

“Il Molise non esiste?”

Some issues for the tourism development strategies in minor destinations

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Extended abstract

Purpose:

This work intends to focus on the challenging difficulties for a minor destination in its tourism strategies. Through the case study of the Italian region Molise, the article tries to analyze these difficulties and to show possible routes for overcoming the emerging obstacles. The Molise region, in fact, is characterized by limited tourist resources and presents some problems so that it is often defined, in the language of social media and in an ironic way, as a region “that does not exist” (“Il Molise non esiste” in Italian). However, thanks to some trends of the last few years and a series of projects put in place, Molise region could change its own course, even if some critical points remain and require to be tackled with greater determination in the future.

Conceptual development:

Academic research has developed so far a broad set of knowledge in the field of destination management, but the focus has been much lower when the specific object of interest is not the big tourism attractions, but the destinations that can be defined as “minor”. Minor destinations are normally characterized by distinguishing traits which lead to greater development complexity of the key factors for obtaining competitiveness on the tourism market (Drakulić Kovačević *et al.*, 2018). Minor destinations considered both as destinations with less developed tourist flows, and as destinations with more restricted geographical boundaries, cannot successfully adopt the destination management strategies typical of more well-known destinations, both in terms of the amount of resources available for promotion, and for their reduced load capacity. Consequently, they may have more difficulties to realize an effective tourism offering strategy. Although the difficulties are mainly due to the fewer resources available (Pakhalov & Saks, 2020), which lead to big difficulties in making investments and conducting significant communication and promotion campaigns, in analyzing the relevance of competitiveness in minor destination strategies, some scholars have highlighted how the value of sustainability can represent a significant distinctive element (Goffi & Cucculelli, 2014). Furthermore, smaller destinations, precisely because they are linked to territories that have a lower carrying capacity, must take care, in meeting the needs of potential tourist demand, to avoid the risks of overtourism (Krajickova *et al.*, 2022), which in this case could cause even greater damage than in destinations with a greater reception capacity.

This kind of context makes particularly relevant the governance choices set up by the public authorities of the local area. The collaboration between public sector stakeholders and the engagement of private sector stakeholders seems to be necessary. In the engagement policies, the local community should play a central role. As noted by some scholars, in fact, the tourist development of minor destinations can be pursued more effectively through the direct involvement of local communities (Calzati, 2013). Furthermore, another key element for tourism development in smaller destinations can be represented by the development of appropriate networking strategies (Pakhalov & Saks, 2020). So, local governments have the task of engaging with local stakeholders, public or private networks and trade associations to enhance and promote a territory in an innovative way. They also must take care and enhance local landscapes to maintain a local identity and support models of sustainable development. Some authors have highlighted how the tourist

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development of a minor destination can be favored by a strategy focusing on a tourist segment (Cresta & Greco, 2016).

All these issues appear particularly relevant for regions or areas that are characterized by a large number of minor destinations, spread throughout the territory, such as Italy, in particular central-southern Italy (Goffi *et al.*, 2023). This paper analyzed the case of Molise region, in Italy, which is introduced in this work as an explanatory case study (Scapens, 2004). This approach was found to be the most useful for analyzing this research field, because destination management research is largely focused on the most attractive destinations and often forgets or neglects minor destinations. An approach of this type, with the use of a case study, can allow for an in-depth reflection on the already existing theoretical elements and favor a development of this reflection on any missing theoretical aspects.

Consequently, the development of the work is aimed at answering the following three research questions:

- 1) which competitive factors of a destination are more difficult to find in a minor destination?
- 2) which governance dynamics among the actors tend to emerge in a minor destination?
- 3) which strategic responses to the difficulties deriving from a penalizing starting context can be identified by a minor destination?

Methodology:

The analysis of the case study (Yin, 2018) of the Molise region has been conducted triangulating and merging data captured by different sources of information/different types of data. They are documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009), qualitative research interviews (Qu & Dumay, 2011), and a survey (Fowler, 2013). While the documentary analysis and the survey have already been completed, as far as the interviews are concerned, the research is still ongoing with the expected involvement of other subjects who have shown a preliminary interest in the research project.

Documentary analysis: The study has analyzed the region's tourism data and highlights the promotion and enhancement actions. In this regard, two essential documents were examined: the Strategic Plan, which is used to develop a strategic plan to study and experiment with territorial governance; and the Communication Plan, which is crucial for developing communication strategies to achieve specific objectives. Moreover, the research has analyzed the project "Il Molise non esiste", developed from 2016 by two private partners, with a great impact on the web, aimed at proposing a new image of the Molise region to attract new visitors. Through this project, the two tourism experts have tried to build a brand for the region by implementing significant strategies that have led to important results.

Research interviews (ongoing): Different stakeholders of the tourism policies of the Molise region have been involved. The categories of stakeholders identified were representatives in the regional council of Molise, politicians of the local authorities of the regional territory, subjects with staff positions of politicians, opinion makers in the tourism sector linked to the Molise region. At the present time, three research interviews have been completed, but numerous other contacts with individuals belonging to the categories indicated are in progress and should lead to the development of between four and nine further interviews in the coming months.

Survey: An online survey was conducted and addressed to a community of travelers to obtain information about their perceptions of this region. It was administered an online survey to a web community of travelers, with 166 replies in May 2022, to analyze the attractiveness of small-sized destinations, in this case of Molise region which is characterized by unique but little-known tourism resources. The aim was to hear the direct voice of a community of travelers to examine the attractiveness of Molise region. Consequently, it was important to understand the perceptions and trends that they have toward a region that presents both potentiality and difficulties from a tourism perspective. It was distributed in Italian on Instagram thanks to the collaboration of "poraccinviaggio" travel bloggers who shared the survey link in their Instagram stories so that users could respond in just a few minutes. The form was divided into two sections: the first one is dedicated to those who have visited Molise, the second one is dedicated to potential tourists and those who have never did a vacation in this region.

Preliminary findings:

Molise is one of the smallest regions in Italy in terms of territory (4,438 km²) and population (307,789 citizens). Molise has not been affected by mass tourist flows and infrastructures that have spoiled the environment elsewhere. This would make possible to activate a sustainable and high-quality tourism, because Molise is a region with authenticity features and can be also considered as an undiscovered territory. In this sense, the weakness of Molise's society and its tourism offer can be converted into

strengths, expressing a proud specificity. Another positive aspect is related to productivity and the presence of small-scale accommodation facilities that attract tourist flows without damaging the environment. However, human capital is a problem which characterizes the region because there are few job opportunities, a prevailing elderly population and a low level of education. So, local authorities can have difficulties in controlling and coordinating resources. Consequently, starting community networks is important to enhance territorial capital, so that stakeholders and local people can cooperate to realize identity projects. Analyzing the data on tourism phenomenon in the Molise region, tourist flows have fluctuated over the years (from 2008 to 2021) with a prevalence of Italian tourists compared to foreigners. In 2020, there was a drastic drop due to the spread of Covid-19 virus that affected in a significant way tourism field, while in 2021 tourist flows have increased, surpassing the pre-pandemic value. In 2022, tourist flows increased again compared to 2021 because of the reopening of international borders.

Promoting a destination involves understanding its deepest and most rooted aspects to accentuate them through a communication process with the market so that to create the identity of a territory. Molise is a weak region from the tourist point of view, still looking for its own identity on a national scale, indeed, it has the mediatic label of “non-existence” and it is characterized by a seasonal tourism, especially during the summer months along the coastal areas, although, the first steps towards the facilities redevelopment have been taken in recent times.

However, a new process of creative enhancement of the region's asset has begun thanks to the advent of digital era and innovation processes of the last years. Therefore, despite Molise is the last one in terms of tourist flows in Italy, it has a potential in terms of geography and services offered, with a focus on sustainability. It is also possible integrating seaside tourism into mixed packages, promoting unspoiled nature by combining hills and mountains or looking for unknown cultural sites. Furthermore, ancient villages have a strong connection to the historical, cultural and identity heritage thanks to which promoting slow and sustainable tourism, as well as experiences related to traditions, folklore, festivals, and gastronomy through which exploring the local roots and making tourist flows less seasonal. In addition, tourism linked to events, fairs and conferences can provide Molise with a new positioning on the market. By considering all these aspects, Molise is a rising destination, so it is not very known, but it has a high potential to develop an offer that meets the new demands of the market through innovative experiences that could be flexible and that could have a local entrepreneurial fabric to be a mouthpiece for a new vision of the territory.

However, now Molise region struggles to enhance its strengths and it cannot arise into international context, also because it has not been able to establish a system. The challenge is creating a process of territorial cohesion, activating stakeholders, citizens, and institutions to establish bonds and defined networks: transforming the resources “fragmentation” from a weakness into a strength through actions that can connect places, activities, people. So, local stakeholders must have specific skills and an to be open to change, as well as population must be “close” to tourists involving them in the process of their own history and identity to obtain an innovative, sustainable, recognizable, and attractive “Molise destination” and at the same time preserve lifestyles, cultures, territories, genuineness, and hospitality that characterize the region.

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of technological and digital skills to provide new services, promote online opportunities, make strategic alliances, and adopt efficient management, organization, and communication patterns, also to reinforce relationships between companies, tourists and territories. Green and sustainable objectives are the other important aspects to protect, enhance and regenerate the heritage. Ecological and digital transition should be managed without sacrificing the tourism experiences and local identities which can make the destination unique. In conclusion, Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted vulnerability of tourism sector as it is a cross-cutting, and an interdependent field linked to many others. Therefore, health aspects, public order, infrastructures, and destination accessibility must coexist into a territory to attract consistent tourist flows.

From the conducted interviews, it came to light that the expression “il Molise non esiste” (“Molise does not exist”) existed for a long time now and it was used as a teasing remark for the small-sized dimension of the region. Therefore, it was transformed into a registered brand in 2016 for tourism purposes at the Ministry of Economic Development, and it has led to a considerable success because the region is known for its “non-existence”, so the wordplay was crucial for the brand awareness. An example is the video-spot “Molise inaccessibile” (i.e., “Molise is inaccessible”) which alternates serious and humorous moments, as well as Italian words with the dialect ones, highlighting in a sarcastic way the scarcity of railway connections between Campobasso and other Italian destinations. The aim was to have fun with the linguistic ambiguity of the inaccessible and unreachable place playing on the expression “it is of an unattainable

beauty” used when admiring someone’s beauty. At the beginning of this project, to create more involvement from the community, photos taken directly by users were posted on social media pages with some descriptions of those places, fostering a process of re-sharing and participation. After that, there has been a paradigm shift from “what beautiful things to see in Molise” to “what life is really like in Molise” to create contents of value that could offer users real gems. Finally, by adopting a series of unconventional strategies, positive results have been achieved in terms of tourist presences and online clicks and views, that have helped to build a significant tourism brand for the region.

Analyzing the data from the survey administered to evaluate the tourism demand component, an abyssal difference emerged between respondents that traveled in Molise (24.8%) and those who have never visited the region (75.9%). Also, among those who have never visited the Molise, there is a good part (20.6%) that has not the intention of taking a vacation in the region. This means that most of them are not attracted or motivated to organize and live an experience in Molise. For this reason, it is important to implement more effective actions that could encourage potential tourists to visit the region and discover some hidden gems that probably they may not even be aware. On the other hand, among potential tourists who would like to visit Molise (79.4%) there is a particular propension to visit many natural sites confirming the last trend of a slow tourism. There is also a good intention to visit cultural and historical sites, albeit lower than the interest in natural sites. Regarding the tourists who have visited Molise, most of them visited two or three times the region and there are rare cases of tourists returning more than three times. Also, a good segment of travelers has stayed for an average of three nights, followed by one night and then two nights. There are few cases where the duration of the stay exceeds three nights. The responses about the satisfaction level with Molise’s hospitality system are very positive. Once again, tourists have a strong proposition to visit natural sites confirming the trend of a slow tourism, but there is a good percentage of visits to cultural and historical monuments.

Online strategies should be introduced to inform tourists about territories that may be interesting to visit, but also strategies and initiatives should be implemented to allow tourists to interact with tourism operators or the community who can provide useful advice for experiencing something unique and increasing its value. In the end, regarding the overall perception of Molise as a tourist destination among the 166 respondents, it was found that a significant portion considers the region to be a relevant destination with a potential to develop (45.8%). Another segment perceives that Molise is a destination of some interest, but just a drive-through stop (27.1%), whereas 16.3% of interviewers consider that Molise is a low-profile region, and 9.6% think that it is an interesting destination to discover. In this sense, Molise faces certain issues that need to be addressed, but despite some negative outcomes from the survey, the region has singular resources that can be enhanced to reinforce its tourism offerings and pleasantly surprise visitors (as indicated by the level of satisfaction with the hospitality system). For this reason, Molise should work towards digital platforms, innovation, creating a cohesive system that fully engages the tourist or the potential one and adopting effective marketing and promotional actions.

Managerial implications:

Focusing on the results on the empirical analysis, Molise is still a minor destination, both for its dimension and for its tourism flows. However, it has potential factors of attractiveness and competitiveness, as natural, culinary, cultural, historical, and experiential peculiarities that have great potential and could assume a strong importance in the region’s tourism offer. Molise, with the push of the regional government, has started a series of projects and initiatives of promotion, communication and marketing that have yield positive results and contributed to attracting more tourists. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic has been the cause of numerous difficulties that affected above all the tourism field, at the same time it has been an opportunity for Molise to emerge, indeed, tourists have preferred to visit places close to their home. Also, Molise has strong historical roots, a consistent sense of identity and many traditions and habits that can be leveraged. This is also important to create a strong destination image that nowadays is still weak due to the problems previously mentioned, a weak identification of the DMO Visit Molise and the strong competition from other regions. For these reasons, it is essential to find solutions to attract and retain tourists, including through a positive hospitality system that makes visitors “feel at home”.

However, other emerging factors are a rather scarce collaboration among regional stakeholders, a lack of engagement with external networks, as well as inadequate coordination actions for communication which lead to a limited usability of tourism resources and seasonal tourist flows. There is also a lack of propension towards entrepreneurship, education, innovation, and differentiation of the tourism product. Therefore, it is crucial starting a dialogue with the local community to highlight the criticalities in the sector and find

solutions to ensure a better tourism management and a creation of captivating and participatory environment. It is also important to define a governance framework for tourism processes that can lead directions and actions that is consistent with the Strategic Plan and that can be easily adaptable to market changes or territory needs. This involves starting a unified and straightforward management of regional data to develop a systematic and strategic framework to foster tourism development. In conclusion, actions are needed for territorial and product promotion carried out in harmony by local stakeholders, leveraging the functions on the web and social media with the goal of creating a network and a systematic, competitive, sustainable, and innovative approach to meet the different tourists' needs and keeping constantly in line with the times.

Starting from these results of the empirical analysis, the research questions can be addressed in this way. About the less present competitive factor in a minor destination, subject of the first research question, the case of Molise confirms the existing literature, highlighting that the scarcity of resource can influence the effectiveness of the tourism offer. At the same time, the case shows that a more disadvantaged starting point in tourism policies can also represent an opportunity because it allows the implementation of new tourism strategies related to the acceptance of new needs emerging from tourism demand, in particular those related to slow and sustainable tourism, based on authenticity. The second research question was about the governance dynamics in a minor destination. The case of Molise shows that without coordination among the public bodies and actual strategies of engagement of private companies and local communities, the development strategies of the destination are very difficult. With reference to the third research questions, about the strategic responses to the difficulties, the case highlights a very interesting – and feasible – path of development, connected with the idea of transforming the weaknesses in strengths, as shown as an example by the project “Il Molise non esiste”.

Research limitations:

The project has not yet been fully completed and has currently seen only partial involvement of political subjects, also due to the recent regional elections in Molise.

Originality and potential public value:

This work focuses on a research gap in the current literature on destination management because it analyzes the strategies of minor destinations, which are an underdeveloped topic in the literature. At the same time, for the reality of the Italian and European context, analyzing the tourism development scenarios of minor destinations can represent an important opportunity, also in the light of the evolution of tourist demand in the post-pandemic scenario. This is because these destinations constitute an important substratum of the national territory – but also with a broader look at the European continent and beyond – and can favor paths both of sustainable tourism that overcome the risks of overtourism, and of growth of some more backward territories from an economic point of view.

Finally, this work also intends to offer its results to the administrators and stakeholders of the Molise region as a point of debate to favor the development and growth of this destination.

Keywords: small destinations; governance mechanisms; public-private partnerships; collaborative governance.

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