

Destination Evolution

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The development of tourism creates socially constructed and specialised productive spaces which are complex and dynamic in nature (Sanz-Ibáñez and Anton Clavé 2014). How this development is materialised in terms of intensity, characteristics and performance can largely differ from place to place even if the product offered is similar or if these spaces are in the same country or region. In this context, it is of utmost interest for tourism scholars, practitioners, decision-makers, and professionals to understand how tourism destinations evolve over time, why such differences are produced, and what mechanisms generate them.

Diverse theoretical and empirical works have put forward different frameworks aimed to generalise the evolutionary transformation of destinations for comparison and forecasting. The first models, between 1939 and 1979, were proposed by authors including Gilbert, Wolfe, Christaller, and Miossec, among others, and focused on how the growth in the number of tourists and changes in the provision of services and infrastructure for them caused spatial changes at destinations (Brouder et al. 2017). Since the 1980s, the Butler's tourism area life cycle (TALC) model stands out for having generated the most discussed research stream on the evolution of tourism in destinations. This stream includes not only the author's original contribution and subsequent discussions (Butler 2021), but also an ample and significant number of applied case studies and conceptual and empirical debates. Butler's model assumes that tourism areas, similarly to other products, evolve through a six-stage pattern – i.e., exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and then a range of possibilities from rejuvenation to decline – because of the increase of tourists. Scholarly literature on destination evolution from the 2000s – including revisions of the TALC model – agree that is crucial to strive to examine destination transformations, vulnerability, adaptability, and resilience from a holistic perspective with the aim of understanding the evolving qualities of tourist places, rather than tackling the analysis of tourism *in* places (Equipe MIT, 2002).

While acknowledging the role of the changing evolution of tourism markets in the transformation of destinations, current approaches consider that these places are complex systems with multiple highly interconnected and interdependent social, environmental, and technical elements co-evolving that generate global, non-linear, open, and permanent

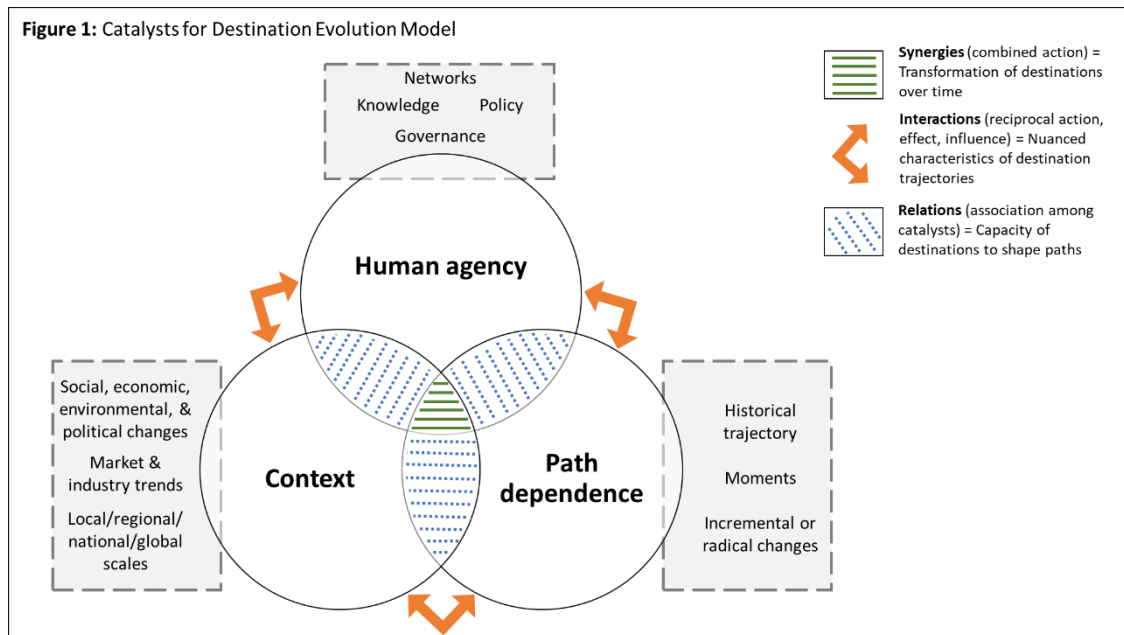
transformations. Hence, it is key to disentangle the triggering factors – internal and external – which challenge the existing structural characteristics of a destination and can move it along new dynamic paths. Among other issues, scholars point out the capacity of tourism to shape complex places with their system of interrelated and mutually dependent actors, social and urban practices and, thus, the crucial role of human agency – i.e., networking, governance, and policies – in enabling destination evolution. This results from gradual or radical interventions aimed to adapt the destination to enabling and constraining local and global contextual forces (Sanz-Ibáñez and Anton Clavé 2014).

Key concepts in evolutionary economic geography (Boschma and Martin 2010), especially path dependence/creation and institutional inertia/innovation – originally used to study the evolution of regions with manufacturing and knowledge-intensive sectors – are useful in understanding the co-evolution of destinations as complex places with economic, urban and residential functions, where paths emerge interacting in a complex environment at the regional and global level (Brouder et al. 2017). One can find already conceptual reflections and explorative case studies applying generalised Darwinism, path dependence, and complexity notions and theories to interpret the mechanisms underlying the changes occurring throughout the evolutionary pathways of a range of destination cases worldwide. These works demonstrate theoretical and empirical adequacy, while providing distinctive powerful forms of interpreting the nuanced, local-specific dynamics of tourist places over time. This brings place characteristics, place dependence and place dynamics at the forefront of the debate on the configuration of tourism destinations' evolutionary processes.

In this sense, short, medium, and long-term destination evolution is not regarded as a linear trajectory derived from the intensity of tourists' attraction from a less developed to a more consolidated state – leading to stagnation and even decline –, but as a contingent process constantly in-the-making. This process, in turn, is shaped by and depends on the synergies, interactions and relations among diverse catalysts, which draw the transformation of destinations over time – see Figure 1. Particularly, human agency, context, and path dependence – each of them including a myriad of elements with co-evolving dynamics – have been identified as the catalysts that play a role in defining the nuanced characteristics of each destination's evolutionary trajectory. They also demonstrate the adaptive capacity of destinations to lock-out their inertia in favour of new scenarios via incremental changes – path plasticity –, disruptive innovations – path creation –, or other type of interventions– e.g., path renewal, path extension or path destruction.

Destination evolution as a socially constructed process implies a prominent role of stakeholders to maintain the tourism activity, revive the development of tourism, and foster place evolution as a destination. Human agency influences path shaping in a positive-enabling or negative-constraining way adapting to the continuously changing conditions, and becomes a mechanism having a great impact on the contingent and unpredictable nature of destination evolution. In the context of a highly fragmented sector, long-term trust, consensus, and strong social and economic networks reinforce destination competitiveness and open windows of opportunity for overcoming lock-in and drawing new development paths. How governance structures, institutions, and strategic policies at local, regional, and/or national scales drive tourism development in a destination over time explains why places influenced by homogeneous

contextual environments evolve in different directions. Thus, the success of proactive contextual policy formulation and implementation is influenced by the expertise of destination actors and local forms of production and innovation, in hand with the existence of university-industry-government relations and the active involvement of stakeholders in knowledge sharing and collective learning.



Tourism destinations are embedded in a social, economic, environmental, and political context operating at different levels and, thus, stakeholders' decision-making and ability to innovate is highly influenced by these forces. Tourism markets – supply and demand – but also the residents' perception of the role of tourism in particular spaces and communities play a decisive role in explaining destination dynamics, as demonstrated, for instance, by the concerns on the impact of 'overtourism' (Butler 2021). Such influence does not need to be deterministic but certainly enables or constrains strategic choices and policy directions. At the same time, the actors themselves can promote improvements and institutional change that benefits the future of a stagnating destination. At the local level, aspects such as the existence of a systemic consciousness, shared values, and sense of belonging or an entrepreneurship culture, are favourable for drawing new development paths; whereas negative dynamics in the aspects mentioned previously or inefficient political regulations act as a barrier. In an increasingly globalised world, the 'moments' that shape destination transitions over time (Sanz-Ibáñez et al. 2017) and unexpected shocks or events with a notable impact – such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, political conflicts, economic recessions, or a pandemic like the COVID-19 can be critical. Likewise, positive, endogenous, and selective 'moments' – policy intervention, key agencies, or strategic coupling alliances in emerging markets, for instance – can be regarded as opportunities for destination upgrading (Sanz-Ibáñez and Anton Clavé 2016).

Finally, path dependence emphasises that place history, that is the pre-existing conditions, as well as events, circumstances, and decisions from the past in a given territory, can have long-term consequences in destination evolution. This does not imply that path dependence is a catalyst constraining destination dynamics, leading inevitably to political, cognitive, or functional lock-in and the decline of the visitor economy. Instead, path dependence acknowledges that destinations can depart from their historical legacies and structures and enable new development pathways by transforming the tourism model towards more sustainable, resilient, and responsible goals. These processes have to be seen as contingent – i.e., open-ended and non-deterministic –, emergent, and continually transforming as a result of a never-ending interplay of path dependence, path plasticity, path creation, path renewal, or path extension that occur as destination stakeholders reproduce, mindfully deviate from, and transform existing development paths.

Destination evolution future debates must be integrated within broader vectors of interpretation, including vulnerability, adaptability, resilience, and co-evolution in the frame of the societal, environmental, and economic changing dynamics derived from the global economic and energy transition and the intensified awareness of the climate emergency and its consequences. Complexity ingredients within the evolutionary economic geography framework represent a promising potential to help understand the transformation of destinations or places with tourism. This is due to the fact that complexity lens allow to analyse places from a multi-scalar perspective and to acknowledge the interdependent character of elements composing a destination (Martin 2021). Resilience and co-evolution are closely related key concepts to approach and understand destination evolution, its vulnerability and adaptability. Resilience can be understood as the political ability of a complex destination to shape sustainable change via constant innovation and learning to gain the capacity of adjustment and adaptation to overcome vulnerability and increase adaptability (Simmie and Martin 2010). The co-evolution concept may allow to acknowledge the key role of institutions – formal and informal rules embedded in social, economic, and political contexts – in destination transformation and related issues as place sustainability, social innovation or social equality (Gong and Hassink 2019).

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