within a destination (Paniccia et al., 2018). By doing so, this paper expands previous co-evolutionary tourism studies (e.g., Cristofaro et al., 2020; Paniccia & Leoni, 2019) by considering multiple destination actors simultaneously, thus providing a more comprehensive overview of destination development. Moreover, the case study findings align with previous investigations' results (e.g., Komppula, 2014; Paniccia & Baiocco, 2020) regarding the crucial role played by tourism entrepreneurs for destinations' sustainable development (Agapito et al., 2022). This result confirms some of the most recent destination management studies (e.g., Sørensen & Grindsted, 2021) that emphasise the importance of sustainable entrepreneurship, suggesting that ecosystems can be sustained and reinforced through entrepreneurial practices that consider environmental and social issues in addition to economic concerns (Agapito et al., 2022). Lastly, this study corroborates several earlier investigations on tourism cooperation (e.g., Snis et al., 2021), suggesting that the overall destination success depends on the existence of collaboration among the various stakeholders aimed at creating trust, collective vision and objectives, based on an interpersonal and relational approach (Beritelli, 2011).

Concerning the *practical implications*, the results from this article offer a co-evolutionary destination management model that can help tourism entrepreneurs and policymakers. In fact, the application of the provided model allows identifying targeted actions for the destination's sustainable development and competitiveness, according to the five identified determinants. These actions are mainly based on the integration, from a holistic and dynamic view, of the different interacting factors (i.e., natural and cultural resources, tourism firms and other organisations, institutions, communities, and tourists) within the destination. Practically speaking, the destination has to *i*) integrate local sub-systems identities, through appropriate activities and tools, within a system perspective that combines the entrepreneurial vision with the policymakers one; *ii*) innovate the tourism offering by promoting the birth and development of

start-ups and digitalising content and processes; *iii*) identify specific tourist targets, taking into account the dynamics of co-determination between tourism supply and demand; and, *iv*) invest in advanced training courses to develop entrepreneurial and managerial skills and to raise the quality and capacity building of tourism firms and institutions.

Overall, the results achieved in this article are interesting for scholars, entrepreneurs, and policymakers, although they present some limitations that open the doors to future fields of investigation. Indeed, the model cannot be standardisable, but it can be transferred to other destinations, at national and international levels, to investigate the importance of natural and cultural resources, the role played by tourism firms and local institutions, and the reasons behind the barriers to virtuous co-evolutionary processes that inhibit sustainable tourism development paths. Another limitation of the study concerns the qualitative and interpretive adopted approach to the interviewees' stories. In this respect, we suggest that future research should include mixed methods by supporting the analysis and also through quantitative tools.

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