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BUILDING A TOURIST DESTINATION BRAND FROM THE RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE: THE ITALIAN PROJECT “SOUTH DESTINATION NETWORK”

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with a case study regarding an Italian tourism project analysed through the lens of a multiple perspectives framework based on the Relational View (RV), Stakeholder Engagement (SE), and Value Co-creation (VCc). The proposed theoretical framework contributes to interpreting issues regarding the development of a tourist destination brand in Southern Italy. The qualitative approach adopted reflects the confirmatory nature of this paper. Meanwhile, the project denominated "South Destination Network" is an experimental building of a tourism destination brand from the relational view of maximizing value co-creation in a cultural perspective through stakeholder engagement. Findings from the case study are discussed with reference to the relational view, stakeholder engagement, and value co-creation. The study concludes with the limitations and implications for further research related to the proposed framework.

KEYWORDS

Tourist Destination Brand; Relational View; Stakeholder Engagement; Value Co-creation; Case Study.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the tourist industry has faced significant change and challenges due to globalization and an increase in international competitiveness (Baker & Cameron, 2008). As a direct consequence of this scenario, the relevance of building a tourist destination brand has grown to respond to the globalized tourist market. In the literature, it is an established fact that destinations compete with one another to attract investment and visitors across the globe and can be marketed as a product (Howie, 2003). Thus require that organizations need adequate skills and competencies in order to escape what Batra (2017) stated: "poor destination management can erode the destination competitiveness" (p. 171).

Nevertheless, the development of a tourist destination brand appears to be a complex task. For example, not all stakeholders are necessarily interested in the viability of a particular destination. Furthermore, the many local actors involved might have different goals and strategies, different resources and competencies, and different visions of a destination's growth. Thus, an important issue in this research area regards the establishment of conceptual links between different theoretical approaches through which a place becomes a destination brand.

Against this background, our paper aims to investigate an experience building of a tourist destination brand from a relational view perspective. The paradigm is seen as a cultural mode of maximizing value co-creation through stakeholder engagement.

The definition of the research purpose derives from several gaps in the literature which this paper attempts to narrow. Even if the relational view is considered strategically important for the joint creation of value (Pellicano, Ciasullo, Troisi, Casali, 2018), the form in which value is co-created within a set of relationships among destination stakeholders is an unexplored issue (Jaakkola & Hakanen, 2013). Fumi Chim-Miki, Gândara & Batista-Canino (2017) consider the latter as the new frontier of knowledge on co-creation. Moreover, stakeholder engagement is another under-theorized area with regard to the focus on the attributes of the relationship between organizations and stakeholders (Greenwood, 2007). In addition, the opportunities for the integration of stakeholders in value co-creation processes do not seem to be considered as an extension of the stakeholder engagement concept, despite the fact that relationality and inclusivity should be seen as indissolubly linked (Pellicano, Perano, Casali, 2016).

With this in mind, an innovative theoretical framework based on the relational view, stakeholder engagement, and value co-creation perspectives is drawn up and the interactions between the three perspectives and relevant impacts are discussed. The theoretical framework is then interpreted through a specific case study using a business case research method in the field of tourist destination branding. This research path has been followed given that the qualitative single case is mainly used by tourism and destination branding researchers and practitioners (Adeyinka-Ojo, Nair, Khoo-Lattimore, 2014).

Therefore, based on the arguments outlined above, the paper is organized as follows. In section 2 the research design is presented. In section 3 first the theoretical background is described and subsequently a theoretical framework is proposed based on three different perspectives. In section 4 the case study design is illustrated. In section 5 the main results of the case study are introduced. In section 6 discussion of the research aim is addressed. In the final section, conclusions are drawn and the limitations and the further direction of the study are examined.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

To accomplish our research objective, we selected a theory-driven exploratory case study approach (Yin, 2017). This method was preferred in order to verify a theory, build new theoretical constructs, and advance previous research in the specific field (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Drawing on Koščak & O'Rourke (2017), the research design is structured on a dual-level approach. With regard to the first level, conceptual desk research was carried out to map the theoretical background of our research area. Subsequently, by means of *Google Scholar*, *Scopus*, *Emerald*, *Science Direct* and *Web of Science* publications appearing in peer-reviewed academic journals were analysed. Only articles with the terms “Relational view”; “Stakeholder Engagement”; “Value co-creation”, and their combinations with “Destination Brand(ing)”, or “Tourism Destination”. In the title, abstract, and keywords were taken into account.

We identified 43 papers relevant to our study from 25 management journal covering the time frame between 2004 and 2017 (Table 1).

Rank*	Journal Title	Number of papers identified	Year/Time-frame published
1	<i>Tourism Management</i>	5	2009-2017
2	<i>Enlightening Tourism: A Pathmaking Journal</i>	4	2016-2017
3	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>	4	2008-2017
4	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	4	2013-2016
5	<i>Journal of Travel Research</i>	3	2007-2017
6	<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research</i>	2	2005-2016
7	<i>Journal of Interactive Marketing</i>	2	2004-2014
8	<i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i>	2	2008
9	<i>European Management Journal</i>	1	2008
10	<i>International Journal of Business and Management</i>	1	2014
11	<i>International Journal of Management Practice</i>	1	2015
12	<i>International Journal of Research in Marketing</i>	1	2016
13	<i>International Journal of Tourism Policy</i>	1	2017
14	<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	1	2007
15	<i>Journal of Business Market Management</i>	1	2010
16	<i>Journal of Destination Marketing & Management</i>	1	2013
17	<i>Journal of Knowledge Management</i>	1	2017
18	<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	1	2004
19	<i>Journal of Organizational Behavior</i>	1	2017
20	<i>Journal of Service Research</i>	1	2008
21	<i>Sinergie Italian Journal of Management</i>	1	2017
22	<i>Sustainability</i>	1	2018
23	<i>Tourism and Hospitality Research</i>	1	2007
24	<i>Tourism Review</i>	1	2014
25	<i>Tourism Tribune</i>	1	2013

* Based on the number of papers identified in each journal

Table 1: The set of journals included in conceptual desk research
Source: Our elaboration

Our literature review, however, is not systematic being a preliminary exploration of the field in order to obtain a twofold aim: firstly, to verify the originality of the framework, and, secondly, to investigate the result.

Findings from the literature review enabled first of all, to identify the gaps in our research field, and then to elaborate a theoretical framework integrating the perspectives of the Relational View (RV) (Pellicano, 2002, 2004, 2017), Stakeholder Engagement (SE) (Freeman, 1984) and Value Co-creation (VCc) (Vargo, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008a, 2008b) (Figure 1).

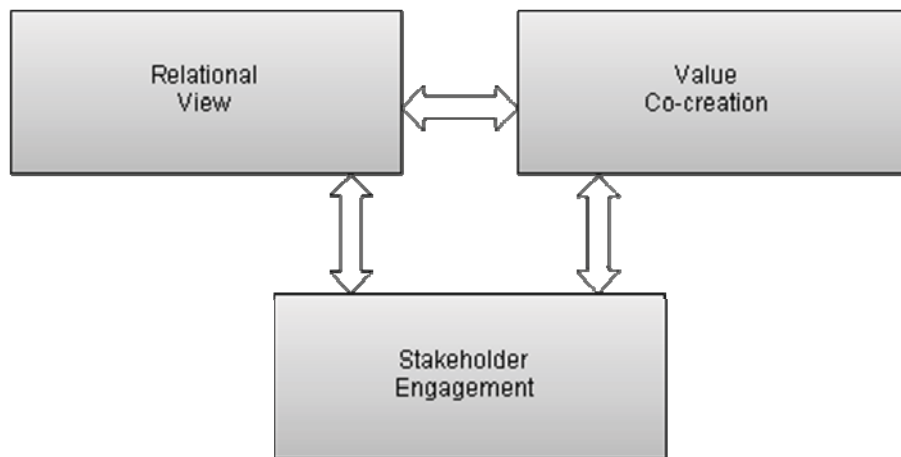


Figure 1: Theoretical framework based on RV, SE, and VCc

Source: Own elaboration

With regard to the second level, a case study analysis was put in place to acquire knowledge of the observed phenomenon and to test the theoretical framework.

A central decision in case study design regards the number of cases to include in a research project. Yin (2009) highlights that researchers need to consider whether it is prudent to conduct a single case study or if a better understanding of the phenomenon will be acquired through conducting a multiple case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). We opted for a single holistic case, namely, the project “South Destination Network” (“Rete Destinazione Sud”) for the following reasons: first “South Destination Network” is both a critical and unique example; secondly, the case is accessible to researchers; thirdly, it is a longitudinal study therefore, it is possible to compare the case at different points in time.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical foundation of our study together with a theoretical framework that combines the RV, SE and VCc describing the process of tourist destination brand development is set out below indicating the gaps in the current literature on tourist destination branding.

3.1) RELATIONAL VIEW (RV)

The term “relation” indicates a synergic exchange between subjects who integrate one another’s resources in a long-term win-win perspective (Pellicano et al., 2016).

In recent decades, the RV has been used to observe complex socioeconomic phenomena. In sociology, Donati (2004) elaborates the relational theory of society while Bruni and Zamagni (2004) propose the relational theory of happiness. In the marketing field, the relational perspective, especially when dealing with the interpretation of business-to-business (Håkanson, 1982) and business-to-consumer (Grönroos, 1983) is quite consonant in terms of application. The RV is also in line with the theories recently emerging in service research, such as the Service Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and service science (Maglio & Spohrer, 2008), that focus on the importance of service, seen as the basis of exchanges between actors participating in value co-creation processes.

For the purposes of this work, the relational perspective adopted follows the Enterprise Relational View (ERV). Consequently, we discuss network relationships without taking into account the network theory.

According to Pellicano et al. (2016), the ERV is an interpretive model that enables the understanding of complex active relationships in the strategic management area using a systemic approach. Such relationships enable interchanges of resources to the mutual benefit of the parties’ involved, activating/incrementing win-win value creation processes. These parties are represented by the Ego, as the decision maker that assumes a central observational position in the system and, the Alter, as part of the interpersonal relationship network of the Ego. This model is a valuable support for the subject responsible for governing activities in interpreting (observing) and understanding the relational dynamics underlying enterprise behaviour and in calibrating future actions from a new perspective.

The ERV interpretative model can be summarized in seven propositions (Pellicano et al., 2016):

a) *relationality and self-reproduction*: the relational nature of communication processes constitutes and sustains the company recognized as a social autopoietic system;

b) *diffusion and definition*: the reticular structure and its related system are read/perceived by the Subject-Observer as parts of the specific context of the enterprise, considered, in turn, as part of the general environment. Therefore, an enterprise, in the dual perspective of structure and system, is the result of a constructive personal observation (Ego – observer subject);

c) *sense and cohesion*: an enterprise is considered as a system that has a symbolic meaning, represented by value co-creation; a sense of belonging can be made possible by a complex mix of rational and emotional factors;

d) *forming and formulating decisions*: as a reflection of a problem's complexity, to the Subject Observer the decision-making process seems designed when the decision-making seems to be shared and diffuse, albeit with different roles, with all other subjects that make up the enterprise system (Alter – Ego' interlocutors);

e) *co-creation and regeneration*: value co-creation internal to the relationships network that represents the organizational pattern of the system enables the self-reproducing regeneration of resources that nurture and allow the viability of the network;

f) *resources and competitiveness*: the competitiveness of the enterprise system is linked to the ability to acquire resources by establishing collaborative relationships, i.e. relationships with subjects who are holders of resources;

g) *leadership and viability*: the governing subject is the guarantor of relational harmony characterized by dynamism and context. Therefore, constant monitoring aimed at facilitating communication processes with the ultimate objective of keeping the enterprise system viable is an essential process.

3.2) STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT (SE)

Management theory and practice attribute a relevant place to the stakeholder concept. According to Freeman (1984: 46), a stakeholder is “*any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives*”.

This widely accepted definition suggests an interdependence of a firm and its stakeholders through a two-way relationship, and justify the stakeholder engagement in an organization's processes and activities.

Greenwood (2007) provides a summary of multiple views of SE that coexist within a single organization. Based on theories of responsibility, SE is a mechanism for organizational accountability and responsibility towards stakeholders. From the perspective of managerial theories, SE is a mechanism for gleaning contributions or managing risks posed by influential stakeholders. Based on social control and construction theories, SE is a mechanism of managerial control and social construction. For our purposes, SE is a stakeholder dialogue and involvement process with which an organization develops strategies and activities fitting to stakeholder needs and expectations (Perano & Cerrato, 2017).

According to the AA1000 standard, the SE process requires the identification of engagement objectives, issues on which to engage, and stakeholders involved. These stages are driven by the principle of inclusivity. This enables a stakeholder's voice to be heard without restriction or fear, also taking into account voiceless stakeholders such as future generations and environment.

Engaging stakeholders can produce positive outcomes. The main benefits regard the implementation of systematic change towards equitable and sustainable development, performance management and reputation risks, greater strategic and operational efficiency, and in depth knowledge of the business environment.

3.3) VALUE CO-CREATION (VCC)

The VCc concept has gained growing visibility in marketing and service literature starting from the work of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), albeit it is considered as an emerging paradigm in management studies (Rupo, Perano, Centorrino, Vargas-Sanchez,, 2018).

The extant research on VCc is summarized up by Alves, Fernandes & Raposo (2016) in the following four clusters of studies: a) co-creation as a business logic; b) co-creation as a source of product/service innovation; c) co-creative experiences and loyalty; d) co-creation and relationships between companies and their customers.

For the purposes of this work, value co-creation is read through the lens of Service-Dominant (S-D) logic overcoming the traditional Goods-Dominant (G-D) logic

in the current socio-economic context dominated by service (Vargo, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008a, 2008b). According to G-D logic, producers are the only actors capable of creating value, in other words, the tangible output of economic exchange. In S-D logic is co-created value, i.e. *“value is always co-created jointly and reciprocally in interactions between providers and beneficiaries through the integration of resources and application of competencies”* (Vargo, Maglio, Akaka, 2008: 146).

Furthermore, understanding value differs between the two perspectives (Pellicano, Troisi, Tuccillo, Vesce, 2017). First of all, value is generated in-use in G-D logic, while it is created in-exchange in S-D logic. Then, the exchange of operand resources characterizes G-D logic, whereas the action of operant resources characterizes S-D logic. Finally, all exchanges are based on goods in G-D logic, and on service in S-D logic.

Regarding VCc, certain aspects require clarification. First, different VCc levels exist. Frow, Payne & Storbacka (2010) talk about co-creation of an idea, co-designing, co-production, co-promotion, co-pricing, co-distribution, co-consumption, co-maintenance, co-outsourcing, co-disposal, co-experience, and co-creation of meaning. Secondly, the actors involved interpret in different ways the required interaction in the VCc process (Vargo & Lusch, 2010).

3.4) INTEGRATION OF THE THREE PERSPECTIVES IN TOURIST DESTINATION BRANDING

Destination branding deals with the application of branding principles in defined geographical areas. An important topic of current tourism research (Sheng-Hsiung, Chang-Hua, Yu-Ting, 2016) due to the need to brand tourist destinations (Hanna & Rowley, 2011). Keller (2003) states that geographical locations, like organizations or products, can be branded in order to create location awareness and location image favouring visits and businesses. Pike & Page (2014) add that branding enables destinations to build their reputation and differentiate themselves from competitors in order to reach target markets and create customer loyalty.

The analysis of the literature review from which the proposed framework based on the three RV, SE and VCc perspectives emerged has turned out to be original and therefore unique in the field of tourist destination branding.

Furthermore, academic studies on tourism relative to one or more of these perspectives for destinations albeit few and fragmentary, show promising findings to apply to the tourism industry.

In contemporary tourism, co-creation is considered a relevant dimension of value creation (Suntikul & Jachna, 2016). VCc is an extremely suitable concept for tourism as it produces value for tourists and residents, and acts as a competitive differentiator contributing to a destination's uniqueness (Binkhorst, 2005). However, it remains difficult to establish the co-creation process when the product is tourism (Fumi Chim-Miki et al., 2017). Suntikul & Jachna (2016) suggest that most studies of value co-creation in tourism are aligned with S-D Logic and prevalently discuss service-intensive niches (wellness tourism), service-oriented sectors (hotels, travel agencies), and digital technologies (the Internet, social networks) (Caputo et al., 2017).

RV can indirectly be deduced from the concept of collaboration between destination stakeholders. D'Angella and Go (2009) clarify that stakeholders are induced to collaborate by virtue of particular features of tourism destinations. These include the scarcity of financial resources to develop adequate tourism growth strategies, destinations vulnerability to sudden disasters and global risks, and fragmentation of supplies in the tourism industry. The RV is also implicitly present when interactions between the tourist and the destination are discussed. These interactions depend on the level of tourist involvement in value co-creation (Shaw, Bailey, Williams, 2011).

In terms of integration of the RV and VCc, co-creation in tourism does not regard the relationship between a particular enterprise and its customers, rather it is the synthesis of relationships between all destination stakeholders. In particular, business-to-business, business-to-consumer, consumer-to-consumer, and consumer-to-business-to-consumer relationships (Fumi Chim-Miki et al., 2017). In this perspective, destination is perceived by tourists as an integrated product.

The integration of the RV and VCc also drives the co-creation of experiences. This is evident in a common conceptualization of destination as the unit of action where stakeholders (enterprise, public organizations, hosts, guests) interact through co-creation of experiences (Saraniemi & Kylänen, 2011).

In sum, RV and VCc prepare the ground for stakeholder engagement and value co-creation dynamics. In the tourism context, some tools of engagement are

indirectly identified in the joint forums and innovative interfaces where the different actors can be interconnected (Saraniemi & Kylänen, 2011), or participatory platforms that enable stakeholders to interact and share their experiences (Fumi Chim-Miki et al., 2017). Besides, the stakeholders empowered by technological platforms can collect, create and exchange information in real time (Vargas-Sánchez, 2016).

4. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS: ITALIAN “SOUTH DESTINATION NETWORK”

4.1) CASE STUDY DESIGN

In order to explore how and explain why different socio-economic actors, in a defined geographical area, can create a relational structure to manage a tourism destination brand, an exploratory case study analysis was carried out. When addressing such ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, an exploratory analysis is preferred given its holistic and descriptive nature (Yin, 1994; 2017). Besides, the development and the governance of this particular kind of network takes place within complex and dynamic processes, a case study is useful to analyze such complex and contextual phenomena. In other words, a case study analysis can contribute to investigating “*a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and it relies on multiple sources of evidence*” (Yin, 1994: 13). Consequently, we have designed the study by means of research on a single case, an extremely interesting example of destination brand in Italy, denominated, “South Destination Network”.

4.2) CASE STUDY DESCRIPTION

“South Destination Network” is a destination brand founded in 2014 by tourism entrepreneurs of four Italian regions (Basilicata, Calabria, Campania and Puglia). The purpose of this project was to promote Southern Italy territory (Figure 2) through the creation of synergies between different players of the tourism industry, such as hospitality and food/beverage companies, local craftsmen, Pro Loco associations, political institutions, opinion leaders and stakeholders. Specifically, “South Destination Network” is framed as a multiregional network of different socio-economic and institutional actors whose objective is to co-create a

single brand, namely “Southern Italy”, acknowledged both nationally and internationally.

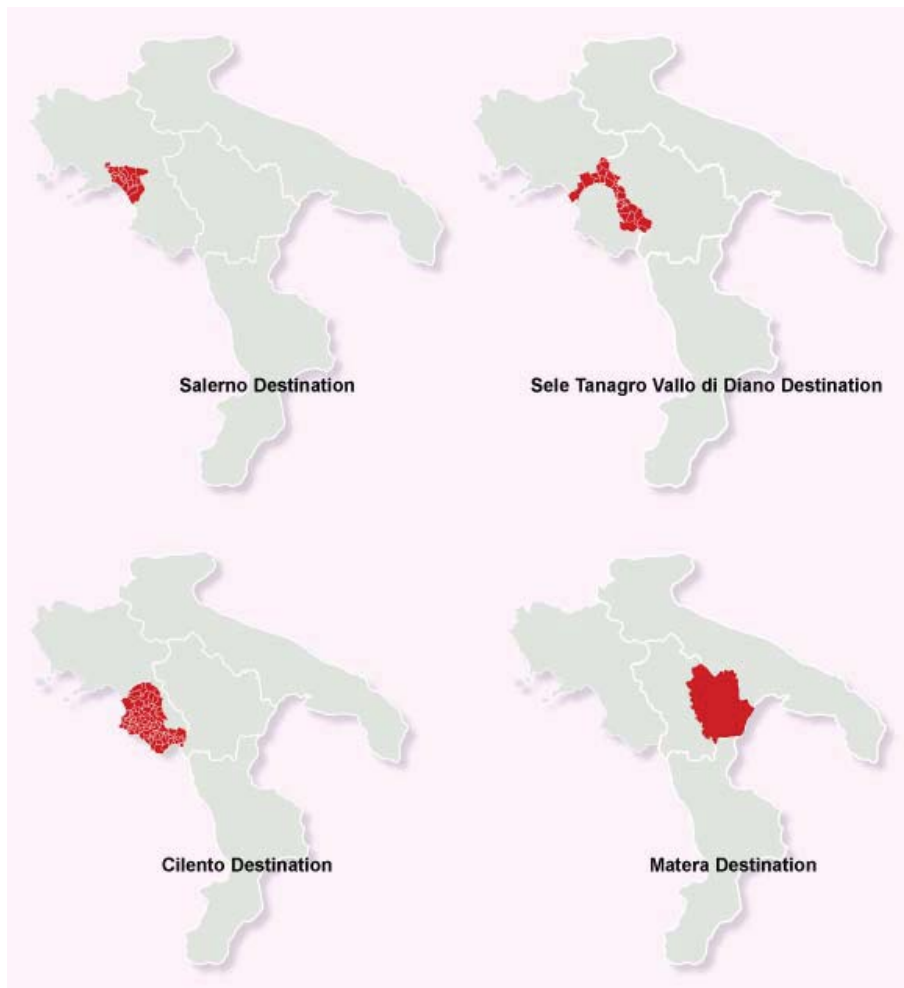


Figure 2: A geographical map of the destinations created by “South Destination Network”.

Source: Own elaboration.

Currently, “South Destination Network” promotes internationally a set of fourteen destinations located in the regions of Campania, Basilicata, Calabria and Puglia.

In order to market its products and services, “South Destination Network” has developed several destination web portals each one containing in the URL the name of the destination. For the future, this organization has planned to create a main destination web portal to map all the regional destinations.

The first destination web portal, denominated “Sele Tanagro Vallo di Diano Destination” (<https://www.destinazioneeletanagrovallo didiano.info/>), was launched in 2017. Destination”, “Matera Destination”. Other web portals are currently under construction.

4.3) DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSES

A further element to consider for researchers when they decide to adopt a case study analysis regards data collection procedures. Several different sources of information can be used in a case study, for example, documentation, archival records, interviews, physical artifacts, direct observations, and participant-observation. Also, within case study research, scholars can collect and integrate quantitative survey data, which facilitates a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). It is important to use several data sources in a case study in order to limit the bias effects of interpretation of a single data source. Using multiple sources however involves certain risks. Thus, data should be processed together, building for example a database, rather than handled individually (Yin, 1994; Stake, 1995).

In order to facilitate data collection we followed a precise protocol path:

1. Initially, we inquired about secondary information dealing with the background of the case. Then, research was carried out on the main academic databases, such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science and Science Direct, in order to verify the existence of scholarly publications relative to “South Destination Network”. From this research zero findings emerged.
2. Verified that the case had never been studied in an academic context, we started looking for information through the Google search engine. Introducing the keywords “South Destination Network” and considering the period January 1, 2014 – May 7, 2018, a total of 169 results, newspaper articles, media interviews, web data (i.e., external links) were obtained.
3. The final step was to collect primary data. An in-depth interview was carried out with the Chairman of the Management Committee of “South Destination Network”. The interview which was audio-taped was of about 60 minutes duration. Using an interview guide (Patton, 2002), open-ended questions were posed based on the seminal research question: “Does a destination network exist which is able to create a unique tourism brand for all the regions of Southern Italy?” More specifically, we asked: “What kind of relationships between the different tourism actors facilitate value co-creation and the

development of “South Destination Network”; “Why and how can stakeholders co-create value?”

Data are mostly texts, thus in order to analyse and interpret data a qualitative content analysis methodology was adopted. Content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990). Furthermore, it is a “*technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages*” (Holsti, 1969: 14). The technique enables researchers to find out and explain the focal point of the study (Weber, 1990).

To organize and make sense of textual data, we used an open coding approach. The five researchers coded the documents found on the web and the transcript of the in-depth interview. Then individually, they proceeded with the coding procedures through a manual method.

Referring to the extant literature and the theoretical framework based on a combination between the RV, SE, and VCc, the researchers identified a schema of concepts and categories, such as “relation”, “engagement”, “resource sharing”, “components”, “network”, in order to interpret the collected data. Our main purpose was to verify if the textual data could be interpreted using this sort of schema. During this stage, the coding results of the five researchers were compared, and, if disagreements occurred, discussions followed to improve coherence.

Comparing the secondary data, such as newspaper articles and media interviews about “South Destination Network” with the category schema, we found out a partial correlation. For example the words “co-creation” and “engagement” weren't mentioned anywhere due the fact these concepts are used principally in academic world. Instead the words “network”, “components”, “resource sharing” and “relation” were most frequently utilized in reference to the project “South Destination Network”.

In brief, from the content analysis of the documents found in the web we obtained a series of information useful to build the socio-economic background of the project “South Destination Network”.

Analysing the interview with the Chairman of the Management Committee of “South Destination Network” emerged that, besides the words “network”, “components”, “resource sharing” and “relation”, recurred other terms such as

“model”, “replication”, “common mission”, “unique brand”, “platform” and “destination web portals”. All these words helped us to extract the structure and the nature of this specific case of tourism destination brand.

5. RESULTS

From a theoretical point of view the destination network “South Destination Network” is a system of relations between a multitude of components. Specifically, if we analyse the model through the lens of the Relational View theorized by Pellicano et al. (2016), we can see how in a specific geographic and cultural context a group of entrepreneurs (Ego) is without its own resources (except for those related to knowledge and competence) consequently it identified potential interlocutors (Alter) in order to activate a resource integration process.

From the analysis of the transcript of the in-depth interview with the CEO of “South Destination Network”, it emerged that the destination network of the entire tourism project is underpinned by an organizational and managerial level legitimated by the different stakeholders. This central coordination uses governance as a new style of government (Mayntz, 2000), as it does not impose hierarchical control, but operates as an orchestrator and facilitator of cooperation and interaction between the different economic/non-economic actors involved.

According to the analysis of the collected data it was found that creating a tourist destination is an extremely difficult task requiring coordination of economic resources, agreements between the private and public sector, interactions with international commercial channels and target market research on a specific customer segment.

As highlighted by the CEO, *“The development of a tourism destination requires a complex planning phase. Specifically, it can be said that planning, even more than the same financial resources, is the fundamental starting point for organizing a tourist destination.”*

Thus, the primary objective of the CEO and the other entrepreneurs was to create a platform capable of implementing a knowledge and information system to improve the relationship between the different actors of the network. The platform, denominated “South Destination Network”, was constituted as a private organization in May 2014.

Thanks to this platform, the group of entrepreneurs, settled in the Southern Italian regions of Campania, Basilicata, Calabria and Puglia, was capable to engage local actors holding diverse resources and start a process of value co-creation.

As the CEO commented: *“The strategy utilized to inform the local stakeholders about the existence and the potentials of the destination model proposed by “South Destination Network” was to create events, focus group and roadshow presentations.”* All these meetings enhanced the relationships among the promoters of “South Destination Network” and the diverse local actors, such as public institutions, associations, hotel managers, restaurateurs, and artisans. Furthermore, these events fostered cohesion among the different parties of the network and created a sense of belonging and a common mission: to re-launch the economy and the tourism sector in Southern Italy.

Finally, from the analysis of the case we found that in order to participate in value co-creation first of all the actors taking part in the process of tourism destination development must have a sense of engagement which is more than mere involvement or participation. Engagement represents a multi-dimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek, 2013; Hollebeek, Glynn, Mark and Brodie, 2014), characterized by a specific intensity level, that plays a central role in the process of relational exchange. Thus, co-creation of value occurs when an actor, for example a hotel manager, is engaged in mutually beneficial collaboration and integrates resources with the actors of a specific interactive network.

With regard to the question: “Why and how stakeholders can generate or co-create value?”, the CEO of “South Destination Network” responded: *“The different stakeholders to generate value for the Destination Network, must first of all have a good reason. For example, potential triggers which encourage individuals to collaborate, create synergy, share resources and knowledge with other tourism players may be economical, linked with the financial crisis, or regarding the difficulties to obtain visibility in a global market.”*

6. DISCUSSION

Based on the extant literature and the findings emerging from the case study, we proposed a theoretical framework for a destination network. The study suggests that

in order to develop a tourism destination brand attention must be focused on concepts such as relations, engagement and value co-creation. Specifically, in order to co-create value actors must be engaged, and to be engaged must participate in a relationship. Thus relationships can be read as a cultural way of maximizing value co-creation and a genuine dialogue between the stakeholders and the management of the destination network, “South Destination Network” the relational structure of which is horizontal. The role of the entrepreneurs who have constituted the platform is to facilitate the integration of resources and communication between the different actors engaged in the network. Thus, the participants, encouraged by a win-win situation, tend to show more trust towards the group of actors involved in governance.

Resource integration and value co-creation is therefore a fundamental element in developing a tourism destination. The actors involved integrate resources in different ways. Actors integrate market resources, individual resources, public resources, knowledge and skills.

Analysing the case study “South Destination Network” we found that one of the most evident outputs of the value co-creation process is the construction of a unique destination brand for the entire product offering of the tourism sector in Southern Italy. In order to communicate to the national and international market the strengths, the culture, the beauty, its gastronomy, and the professional expertise of hospitality companies, a series of web destination portals was created. Thus, “South Destination Network” represents an interesting case of tourism destination based on digital technology. After all, according to Morrison (2013), the Internet and online platforms have become the most important venue for destination branding, as well as being the first option when people decide to search for information relative to destinations (Morrison, 2013).

7. CONCLUSION

We selected this case study for the following reasons: first “South Destination Network” represents a good example of destination-branding model based on stakeholder engagement and value co-creation. Secondly, the case exerts two important functions of brands in general, i.e. identification and differentiation (Aaker, 1996). The main objective of “South Destination Network” is to communicate a

destination's unique identity by differentiating it from its competitors, specifically this destination brand strives to raise consumer awareness of the South of Italy and rejects stereotypes. Thirdly, this case is interesting as it represents an example of tourism destination based on digital technology.

In short, from the analysis of the case study we obtained a series of supporting elements relative to the validity of the theoretical framework we proposed. The theoretical framework built on the Relational View (RV), Stakeholder Engagement (SE), and Value Co-creation (VCc) narrows a gap with the current literature on tourism destination. In the literature, no studies were found that blended these three fundamental concepts. Consequently, our research, hopefully, has produced a research advancement.

The study also has multiple implications for practitioners to delve into the complex scenario of tourism destination brand development. First, our study explains the main process that links the construction of the tourism network and the specific sales channels (i.e., the destination web portal). Secondly, the study provides a model of destination network that can be replicated successfully in any geographic area. As highlighted by the CEO of "South Destination Network": "*The intention is to develop a model to be replicated, first of all, in the Southern Italy regions and then extended to the rest of the country.*" Thirdly, our study offers an alternative business strategy for tourism destination brands. Attention is focused on the creation of win-win relationships among the different actors involved in the network. After all, only by combining forces and resources is it possible to create joint destination web portals to reach specific target markets.

Finally, as an exploratory case study, the study inevitably has limitations that can however, also provide opportunities for future research.

In our work, a single case study is conducted in order to achieve the research objective. Thus, methodological choice represents the main limitation of the study given that a single case study is considered insufficient for generalizing results. Non-generalizability is also due to the narrow research context confined to the destinations of Southern Italy.

In future, the interactive processes of the three perspectives (RV, SE, VCc) could be investigated in confirmatory multiple-case studies relative to different destinations in the world. In addition, further research could attempt to verify the validity of the theoretical framework in other service industries. Despite the importance of a

qualitative interpretation of potential interactions between the three perspectives, a further research avenue could focus on the quantitative assessment of such interactions. With this aim in mind, the RV, SE, and VCc have to be previously deconstructed into specific variables and indicators.

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