

Destination competitiveness: A phenomenographic study



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HIGHLIGHTS

- An outcome space for destination competitiveness with three hierarchically related conceptions is presented.
- Previously overlooked elements of destination competitiveness are discussed.
- A unique research approach, phenomenography, is employed.

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ABSTRACT

The destination competitiveness literature, while well established, is fraught with inconsistencies over its definition, measurement and its legitimacy as a topic of research. Given the divide that exists, this paper proposes a phenomenographic approach to the study of destination competitiveness. Specifically, the paper argues that efforts to advance destination competitiveness should be preceded by a better understanding of how destination stakeholders is conceptualize the term.

This paper explores how destination stakeholders understand destination competitiveness. The findings reveal three distinct conceptions of destination competitiveness which are hierarchically related: destination competitiveness as *perception of a destination*, destination competitiveness as *performance*, and destination competitiveness as a *long-term process*. Additional features of destination competitiveness are discussed including the relationship between competitiveness and attractiveness, and the dynamic nature of the competitor set. This paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for advancing the destination competitiveness concept.

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1. Introduction

Intensified competition between destinations, concerns over limited resources, and the recognition of competitiveness as a critical success factor, have all contributed to an expanding body of literature on tourism destination competitiveness (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2004). Indeed, the past two decades have witnessed a multiplicity of efforts from tourism scholars, destination managers and international organizations alike to attempt to measure the competitiveness of cities, regions and even countries as tourism destinations, as well as identify the factors that can contribute to their enhanced and sustained competitive positions.

Despite its clear popularity as a topic of research, the study of

tourism destination competitiveness has been marked by controversy and confusion. At the root of this polemic debate are three important and interconnected causes. Firstly, there is the widely recognized complexity of the concept (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009; Li, Song, Cao, & Wu, 2013). Different perspectives have been employed to explore the topic including the original attractiveness approach (Bramwell & Rawding, 1996; Chon, Weaver, & Kim, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Faulkner, Oppermann & Fredline, 1999; Kim, 1998), the price level approach (Dwyer, Forsyth, & Rao, 2000, 2002), and recently more holistic multi-layered approaches (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). In addition to these approaches, the topic of destination competitiveness, given its scope and complexity, can and has been linked to an array of areas within the broader tourism destination management sphere including branding, image (Uysal, Chen, & Williams, 2000), marketing and management (Buhalis, 2000). Furthermore, given the destination as the unit of analysis, concepts such as place making and place branding which are inherent and implicit within the

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destination competitiveness concept, have been referred to (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003). As a result, a multiplicity of approaches and related constructs have been encompassed within the concept (Heath, 2003).

Secondly, the multifaceted nature of the concept has led to the lack of consensus around its definition (Azzopardi, 2011; Botti & Peypoch, 2013; Mazanec, Wöber, & Zins, 2007). A variety of definitions have been proposed and a recent review (Abreu-Novais, Ruhanen, & Arcodia, 2015a) revealed that these definitions generally entail the following dimensions: economics, attractiveness and satisfaction, and sustainability. The economic dimension, which is often regarded as the central facet of competitiveness (Li et al., 2013), includes “price differentials coupled with exchange rates movements, productivity levels of various components of the tourist industry” (Dwyer et al., 2000, p. 9), “objectively measured variables such as visitor numbers, market share, tourist expenditure, employment, value added by the tourism industry” (Heath, 2003, p. 9) and “ability to increase tourism expenditure” (Crouch & Ritchie, 2012, p. vii).

The second dimension commonly identified across definitions relates to the notion of attractiveness and satisfaction (Enright & Newton, 2004; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Here, it is recognized that destinations must strive to appeal to visitors and also offer a tourism experience that is superior to competing destinations (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Sustainability is the final dimension found in much of the academic discourse on competitiveness. While Crouch and Ritchie (1999) referred to ‘sustainable competitiveness’ as incorporating ecological, social and cultural stewardship more broadly, subsequent definitions have tended to adopt a resource-based and environmental focus of sustainability. Examples of this include “preserving the natural capital of the destination for future generations” (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003, p. 2), and “create and integrate value-added products that sustain its resources” (Hassan, 2000, p. 239). Or, as Buhalis (2000, p. 9) notes, “destination competitiveness must also recognize the sustainability of local resources for ensuring the maintenance of long-term success as well as the achievement of equitable returns-on-resources utilized to satisfy all stakeholders”.

Finally, and stemming from the absence of a widely accepted and clear definition of destination competitiveness, is the disagreement as to the most effective and rigorous way of measuring it. Once again, multiple approaches have been employed resulting in different and often conflicting answers to three essential questions: *What is measured? How is it measured? and Who measures it?* (Abreu-Novais et al., 2015a). Empirical attempts to identify and assess destination competitiveness remain constrained by the debates and contradictions in conceptualizing the term. Furthermore, although academic discourse on the topic broadly acknowledges the multiplicity of existing views (Abreu Novais, Ruhanen, & Arcodia, 2015b; Mazanec et al., 2007; Zehrer, Smeral, & Hallmann, 2017), it has yet to ‘take stock’ and explore these variations and relationships in understanding the concept. Arguably any further investigation of destination competitiveness should be informed by a more thorough understanding of the conceptualizations of the term from those stakeholders who are responsible for operationalizing the concept in practice; that is, supply-side stakeholders including government, business owners, associations and local residents, as well as tourists whose perspectives have long been recognized as important in any attempts to measure competitiveness.

Recognizing these limitations and gaps, and in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of competitiveness, this paper returns to the foundations of the concept by investigating what actually constitutes destination competitiveness and the spectrum

of perspectives on the concept. Accordingly, the focus of this paper is not to discuss how the tourist actually makes decisions about competing destinations, instead its aim is to investigate how individuals (representing different stakeholders) view the concept of destination competitiveness. The approach adopted, phenomenography, is an interpretive methodology recognized for its value in unveiling the qualitatively different ways of understanding and experiencing a phenomenon (Marton, 1981). It provides the opportunity for further investigation as it allows for an array of first person experiences of destination competitiveness therefore enabling a more holistic view that reflects stakeholders’ perspectives. As such, this paper provides a critical re-evaluation of the destination competitiveness concept. Utilizing phenomenography as a novel research lens provides the opportunity to extend existing literature on the topic by contributing new and insightful viewpoints and conceptualizations of the destination competitiveness concept.

2. Views on destination competitiveness

Academic interest in how destinations can succeed in a highly competitive market grew until the late 1990s with various tourism scholars highlighting the importance of this topic (Buhalis, 2000), while others focused on the competitive position of particular destinations (Haahti, 1986; Tsai & Wang, 1998). It was, however, Crouch and Ritchie’s (1999) seminal work that put destination competitiveness on the tourism research ‘map’. Their grounded-research approach, which entailed multiple modes of data collection, produced the first model of destination competitiveness. Following their work, the topic progressed to include various perspectives on the term, different conceptual models and the identification of a wide range of determinants and factors, as well as a multiplicity of measurement approaches.

Since the early investigations in this field, many researchers have attempted to define destination competitiveness. Being labeled as a vague (Hanafiah, Hemdi, & Ahmad, 2015) and complex (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009; Li et al., 2013) construct, defining the concept has proven to be a challenging task. Within the various available definitions and conceptualizations of the term, it is possible to recognize that destination competitiveness seems to be linked to the notion of “ability”. This has been one of the most commonly referred to elements in definitional statements (Abreu-Novais et al., 2015a) and refers to the capacity of a destination to achieve certain goals. The actual goals that a destination is aiming to achieve are wide-ranging but can be categorized into three dimensions: economic and the associated well-being of the population (Azzopardi, 2011; Bahar & Kozak, 2007; Dwyer, Mellor, Livaic, Edwards, & Kim, 2004; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003), attractiveness and satisfaction (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2004) and sustainability (Azzopardi, 2011; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Hassan, 2000).

Academics have also been concerned with the development of theoretical models that aim to identify and explain the forces that drive destination competitiveness. A considerable number of models have been proposed (Andrades-Caldito, Sánchez-Rivero, & Pulido-Fernández, 2014; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Goffi, 2013; Heath, 2003; Omerzel, 2006; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) and their impact has ranged from incremental contributions through to major advances that have included the development of complex models with exhaustive lists of indicators. Among the existing frameworks, again Ritchie and Crouch’s (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) model of destination competitiveness is regarded as the most comprehensive theoretical explanation of the concept (Boley & Perdue, 2012; Hudson, Ritchie, & Timur, 2004; Tsai, Song, & Wong, 2009), and has inspired the development of subsequent

models (Andrades-Caldito et al., 2014; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Omerzel, 2006). This probably explains why, despite the variety of efforts, the majority of the underlying concepts regarding the determinants of destination competitiveness are somewhat similar.

While the academic progress achieved is indisputable, there are still issues worthy of further clarification relating to the conceptualization of the term. First, there seem to be contradictions in the orientation of the concept; inconsistencies between an 'external' orientation that considers competitiveness as a result of the comparison with other destinations and an 'internal' orientation that regards it in more absolute terms. On the external orientation side, there is discourse which links competitiveness to the notion of a destination as superior vis-à-vis its competitors. In other words, destination competitiveness is a relative concept and only makes sense when making comparisons between destinations (Gomezelj and Mihalić, 2008; Gooroochurn & Sugiyarto, 2005; Kozak & Rimmington, 1999). Definitional excerpts including the "ability of a destination to deliver goods and services that perform better than other destinations on those aspects of the tourism experience considered to be important by tourists" (Dwyer & Kim, 2003, p. 374) and "the ability to create and integrate value added products that sustain resources while maintaining market position relative to other competitors" (Hassan, 2000, p. 239) exemplify that external orientation. On the other hand, there are definitional statements where this external focus does not feature, for instance: "competitiveness is related to the ability of the destination to create and nurture a high-quality product" (Croes, 2011, p. 440), "a destination is competitive if it can attract and satisfy potential tourists" (Enright & Newton, 2004, p. 340), or even the most commonly cited definition of the term: "ability to increase tourism expenditure, to increasingly attract visitors while providing them with satisfying, memorable experiences, and to do so in a profitable way, while enhancing the well-being of destination residents and preserving the natural capital of the destination" (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003, p. 2). In these cases, and contrary to the external approaches noted above, the competitiveness of the destination here is conceptualized in terms of its internal attributes and abilities.

In both external and internal orientations of the concept, there is broad acknowledgement that a destination does not exist in a vacuum and so the success of a destination is affected by what happens internally in that destination as well as externally in competing destinations (Crouch, 2010). While this preposition is intuitively obvious, when assessing a destination's competitiveness however, it is less clear how much emphasis should be given to the performance of competing destinations. In other words, it is not obvious whether or not a destination that meets the criteria of competitiveness insofar as it attracts and satisfies tourists, increases tourism expenditure, while ensuring its sustainability is still considered competitive, regardless of its competitors' performance. Despite being subtle, this difference can affect how competitiveness is conceptualized and measured. This point has been similarly voiced by Mazanec et al. (2007, p.88) who, in criticizing the use of destination competitiveness, stated that it is "open to discussion whether external criteria for destination competitiveness, such as destination market share or sustained relative growth, may be characterized as indicators, or whether these variables are better considered to be effects within the overall causal chain".

A second point of apparent incongruity in current discourse involves the role that economic prosperity of the destination's resident population assumes in the conceptualization. The aforementioned economic dimension of competitiveness is a common feature across definitions with some consensus around the notion

that there is a connection between destination competitiveness and the enhanced well-being and prosperity of destination residents. It is less clear however whether this enhanced welfare is a condition for destination competitiveness or a desired outcome of a competitive destination. On the one hand, there are statements that embrace the former view: "the most competitive destination in the long term is the one which creates well-being for its residents" (Bahar & Kozak, 2007, p. 62), "ability of the destination ... to attract visitors to a destination by offering them a unique overall experience ... that satisfies ... the economic prosperity objective of the residents" (Azzopardi, 2011, p. 22) and the aforementioned widely cited definition from Ritchie and Crouch (2003). On the other hand, there is a view that the "ultimate goal of competitiveness is to maintain and increase the real income of its citizens, usually reflected in the standard of living of the country" (Dwyer & Kim, 2003, p. 372). As noted by Heath (2003), under this perspective destination competitiveness is not an end in itself but instead becomes a means to an end. Clearly, there is a need to better understand the position that the economic welfare of residents has within the concept of competitiveness. Establishing these delimitations will have implications for measuring destination competitiveness.

A third limitation stems from the nature and scope of the tourism experience. Destination competitiveness, unlike competitiveness in other industries, does not refer to a single, well-defined product or service but to an overall experience which entails an "amalgam of individual products and experience opportunities" (Murphy, Pritchard, & Smith, 2000, p. 44). This 'total experience' (Dwyer et al., 2004) is produced by a variety of destination stakeholders who contribute to the visitor experience: tourism enterprises, local residents, other supporting industries, destination management organizations and the public sector (Crouch, 2010). This 'fuzzy' notion of the destination further complicates the unit of analysis and thus the measurement of destination competitiveness (Claver-Cortés & Pereira-Moliner, 2007).

Given the crucial role of these different stakeholders in the making of a destination, contributing to and ultimately responsible for the destination's competitiveness, it is arguably fundamental to understand how these destination stakeholders conceptualize the term. Existing academic definitions are multifaceted, however, it remains unclear the extent to which they reflect the meanings attached to the concept by the different destination stakeholders (Abreu-Novais et al., 2015a). While at least certain models (Dwyer et al., 2004; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) have used stakeholder opinion and feedback in constructing their approaches, these studies were not aimed at exploring how different stakeholders conceptualize the various dimensions of the concept. Instead, these qualitative data stages had the purpose of supporting the design of a standardized model comprising generic dimensions and factors that could help predict the success of destinations. Consequently, it cannot be determined if stakeholders do in fact relate to all dimensions of the concepts presented in these models. A further point in support of this argument lies in Ritchie and Crouch's (2003, p.62) acknowledgement that "in all the discussions and interviews that took place, the opinions that were expressed tended to focus on a subset of competitiveness factors". This highlights that different stakeholders focus on various aspects of destination competitiveness which opens the possibility that they might even attribute completely different meanings to the term. It then seems logical that empirical research into the various ways in which destination competitiveness is conceptualized is essential for identifying potential variations in understandings. This is particularly important in the context of destination competitiveness measurement efforts which rely heavily on destination stakeholders themselves (Abreu-Novais et al., 2015a).

3. Study methods: a phenomenographic approach to destination competitiveness

Originally developed in Sweden during the 1970s to explore conceptions of learning, phenomenography was quickly adopted in the field of education (Marton & Svensson, 1982; Marton, 1981). It has since been expanded and adopted to investigate a myriad of other social phenomena including business (Lamb, Sandberg, & Liesch, 2011), management (Dunkin, 2000; Sandberg, 2000), and marketing (Lin & Niu, 2011), among others. In tourism, however, this interdisciplinary research approach has received comparatively little attention. While phenomenology has been applied to explore an array of issues within tourism and the tourist experience (Cohen, 1979; Prentice, Witt, & Hamer, 1998; Santos & Yan, 2009; Wilson, McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013), few studies have adopted phenomenography (Mkono, 2015; Watkins & Bell, 2002).

In a similar way to phenomenology, phenomenography is a qualitative research approach that seeks to describe and understand individuals' experiences of reality (Marton, 1981). In this sense, both approaches share the objective of researching and revealing the human experience. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the more nuanced differences between phenomenography and phenomenology (for detailed reviews see Larsson & Holström, 2007; Martinková & Parry, 2011), there are several key differences in terms of their underlying assumptions and outcomes of their analysis. Firstly, phenomenography focuses on the analysis of empirical research as opposed to phenomenology which is a philosophical school of thought based on theorizing (Limberg, 2008). Secondly, phenomenography is focused on collective meaning whereas phenomenology emphasizes individual meaning (Barnard, McCosker, & Gerber, 1999). Thirdly, phenomenography focuses on a second-order perspective describing the world as it is experienced and understood while phenomenology emphasizes a first-order perspective describing the world as it is (Assaroudi & Heydari, 2016; Barnard et al., 1999). Finally, in phenomenography, the focal point is revealing and understanding the qualitatively different conceptions of a given phenomenon (Dall'Alba, 2000). The results then become an outcome space where conceptions or 'categories of description' are presented according to the views expressed by the participants. In contrast, in phenomenology, the focus is the foundations which are identified by looking for the most invariant meaning of the phenomenon which lead to the identification of meaning units (Barnard et al., 1999; Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002).

Phenomenography has evolved into a distinct research approach (Barnard et al., 1999) with its focus on conceptions of specific aspects of reality one of its most distinctive features. Such conceptions correspond to the way individuals understand or experience the various aspects of the world (Sandberg, 2000) and they are relational, experiential, content-oriented and qualitative (Marton, 1986). The epistemological assumption in this approach is that individuals differ as to how they conceptualize and experience phenomena but such differences can be described, communicated and understood by others (Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002). In addition, the premise of phenomenography is that there is a limited number of ways of conceiving or experiencing a phenomenon or aspect of reality and it is possible to capture this variation in categories (Marton, 1981; Pang, 2003).

Despite its novelty in tourism empirical research, phenomenography has been suggested as a valuable approach to explore different issues in tourism (Abreu-Novais, Arcodia, & Cavlek, 2014; Ryan, 2000; Tribe, 2004). As Ryan (2000) argued, this approach allows for the unveiling of individual experiences, as well as shared consensus around understandings that enables model building. Following Ryan (2000), Tribe (2004) further suggested that the

approach may help to address the gap where the knowledge being offered about people differs from people's knowledge about themselves.

Amongst the destination competitiveness literature, quantitative methods have tended to dominate (Dwyer et al., 2004; Enright & Newton, 2004) with few studies reporting the use of qualitative methods. For instance, the seminal work of Crouch and Ritchie (1999) was based on interviews which sought to identify stakeholders' perceptions of the factors that determine the success of a destination. However, their focus was on developing consensus around the determinants of destination competitiveness as opposed to the nuances of meaning. Given that destination competitiveness "means different things to different people" (Ayikoru, 2015, p. 143), in order to develop an enhanced understanding it is imperative to investigate the different understandings of the term and the relationships between them.

To bring to the fore the qualitatively different ways of conceiving and experiencing destination competitiveness, a phenomenographic approach provided the lens for exploring this phenomenon in the minds and lived experiences of different stakeholders. Consequently, these qualitatively different ways, as opposed to the focus on academic definitions of destination competitiveness, can provide a basis for a more holistic understanding of the studied phenomenon (Limberg, 2008). In addition, phenomenography can foster the discovery of new features and nuances (Limberg, 2008) as well as allow for the investigation of the hidden relationships between conceptions and experience (Francis, 1993). This strength of phenomenography is particularly valuable considering the well-recognized complexity of destination competitiveness.

Data was collected in the form of interviews, the predominant data collection tool used in phenomenographic research (Bowden, 2000; Marton, 1986). Following the phenomenographic tradition, the selection of interviewees was purposive and underpinned by the notion of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in order to allow for the capture of the greatest possible variation in conceptions. This variation in sample is a fundamental aspect of phenomenographic research (Marton, 1981, 1986; Sandberg, 2000; Wright, Murray, & Geale, 2007). One particular destination was chosen for the context of the study - Portugal. Choosing a specific destination was required to provide a sampling framework for participants (i.e. identifying individuals that represent particular stakeholder groups). In addition, focusing on a particular destination ensured that the interviewer and participants had a focal or common point to discuss within the interview. While participants were asked to reflect on Portugal as a tourism destination during the interview, this did not mean that the discussion was in anyway limited to Portugal only and participants discussed a variety of examples from their experience and knowledge. The choice of country was driven by the need to access potential interviewees from different stakeholder groups within a destination and the researchers' access to such stakeholders. Thirty-five participants were selected from different stakeholder groups, gender and age group, as shown in Table 1. The sample size was consistent with the expectations regarding theoretical saturation, which in phenomenographic studies is generally agreed to occur between 15 and 25 participants (Forster, 2016; Lamb et al., 2011; Sandberg, 2000).

Given the context of the study, participants were from Portugal with the exception of international tourists. The latter were chosen by identifying individuals who had previously visited Portugal. Interviews were conducted by one of the authors in either Portuguese or English, depending on the preference of the participant. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary from Portuguese to English by the same author who conducted the interviews.

Table 1
Profile of participants.

#	Stakeholder group/activity sector	Age group	Gender
1	International tourist	20–29	Female
2	Association	50–59	Female
3	Private Sector – Accommodation	50–59	Male
4	Private Sector – Accommodation	20–29	Male
5	Private Sector – Wine tourism	30–39	Female
6	Private Sector – Entertainment	30–39	Female
7	Private Sector – Accommodation	20–29	Male
8	Public Sector – Transportation -Airline	40–49	Male
9	Association	40–49	Female
10	Public Sector – DMO	40–49	Male
11	Public Sector – DMO	50–59	Female
12	Private Sector – Events/Entertainment	30–39	Male
13	Private Sector – Entertainment	30–39	Male
14	Private Sector – Tour Agency	40–49	Male
15	Public Sector – Government	30–39	Male
16	Private Sector – Exhibition Centre	20–29	Male
17	Public Sector – DMO	40–49	Female
18	Private Sector – Accommodation	50–59	Male
19	Private Sector – Accommodation	18–19	Male
20	Public Sector – DMO	50–59	Female
21	Private Sector – Tour Agency	40–49	Male
22	Private Sector – Transportation – Transfers	50–59	Male
23	Local Resident	40–49	Male
24	Local Resident	20–29	Female
25	Local Resident	30–39	Female
26	Local Resident	30–39	Male
27	International tourist	30–39	Female
28	International Tourist	30–39	Female
29	International Tourist	30–39	Female
30	Local Resident	+60	Female
31	International Tourist	30–39	Male
32	International Tourist	+60	Male
33	Local Resident	30–39	Male
34	Local Resident	40–49	Male
35	International Tourist	30–39	Female

The interviews were both semi-structured and open; semi-structured in the sense that the topic of the interview was clearly set through the use of a certain number of questions (Åkerlind, Bowden, & Green, 2005), in this case four, and open in the sense that the researcher was guided by the responses of interviewees and that interviewees were encouraged to describe and discuss their conceptions in detail (Svensson, 1997). Four main questions guided the progression of the interviews: 1. *What does it mean to you for a destination to be competitive?* 2. *Can you give me an example of a destination that you consider competitive?* 3. *In your view, can you describe the competitiveness of Portugal as a tourism destination?* 4. *Can you give me your opinion about a destination that is more/less competitive than Portugal?* Given that all participants had experience with Portugal as a tourism destination the last two questions guided participants to focus on a specific example with which they had familiarity. Follow-up questions such as *What do you mean by that?*, *Can you explain that further?*, and *Can you give an example?* were also used where appropriate to encourage participants to clarify and elaborate upon their answers and demonstrate their ideas in specific and practical situations (Sandberg, 2000). This process continued until no further progress was made in terms of developing a mutual understanding between interviewee and interviewer. The interviews lasted on average about 30 min with some interviews taking up to 97 min.

Each interview was recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The interview data was analyzed through a process of iteration consistent with qualitative research analysis techniques. As in phenomenographic analysis, there was a conscious attempt from the researcher to 'bracket' their own preconceived ideas about what constitutes destination competitiveness to ensure the

researcher's own biases do not influence the interpretation and that the findings are grounded in the participants' descriptions and experiences (Wright et al., 2007).

The analysis entailed three stages as per phenomenographic research methods. First, the identification of the conceptions of each participant was garnered through the careful and repeated reading of transcripts. Consistent with phenomenographic analysis techniques interview transcripts were analyzed in their entirety rather than analyzing isolated and discrete statements. The objective is to avoid the possibility of interpreting experiences out of context (Åkerlind, Bowden, & Green, 2005). Second, transcripts were sorted according to the conceptions that emerged so that individuals with similar conceptions (or ways of viewing and experiencing the phenomenon) could be grouped. Transcripts were re-read and compared within and across groups to check the allocation of transcripts to different groups. This was to verify the stability of the discovered conceptions. The third stage involved exploring the structural links between the different conceptions. It was at this phase of the analysis where the researchers' perspectives are used to interpret the logical relationships between the conceptions (Bowden, 2000). Following the recommendation of a number of phenomenographers, this step was undertaken only after the conceptions had been finalized to avoid imposing a biased structure on the data (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). This stage concluded with the mapping of the conceptions into an outcome space; the logically and hierarchically ordered set of the different ways of experiencing a phenomenon (Marton, 1981).

This structural framework was developed based on the variation of conceptions according to three dimensions that emerged from the data: the focus of destination competitiveness in regards to the perceived goal of destination competitiveness; the orientation of the concept determined by the delimitations of the notion of destination competitiveness, and the view of the destination in terms of the context where destination competitiveness takes place. These dimensions enabled looking for referential (what element) and structural (how element) differences between conceptions. In this context, the former refers to the general meaning that is attributed to a phenomenon with the latter referring to the way in which the component parts of the phenomenon related to each other (Marton, Dall'Alba, & Beaty, 1993).

4. Results

From the phenomenographic analysis and interpretation described above, three qualitatively different conceptions of destination competitiveness emerged from the data: (1) destination competitiveness as the perception of a destination, (2) destination competitiveness as performance, and (3) destination competitiveness as a long-term process. While many similarities were found to exist across the stakeholders interviewed, particularly with respect to the numerous factors that contribute to a destination's success, the differences identified lie essentially in the three aforementioned dimensions: the orientation of the conception as well as its goal, and how it is translated into determinants and factors. For instance, within each conception, it is possible to distinguish differing perceptions of the characteristics and dimensions of competitiveness.

4.1. Conception 1: destination competitiveness as the perception of a destination

In the first conception, destination competitiveness is viewed by participants as an evaluation of the characteristics of a destination. This evaluation is personal, subjective and can stem from either the individual's experience of that destination or simply the

information and images that an individual has of that destination. The most distinctive feature of this conception is its sole focus on the individual consumer. Destination competitiveness emerges as the individual relationship between the destination and the tourist or potential tourist. In this sense, competitiveness can be seen to relate to the potential of the destination as well as the notion of “attractiveness” (R1). The competitive destination is therefore “attractive and interesting; it has a lot to offer” (R1) and determines “how much (one) would like to go to that destination” (R28).

In this conception, participants describing destination competitiveness or a destination that is competitive essentially discuss what they, as individual tourists, can experience or are seeking in a destination. In that sense destination competitiveness is very centered on the individual and their benefits from visiting the destination: “what can that destination offer to me as compared to other destinations. What it can offer me in terms of leisure, in terms of attractions, comfort, safety, in terms of knowledge ...” (R29) and “for me, to start with, it (the destination) has to have something cultural. Something that draws me there. I live in the Algarve and therefore I have beaches, sun, summer. The main factor that leads me to travel is culture. Therefore the first thing needs to have that; (...) the competitive destination is the destination that draws me there, that enriches me as a person and my knowledge (R24).”

The goal of a destination, according to this conception, is essentially to establish a connection with the tourist or potential tourist by offering the products, experiences or features the tourist wants or needs. Here the destination is seen as a product or potential product that can be experienced. Considering the multi-dimensional nature of a destination, there is a panoply of factors playing a role in the overall perception of a destination. Accordingly, competitiveness emerges as a composite concept: “the total score that the destination has in the collection of factors that the person buying values” (R12) and “analyzing all the factors of the destination, everything that the tourist desires in a trip ... I look at the pros and cons; if it's worth it then the destination is competitive” (R16).

The sole consumer orientation in this conception implies that destination competitiveness has a strong subjective nature as different tourists value different things. In addition, such decisions are not necessarily rational as can be seen in the following observation:

“I would look at the factors; I would measure them not in a very explicit way. Analyze on paper? No. In the end it's a decision from the heart I would say, from the stomach. It's always a thing that ... I don't understand my decision at all, so it's not a theory or a model where I put inputs and there's just a little tiny advantage for one destination competitiveness so that I would choose that destination. But implicitly I always measure the things, the mood or in the needs or what to fulfill with the trip. And then it leads to one destination being more competitive than another” (R28).

4.2. Conception 2: destination competitiveness as performance

In a similar way to the previous understanding, individuals sharing this conception view destination competitiveness as what tourists need and desire. Unlike the previous conception however, the focus here shifts from the individual tourist to the destination itself and the beneficial outcomes that may yield from that competitiveness. Even when discussing ‘attractiveness’ as was similarly mentioned in the previous conception, participants here describe it in a more generic and destination oriented way: “I think that (competitiveness) must mean the viability of the destination to attract people. A destination survives by visitors coming, that's what it is. So to what extent people see it as value proposition to come and spend money in this destination rather than another”

(R32). In this conception there is an additional shift in terms of how a destination is perceived. As opposed to being seen as an experiential setting, the destination emerges as a product that needs to be marketed and consumed: “At the end of the day (a destination) is a product. You can have the best product in the world, you can have the best phone, best computer, best anything; but if people cannot get to it or don't even know about it, it cannot be competitive” (R34).

This conception entails a departure from an individual and subjective based notion to a more pragmatic and objective approach towards destination competitiveness. In this sense, the aforementioned perception and potential of a destination are translated into competitiveness only when accompanied by identifiable results. Destination competitiveness is therefore defined in terms of the ability of a destination to achieve certain goals; it is not about the potential of a destination but about transforming the destination's characteristics or circumstances into measurable outcomes. The nature of these outcomes can vary and encompass tourist arrivals (R20), market quotas (R18), tourism expenditure (R22), and average number of visitor nights (R27). While they differ, such outcomes have an external emphasis as they all focus on tourist behavior; if tourists visit the destination, how long do they stay, and how much money do they spend?

Additionally, the goals that are defined and therefore determine what competitiveness translates into “depend on the market that the destination is trying to target” (R11), and the strategy the destination wants to implement, “quality or quantity” (R10). As one respondent explained, “just because a destination attracts millions of tourists does not necessarily mean it's competitive, it's more to do with the revenue that it generates” (R11). This focus on outcomes, and in particular, on expenditure and profitability (R22) shows a clear shift, in comparison to the previous conception, from a demand orientation to a supply orientation. The following excerpts clearly highlight the focus of competitiveness as viewed by individuals sharing this conception:

“If you are competitive it means that you are able to not have a high season and a low season. You are able to have a medium level of tourists each day of the year ... you want to increase your performance and in the tourism industry I think that you can measure performance by for example, measuring the number of nights each person spends in a hotel, or the average spending of each person. And also, another important thing is to differentiate the different levels of, how can you say ... markets. For example, Rome attracts a lot of tourists but you also have to distinguish what you mean. You have visitors and you have tourists ... you differentiate the person that just visits the place in a day. So he doesn't sleep or stay. And more importantly, he doesn't even eat in a restaurant or in a bar. He leaves his house in the morning with his backpack, with his lunchbox, with his water; he visits the Vatican museum, after that he has lunch in a garden, he eats his sandwich and he goes back home. So at the end of the day what is the value of that for Rome?” (R27).

4.3. Conception 3: destination competitiveness as a long-term process

The third and last conception of destination competitiveness appears not as a perception of a destination or a set of identifiable performance indicators, but as a process that is grounded in an intricate network - the tourism destination. In this conception, the destination is not merely seen as the experiential setting or the product consumed by tourists but as a system: “a destination is not just the physical place. It is not just a physical destination. The destination is everything that surrounds the place. Everything that is a part of it and everything that interferes with it: social,

economic, political ... everything” (R5). Following this more complex notion of a destination, destination competitiveness cannot be merely translated into performance measures; instead destination competitiveness is concerned with all the elements and steps that are necessary for a destination to achieve certain goals as well as the effects of these goals – it becomes a process.

The processual nature of this conception relates to the different and well thought out steps that are involved in making a competitive destination. This process starts with a vision: a destination “needs to have an idea of what it wants to be” (R26) and “needs to bet on what it wants to be” (R5). The consistency of this vision is also fundamental: “sectors like tourism should not depend on politics. There needs to be a tourism strategy independent of the secretary [Secretary of State for Tourism] for tourism being A, B or C” (R14). This involves putting in place mechanisms that will allow that vision to be achieved. This involves a variety of elements including “creativity, entrepreneurship, resources, cooperation between the different entities, strategic vision ...” (R5).

The long-term element present in this conception relates to concerns that extend beyond the immediate outcomes of tourism. In this sense, there is a time dimension to destination competitiveness; it is not enough for a destination to attract and satisfy tourists and to increase performance measures relating to tourism, but it is also fundamental to sustain this over the longer term. This continuity needs to be reflected in tourism policy (R19), responsible and efficient use of resources (R8, R17) and maintenance of the destination's identity (R26) to ensure the long-term success of the destination.

With this long-term focus comes a concern about the general ‘well-being’ of the destination. The orientation of this conception is therefore not simply about demand or supply; instead it is a holistic approach that demonstrates concern for the various destination stakeholders as well as the destination as a whole. For instance, working conditions (R13), the motivation and productivity of workers (R7), and the general organizational culture of a destination (R7) are examples of elements that are important to consider for those engaged in the sector. Similarly, taxation systems (R9), bureaucracy (R14), and general conditions to attract investment (R13, R21) exemplify concerns for local businesses. Additionally, the well-being of the local residents is also considered: “Let's think about Paris ... Maybe the Parisians don't really like that Paris has so much tourism ... and why does that happen? Because tourists end up disrupting local people's life” (R09). Given this risk, tourism destinations need to decide “on the number of tourists that (they)

can or are willing to welcome” (R26). Such ‘capacity’ from the residents' perspective can in fact be less than the capacity of a destination in terms of its hotels and transportation systems. Furthermore, the number of tourists can actually impact the quality of the tourism destination: “There are certain destinations that welcome too many people. When you go to Venice, when you go to Prague ... I think they are destinations that become a sort of Disneyland where there are no local people left, in which everything is oriented towards tourists and it starts looking fake. I mean tourism destinations need to try and preserve their identity” (R26). In this sense, destination competitiveness in this conception entails a broader concern for the ‘well-being’ of the destination as a whole.

4.4. A hierarchy of understanding of destination competitiveness

The three descriptions presented above not only reveal a variation in how the competitiveness of tourism destinations is conceptualized and experienced but they also unveil a hierarchy of understanding by destination stakeholders. The hierarchical relationship between conceptions is established in such a way that conception one is the least comprehensive, and conception three the most comprehensive. Conception one, *the perception of a destination*, has a narrower approach and focus and destination competitiveness is delimited to a composite of several separate destination attributes or elements. The scope of competitiveness is expanded in conception two, *performance*, with an increased focus on the ability of the destination to achieve identifiable outcomes. In conception three, *a long-term process*, the degree of complexity and sophistication is further extended as the competitiveness of a destination involves a time dimension where vision and strategic orientation are fundamental. In addition, this last conception subsumes each of the lower-ordered understandings. Fig. 1 illustrates the hierarchy of understanding found in this study.

5. Discussion

The categorization of individual stakeholders according to their understanding of destination competitiveness was based on the essential differences between individual descriptions. The three qualitatively different conceptions of destination competitiveness however, also present some similarities across individual descriptions. The first point of commonality between all three conceptions is, to some extent, the subjective nature of the foundations of destination competitiveness. All participants mentioned, in one

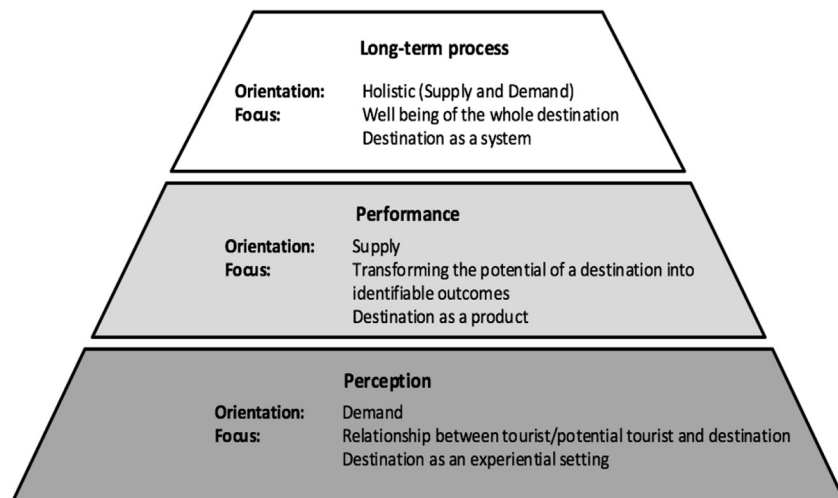


Fig. 1. Outcome Space of the conceptions of Destination Competitiveness.

way or another, how competitiveness depends on what the tourist is looking for. Demand factors have been recognized as important in the destination management literature more broadly (Pearce & Schänzel, 2013), as well as in destination competitiveness more specifically (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). However, the results of this study show that demand is not simply an additional dimension of destination competitiveness. Not only does destination competitiveness depend on the image that potential tourists have of that destination, but it also depends on previous experiences with that destination. For example, the same tourist searches for tourism destinations with different purposes throughout one's life. This of course depends on the tourist themselves, their motivations, interests, and limitations: "It's very subjective. There are different types of destinations; there are different types of tourists that choose a destination for completely different reasons. The same person has different needs. Therefore the same person can have different profiles" (R12). This subjective and dynamic nature of the construct suggests that its evaluation is a very personal one and this has two important implications. Firstly, that destination competitiveness can never be fully understood with purely objective measures and secondly, that conceptualization and measurement of destination competitiveness should reflect different market segments in terms of motivations, previous experience as well as socio-demographic characteristics.

The second similarity across individual conceptions is the importance of distinctiveness. While competitiveness is traditionally assumed to be related to some sort of superiority in relation to the competition, in the case of tourism destinations such superiority seems to be closely linked with the notion of distinctiveness: "Competitiveness is in the first place related to difference. That is what that destination has that only it has or that others have but in which it is better than the others" (R3). While the destination needs to offer what the tourist is interested in, in order to be competitive a destination also needs to "have something that distinguishes it from the competition" (R6). In fact, this distinctiveness becomes even more important when the elements of price and distance play a role: "A destination only needs to be financially accessible if it doesn't have something very unique. If there is a great will to go there and something very particular about it, the destination can be far away and expensive, but still competitive" (R6). In addition, "in this era of globalization what we don't want is to move from our home and to be in another shopping centre, in another Disneyland and find the exact same things. I want something different" (R26).

Further to these similarities, the process of interpreting the data also considered potential sources of variation in conceptions of destination competitiveness. To some extent, it was expected that the category of stakeholder would help to explain the differences across conceptions. Destinations have different stakeholder types with different interests and needs: tourists who want to have a memorable experience of a destination, local residents who want to experience the benefits of tourism development while at the same time not having their daily lives disrupted due to tourism, businesses that want to contribute to and benefit from tourism development, and governments that need to define and implement a vision for tourism development. Certain stakeholders seem to combine two categories such as business owners who are usually local residents or government officials who are also residents of that destination. Accordingly it was expected that, for instance, government stakeholders would have a more complex understanding of destination competitiveness and that tourists would not have sufficient knowledge about a specific destination to understand the intricacies of destination competitiveness. Surprisingly, one tourist expressed the second more complex conception of competitiveness (performance) while two others expressed the most complex one (long term process). Despite their role as

consumers of the destination they were able to demonstrate knowledge and experience beyond a demand oriented perspective.

In general, individuals sharing the most complex conception often provided descriptions of their personal experience as tourists in different destinations, and local residents even discussed strategic or organizational issues which aligned with the knowledge of government stakeholders. As such, differences in conceptions were not shaped by the category of stakeholder but instead by the capacity of participants to understand the interests and needs of different stakeholder roles in the destination. This conscious effort to consider other perspectives seems to be a major determinant in expressing the most sophisticated conception of destination competitiveness (Fig. 1). The main implication of this finding is that destination competitiveness emerges as a negotiable concept in that it must find some level of balance between the often conflicting interests of different stakeholder groups.

While destination competitiveness has previously been identified as dynamic (Heath, 2003), given the evolving nature of consumers' preferences which require destinations to continuously respond and adapt, the negotiable nature of the concept identified in this study brings another level of complexity to the concept. Destinations aim to achieve a number of desirable outcomes including increased number of tourists and improved quality of life of local residents, among others. These outcomes can be conflicting as different stakeholder groups may have different perspectives of what success entails. For instance, not all local residents may think that increasing tourist numbers is necessarily important for the competitiveness of the destination. Yet as stakeholder theory acknowledges, "a stakeholder ... is any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46); as such these diverse views should at least be acknowledged and ideally negotiated. Arguably the extent to which the destination can negotiate some level of balance or agreement between different stakeholders' interests should be a further measure of destination competitiveness.

Finally, the findings also revealed a number of aspects of destination competitiveness which have not been explicitly discussed in the existing literature. The first of these is the number of tourists in a destination, or more specifically the balance between tourists and residents, which emerged as a potentially important determinant of destination competitiveness. This factor was mentioned by individuals from different stakeholder groups and so represents an important issue from both supply and demand perspectives. From the perspective of supply, and as mentioned in the third conception, this balance contributes to the competitiveness of a destination in that it is important to maintain quality of life for residents as well as to ensure their support of tourism development. On the other hand, the number of tourists, or more importantly the balance between tourists and local residents, can affect destination choice. This view was expressed in this study by a Finnish and German tourist respectively: "I would not like to go to a destination where I hear more Finnish than the local language and I think that is the situation in some parts of Spain" (R1) and "They try to fulfill the German tourist so they can have white beer and white sausages and I don't want to go to Italy to see that sorry" (R26). In addition, the number of tourists a destination welcomes can affect the quality of the experience when "we treat the customer less well because we know that the day after we will have even more clients that will pay even more money" (R19). This aspect is important given the traditional view that competitive destinations attract more tourists.

Second, there is a blurred relationship between attractiveness and competitiveness. While not all participants referred to this relationship and therefore it was not obvious enough to be incorporated in the actual conceptions, there is an apparent difference in

the way this relationship is understood. This relationship takes three forms. The first one is where attractiveness equates to competitiveness “the perception the tourist has of the destination” (R11) and “Like attractiveness ... Like how attractive a destination is ... How interesting the destination is, how many different things it can offer” (R1). This view emerged more in conception one. A second way of interpreting this relationship is attractiveness being part of competitiveness. In this view, attractiveness is one element but is not sufficient to lead to competitiveness: a destination “can be attractive but it's not competitive because the residents themselves are leaving” (R26), and “this is what makes Lisbon attractive to me but it's not overall competitive in that it makes the town so unique that there is no other town” (R28). Finally, a third understanding of this relationship is the separation between attractiveness and competitiveness in which there is not necessarily a relationship between the two. Here competitiveness is “when the choice is rational. If it is an emotive choice then it doesn't depend on the competitiveness of the destination but on the level of emotion that makes the person make that choice. That's not competitiveness but attractiveness of the destination. And they can be connected or not” (R12).

The last point relates to the set of competitors of a destination as a tailored and dynamic construction. As often stated in the literature (Buhalis, 2000; Dwyer et al., 2004; Enright & Newton, 2004), the competitiveness of tourism destinations can only be understood in the context of comparison with competing destinations. Traditionally, such competitors are seen as being destinations offering a similar product and within a similar distance range from the tourist's point of origin. The analysis of the interviews suggests however that this traditional view needs to be revisited as there are clearly other forces shaping the number of specific destinations considered as alternatives for a given trip. At a more basic level, the notion of distance has been relativized: “The world is becoming rounder and nowadays it is very easy to get from one end to the other ... it's becoming easier and easier for people to travel” (R12). Thus, distances are perceived differently and distance itself is less likely to be an insurmountable barrier for destinations to compete with each other. In addition, there seems to be a tailored and dynamic dimension in the definition of the competitor set. Two examples brought up in the interviews demonstrate this dimension. For instance, a tourist that is looking for a new experience is not considering destinations previously visited. In the tourist's mind, the competing destinations for that particular trip are only unexplored destinations (R31). In a different situation, while planning a trip a tourist considers one destination that he/she would normally not consider because of an interest to visit a friend or a relative living in that destination. In this particular situation, this different destination can be competing with destinations that are very different in nature and products (R33). These simple examples show how destination competitiveness can change according to the type of tourist, type of experience sought, the tourist's previous travelling experience and a number of other personal factors.

While the conceptions found in this study highlight some previously overlooked elements of destination competitiveness, there are some commonalities with previous studies. For instance, the first conception aligns with some elements in the attractiveness approach (Bramwell & Rawding, 1996; Chon et al., 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Faulkner, Oppermann & Fredline, 1999; Kim, 1998) in the sense that destination competitiveness is related to the level of desire to travel to a destination. Similarly, key ideas in the ‘performance’ conception have an affinity with various common definitional statements about destination competitiveness. The focus on achieving specific goals and measurable outcomes can also be seen in excerpts such as “competitiveness is a general concept that encompasses ... productivity levels of various components of the

tourist industry” (Dwyer et al., 2000, p. 9) or “objectively measured variables such as visitor numbers, market share, tourist expenditure, employment, value added by the tourism industry” (Heath, 2003, p. 9). The nature of these outcomes tends to be economic which is consistent with the view that the nature of the central dimension of the concept is economic. This is further emphasized by Li et al. (2013, p.247) who state that “only when it is able to convert the advantageous positions of some indicators into tourism revenues can a destination be regarded as competitive”. Finally, the third conception of destination competitiveness as a long-term process aligns with some of the more complex conceptualizations such as Ritchie and Crouch's (2003) inclusion of destination ‘well-being’ in their definition. Here they note the importance of “enhancing the well-being of destination residents and preserving the natural capital of the destination for future generations” (p.5).

6. Conclusion

The phenomenographic analysis employed in this study reveals three distinct conceptions of destination competitiveness with an increasing level of complexity between them: destination competitiveness as *perception of a destination*, as *performance*, and as a *long term process*. The conceptions discovered show that besides the known complex and relative nature of destination competitiveness, there is a significant degree of subjectivity and dynamism in the concept. Destination stakeholders, who often have opposing needs and motivations, have diverging views on what the success of that destination means and requires. Acknowledging this negotiable nature of the term is particularly important given the popularity of destination competitiveness in political and media circles. Understanding and ‘educating’ stakeholders on the different levels of the concept can be a starting point for a higher level of agreement between different stakeholder groups.

In addition to revealing the differences across understandings of destination competitiveness, the analysis also exposed a number of features of destination competitiveness hidden or blurred in previous research. These features, namely the dynamic nature of the competitor set and the importance of the balance between tourists and local residents open up a myriad of research possibilities that can further advance destination competitiveness. Certainly any discussion of destination competitiveness should include a reflection on the competitor set as implicitly or explicitly potential tourists often have a wide range of destinations to choose from when deciding to travel. The exploratory discussion of the relative and dynamic nature of the competitor, while brief, forces the traditional view of the group of competing destinations to be challenged and calls for further investigation. If certain (or all) tourists no longer see the traditional geographical distances between destinations and do not always see the same destinations as competitors of a certain destination, then the measurement of destination competitiveness needs to mirror those changes. There needs to be more focus on understanding how the measurement of destination competitiveness can be performed given such dynamics.

The reference to the balance between tourists and residents is particularly relevant given two factors: the current context where tourism is often seen as ‘the golden goose’ and cities, regions and even countries are using tourism to offset struggling economic performance and deficiencies, and secondly, the often referred to transition away from mass tourism which has forced destinations to develop more tailored products to satisfy the needs and interests of different tourist markets (Assaker, Hallak, Vinzi, & O'Connor, 2013). It is therefore crucial to give more attention to the limits of a destination in terms of not only the physical resources but also the

destination's identity and 'well-being'. Although the balance between tourists and locals may not be important to all tourists and applicable to all given the success of many mass tourism destinations, it is still important to raise awareness in order to allow a more complete discussion of the particular situation of different destinations.

A final pertinent note is that the methods adopted in this study allowed for novel insights into the destination competitiveness concept. While an established research approach in different disciplines and contexts, phenomenography has not yet permeated tourism research. The few references to phenomenography within tourism seem to have their origins in one single article (Ryan, 2000) where it is argued that phenomenography is a methodology that can capture the interpretation of tourism and allow researchers to understand tourism experiences. This paper aims to contribute to the dissemination of the phenomenographic approach and demonstrate its applicability when investigating the various and complex phenomena that are involved in understanding tourism and tourism experiences.

Author contributions

Margarida Abreu Novais was responsible for the overall conception and design of the study, data collection and led the analysis and interpretation of the data, as well as developing the first draft of the paper.

Lisa Ruhanen was responsible for revising and rewriting subsequent drafts of the paper, in particular critically revising the paper based on the reviews provided by the referees.

Charles Arcodia was responsible for revising and editing drafts of the paper.

All authors contributed to the conceptual direction, research design and the robustness of the conceptions emerging from the data.

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