

ENHANCING REGIONAL COMPETITIVENESS THROUGH STRATEGIC
MANAGEMENT OF TOURISM CLUSTERS: EVIDENCE FROM EUROPEAN
COUNTRIES

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Abstract: In the context of globalization and increasing interregional competition, tourism has become a crucial driver of regional economic development. One of the most effective mechanisms for strengthening the competitiveness of tourist destinations is the formation and strategic management of tourism clusters. This article examines the role of tourism clusters in enhancing regional competitiveness, with particular emphasis on the experience of European countries. The study analyzes theoretical approaches to cluster development, identifies key strategic management tools, and evaluates best practices applied in Europe. Using a qualitative and comparative methodology, the research highlights how coordinated governance, innovation, public-private partnerships, and sustainable development strategies contribute to successful tourism clusters. The findings demonstrate that strategically managed tourism clusters significantly improve regional competitiveness by increasing productivity, attracting investment, fostering innovation, and ensuring sustainable territorial development. The article concludes with recommendations that may be adapted for other regions seeking to strengthen their tourism potential through cluster-based approaches.

Keywords: tourism clusters, strategic management, regional competitiveness, sustainable tourism, European experience, destination development

Introduction

Tourism has evolved into one of the most dynamic sectors of the global economy, contributing significantly to employment, income generation, and regional development. According to international development models, regions that effectively utilize their tourism potential tend to demonstrate higher levels of competitiveness and socio-economic stability. However, in an increasingly competitive global tourism market, isolated enterprises and fragmented governance structures are no longer sufficient to ensure sustainable growth.

In this context, the concept of tourism clusters has gained considerable attention in both academic research and policy-making. Tourism clusters represent geographically concentrated networks of interconnected businesses, institutions, and supporting organizations operating within the tourism sector. These include accommodation providers, transport companies, cultural institutions, educational establishments, local authorities, and innovation centers.

European countries have accumulated substantial experience in developing and strategically managing tourism clusters as instruments for regional competitiveness. Countries such as Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and Austria have successfully integrated cluster-based approaches into

their regional development strategies. The relevance of this topic lies in the need to analyze these experiences and identify transferable lessons for other regions.

The purpose of this article is to explore how strategic management of tourism clusters contributes to enhancing regional competitiveness, using European countries as empirical examples.

Theoretical Framework of Tourism Clusters and Regional Competitiveness

The concept of clusters originates from regional economics and was popularized by Michael Porter, who defined clusters as geographically proximate groups of interconnected companies and institutions in a particular field. In tourism, clusters differ from industrial clusters due to the service-oriented, experience-based, and highly interdependent nature of tourism products.

Tourism clusters are characterized by:

- Spatial concentration of tourism-related actors
- Strong inter-firm and inter-institutional linkages
- Shared infrastructure and resources
- Cooperation alongside competition
- Integration of cultural, natural, and human capital

These characteristics enable clusters to generate collective efficiency, which individual enterprises could not achieve independently.

Regional competitiveness refers to a region's ability to attract visitors, investment, and talent while ensuring sustainable economic growth and high quality of life for residents. In tourism, competitiveness is influenced by factors such as destination attractiveness, service quality, accessibility, innovation, branding, and sustainability.

Tourism clusters enhance competitiveness by:

- Increasing productivity through specialization
- Stimulating innovation and knowledge exchange
- Strengthening destination branding
- Reducing transaction costs
- Enhancing resilience to external shocks

Thus, clusters serve as strategic tools for regions seeking long-term competitive advantages.

3.Strategic Management of Tourism Clusters

Strategic management of tourism clusters involves the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of long-term development strategies aimed at improving cluster performance and

regional competitiveness. Unlike spontaneous agglomerations, successful tourism clusters require deliberate coordination and governance.

Key objectives of strategic management include:

- Aligning stakeholder interests
- Enhancing cooperation between public and private sectors
- Promoting innovation and digitalization
- Ensuring sustainable use of resources

European practice demonstrates several governance models for tourism clusters:

- Public-led models, where regional or local governments play a central coordinating role
- Public–private partnerships, combining state support with entrepreneurial initiative
- Network-based governance, emphasizing collaboration among autonomous actors

Effective governance is characterized by transparency, inclusiveness, and shared strategic vision.

Strategic management of tourism clusters employs various tools, including:

- Regional tourism development strategies
- Destination management organizations (DMOs)
- Branding and marketing strategies
- Innovation and training programs
- Monitoring and evaluation systems

These instruments enable clusters to adapt to changing market conditions and consumer preferences.

European Experience in Tourism Cluster Development

Italy: Cultural and Creative Tourism Clusters. Italy represents a prominent example of tourism clusters based on cultural heritage and creative industries. Cities such as Florence and Venice have developed clusters integrating museums, hospitality services, artisans, educational institutions, and local authorities. Strategic management focuses on heritage preservation, diversification of tourism products, and visitor flow management.

Spain has successfully implemented tourism clusters in coastal regions and major cities such as Barcelona. Strategic priorities include innovation, digital transformation, and sustainable tourism. Cluster governance emphasizes strong public–private cooperation and destination branding.

Austria and Germany: Alpine and Rural Tourism Cluster. In Alpine regions of Austria and Germany, tourism clusters are oriented toward nature-based and rural tourism. Strategic

management highlights sustainability, environmental protection, and year-round tourism development. These clusters contribute significantly to regional income while preserving ecological balance.

European experience demonstrates that:

- Strategic coordination is essential for cluster success
- Innovation and human capital development play a critical role
- Sustainability must be integrated into cluster strategies
- Strong institutional frameworks enhance competitiveness

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and comparative research methodology. The research is based on:

- Analysis of academic literature on tourism clusters and regional competitiveness
- Comparative review of tourism cluster models in selected European countries
- Examination of policy documents and strategic frameworks

The methodological approach allows for identifying common patterns, best practices, and strategic principles applicable across different regional contexts.

Discussion

The findings confirm that strategically managed tourism clusters significantly enhance regional competitiveness. By fostering cooperation among stakeholders, clusters create synergies that improve service quality, innovation capacity, and destination attractiveness. European cases demonstrate that clusters are not merely economic structures but also social and institutional systems that require long-term strategic vision.

Moreover, tourism clusters contribute to balanced regional development by reducing spatial disparities and supporting peripheral regions. However, challenges such as overtourism, environmental pressure, and governance complexity must be addressed through adaptive management strategies.

Conclusion

Tourism clusters represent a powerful instrument for enhancing regional competitiveness when supported by effective strategic management. The experience of European countries shows that cluster-based approaches improve productivity, innovation, and sustainability in the tourism sector. Strategic governance, public-private cooperation, and long-term planning are essential prerequisites for success.

The results of this study suggest that regions seeking to strengthen their tourism competitiveness should prioritize the development of tourism clusters tailored to local resources and institutional



contexts. Future research may focus on quantitative assessment of cluster impacts and the application of digital technologies in cluster management.

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