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Is Tourism a Driver for Smart Specialization? Evidence from Apulia, a Southern European Region with a Tourist Vocation.

Abstract

This regional spotlight paper aims to demonstrate how tourism can be identified as a pivotal sector for smart growth of a regional destination. Specifically, the study focuses on Apulia, a Southern European region called to meet the objectives of intelligent, sustainable and inclusive growth within the Smart Specialization strategy. Smart Specialization is an agenda for socio-economic development of the European Union, based on identifying regional vocational areas and industries and promoting place-based entrepreneurial development. The relevance of tourism for Smart Specialization is confirmed by the recent dynamics and trends reconfiguring this industry, in a perspective of a regionally integrated system and knowledge-intensive industry. The regional spotlight paper thus aims to highlight implications and strategic actions for marketing and management of Apulia as a smart destination, by demonstrating how its regional tourist vocational identity can represent a suitable means to sustain structural development and broader socio-economic wellness processes.

Introduction

This regional spotlight paper aims to discuss the opportunities and challenges associated with creating a Smart Specialization agenda in a region with a tourist vocation. Specifically, the study focuses on Apulia, a Southern European region in Italy and a destination of recognized and growing popularity.

By 2020, Apulia, together with all other European regions, is called on to foster structural development, addressing the objectives of intelligent, sustainable and inclusive growth. These comprise the main goals of Europe 2020, a socio-economic framework conceived by the European Union to reinforce the European area's competitiveness as well as consolidating and leveraging its communities' social and economic conditions.

Aiming to sustain the structural development of European regions, the European Union (EU) recently launched the Smart Specialization strategy, a political and economic framework to reinforce European competitiveness. Smart Specialization was conceived as a place-based strategy that invites regions to identify their development path according to their vocations, leveraging on key enabling technologies and focusing on entrepreneurial development (Romano, Passiante, Del Vecchio & Secundo, 2014; EC, 2012; Foray, David & Hall, 2011; McCann & Ortega Argilés, 2011; Wintjes & Hollanders, 2011). The key enabling technologies are identified as an opportunity to explore due to their contribution to sustaining the creation of new industrial domains and the renewal of existing ones (Foray et al, 2011; McCann & Ortega Argilés, 2011).

Framed on the above premises, this regional spotlight paper solicits a reflection on the meaning of tourism as a pivotal sector for the socio-economic development of a regional tourism destination, coherently with the Smart Specialization strategy.

Focusing on Apulia, the study will demonstrate how tourism represents a vocational industry for the region, due to the favourable combination of conditions and environmental factors (Pedrini, 1984) and a meaningful opportunity for its smart growth in the light of its knowledge-intensive nature. This requires awareness of the current trends emerging in tourism, its smart configuration, and its nature as a regional integrated system.

During the last decade, tourism has experienced radical changes that have affected the competitive dynamics of destinations. Due to the broad distribution of ICTs and social media technologies (Neuhofer, Buhalis & Ladkin, 2014), tourism has started being configured as a knowledge intensive industry (Del Vecchio, Passiante, Vitulano & Zambetti, 2014; Zhang, Song & Huang, 2009). Competition among destinations is increasingly based on the amount and kind of information available for tourists; the local experience related to a certain destination is a function of the knowledge available. This highlights the Big Data phenomenon as an actual dimension of tourism, with huge amounts of information created and distributed by users through their social identities and accounts (D'Amore, Baggio & Valdani, 2015; Del Vecchio et al, 2014) or by their interaction with sensors and smart tags (e.g., the Internet of things). This allows to derive a further trend characterizing the industry and identifiable in the experiential perspective of a journey composed of all the experiences associated with the destination. It suggests the opportunity of viewing the destination as a set of products and services made available to tourists according to their needs and expectations (Del Vecchio et al, 2014; Neuhofer et al, 2014; Aarikka-Sterroos & Jaakkala, 2012).

Configurable as an integrated regional system of actors (Ndou, 2011; Buhalis & Law, 2008), destinations can be managed appropriately as a modular bundle of different products and services to be assembled within tourists' timeframes and budgets (Pellegrin-Romeggio & Leszczyńska, 2013).

Smart tourism can be defined as the result of The interconnection between tourism destinations and multiple stakeholder communities through dynamic platforms and knowledge-intensive communication flows and enhanced decision support systems is identified by Buhalis & Amaranggana (2015) as the essence of the smart tourism.

All this highlights this study's perspective on the significance of tourism as an industry of primary importance for the Smart Specialization strategy of a region with a tourist vocation.

Relevance to Apulia Region

This section aims to demonstrate the tourism sector's relevance for Apulia's Smart Specialization. As with all European regions, Apulia is involved in the Smart Specialization process promoted by the EU to achieve the objectives of intelligent, sustainable and inclusive growth by 2020. Consistent with the place-based nature of the Smart Specialization strategy and its focus on the entrepreneurial discovery process (Carayannis and Rakhmatullin, 2014), each region must implement its own development agenda, moving on from its current socio-economic performance and in line with its vocation (EC, 2012; Foray et al, 2011; McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2011). It is important to note that Apulia is a convergence region, characterized by structural delays and socio-economic deficits, and its performance in terms of innovative entrepreneurship, technological innovation and public knowledge is still lower than the EU average (EU, 2014; Wintjes & Hollanders, 2010). In addition, it has low capabilities for creating, absorbing and distributing knowledge (Technopolis, 2011). Based on the premises behind the Smart Specialization strategy, it must be determined if tourism is a vocational sector for Apulia and how it can be developed as a primary contribution area to attain intelligent growth objectives. From the north to the south, the region is surrounded by the Adriatic and Ionic seas, with continuous coasts and beaches. Its differentiated and accessible natural, cultural and agro-food heritage clearly makes Apulia a region suited to tourism. The region also boasts three UNESCO sites, natural and marine reserves, typical rural buildings, monumental olive trees and a rich food tradition. Over the past year, Pugliapromozione, the regional agency for tourist development, has contributed to the destination's a structured tourism promotion process with positive returns. All this has bolstered Apulia's recent affirmation as a destination in the international market. Lonely Planet ranked Apulia in the top 10 of the best value travel destinations in the world in 2014. In the same year, the National Geographic called Apulia the most beautiful region in the world. In 2015, the official Pugliapromozione marketing

campaign hashtag #weareinpuglia topped Twitter trends. Those considerations highlight the prominence of tourism as a vocational sector for Apulia. It meets Pedrini's (1984) definition of tourist vocation with its combination of favourable environmental factors, cultural heritage, agro-food, accessibility, etc. Focusing on this evidence, it is necessary to think critically of the real meaning of an Apulian smart destination, primarily if it is to be adopted as a vocational intervention sector to achieve the intelligent growth required by the EU. The centrality of tourism on the regional intelligent growth agenda results from its nature as an integrated system, as previously noted. Specifically, promoting the creation of a smart destination involves many implications and spillovers for other sectors directly or indirectly connected to tourism. This makes it possible to overcome the view of tourism as a traditional industry uninterested in the application of key enabling technologies. The tourism industry's smart configuration highlights the challenges associated with the frontier of ICT and social technologies. It indicates the importance of investing in creating innovative entrepreneurship that promotes the key enabling technologies in existing companies directly and indirectly linked to tourism, as well as in new ventures and start-ups. In Apulia, this will imply reinforcement of the entrepreneurial context, removing the regional entrepreneurial context's obstacles and limitations. In the framework of EU funds for the 2014–2020 period, Apulia will also benefit from resources to address challenges in improving its structural parameters in terms of competitiveness and innovation.

Focusing on the importance of pursuing a vocational development path as well as removing the obstacles already mentioned in terms of innovation and entrepreneurial performance, tourism could represent a strategic industry for the growth of Apulia and its Smart Specialization. The extent to which this is possible will be mostly determined by the region's ability to comprehend the opportunities offered by ICT and key enabling technologies in reinforcing the tourism sector's competitiveness within the umbrella of a larger and more inclusive socio-economic regional ecosystem.

Implications for marketing and management of Apulia as a smart destination

As argued in the previous paragraphs, the identification of tourism as a vocational sector for the Apulia region implies a large set of challenges and involvement in regional smart development. The nature of regional integrated system and the growing relevance of knowledge-based dynamics, due to the broad distribution of ICTs and synthesizable into the Big Data paradigm, recall the importance of designing and implementing an agenda for creating an Apulian Smart Destination. This leads to consideration of a set of practical implications for marketing and managing Apulia as a destination.

First, it is necessary to generate awareness of the region's tourist vocation, as well as promoting creation of a regional ecosystem. This is a challenging dimension of the smart evolution of the Apulian destination, requiring establishment of a regionally integrated system of actors shaping the boundaries of the tourist supply chain. It affects a large community of stakeholders, from the region's universities and research centres specializing in tourism and related technologies to companies and institutions directly and indirectly involved in tourism. This also requires more structured reinforcement of the Apulia brand, with more participation in national and international market promotion initiatives. Meanwhile, this is expected to contribute to overcoming the fragmentation and lack of collaboration that still characterize the destination (Mele, Stefanizzi, Del Vecchio & Ndou, 2015)

With enhancement of key enabling technologies being a primary opportunity at the base of the Smart Specialization strategy, a second implication arises. Research centres and companies need to engage in a virtuous dialogue to identify the needs of local supply chains – both directly and indirectly connected to tourism – and the areas of entrepreneurial opportunities arising in terms of renewal of existing businesses or creation of new ventures.

Third, starting from trends related to personalizing the tourist experience, it could be useful to adopt a modular approach allowing greater personalization of regional tourist products and services. The offer of local experiences could be made simpler and more effective by exploring and deepening working knowledge of the region's resources, establishing modules to be combined according to tourists' financial and time constraints. This also suggests the opportunity of implementing intelligent systems for monitoring and forecasting tourism demand, building a more personalized travel experience at the destination.

Focusing on sectoral trends in tourism, a fourth challenge is related to overcoming the absence of an entrepreneurial regional tourism culture. With a few exceptions, this means a presence of micro companies with a familial management style and a fragmented offering of products and services. This could positively affect the creation of a successful local experience, particularly the deseasonalizing process, a major hurdle for a destination traditionally recognized for its sea and beaches, and creation of unconventional travel packages and enhancing the region's inland areas. The role of the regional agency for tourist promotion could be expanded to create travel packages.

All the above suggests the need for a political agenda to project Smart Specialization opportunities into the region. This will move the region towards preliminary awareness of the significance of "smartness" in destination management and the role that tourism can play in generating momentum and supporting an inter-sectoral process growth aligned with the objectives of intelligent, sustainable and inclusive growth as requested by the EU. Although context dependent, those implications can be easily extended to destinations and regions with similar vocation and socio-economic trends.

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