

From Undertourism to Destination Repositioning through Multi-Level Governance. The Case of the Marche Region (Italy)

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a shift in tourism toward undertourism destinations, where travelers seek authentic experiences and deeper engagement with local resources and landscapes. Within this context, the present study examines how collaborative networks involving public and private actors can leverage undertourism as a strategic opportunity for destination repositioning. Focusing on the Marche Region (Italy), the research adopts a qualitative case study approach based on semi-structured interviews with key informants. Qualitative analysis and coding of the interview data revealed five types of networks that underpin the strategic and operational architecture of the region's tourism and cultural sector: public-private, intra-sectoral, inter-sectoral, cross-territorial, and industry-community networks. The findings indicate that sustainable competitiveness depends on integrating diffuse territorial assets through multi-level governance, addressing infrastructural gaps, and enhancing community wellbeing. They further suggest that successful destination repositioning requires a shift from traditional competition to “coopetition”,

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together with the need for new professional roles capable of orchestrating development processes and managing fragmented resources.

Keywords: Undertourism; public-private collaboration; destination competitiveness; sustainability; authenticity; multi-level governance.

Sommario

Il COVID-19 ha accelerato un cambiamento nei flussi turistici verso destinazioni caratterizzate da *undertourism*, nelle quali i viaggiatori cercano esperienze autentiche e un maggiore coinvolgimento con le risorse locali e il paesaggio. In questo contesto, lo studio analizza come le reti collaborative tra soggetti pubblici e privati possano valorizzare l'*undertourism* come opportunità strategica per promuovere il riposizionamento di una destinazione. La ricerca si focalizza sul caso della Regione Marche (Italia), adottando un approccio qualitativo basato su interviste semi-strutturate a informatori chiave del settore. L'analisi qualitativa e la codifica delle interviste hanno permesso di individuare cinque tipologie di reti che costituiscono l'architettura strategica e operativa del settore turistico-culturale marchigiano: reti pubblico-private, reti intra-settoriali, reti inter-settoriali, reti trans-territoriali e reti settore turistico-comunità. I risultati rivelano che la competitività sostenibile di una destinazione dipende dall'integrazione delle risorse diffuse sul territorio attraverso una governance multilivello, in grado di colmare i divari infrastrutturali e di garantire il benessere della comunità locale. Lo studio evidenzia, inoltre, come un riposizionamento di successo richieda il passaggio da una logica competitiva tradizionale alla "coopetizione", nonché l'introduzione di nuove figure professionali capaci di orchestrare i processi di sviluppo e di gestire risorse frammentate.

Parole chiave: Undertourism; collaborazione pubblico-privata; competitività della destinazione; sostenibilità; autenticità; governance multilivello.

1. Introduction

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector has undergone profound transformations, marked by evolving tourist preferences and increasing demand for sustainable and experiential offerings (ETC, 2022; Goncu & Kamasak, 2024; Sageena & Kumar, 2025). In some instances, travelers are progressively moving away from overcrowded and standardized destinations toward lesser-known locations that promise authenticity, meaningful engagement, and closer connections with local communities (Blázquez-Salom *et al.*, 2023). The concept of undertourism captures this redirection of tourist

flows toward small towns, inland areas, and niche destinations that were previously marginal within mainstream tourism circuits. This shift aligns with a broader notion of cultural tourism that has emerged over recent decades – one no longer exclusively focused on traditional “art cities”, but extended to the multifaceted culture of a place. Cultural tourism is thus conceived as an integrated mix of elements: art, monuments, and historical centers, but also gastronomy, craftsmanship, natural landscapes, and slow-tourism itineraries (e.g., cycling and trekking). Given this multidimensionality, recent literature has introduced the concept of cultural landscape tourism (Montaguti & Meneghello, 2018; Cerquetti *et al.*, 2019), characterized by the integration of diverse elements that collectively shape territorial identity.

In this regard, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, at the European level, policymakers and regional Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) have rediscovered villages and small towns as models of sustainable tourism able to promote psychological well-being and enhance local cultural identities (Battaglia, 2018). In line with this trend, the Italian policy framework has evolved significantly with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which identifies the revitalization of small historical centers as a structural priority. Specifically, the *Bando Borghi* (Investment 2.1, Mission 1, Component 3 – Attractiveness of Villages) represents a milestone in this strategy, allocating over one billion euros to support the economic and social regeneration of villages through “Lines A and B” of funding. This initiative represents a qualitative leap from previous strategies, such as the National Strategic Tourism Plan 2017–2022 or earlier programs like *Cammini d’Italia* (2016) and *Borghi* (2017), shifting the focus toward a systematic, culture-led regeneration approach. The current strategy aims to transform these inland and peripheral areas into smart villages by integrating digital innovation, sustainable mobility, and heritage enhancement. The effective implementation of these NRRP-funded interventions is designed to enhance the quality of cultural and tourism offerings, meeting the increasing demand for cultural landscape experiences. By fostering local entrepreneurship and community-based services, these measures aim to counter depopulation and contribute to the long-term economic and social revitalization of the Italian territory.

A key driver of destination competitiveness and long-term sustainability is the ability to design cohesive networks among several different territorial actors. Indeed, while experiential tourism provides a concrete pathway for activating authenticity and co-creating value in undertourism destinations, its implementation depends on multi-level governance and network-based coordination among public and private actors (Farmaki, 2020). Supportive institutional frameworks, targeted funding mechanisms, and collaborative

networks play a crucial role in enabling innovation and enhancing destination competitiveness. Despite their growing relevance, the extent to which undertourism can be strategically leveraged as a development opportunity – rather than merely a structural condition – remains underexplored in the literature, particularly regarding how governance arrangements and multi-stakeholder networks contribute to destination competitiveness.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how collaborative networks involving public and private stakeholders can leverage undertourism as a driver of destination repositioning. To this end, it addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How can collaborative networks between public and private stakeholders shape and implement tourism development strategies in undertourism destinations?

RQ2: Which governance mechanisms and multi-stakeholder dynamics are necessary in transforming undertourism from a structural constraint into a strategic development opportunity?

To achieve this goal, the research adopts a qualitative case study methodology focusing on the Marche region (Italy), a representative context characterized by diffuse heritage within undertourism dynamics. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants (KIs) representing strategic stakeholders, including trade associations and public administrators.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework; Section 3 outlines the research design; Sections 4 and 5 analyze and discuss the empirical findings; Sections 6 and 7 highlight managerial and policy implications, as well as future research directions.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Undertourism from structural constraint to strategic opportunity

In recent years, the concept of undertourism has emerged within tourism studies as a significant counterpoint to overtourism, gaining increasing attention particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Trono *et al.*, 2022; Barač–Miftarević, 2023; Mahendru *et al.*, 2024). While overtourism addresses the negative externalities associated with excessive visitor concentration (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Milano *et al.*, 2019), undertourism refers to the opposite condition, broadly defined as a situation in which tourism demand falls well below a destination's carrying capacity (Pai *et al.*, 2024).

As noted by Barač–Miftarević (2023), overtourism and undertourism should be understood as interconnected phenomena that are increasingly inevitable in an era characterized by globalization, growing mobility, and changing tourist expectations (Milano & Koens, 2021).

In its primary sense, the concept of undertourism is associated with negative economic implications arising from insufficient tourist flows, particularly in destinations that remain marginal within dominant tourism circuits and experience significant underutilization of accommodation capacity. Drawing on the emerging literature, it can be conceptualized through five main interconnected dimensions:

- *Spatial peripherality*: the undertourism phenomenon predominantly affects destinations situated outside mainstream tourism circuits, such as small towns, rural areas, and peripheral regions (Garau, 2015; Lucarno *et al.*, 2020);
- *Institutional weaknesses*: undertourism destinations frequently suffer from inadequate planning, mismanagement of destinations, and a lack of coordination among stakeholders (Séraphin *et al.*, 2020);
- *Demand insufficiency*: in undertourism destinations, the tourism demand is chronically lower than the territory's potential and actual carrying capacity, attracting few or no tourists at all (Mihalič, 2020; Mihalič & Kuščer, 2019; Pai *et al.*, 2024);
- *Accommodation underuse*: as a direct economic consequence of low demand, undertourism destinations experience a significant underutilization of local hospitality infrastructure and accommodation capacity, which severely hinders local economic viability (Milano *et al.*, 2019);
- *Temporal/seasonal volatility*: undertourism is not a transitory condition limited to periods of crisis or disaster, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, but can manifest as a structural or seasonal phenomenon that challenges long-term destination stability (Pai *et al.*, 2024).

Beyond its descriptive dimension, undertourism is increasingly interpreted as a strategic opportunity for destination repositioning. Fletcher *et al.* (2019) conceptualize undertourism as a process aimed at enhancing the resilience of vulnerable territories through targeted tourism development. In this perspective, undertourism reflects a broader shift in tourist behavior, as growing awareness of the drawbacks of mass tourism encourages some travelers to seek alternative, less congested destinations (Blázquez-Salom *et al.*, 2021).

Emerging and lesser-known destinations tend to promote themselves by emphasizing local narratives, cultural identity, community life, and place-based values, rather than relying solely on standardized or image-driven representations (Biagiotti, 2019). From a managerial standpoint, this shift is

framed as an intentional development pathway aimed at redistributing tourist flows and enhancing the visibility of overlooked territories (Gowreesunkar & Vo Thanh, 2020). Ultimately, this transition calls on destination managers and policymakers to move beyond growth-oriented paradigms toward value-oriented approaches that prioritize experiential quality, sustainability, and local well-being, and consider key relationships and evolutionary dynamics among various actors at multiple levels (Baiocco *et al.*, 2023).

In this sense, undertourism should not be interpreted as a structural condition reflecting weak competitiveness, but rather as a strategic framework through which destinations can redefine their positioning while avoiding the pitfalls traditionally associated with mass tourism (Horlings, 2015; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Within this reorientation, the capacity of destinations to generate value increasingly depends on intangible and place-specific resources, among which authenticity and experientiality emerge, respectively, as strategic assets and mechanisms for a destination's sustainable competitiveness (Butler, 2017; Chen *et al.*, 2020; Zhou *et al.*, 2022; Yi *et al.*, 2025). However, authenticity becomes tangible, lived, and economically productive through deliberate experience design and active visitor engagement (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Authenticity enables destinations – especially small, peripheral, and heritage-rich areas – to position themselves within high-value, experiential tourism markets. Experiential marketing, in turn, provides a practical approach for translating local cultural and social resources into distinctive tourism propositions (Schmitt, 1999; Pencarelli, 2019).

However, the successful implementation of experiential tourism depends on coordination among destination stakeholders. Fragmented or poorly aligned experiences risk undermining authenticity, coherence, and the overall destination image (Litavniece *et al.*, 2021). Crucially, transforming undertourism from a structural liability into a deliberate strategic opportunity requires shifting from fragmented initiatives to multi-level stakeholder networks (Barač-Miftarević, 2023). The effectiveness of these strategies depends on how regional tourism actors – both public and private – coordinate resources, align narratives, and implement innovation-oriented governance approaches. As demonstrated by Pinto *et al.* (2025) in their analysis of tourism-dependent regions, the governance of peripheral areas demands institutional coordination to overcome localized constraints and fragmented networks. Within this framework, network-based collaboration becomes the foundational mechanism to bridge the gap between local communities and institutional stakeholders, facilitating a shared vision that balances regional development with the local residents' quality of life. Consequently, a comprehensive mapping of these relational dynamics is essential to understand

how diversified stakeholders can jointly co-create sustainable tourism outputs.

2.2 Public-private and multi-level collaboration for destination repositioning

Uplifting flows towards lesser-known destinations is of interest not only to private operators but also to public institutions, whose objectives include promoting regional tourism-driven economic growth and local communities' engagement and well-being. Therefore, public institutions often strive to establish collaborations with local private actors to achieve additional value by encouraging investment in key activities. The involvement of all those who live in a destination is of paramount importance, since their lives are ultimately affected by public funding.

In public-private collaborations, public actors act both as rule-setters and contractual counterparts to private firms (Quelin *et al.*, 2019). These partnerships can initiate cascading positive effects on destination competitiveness and ultimately on the well-being of local communities. Therefore, they are increasingly recognized as catalysts for sustainable tourism growth, as they enable destinations to integrate public policy frameworks with the operational expertise of private operators (Pascariu & Dragan, 2006). In contexts characterized by undertourism, where competitiveness depends on leveraging diffuse heritage, multi-level governance is essential for coordinating actors across local, regional, and national scales (vertical cooperation) (Stoffelen *et al.*, 2017). Such coordination ensures that strategic directives are translated into integrated, place-based experiences, effectively mitigating the risks of fragmented tourism offerings.

Furthermore, public-private networks can address structural bottlenecks by fostering coopetition – a form of collaborative competition – among local businesses, shifting the local dynamic from a zero-sum game to a shared collaborative advantage (horizontal intra-industry cooperation) (Baggio *et al.*, 2010; Della Corte & Aria, 2016). By working together, public and private stakeholders can create a positive cycle of innovation and resource sharing that directly supports the local economy (Della Corte & Aria, 2016). Ultimately, establishing robust public-private synergies (encompassing both vertical governance and horizontal cooperation) enhances the experiential value and long-term sustainability of marginalized destinations, ensuring that the economic and social benefits of tourism foster both destination competitiveness and collective wellbeing (Pascariu & Dragan, 2006).

The effectiveness of these collaborative frameworks inherently depends

on the complementary deployment of public and private support. From a welfare-theory perspective, public intervention and institutional support are vital for correcting market failures, particularly in rural or undertourism destinations where small enterprises often struggle to secure credit from traditional financial institutions to upgrade their offerings (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000). By providing foundational investments – such as infrastructure enhancements, capacity-building programs, and targeted funding initiatives – public actors lower the barriers to entry, establish the regulatory rules of the game, and buffer local stakeholders against environmental risks (Quelin *et al.*, 2019).

However, public funding alone is insufficient to increase a destination's value. Private support and engagement, driven by entrepreneurial agility and market responsiveness, are essential to translate public infrastructure into authentic, experiential tourism products (Pascariu & Dragan, 2006). Private actors provide the necessary operational investments, service innovation, and direct interactions with tourists that define the cultural landscape experience. Therefore, multi-level governance and coopetition serve as mechanisms through which public resources and private entrepreneurial support mutually reinforce one another (Stoffelen *et al.*, 2017). This synergy ensures that public financial intervention triggers private sector investment, transforming latent territorial heritage into a concrete competitive advantage that ultimately fosters the socio-economic well-being of the entire destination (Della Corte & Aria, 2016).

3. Research design

3.1 Research context: the case of the Marche region

The Marche region, located in central Italy along the Adriatic coast, offers a distinctive setting for examining the innovation dynamics of the tourism system from the undertourism perspective. Characterized by a diverse territorial configuration, the region combines coastal destinations, small historic towns, rural hinterlands, and natural landscapes, forming a complex and heterogeneous tourism system. While the coastline attracts significant seasonal tourism, inland and peripheral areas have traditionally been under-visited, making Marche an ideal case to explore strategies for destination repositioning under conditions of undertourism and for leveraging authenticity as a differentiating resource.

Tourism demand has shown steady recovery following the 2016–2017 earthquakes and the COVID-19 pandemic. After a 22% drop in overnight

stays between 2016 and 2018, the sector rebounded in 2019 before the 2020 health crisis interrupted growth. From 2021, arrivals and overnight stays rose consistently, reaching 2.7 million arrivals and 11.4 million overnight stays in 2024 – exceeding pre-pandemic levels¹. Compared with 2022, growth in 2023 was modest (+0.6%), well below the Italian average (+8.5%) and among the lowest overall, surpassing only Sardinia (-3.4%). However, when compared with 2019, the Marche region shows a positive recovery: overnight stays increased by 2.8%, a figure slightly above the national average (+2.4%). Although Marche is not among the regions that recorded the strongest post-COVID increases, such as Lazio or Molise, it performs better than many regions in Southern Italy that have not yet returned to their 2019 levels (ISTAT, 2024, p. 7).

The demand profile remains predominantly domestic (83.8% of overnight stays in 2023) (Ministero del Turismo, 2024, p. 9), yet international arrivals – particularly from Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein – are recovering (+29% arrivals; +27% overnight stays vs. 2019). This trend reflects a growing preference for less-crowded, authentic, and sustainable destinations, with tourists increasingly seeking slow travel, cultural immersion, gastronomy, and engagement with local communities, aligning with experiential and authenticity-driven tourism patterns.

Seasonality and shorter stays (from 5.34 days in 2017 to 4.38 days in 2023) (Regione Marche, 2024, p. 2) remain structural constraints, concentrating flows in the summer months and limiting the full exploitation of experiential tourism opportunities. In addition, the tourism labor market in the Marche region is characterized by structural heterogeneity, reflected in the significant presence of foreign workers (25.7%), the diversity of age groups represented, and the predominance of part-time employment contracts (52.8%) compared with full-time arrangements (47.2%) (FIPE Confcommercio, 2023). These patterns underscore the need to develop year-round, immersive experiences to extend stays, diversify demand, and enhance the value of marginal destinations, thus ensuring more stable and attractive working conditions.

On the supply side, the Marche region also features a complex and evolving accommodation system. In 2023, compared with 2019, a significant decline was recorded in the number of hotel establishments (-38 units, equivalent to -4.68%) and in the number of available bed places (-3,468, equivalent to -6.21%)². In 2023, 774 active hotels provided 52,421 beds, with lower-

¹ Own elaboration on Marche in Numeri. Turismo, <https://statistica.regione.marche.it/Marche-in-Numeri/Turismo>, 14.06.2026.

² Own elaboration on Marche in Numeri. Turismo, <https://statistica.regione.marche.it/Marche-in-Numeri/Turismo>, 14.06.2026.

and mid-range hotels contracting, while four- and five-star facilities remained stable (Regione Marche, 2024). In contrast, the non-hotel sector expanded sharply (+41% in establishments since 2019), largely due to the formalization of previously informal private accommodations. This growth of flexible, small-scale, and locally embedded accommodations supports experiential tourism, enabling closer interactions with local communities, traditions, and heritage.

The combination of uneven demand, diverse supply, and evolving tourist preferences positions Marche as a dual tourism system, facing coastal overtourism pressures and inland undertourism challenges. This duality makes the region particularly suitable for investigating how regional actors interact to co-create value, redistribute tourist flows, and foster sustainable development across heterogeneous territories.

3.2 Methodology

Building on the theoretical framework outlined above, this research adopted a case study methodology focusing on the innovation dynamics of the tourism system in the Marche region (Italy) to draw insights into how collaborative networks of public and private stakeholders can leverage undertourism as a vehicle for destination repositioning. A qualitative approach was applied to provide a comprehensive understanding of how regional tourism actors interpret and respond to post-COVID-19 transformations from an undertourism perspective.

Data were collected through online in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five KIs, conducted between March and July 2025. The interviews focused on tourism supply and demand trends, actors, governance, collaboration, and policy directions within the touristic ecosystem of the Marche region. Specifically, they addressed the following aspects: evolution of tourism demand; structure and competitiveness of tourism businesses; destination management and territorial marketing policies; training and infrastructure policies; and sustainability and innovation.

As shown in Table 1, the purposive sample included local stakeholders and experts deeply embedded in the region's cultural and tourism governance. The involvement of these KIs enabled the collection of rich, context-specific insights into both the structural challenges and the evolutionary trends of the local tourism ecosystem.

The analysis of interview transcripts was guided by the inductive principles of the Gioia methodology (Gioia *et al.*, 2013) to progress from informant-centric first-order concepts to researcher-centric second-order themes.

However, avoiding the rigid application of methodological templates (Pratt *et al.*, 2020), our final analytical model departs from a strictly linear hierarchy. Because tourism governance and territorial development are highly interconnected phenomena, several second-order macro-themes in our data conceptually bridge multiple aggregate dimensions.

The analytical process followed a systematic three-stage coding pipeline:

- *First-order concepts*: the transcripts were analyzed inductively to isolate informant-centric open codes. A total of 32 statements directly reflecting the language of the KIs were extracted;
- *Second-order themes*: through a double-staged coding, first-order concepts were clustered based on conceptual similarities into 11 researcher-centric macro-categories;
- *Aggregate dimensions*: second-order themes were mapped into transversal themes, encompassing the 5 macro-networks of public and private collaboration analyzed in Section 4.

This approach ensured methodological rigor while remaining faithful to the complex, overlapping realities reported by our informants (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Table 1: Profiles, sectors, institutional levels, and strategic scope of KIs

ID	Stakeholder	Sector	Institutional level	Scope	Interview duration
1	Tourism business trade association, representative	Private	Local business network	Local business advocacy and destination marketing	17 min.
2	Tourism business trade association, representative	Private	Local business network	Local business advocacy and destination marketing	60 min.
3	Senior policy officer	Public	Regional	Strategic policy-making	50 min.
4	Project manager	Public-private interface	Local-Regional	Place-based regeneration and network implementation	25 min.
5	Museum network, director	Public	Local	Network implementation	63 min.

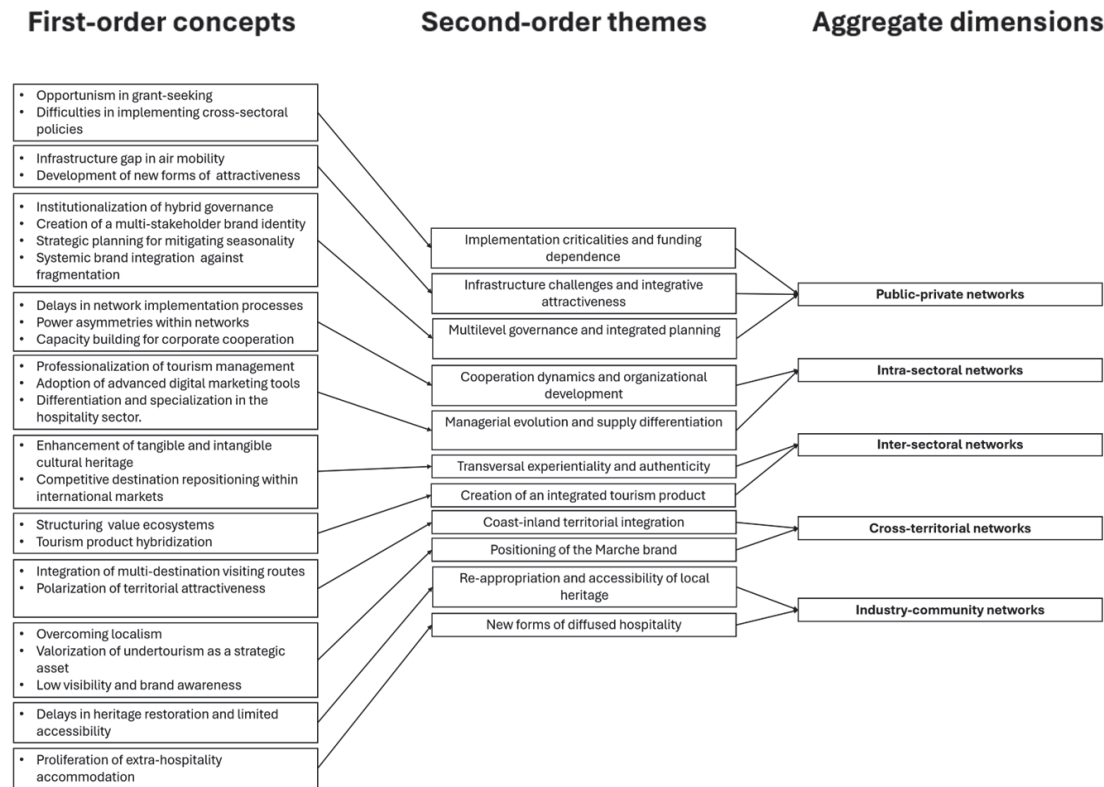
4. Results

The results from the interviews confirm that the Marche region is experiencing a shift in both tourism demand and supply, consistent with the under-tourism phenomenon. In this context, experiential tourism and small-town visitation are emerging as key drivers of regional development. These dynamics are best understood through the lens of relational tourism development, where value is not an intrinsic property of a single resource, but a result of interactions among diverse actors, territories, and sectors. A key finding is that authentic offerings cannot be sustained through isolated initiatives; they require a systemic approach, where resources (e.g., accommodation, cultural offering, mobility, etc.) are embedded within a broader service ecosystem.

Qualitative classification and coding of the interviews led to the emergence of an interpretive framework (Fig. 1) that illustrates how informant-centric concepts (the first column on the left) directly aggregate into broader strategic themes (second column). For instance, operational concerns raised by private sector representatives (KI1, KI2) and local project managers (KI4, KI5) regarding fragmented local resources were combined with the strategic guidelines outlined by regional policymakers (KI3). This process allowed 5 relational networks (third column) to emerge as the strategic and operative architecture of the touristic-cultural sector in the Marche region: public-private networks, intra-sectoral networks, inter-sectoral networks, cross-territorial networks, and industry-community networks.

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that destination competitiveness is not simply a function of resource endowment, but of how heterogeneous actors are able to coordinate meanings, roles, and strategic action across organizational levels and territorial boundaries (Haughland *et al.*, 2011).

Figure 1: Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews with KIs operating in the tourism and cultural industries in the Marche region



4.1 Public-private networks

This dimension serves as the strategic “governance frame” for the regional architecture. The institutionalization of hybrid entities, such as Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), is seen as a prerequisite to foster collaboration among diverse stakeholders, bridging the gap between «entrepreneurship, politics, and associations» [KI1]. Beyond coordination, these hybrid entities are fundamental to creating a strong destination identity. The challenge lies in transforming the regional “plurality” into organizational and promotional strength, as the Region is described as «a unique brand [that] at the same time preserves a varied territorial identity» [KI3]. Consequently, public-private synergy should facilitate strategic planning for diffused deseasonalization, ensuring that all measures move «in the direction of a more experiential, widespread tourism, less concentrated on summer seasonality» [KI3]. However, the implementation of this public-private governance model faces implementation difficulties and funding dependence. KI5 highlights a disconnect between strategic policy-making and local execution, where municipalities often engage in opportunistic grant-seeking. This results in «huge

confusion» and overlapping objectives, in which the original strategic intentions often «get lost in project management» [KI5]. A second crucial theme for activating effective governance concerns the infrastructural challenges that the network must address. The infrastructural gap, particularly regarding air mobility, is identified as a structural bottleneck. Respondents noted that the region «should invest a bit more in the airport, which is an extremely important source for tourist connections» [KI1]. To mitigate these physical constraints, the public and private sectors collaborate to develop compensatory attractiveness levers: the network focuses on enhancing the territory's "soft value" and attractiveness to compensate for physical accessibility constraints: «Obviously, one tries to compensate with the attractiveness of the territory, [...] we must be attractive in other ways» [KI2].

4.2 Intra-sectoral networks

While the public-private framework provides the strategic canopy, the intra-sectoral level examines how individual operators coordinate to professionalize the supply chain. Network-building here is described as a latent process that requires significant time to gain institutional legitimacy [KI5]. Furthermore, these networks often suffer from structural imbalances where larger, resource-rich entities may overshadow smaller ones, creating an "asymmetrical" environment that can hinder collective representation: «I really tried to give legs to a network [but] it is a completely asymmetrical network, [...] not representative of a territory» [KI5].

To mitigate these imbalances, respondents highlight the need for capacity building, suggesting that «it would be beneficial to expand training opportunities, increase the number of meetings, and foster interaction among entrepreneurs – potentially by involving well-prepared associations whose core mission includes education as a primary priority» [KI1].

This need for coordination is driving a managerial evolution in the sector. Consistent with studies on the disruptive impact of the sharing economy (Sigala, 2017), traditional accommodation providers are forced to rethink their value proposition.

The interviews suggest that the growth of experiential tourism «pushes traditional accommodation facilities to differentiate themselves [...] offering a series of services, SPAs, greater comforts [...] which tend to generate a virtuous cycle» [KI2] in response to the proliferation of diffused hospitality options. This "upgrading and upselling" process is seen as a vital response to the proliferation of diffused hospitality options.

Ultimately, competitiveness depends on transitioning from amateur or

purely political approaches to data-driven strategies. This requires a profound professionalization of tourism management. Operators recognize that «you cannot delegate to a politician to drive things forward»; instead, the sector must embrace digital tools toward a more data-driven marketing strategy, by «positioning ourselves on Google and [...] using artificial intelligence, to enter people's phones, since that is where we must enter» [KI1].

4.3 Inter-sectoral networks

The third dimension explores the hybridization of the tourism product through cross-fertilization between culture, agriculture, and hospitality. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, a clear shift has been observed: tourists increasingly seek «unspoiled realities» and «authentic places» outside of iconic, over-crowded circuits [KI5, KI3]. Modern vacations now integrate art and sacred circuits with regional excellence, such as the legacy of Giacomo Leopardi or Raffaello: «Today people don't go on vacation just because they want spaghetti and to sunbathe, today people want to see art, sacred circuits, [...] culture» [KI1].

A central theme emerging from the interviews is the transition toward transversal experientiality, whereby object-based authenticity – rooted in original cultural assets – acts as a catalyst for activity-based and existential forms of authenticity, deepening the visitor's sense of meaning (Kolar & Žabkar, 2009). Consequently, in contemporary management, authenticity is no longer just a quality, but a strategic resource for destination differentiation and competitive advantage (Butler, 2017). This shift is particularly crucial for destinations leveraging undertourism in the post-pandemic landscape. The core of this dimension is the integrated tourism product. The findings suggest that a single resource, such as a «simple abbey», only becomes a viable product when inserted into an ecosystem of guides and accommodation [KI2]. This requires a «stitch-by-stitch» approach [KI4] – a meticulous planning process involving farmers, winemakers, and cultural operators. By leveraging both tangible and intangible traditional assets, such as wine and olive oil tourism, the region shifts from a resource-based logic to a system-based logic, in which authenticity serves as an enabling condition that enhances experiential quality and triggers positive behavioral outcomes, such as loyalty and word-of-mouth (Yi *et al.*, 2025).

4.4 Cross-territorial networks

This dimension focuses on the spatial integration between the coast and the hinterland. Data show a significant shift in attractiveness: while coastal tourism remains stable, the hinterland is experiencing a «boom in the search for historic villages» (*borghi*) [KI3]. This is not a zero-sum game but a functional synergy; international visitors often lodge on the coast while seeking «experiential immersion» in the inland villages [KI1]. To succeed, the region must overcome persistent localism and “bell tower” rivalries [KI2]. The Marche brand is increasingly associated with its network of small towns, which serve as a strategic asset for mitigating fragmentation. Strategic effectiveness requires «thinking of ourselves as a unified context» [KI2] and accelerating connection processes [KI1]. By integrating small villages into broader regional circuits, the undertourism characteristic is repositioned as a competitive advantage, offering a more sustainable and visible alternative to saturated destinations [KI3].

4.5 Industry-community networks

The final dimension of the framework examines the industry-community network, focusing on the crucial relationship among tourism development, local identity, and the destination’s social fabric. This dimension moves beyond purely economic transactions to examine how the tourism supply chain integrates with – or, in some cases, disrupts – the life of the local community. A critical challenge is the re-appropriation and accessibility of local heritage. Prolonged closures due to post-disaster recovery pose a risk of “identity discontinuity”, in which the symbolic link between the community and its heritage is broken. As KI5 warns, if assets remain inaccessible, the local «feeling of belonging» is jeopardized. Simultaneously, the proliferation of diffused hospitality (e.g., B&Bs, tourist apartments, etc.) is a «double-edged sword». While it expands the region’s capacity, it structurally alters historic centers, often displacing student populations and traditional residents [KI2]. This dimension emphasizes that a sustainable ecosystem requires a “social return” on heritage and a balance between industry growth and community needs. Tourism must be aligned with residents’ accessibility and cultural continuity to avoid the risks of gentrification and depopulation. Within an undertourism perspective, the focus should shift from tourist satisfaction to the comprehensive enhancement of the residents’ quality of life. In this network configuration, local well-being is not merely a product of tourism activity, but a structural prerequisite: only by ensuring a high quality of life for

residents can a marginalized territory remain an authentic, welcoming, and resilient destination over the long term.

5. Discussion

The five dimensions, emerging from the analysis of the interviews, form a relational and evolutionary architecture (Fig. 2) that enables the Marche region to transition from a structural constraint of undertourism to a strategic opportunity for repositioning (Fletcher *et al.*, 2019; Lucarno *et al.*, 2020). At the foundation of this framework lies the public-private network, which acts as the indispensable “governance canopy”. As highlighted in the literature, both overtourism and undertourism often stem from inadequate planning and a lack of stakeholder coordination (Séraphin *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the institutionalization of hybrid entities, such as DMOs, is not merely an administrative task but a prerequisite to move beyond growth-oriented paradigms toward value-oriented approaches that prioritize strategic planning and local well-being (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

Within this overarching governance framework, a sequential logic of co-operation emerges, clarifying the paths that both public and private stakeholders can follow to collaborate effectively and turn undertourism into an opportunity. First, intra-sectoral networks are required to professionalize the supply chain and mitigate the “translational ineffectiveness” of public policies. This internal coordination is the first step in safeguarding place identity, ensuring that individual operators can collectively manage authenticity not as a “staged” performance (MacCannell, 1973), but as a professionalized strategic resource (Butler, 2017). Networks of operators – spanning coastal, inland, and extra-hotel segments – play a central role in facilitating innovation, enhancing competitiveness, and improving governance. Coordinated use of funding and resources allows actors to avoid fragmented initiatives and to implement strategic, long-term projects. These findings underscore the importance of combining product innovation (new experiences, offerings) with process innovation (networked collaboration, governance structures) to support sustainable, resilient regional tourism.

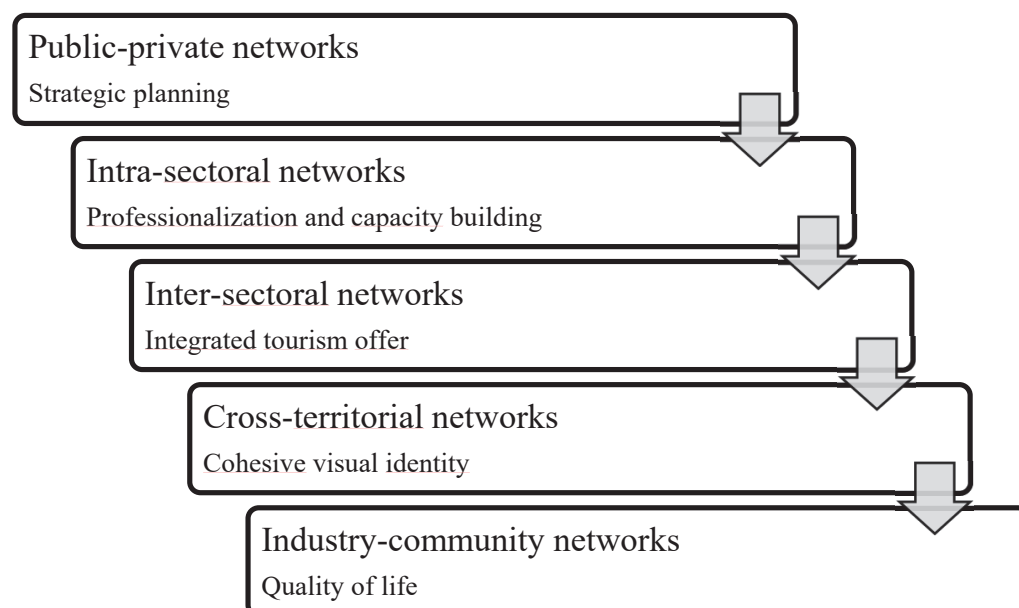
Once internal coordination is achieved, the focus shifts to intersectoral networks, where product hybridization occurs, and the definition of an integrated tourism offer plays a crucial role. This stage is the operational heart of experiential tourism. By integrating culture, agriculture, and hospitality, the region activates object-based authenticity to foster existential authenticity and meaningful engagement (Kolar & Žabkar, 2009). This «stitch-by-stitch» job [KI4] is the practical application of experience design, transforming intangible assets

into a multidimensional “cultural landscape” where value is co-created through the interaction of diverse sectors (Montaguti & Meneghello, 2018). However, for this system to achieve international competitiveness, the cross-territorial dimension becomes the strategic lever for branding.

By functionally linking the coast and the hinterland, the region can effectively redistribute tourist flows – a key managerial goal in undertourism contexts (Gowreesunkar & Vo Thanh, 2020). This synergy allows the region to reposition itself as an “unspoiled reality” [KI3], offering a credible alternative to mass-tourism circuits by leveraging its nature, slow mobility, and authentic narratives (Biagiotti, 2019), towards a cohesive visual identity.

Finally, the industry-community network represents the ultimate condition for long-term sustainability and resilience (Fletcher *et al.*, 2019). This dimension ensures that tourism development does not lead to “identity discontinuity” but remains embedded in the social fabric. As suggested by the theory, hospitality serves as the mediating interface where place identity is negotiated. Only by ensuring a “social return” on heritage and preventing the displacement of residents can the destination maintain the very genuine social interactions that modern tourists seek (Zhu *et al.*, 2025). This relational hierarchy demonstrates that destination competitiveness in undertourism areas is not merely a function of resource endowment. It is a sophisticated process of coordinating meanings, roles, and strategic actions (Haughland *et al.*, 2011), where authenticity acts as the enabler and experientiality as the mechanism to transform a marginal territory into a high-value, resilient destination.

Figure 1: Strategic mapping of the five relational networks and corresponding operational outputs



6. Managerial and policy implications

This study has investigated how collaborative networks can transform undertourism from a structural constraint into a strategic opportunity for destination repositioning. The findings from the Marche region demonstrate that the transition toward a value-oriented tourism model depends on the ability to integrate diffuse heritage, authenticity, and multi-stakeholder governance.

The results of this study suggest that creating bridges among isolated actors is of paramount importance for overcoming the underutilization of resources. Tourism operators should not hesitate to seek synergies with actors in the cultural sector. Additionally, direct competitors should not be feared but rather interpreted as components of a broader cultural tourism landscape, in which the success of one firm will benefit other firms as well. From a managerial perspective, regarding RQ1, the study demonstrates that collaborative networks between public and private stakeholders shape and implement tourism development strategies by driving a necessary paradigm shift for local operators from competition to “coopetition”.

Tourism and cultural operators must move beyond the fear of direct competitors. In an undertourism context, the “competitor” is not the neighboring hotel, but the lack of visibility of the territory. Success should be viewed as a collective outcome where the enhancement of one asset increases the value of the entire cultural landscape. Furthermore, managers should work towards a cross-sectoral hybridization and seek synergies with non-traditional tourism sectors, such as agriculture and craftsmanship, to design “stitched” experiences that protect authenticity while ensuring economic viability.

Concerning governance dynamics, in response to RQ2, the study highlights that the most effective governance mechanisms to transform undertourism into a strategic opportunity rely on network-based coordination, strategic regional guidance, and community engagement. This paradigm shift requires the empowerment of new professional figures acting as network orchestrators or “destination managers” who possess the skills to mediate between public and private interests, manage complex data, and coordinate grant-seeking activities. As for policy implications, policymakers – mainly regional actors – play a crucial role as the strategic governing body of the territorial strategy. First, public intervention must prioritize both physical and digital accessibility (e.g., airport connections and smart-village infrastructure). Policies should incentivize the formation of formal networks that transcend municipal boundaries. Funding mechanisms should reward projects that demonstrate a unified destination identity rather than isolated interventions. To prevent the negative externalities of future growth, policy actions must foster citizens’ engagement. Ensuring that

tourism development enhances the quality of life for residents (not just for visitors) is essential to maintaining the social sustainability of small villages.

7. Limitations and future research

Despite the insights provided, this study is subject to some limitations that open avenues for future investigation. As an exploratory study, the analysis focused exclusively on key informants and supply-side stakeholders and is rooted in the specific socio-economic context of the Marche region. Future research should integrate the demand perspective by investigating how tourists perceive these “undertourism” destinations and whether their expectations of authenticity are met, and adopt a comparative approach by analyzing other Italian or European regions to identify universal versus context-specific drivers of destination repositioning. Given that many NRRP-funded projects are still in the implementation phase, longitudinal research will be necessary to assess the actual long-term impact of these investments on countering depopulation and fostering economic resilience.

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