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STRATEGIC COUPLING EVOLUTION AND DESTINATIONS UPGRADING

Abstract

This paper combines current notions from the evolutionary economic geography, relational economic geography and global production networks to shed light to the evolutionary path of tourism destinations. Under this approach, the concepts of strategic coupling and upgrading are considered useful tools to increase understanding about the role of trans-local networks – alliances between local stakeholders and global market intermediaries – in increasing the innovation and competitiveness of local tourism firms and then shaping evolutionary trajectories of destinations. Empirical evidence is obtained through the analysis of the development of the Russian market in a coastal Southern Catalonia destination during the period 1994 – 2013. The nature and dynamics of the distinct strategic coupling patterns identified – *cooperative, mediated, self-interested* and *captive* – as well as their upgrading outcomes – *process, product, inter-sectoral* and *functional* – are discussed.

Keywords: evolutionary economic geography, relational economic geography, global production networks, strategic coupling, upgrading, tourism geography

1. Introduction

Research aiming to disentangle how tourism destinations evolve over time has been one fundamental pillar in tourism studies. However, there are still many unresolved issues with regard to the forces at work that influence evolutionary change in tourist places and, hence, act as catalysts shaping their development trajectories (Butler, 2014). Particularly, further researches on the dynamics and long-term repercussions of global-local linkages at firm and destination level are called for (Agarwal, 2005; Hjalager, 2007; Milne & Ateljevic, 2001), including those settled within the increasingly complex networks for the distribution of tourism services in the global market (Kracht & Wang, 2010). Likewise, while impacts of political interventions have shaped much of the discussion of restructuring and rejuvenation

of mature destinations (Agarwal, 2002), arguably little has been done to find out which role bottom-up entrepreneurial synergies have in enabling new paths.

The main aim of this paper is to explore whether the fostering and consolidation of strategic alliances between local actors and global intermediaries may perform a real influence on the upgrading of tourism firms and, by extension, on opening new opportunities for mature destinations facing lock-in. In order to address these concerns, the paper proposes an analytical framework which is informed by the streams of evolutionary economic geography (EEG) (Boschma & Martin, 2010), relational economic geography (REG) (Bathelt & Glückler, 2003) and global production network theories (GPN) (Coe, 2012). The research examines in particular the influence of strategic coupling (Yang, 2009; Yeung, 2009) in upgrading (Gereffi, 1999; Humphrey & Schmitz, 2000) tourism firms and destinations. In doing so, it also provides evidences on the specificities of the evolution and effects of global production networks in the case of tourism, a service sector that still has not yet been analyzed in the literature (Yeung and Coe's, 2014).

The empirical analysis is situated in central Costa Daurada in Southern Catalonia, a mature coastal destination whose restructuring was especially favoured – even though not exclusively – by the development of strategic relations between local firms and global players in order to attract the Russian market in the early 1990s, when the Russian was for many Mediterranean coastal destinations one of the most desirable markets as a consequence of the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Mariani, Buhalis, Longhi, & Vitouladiti, 2014). To do it, a qualitative study completed with archival research and official statistic data analysis is adopted. As a result, this paper elucidates two specific issues: 1) the dynamics of the strategic coupling processes between local actors and global intermediaries in the Russian market during the period 1994 – 2013, and 2) the resulting upgrading effects of these relationships in the local tourism industry. The ways in which these synergies have contributed to open new development paths for the destination are also discussed.

2. Conceptualizing the role of global production networks in tourism destinations evolution

Recent developments in tourism geography are exploring the opportunities arising from drawing on emergent approaches in economic geography to shed light on the analysis of evolutionary change in tourism destinations (Brouder, 2014). Particularly, the integrated EEG-REG approach proposed in Sanz-Ibáñez and Anton Clavé (2014) takes the notions of *path dependence*, *human agency* and *contextuality* as key triggers influencing the long-term performance of tourist places. From this view, destinations evolution is understood as a “complex, path- and place-dependent process that is determined by the action and interaction of stakeholders and their ability to adapt or create new paths, and, thus, to survive in response to local and global changes” (p.10-11).

This approach considers first that the historical trajectory of destinations provide clues about their past, present and future conditions. Hence, it admits the influence of past events,

circumstances and decisions – i.e. path dependence – on the long run, while highlighting the contingency of destination evolutionary pathways (Ma & Hassink, 2014). In this vein, the notions under the umbrella of the *path metaphor* such as path creation and path plasticity (Sanz-Ibáñez, Wilson, & Anton Clavé, 2015) are seen as powerful tools to increase understanding of the huge capability of destinations to remain attractive and avoid decline (Agarwal, 2012). The path creation lens gives insights to understand disruptive interventions – mindfully implemented by (key) stakeholders – in originating new evolutionary pathways (Gill & Williams, 2014). Alternatively, the path plasticity perspective (Halkier & Therkelsen, 2013) focuses on the role of incremental shifts in promoting the (re)development of destinations.

Secondly, according to this EEG-REG approach, the open-ended and unpredictable nature of destinations evolution is mostly due to the leading role of stakeholders' contingent – but context-specific – intentions, strategies and practices – that is, *human agency* – in driving tourism development (Gill & Williams, 2014). Nevertheless, while the literature has mainly regarded (reactive) political interventions as the key for the success in renewing mature destinations (Anton Clavé, 2012), research elucidating the influence of (pro-active) strategies led by the private sector – generally in collaboration with public authorities – is still scarce. In fact, there are extensive analysis highlighting the utmost importance of local networking in disseminating innovation within the destinations (Dredge, 2006; Scott, Cooper, & Baggio, 2008) but there is still much research to do in order to comprehend which role bottom-up entrepreneurial strategies – frequently led by a few visionary entrepreneurs or 'champions' – have in enabling their adaptability and long-term competitiveness.

Finally, as Agarwal (2005) argued, most studies in tourism neglect the role of (global) external forces in the development of destinations as a *contextual* trigger influencing its long-term performance except when they have a negative or critical influence. Thereby, there is need to recognise the positive contributions that external relations may have in the creativeness and innovation among tourism firms, as well as in the competitiveness of destinations in the global market (Erkuş-Öztürk, 2009, 2010). This is especially crucial in international coastal tourism destinations, where a diverse range of actors operate in trans-local networks.

In conclusion, this approach evidences that it is necessary to look for a new perspective which includes in the analysis of destinations evolution the synergies emanating from the complex relationships between actors at different geographical scales (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001). The GPN approach – which presents potential complementarities with the EEG literature (MacKinnon, 2012) and is closely related to the REG perspective (Coe, 2012) – is proposed here as a suitable approach to be included in this analytical framework.

2.1. *Global production networks in tourism*

The complex interconnections arising in the context of economic globalisation and their effects to the geographies of production have become a key focus of analysis in contemporary economic geography (Benner et al., 2011). Actually, since the beginning of the 1990s

different competing terminologies have been proposed. This is the case of global commodity chains (GCC) (Gereffi, 1999), global value chains (GVC) (Gereffi, Humphrey, & Sturgeon, 2005) and global production networks (GPN) (Henderson, Dicken, Hess, Coe, & Yeung, 2002). Although some of these formulations have been translated into the tourism domain (see, e.g., Mosedale, 2006, for GCC, Erkuş-Öztürk & Terhorst, 2010, for GVC, and Niewiadomski, 2013, for GPN), the fact is that more detailed insights are required (Hjalager, 2007).

The GPN approach represents a heuristic relational analytical framework that compensates some of the weaknesses identified in the rest of conceptualisations (Coe, Dicken, & Hess, 2008; Henderson et al., 2002; MacKinnon, 2012). Coe (2012) identifies three specific contributions. First, the GPN framework tries to capture the complex and contingent nature of network configurations instead of focusing on the analysis of linear structures. Moreover, it takes a multiscale perspective, so it studies the relevant relations established between actors belonging from the local to the global arenas. Last but not least, it includes in the analysis the broad range of actors shaping economic activities – including firms and other non-firm organisations such as public organisations at different levels. In addition to this, Yeung (2009) states that it also opens up the discussion of the impacts arising from the local-global interactions in the development of firms and territories.

Taking into consideration that GPN studies the “nexus of interconnected functions, operations and transactions through which a specific product or service is produced, distributed and consumed” (Coe et al., 2008, p.272), this approach may also contribute to analyse the relationships established among the multiplicity of actors participating in what have been traditionally known in the tourism literature as ‘distribution channels’, that is, the platforms that connect local suppliers and global consumers facilitating the commercialisation and delivery – as well as, we might say, the production – of tourism services (Buhalis, 2000; Kracht & Wang, 2010).

Although both the role of intermediation and the structure of the tourism distribution system have experienced huge transformations in recent times as a result of the advance of information and communication technologies, the relationships settled with global intermediaries are still crucial in the case of mass coastal destinations (Erkuş-Öztürk & Terhorst, 2010). This is partly due to the fact that these destinations still rely heavily on international tour companies for gaining visibility and attracting the large amount of consumers they need to assure profitability – particularly those belonging to the accommodation sector. Obviously, even though this can not be generalized to all markets and we might say that – generally – the more mature a market is, the more likely the distribution of tourism services depend less on conventional intermediation, there is room for deeper theoretical and empirical investigation to fully understand the dynamics of the interaction between local firms and global intermediaries.

The literature analysing the relationships within the tourism distribution system has traditionally emphasized a relatively vulnerable position of local players in front of major tour operators (Buhalis, 2000). Nonetheless, as Ioannides (1998) pointed out, in the global

tourism economy both type of actors might be interested in joining efforts to maintain and enhance their competitive position by establishing cooperative strategic alliances and configuring which we refer here as global production networks. This paper sheds new light on this issue, as well as on the synergistic outcomes derived from these global-local relations, by taking two key concepts under the GPN perspective: ‘strategic coupling’ (Yang, 2009; Yeung, 2009) and ‘upgrading’ (Gereffi, 1999).

2.2. *Strategic coupling and upgrading in tourism global production networks*

Yeung (2009) defines coupling processes as “a mutually dependent and constitutive process involving shared interests and cooperation between two or more groups of actors who otherwise might not act in tandem for a common strategic objective” (p.332). Following MacKinnon (2012), the conceptualisation of coupling processes is based on three main assumptions. First, these processes bring together actors from different spatial scales with a common goal that motivates them to work together. Second, the launching and continuity of these processes need the engagement and active intervention of participants. Third, couplings are time-space contingent, so decoupling and recoupling may also occur when interests of participants and/or institutional contexts change.

Even though not without criticism (Tokatli, 2013), scholars sustain that strategic coupling determines the boosting of upgrading at the industry level and could have real influence on local and regional development trajectories (Yeung, 2009). In fact, strategic coupling dynamics and effects still deserve a more coherent and systematic theoretical conceptualisation (Yeung & Coe, 2014). In this sense, for instance, the degree of explicit coordination and power asymmetries among actors need to be more deeply analyzed, as well as the results of the diverse strategies implemented by stakeholders and the multiple governance structures arising from the strategic choices of the counterparts (Gereffi et al., 2005).

In tourism research, the ‘upgrading’ notion has not been commonly applied explicitly even though similar conceptual discussions derived from this concept may be found in the literature on tourism innovation. This is the case, for instance, of scholars who have emphasized the role of networks and clusters in enabling cross-sectoral collaboration and the transfer of knowledge between actors and, eventually innovations (Hjalager, 2010). Nevertheless, as stated, little has been done to examine the contributions of global linkages – particularly those settled with global intermediaries – in the innovativeness of local tourism firms. There is the exception of some illustrative studies such as those of Erkuş-Öztürk (2009, 2010) and the work of Niewiadomski (2015), who shows how the expansion of international hotel groups in Eastern Europe had remarkable impacts on the upgrading and the economic performance of the tourism sector in these countries.

All in all, much efforts must be done to empirically evidence the effects of global networks in sustainable and substantial development and redevelopment of destinations, as well as in the improvement of tourism firms and destinations competitiveness (Erkuş-Öztürk, 2010; Hjalager, 2010). Moreover, when applied to tourism, the discussion on ‘upgrading’ has to

cover technological but also ‘non-technological upgrading paths’ – i.e. those related, for instance, to organizational and marketing initiatives (Schiller, 2013). In fact, the latest developments on this topic propose different taxonomies in order to capture the complete variety of upgrading paths that could be applied to the evolution of tourism destinations. Among them, Humphrey and Schmitz (2000) and Schmitz (2004) propose a useful typology distinguishing between product, process, functional or inter-sectoral upgrading.

Otherwise, coupling strategies in tourism global production networks exhibit two relevant peculiarities in comparison with other industrial sectors worth to be highlighted. First, coupling – especially in its initial phase – is hardly possible without a key player acting as a middlemen connecting global and local actors: the incoming travel agencies (Kracht & Wang, 2010). These players, as noted by March (2000), offer to the tour operator their support to sign commercial agreements with local suppliers, while providing guarantees to the locals in advancing them payments and managing contracts. Further, in slight contrast to research conducted in other industrial contexts where the knowledge and technologies transfer from global actors to local firms is considered the main strategic value of coupling (Li, 2013), the market gap – that is, the accessibility and influence to develop and dominate demand markets – is the more prominent issue in tourism global production networks (Bastakis, Buhalis, & Butler, 2004; Cavlek, 2004). These issues are specifically addressed in this paper.

3. Empirical setting, objectives and methodology

The research is based on the study of central Costa Daurada (cCD), a Mediterranean coastal destination located in the south of Barcelona, in Catalonia. The area comprises three different municipalities – Salou, Cambrils and Vila-seca – and, with 11.5 million overnight stays in 2013 (63% of them corresponding to foreign tourists), is nowadays one of the major Spanish coastal destinations. With about 85,000 accommodation commercial beds – including hotels, campsites and registered tourist apartments – this destination is also home of PortAventura, one of the top European theme parks (4M visitors per year), which was planned during the eighties as a strategic tool to help overcome the lock-in of the tourism activity in the area (Anton Clavé, 2010). The search for new emergent markets – particularly the Russian – was also a prominent strategy since the nineties to rejuvenate the destination.

The Russian market represented only an estimated total of 30,000 tourists in 1994 in cCD – 1% of the 2.6M Russians travelling abroad in that year, being such an irrelevant percentage of total international tourists in the area that it was not accounted for in official statistics. Almost twenty years later, in 2013, the destination received 463,000 Russian tourists, which positioned this market as the leading international market in the area (30% of total foreign tourists). This figure represented a 47% and a 30% of the 1 million and 1.6 million Russians travelling to Catalonia and Spain respectively in 2013, and a 7% of the Russian outbound tourism.

Having all this in mind, the purpose here is to investigate whether the fostering of strategic coupling among local actors and global intermediaries operating in the Russian demand

market influenced the de-lock-in and the upgrading of cCD. In fact, statistics evidence that the tourism activity in cCD experienced a considerable expansion and improvement since the 1990s. From 1994 to 2013, hotel accommodation beds increased more than 60% (from approximately 26,000 to 42,000 hotel beds) and, more importantly, while in the mid-1990s the 91.2% of the hotels were middle-class (2 and 3 stars) and high-class hotels (4 stars) only accounted for 4.7% of the total; in 2013, the predominant hotels were those included in the highest categories (57.5%). Besides, the revenue per available room (RevPAR) per year of hotels currently place the municipalities in the area in the top positions of the ranking comparing to the average RevPAR for coastal destinations in Catalonia.

The design of the empirical analysis undertaken was based on the mix of three different methods. First of all, we conducted a total of 18 face-to-face depth interviews – which lasted from 45 minutes up to 2 hours – over the period March – June 2014. Following the snowball and reputation sampling, during the interviewing process participated the CEOs of 6 local hotel chains (which represent a 45% of the total hotel bed-places in the area); the CEOs of 7 local incoming travel agencies (which manage more than 90% of the Russian tourists coming to the area); representatives of 3 tour operators specialized in the Russian market (which approximately operate the 80% of the Russian market in the area); and senior representatives of 2 DMOs involved in the promotion of the destination. For the sake of anonymity, the names of the firms and organizations are not displayed.

Besides, we collected and analysed archival data such as sectoral studies, annual reports and press releases published by relevant tourism policymakers and research centers – namely, the Catalan Tourism Board, the Tarragona Provincial Tourism Board and the Science and Technology Park for Tourism and Leisure of Catalonia. Media articles and reports – both printed and online. Further information was extracted from the analysis of several promotional and informative materials generated by local/regional public authorities and private companies. Finally, we built on official data from 1994 to 2013 to measure, on the one hand, the evolution of the Russian market in the area (number of tourists and overnight stays); and, on the other hand, the evolution of the hotel accommodation supply during the same period. The data was obtained through the official statistic organisms at the national, regional and local level (i.e. the Spanish National Statistics Institute, the Catalan Institute of Statistics and the Costa Daurada Tourism Observatory).

4. Findings

This section comprises the main findings of the research focusing on two specific issues. Firstly, it includes an in-depth analysis of the nature and dynamics of strategic coupling processes identified in cCD between the local hotel suppliers, local incoming agencies and global intermediaries operating in the Russian market from 1994 to 2013. Secondly, the upgrading outcomes of these processes are also described, categorized and evaluated.

4.1. Strategic coupling dynamics

During the end of the 80s and the first half of the 90s – with the exception of the period around the Olympic Games held in Barcelona in 1992 –, the tourism sector in cCD faced a considerable downturn. As a reaction and in parallel to other strategies aimed to renew the tourism product of the area (Anton Clavé, 1997), a small group of local pioneer entrepreneurs (hoteliers and incoming travel agencies) interpreted the political and economical opening of Russia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s as an opportunity to un-lock the destination. This prompted them to travel to Russia and search contacts among the emerging Russian outbound travel agencies. The initiative was strongly supported by the Catalan Government, who opened a promotion office in Moscow in 1993.

The pioneer contacts between the local industry and the Russian global intermediaries had as a result the settlement of two different patterns of coupling: the *cooperative* and the *mediated* (Figure 1), with each partner playing interdependent and complementary roles. In the cooperative coupling, partners – a prominent hotel firm, a nationally-renowned incoming and an emerging Russian operator – worked in a very close (even personal) collaboration and a well-balanced association. Alternatively, in the mediated coupling, the (relatively modest) incoming agency involved in the process acted as a crucial middleman between some hotels in the area and several small Russian outbound agencies, thus presenting highly cooperative but slightly imbalanced power relations in favour to the incoming. The degree of dependence, bearing in mind the limited importance of the market, was low in both types of coupling. As a consequence of these initial alliances, the Russian market acquired a slow but steady increase in cCD, which brought to the area a considerable number of Russian tourists with high purchasing power.

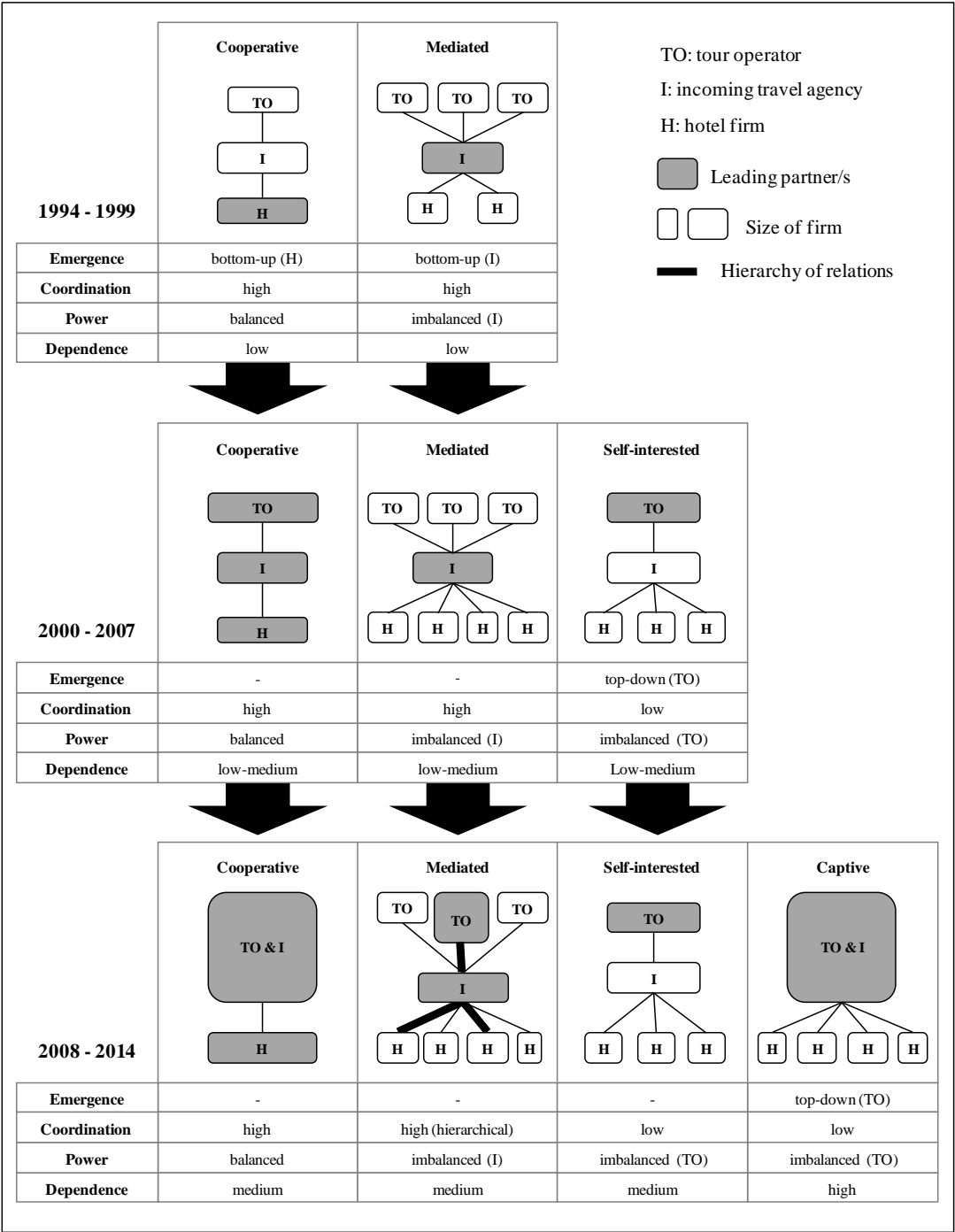
In 1998, the Russian outbound tourism market seriously struggled as a consequence of a financial crisis (Oficina Española de Turismo de Moscú, 2000), which affected severely the structure of the Russian intermediation sector. Many of the intermediaries operating in cCD – especially those smaller and with less turnover – became bankrupt and disappeared, incurring large amounts of money to the local incoming agencies. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 2000s, the Russian economy gradually recovered and the demand for travelling abroad increased exponentially. In parallel, the number of actors involved in the Russian global production network of cCD grew considerably. This circumstance led to the recovering and stabilisation of the two previous couplings as well as the emergence of a new set of *self-interested* coupling practices (Figure 1).

Self-interested couplings responded to top-down dynamics, so the process was mainly fostered by new tour operators in the area – most of them Turkish of origin. Their strategy consisted in purely commercial agreements and less close relationships between tour operators, incoming and local hotel firms. The ties among participants, thus, were weaker than in the other couplings and the degree of coordination was also (intentionally) considerably lower. The new scenario facilitated the arrival of new profiles of Russian tourists – with slightly lower purchasing power in comparison to the first Russians visiting the area.

With regard to the pre-existing cooperative and mediated coupling strategies, the enlargement of the market share generated more ambitious and business-oriented goals and motivations.

This supposed a slight increase in reciprocal dependence between partners, while trust, strong interpersonal social relations and collaborative attitudes – accomplished by frequent (even face-to-face) interactions despite the geographical distance – still remained as the pillars sustaining the success of their high degree of explicit coordination. Power relations remained as the main factor differentiating these two coupling practices: while the cooperative was characterised by presenting no (or at least low) power asymmetries between partners; the mediated was still governed by lightly imbalanced power relations, giving a higher degree of centrality to the incoming.

Figure 1. Evolution of strategic coupling patterns in the Russian global production network of cCD.



Several institutional-contextual issues had a positive impact on the evolution of the aforementioned dynamics. The first and perhaps most important factor was the progress achieved – as a result of crucial intense negotiations between local entrepreneurs and governments at different scales – in what concerned visa expedition issues at origin. Complementarily, organizing and participating in events and activities – such as tourism fairs, roadshows, famtrips and presstrips – to promote the destination in the Russian market became part of the agenda of the major local stakeholders, working in very close collaboration with the Catalan DMO office located in Moscow and the TOs.

The picture changed substantially when in 2008 occurred a decoupling crisis between the TO and the local incoming engaged in cooperative coupling. This crisis – in parallel with the consolidation of cCD as the most preferred Spanish destination for Russians – became an inflection point for the configuration of a much populated and complex network in which four distinct coupling strategies – including a new form of *captive* coupling – currently coexist. Actually, actors may be engaged in more than one coupling practice at the same time, which led them to act differently depending on the partners with whom they interact.

The decoupling process resulted in the subsequent increase of power and influence of the TO (also incoming) participant in the cooperative coupling. Notwithstanding, the nature of the coalition with the original local hotelier partner remains highly cooperative and mutual benefit-oriented, while opening the floor to much more direct – but also a bit more dependent – relations. In this case, the power balance between the global and the local counterparts is particularly favoured by the durable, trusty and strong personal links between the representatives at the forefront of both firms, even inducing to the planning and financial co-participation in joint projects at the destination.

With regard to the mediated coupling, the well-established relationships between the counterparts remain stable and fruitful. The power asymmetries derived from the central role of the incoming are still in place, but relationships are closer, which supposes the achievement of a higher degree of coordination. Nonetheless, a certain hierarchisation of relations between partners has emerged. In fact, despite working with different TOs at the same time, the incoming has strengthened relations – in the form of a joint venture – with the more powerful intermediary in terms of number of tourists. Besides this process of integration, the incoming has been actively involved as a shareholder of some hotel partners.

At this stage, *self-interested* coupling practices – those in which the counterparts work together for convenience and present weak ties – are materialised in different business strategies. Some of them take advantage of an alliance with an influential pre-existent local incoming, while others induce the creation of new foreign-owned (but runned independently) incomings. In both cases, the degree of coordination is higher than in previous times but it is not as effective and committed as in the cooperative and the mediated couplings. In the same vein, TOs still act as the leader firms and reciprocal dependence increases considerably, but local suppliers tend to establish couplings of this nature with more than one TO in order to avoid being subject to their absolute control.

Finally, as indicated, a new globally-driven type of alliance – adopted particularly by non-Russian of origin TOs – emerged: the *captive* coupling. Under this pattern, the operator – integrating the receptive services – is simply seeking advantageous (or even extractive) commercial relations, using its power to obtain good prices and conditions from local hotel firms. The TO has much influence and tight control on the Russian market and provides access to this segment to the subordinate local hotels – some of them, particularly the mid-class ones, facing significant problems to look for other operators to work with in a context of lack of demand in their traditional markets. This practice, is based on unidirectional top-down flows of information and demands, so the TO has a highly privileged position.

4.2. *Upgrading outcomes*

This section pays attention to the contribution of the strategic coupling processes described previously in enabling specific upgrading outcomes in the cCD's tourism sector during the period 1994 - 2013. Notions of product, process, functional and inter-sectoral upgrading from Humphrey and Schmitz (2000) and Schmitz (2004) are taken, although some conceptual and operational adjustments have been made in order to apply these categories into the tourism context considering the intangible nature of the tourism product and the complexity of the production and distribution processes in this sector.

The most common type of improvements developed by the local hotel sector – and to lesser extent, the incoming agencies – as a result of the coupling strategies fall in the category of *process upgrading*. This category of upgrading is basically necessity-driven, thus responding to the need of local firms to adapt their products and services to the demands and expectations of Russian tourists. Therefore, the main motivation is to gain efficiency in relation to the new market by reorganizing internal production processes.

Actions undertaken in this regard are mostly related to human resources management. In particular, when a new market arrives the sector struggles to find workforce – front-office employees, commercial positions and tour guides – with appropriate language skills and culturally-sensitive. This situation prompts in cCD the need to recruit Russian-speaking personnel from Eastern Europe countries and educate these skills among local workers. Besides human resource management, tourism firms carry out other backstage improvements in what concerns their network of providers. Hotels look for new providers (or expand their commercial agreements with previous ones) to include new products in their buffet and bar services, to offer Russian newspapers, magazines and television channels or even to schedule special entertainment, cultural and recreational activities and experiences. On their behalf, the incoming travel agencies make efforts to design attractive packages for the market. This means the expansion of their services portfolio (e.g. transfers and local tours to visit the principal attractions, such as Barcelona, and provide them experiences to their liking).

All types of coupling favour the creation of new employment opportunities and the improvements of employees training. It is worth noting, though, that couplings with a longer trajectory and higher degree of coordination – i.e. cooperative and mediated – contribute more significantly to the reconfiguration of the network of providers in comparison to the most

recent and more intensely globally-driven, the self-interested and captive ones. In terms of the roles played by each partner to foster process upgradings, the hoteliers and incomings assume the investment needed to implement such improvements. The global counterparts, on their behalf, act as instigators and advisers – sometimes directly or via the incoming agency – by providing up-to-date information of market demands and the guidance needed to orientate the reforms.

Turning to the *product upgrading* synergies, these market-driven innovations are particularly significant in the hotel sector among the 3 and 4-star hotels which, responding to the demands of superior quality from this market, make considerable investments since the beginning of the 2000s to assure a better competitive position. In this sense, the hotels tended to include fitness and spa facilities or quality restaurants, as well as to offer a wide variety of healthcare and luxury services and products. Likewise, some hotels also renovated indoor and outdoor areas in terms of decoration and gardening having in mind the Russian tastes and preferences. The role of each counterpart in favouring these innovations is similar to the dynamics previously explained– that is, the TO and the incomings provide their knowledge and guidance, while the local hoteliers are the principal investors.

Aside from favouring the renovation of the hotel infrastructure, two specific couplings among powerful (in terms of market share) local firms and global intermediaries promoted costlier and more ambitious *product upgrading* projects by opening new upper-category hotels clearly oriented to the Russian market. In the case of the cooperative coupling – the most durable and committed global-local partnership – the counterparts participated equally in financing the purchase and renovation of a pre-existing hotel in order to convert it in a 4-star superior hotel in 2012. Alternatively, a self-interested coupling of three actors (a Russian-Turkish TO, a local incoming and a local entrepreneur) had as a result the opening of the first 5-star hotel in the area in 2009. In this case, the local entrepreneur, assumed all the investment needed, while the incoming and TO counterparts only provided their commitment to attract customers looking for this new high-class accommodation offer.

With regard to the *inter-sectoral upgrading* – a kind of more complex and business-driven innovation –, the most fruitful synergies occur between partners participating in the mediated coupling. The central position of the local incoming is a key factor to convert the firm in an agent capable to develop vertical integration processes with the objective to apply their competences and influence into other complementary sectors in their network. In fact, the incoming becomes engaged in a joint venture with one of the main (Turkish) TOs in the Russian market. Each partner contributes equally to the upgrading: the TO provides direct access and knowledge about the market and investment, while the incoming travel agency contributes with their expertise, investment and, particularly, their large portfolio of contacts at the destination with the prominent hotel firms and the DMOs at different levels. Furthermore, the incoming also becomes shareholder of several hotels, a circumstance that is favoured – among other factors – to their participation in the Russian global production network.

Another major contribution derived from the development of strategic couplings in cCD is the reinforcement of collaboration and networking synergies between actors at the local level – especially within the private sector, but also between the private and public sector –, which leads to new forms of governance and collective action to deal with the global forces and actors. We refer to these organizational-driven synergies as *functional upgrading*. The aim (and active intervention) of the local private sector to attract the Russian market drives the industry, especially the biggest firms participating in the more durable kind of alliances, to join efforts and become exceptionally engaged in functions going beyond their traditional fields of action. Actually, from the beginning of the 2000s the private sector exhibits in cCD a more proactive attitude and interest on taking part in the decision-making and governance of the destination, doing everything in their power to facilitate the arrival of the Russian tourists to the destination. This is particularly evident, for instance, in the case of the measures adopted to increase the efficiency in the processes of expedition of visas. It is also manifested in the field of the promotion and marketing of the destination – a function traditionally played almost exclusively by the DMOs.

Figure 2. Strategic coupling patterns and upgrading outcomes in cCD (1994 – 2013).

			Strategic coupling patterns			
			Cooperative	Mediated	Self-interested	Captive
Upgrading outcomes	Process	Creation of employment opportunities and staff training	High	High	High	High
		Reconfiguration of supply networks	High	High	Medium	Medium
	Product	Improving extant hotel facilities	High	High	Medium	Medium
		Development of new hotel infrastructure	High	None	High	None
	Inter-sectoral	Activation of locally-driven processes of vertical integration	None	High	None	None
	Functional	Reinforcement of networking synergies among stakeholders	High	High	Medium	Medium
		Strengthening of local governance structures	High	High	Medium	Medium

Contribution: None Low Medium High

In sum, results illustrate that the development of different evolving patterns of strategic couplings within the Russian global production network stimulates distinct types of upgrading during the period 1994 – 2013. Going into detail (see Figure 2), it emerges that upgradings of less magnitude – such as process improvements and relatively low-investment product renovations are facilitated generally by all types of coupling. In contrast to this, the more complex and ambitious (in terms of scope, involvement and investment) upgrading projects are certainly favoured – but not dependent – by the existence of closer, durable and balanced power relationships between the counterparts – this is the case of inter-sectoral, functional and product upgradings (particularly when it comes to investments in new hotel infrastructure). However, when local-global relations respond to business-oriented goals and global intermediaries have a considerable degree of control over local firms – that is, in the case of self-interested coupling strategies – significant product upgrading outcomes may also emerge

when the TO and the local counterpart reach a high market share and influence. Finally, the contribution to meaningful upgrading outcomes is considerably low when relations are essentially *captive*.

5. Discussion

Empirical evidences show that a relation between strategic coupling processes and upgrading can be identified in the case study presented. The analysis has elucidated how strategic coupling dynamics act as a stimulus for the upgrading of tourism firms participating in processes as such (Henderson et al., 2002; Humphrey & Schmitz, 2002). Moreover, bearing in mind that research in the tourism field states that the competitiveness of a destination is largely determined by the performance of firms operating there (Claver-Cortés, Molina-Azorín, & Pereira-Moliner, 2007), it might also be argued here that the consolidation of the Russian global production networks in cCD – even though they deal with a specific part of the demand market – has somewhat contributed to the upgrading of the destination as a whole.

Obviously, as Tokatli (2013) pointed out in his critique of the upgrading literature, the upgrading effects at the destination level might be hardly attributable exclusively to this circumstance. The rejuvenating condition of the destination as well as the general economic atmosphere during the last 20 years might also explain the trajectory of any destination (Agarwal, 2002). Likewise, other relevant (national and international) markets and (mediated or non-mediated) distribution networks which coexist at the destination during the same period might have a significant influence. Most importantly, new ambitious policy-led projects that favoured the renewal and diversification of the traditional beach product since the mid-1990s – i.e. the development of the PortAventura theme park (Anton Clavé, 2010, 2012) – might also have something to do with this process.

Made these initial clarifications, evidences provided allow to affirm that certain key determinants favour the potential of strategic coupling processes in enabling local tourism firms upgrading and, as a consequence, in shaping a destination evolutionary trajectory towards new paths of development.

To begin with, the actors and dynamics behind the fostering of the coupling in its initial phase are of great importance. Coupling processes emerging as a result of an implicit bottom-up strategy are more beneficial in the long run (this was also stated by Yang, 2009, in the case of the IT sector). Under these circumstances, the local partners – especially the larger firms (Buhalis, 2000; Erkuş-Öztürk & Eraydın, 2010) – occupy a stronger and autonomous position and are able to foster durable win-win coalitions (this is the case of the cooperative and mediated coupling types). On the contrary, when globals are the initiators, power relations between participants tend to be asymmetrical (as evidenced in the self-interested and captive couplings identified). This reinforces the role of entrepreneurship in tourism destination evolution. In fact, taking Gill and Williams's (2014) words, results demonstrate how the mindful decisions made by 'champions' (or charismatic visionary entrepreneurs) at one point in time can end up becoming years after a collective strategy able to shape the course of the

evolutionary trajectory of a destination. It shows, thus, that private-led initiatives may favour major institutional changes needed to un-lock mature destinations. Additionally, it indicates that upgrading effects derived from strategies implemented by players related to a specific demand market might end up affecting other markets and players within the destination that are not necessarily related to the coupling processes that generated them in the first place.

The research also evidences that the support and cooperation of DMOs and public authorities – often pressured or led by the entrepreneurs or private sector associations – turns out to be another valuable factor facilitating either the consolidation of coupling processes and their fruitful outcomes. These non-firm actors, and the policies and actions they implement, become significant to adapt the institutional-contextual scenario that these partnerships need to succeed (Yeung & Coe, 2014). In cCD these processes could hardly have prospered unless it had not been for the intervention of the agents belonging to the public sphere in matters related to the problematic issue of visa expedition. In a similar vein, at the time that the number of actors participating in these trans-local networks increased considerably, the DMOs acted as representatives of the interests of the destination, as well as a platform through which activate and efficiently organize potent joint promotion actions.

From a different point of view, the study also allows to assert that – in line with the empirical analysis conducted by Li (2013) in the electronic industry – geographical factors such as the social, economic and cultural context in which the counterparts are embedded play a crucial role in influencing the way in which local and global actors interact, as well as the upgrading outcomes of coupling (Gereffi et al., 2005; Henderson et al., 2002). In this regard, local hoteliers and incomings valued more positively their relations with the Russian TOs in comparison to the intermediaries runned by Turkish-Russian or English capital firms – to whom they associated more hostile practices and the aim to pursue their own benefits at the expense of the local industry (Buhalis, 2000).

Complementarily, following Yeung and Coe (2014), findings show that strategic coupling between counterparts belonging to the same sector in a specific tourism area can adopt different ways of interacting and perform governance responding to actor-specific attitudes and decisions. In fact, it emerges that the charisma of the individuals leading coupling processes is crucial, due to the fact that relations and commitment are generally not set at the level of firms or organizations. On the contrary, they are established among the individuals at the forefront of the different counterparts. In this regard, similarly to the analysis of Gereffi et al. (2005), empirical evidence tells us that the couplings that generate most beneficial upgrading outcomes are those in which do exist co-operation between more or less ‘equals’ and relations are based on durable, trusty and mutual-benefit oriented (professional or even personal) relations – cooperative and mediated couplings.. In contrast to this, the more subordinate local firms are in relation to the large and dominant global intermediaries fostering extractive relations – self-interested and captive couplings –, the less beneficial in terms of upgrading the partnerships are.

6. Conclusion

This paper illustrates the ways in which the configuration of coupling strategies between local stakeholders and global intermediaries can act as a mechanism able to unlock (Hassink, 2005) mature destinations, opening the opportunities for new incremental shifts in their evolutionary trajectory.

New theoretical insights and empirical evidences have been given about the specificities of global production networks, strategic coupling dynamics and upgrading processes in tourism. The empirical observation allowed to identify four (evolving) patterns of strategic coupling – i.e. *cooperative*, *mediated*, *self-interested* and *captive* –, depending on the characteristics of local-global partnerships over time in terms of: 1) the way in which the first contacts emerged, 2) the degree of coordination, 3) the power asymmetries and 4) the degree of dependence. In doing so, some aspects that are specific to the strategic coupling processes in tourism were determined. The first peculiarity is the crucial role of local incoming agencies and DMOs. The second one is the fact that these trans-local networks in tourism are not closed or exclusive, so actors may diversify their alliances and became engaged in different coupling strategies at the same time. It has also been evaluated the ways in which the nature and dynamics of strategic coupling patterns act as catalysts of the upgrading of tourism firms by adopting *process*, *product*, *inter-sectoral* and *functional* improvements. Going a step further, the paper has also shed light on the key factors that enhance the potential of processes as such in shaping destinations evolutionary trajectories towards new paths of development.

The specific contribution of this analysis is fourfold. First, it adopts a multi-scalar perspective, so it includes the global dynamics that affect destination competitiveness (Agarwal, 2005). Second, bearing in mind the crucial role of agency in shaping destinations evolution, it embraces the effects resulting from the action and interaction of the broad range of firm and non-firm actors that belong from the local to the global arenas. Third, it also opens up the discussion of the synergies driven by the global-local interactions beyond mediation (sometimes considered controversial). In this vein, it admits the potential of these relations to favour the innovation of tourism firms by providing to local actors information and access to new (or emergent) international markets (Bastakis et al., 2004) and even financial investment in some cases. Last but not least, results highlight the crucial role of entrepreneurial (proactive) decisions as seeds of future collective strategies that create new opportunities for mature destinations. Notwithstanding, it has also been highlighted that it is necessary to avoid excessive overdependence on markets and global actors, because local stakeholders have to remain the main leaders and active participants in the planning and development of tourism.

Otherwise, by providing empirical evidence on global production networks in tourism – a service sector that has not received attention yet –, the paper responds to Yeung and Coe's (2014) claim of the need to “offer novel theoretical insights into why and how the organization and coordination of global production networks varies significantly within and across different industries, sectors and economies” (p.1). In fact, results provided open and enrich debates that need further scrutiny for building up the research agenda of the new paradigms emerging in the economic geography discipline (Benner et al., 2011). For instance, as Hassink (2010) argues, most EEG studies are narrowly focused on analysing the effects of

(local) intrinsic dynamics affecting the evolution of the economic landscape, while neglecting the role of (global) external forces or reducing them to negative and critical influences. This fact reinforces the value of integrating EEG, REG and GPN approaches – as proposed in this paper – and the interest of the results obtained. On the other hand, tourism research can contribute greatly to a better understanding of the role of demand markets and processes of market making (recognized as one of the most commonly acknowledged societal institutions by Farole et al., 2011) in shaping the long-term dynamics of the geographies of production, a topic that, although its crucial importance, has received little attention by economic geographers, regional economists and social scientists in general.

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