

Article

Reshaping the Role of Destination Management Organizations: Heritage Promotion through Virtual Enterprises—Case Study: Bresciatourism

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Abstract: Cooperation in tourism is considered crucial for sustainable destination promotion, addressing several opportunities to decrease the level of competition among actors to achieve advantages for all. Global markets force rapid, virtual teaming up and high reconfigurability through heavy reliance on information and communications technology in the pursuit of specific market opportunities for a destination's heritage promotion. In light of a reshaped destination management organization role, this work focuses on temporary cooperation and adapts the dynamic virtual enterprise model to tourism. A case history in Brescia was examined to support the theoretical construct. The resulting conceptual schema highlights the main features of a virtual enterprise in tourism (VEt), the life cycle stages—qualified by dynamic adaptation—and the leadership role of the destination management organizations. In generating a VEt model, four conditions for effectiveness emerge.

Keywords: heritage promotion; globalization; tourism; temporary cooperation; virtual enterprise



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on tourism. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) World Tourism Barometer states that international tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) fell by 72% in January–October 2020 compared to the same period the year before, curbed by slow virus containment, low traveller confidence and important restrictions on travel still in place. UNWTO's extended scenarios for 2021–2024 point to a rebound in international tourism by the second half of 2021. Nevertheless, a return to 2019 levels of international arrivals could take 2½ to 4 years.

This moment follows decades of rapid expansion of globalization, revolutionizing the corporate competitive environment. Through the generation of new media, the new millennium has brought a wave of extraordinary transformation [1] and turbulence in terms of extremely volatile conditions [2]. The resulting hypercompetitive environment [3] draws attention to the need for a rational use of time and (global, reshaped, competitive) space [4] to manage the unpredictable and rapid changes in the turbulent environment [5].

Multiple challenges are facing the tourism industry on a broad scale. The challenge to adapt to the new, expanded competitive environment has been shaped by technological progress, economic slowdowns, climate change and natural disasters [6] as well as, of course, by new media and other means of promoting destinations [1].

The tourism industry has called for partnership as one of the most important solutions to global challenges [7,8]. Officially, the UNWTO 17th Sustainable Development Goal (“Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”, www.asdg.un.org, accessed on 25 October 2019) calls for public and private partnerships to generate sustainable development. To this end, the industry has recognized the need for both “the global partnership for sustainable development

complemented by multistakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technologies and financial resources to support the achievement of sustainable development goals in all countries, particularly developing countries” (paragraph 16) and encouraging and promoting “effective public, private, and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships” (paragraph 17) (<https://indicators.report/goals/goal-17>, accessed on 25 October 2019).

Academia considers partnership in tourism as closely related to the achievement of sustainable heritage development for a destination [9,10]. This link strengthens as a partnership evolves into a “cooperation”: the economic development of the destination funds the protection of cultural and natural heritage [9,11], while Destination Management Organizations (DMOs)—nonprofit entities in charge of generating tourist visitation for a given area, also leading the overall tourism industry at a destination—should focus on coordinating private and public tourism industry constituencies [12]. The need to generate economic growth while cooperating to ensure social progress and environment protection [13] highlights the urgency of promoting sustainable heritage development, which has forced DMOs to reshape their approaches [6]. As noted, the tourism industry is becoming more complex and has undergone fast-paced changes; therefore, DMOs have had to reinvent themselves in order to adapt and drive the revolution taking place [14]. They have accomplished this by relying heavily on digital technologies, representing emerging trends that are also a *sine qua non* condition in the promotion of destinations’ heritages.

This work investigates the cooperation process for fostering sustainable heritage promotion through temporary cooperation. This model is based on the relationships among public entities that resemble virtual enterprises (VEs), short-term cooperative entities engaging selected partners for a limited period around a well-defined aim by heavily relying on information and communication technologies. First, a literature review on cooperation in the tourism domain is performed. Then, the virtual enterprise model is explored, a model that has not been, heretofore, explicitly related to the tourism industry.

Supporting the theoretical contribution, the methodology suggests an adaptation of the virtual enterprise model to an unsteady, globalized tourism industry, generating a dedicated life cycle and highlighting the peculiarities of a tourism VE.

An empirical case of heritage promotion is also offered: Bresciaturism (the DMO of the Italian province of Brescia, a destination that ranks second in the region in attracting tourists (Brescia Province Report on Tourism Flows [Movimento dei turisti negli esercizi ricettivi], 2018)), which has promoted and led a temporary cooperation project with the primary goal of sustaining foreign tourist flows to the destination through a well-planned social media localization strategy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cooperation in Tourism

The definition of cooperation in tourism given by Wood and Gray [15] considers the voluntary actions of independent stakeholders engaged in a common process. They explicitly assume several fundamentals of cooperation in tourism: the autonomous parts, a voluntary intention and a common path followed by defining shared rules, while other features are not stated; parts are autonomous and can also compete, thus partners are “co-opetitors” [3] (i.e., they cooperate in some areas while competing in others). A pool of common resources and capabilities, dedicated to and dispersed among partners [16,17], is prepared along with a formal plan of activity and mid-process and final checking actions.

In this sense, accurate operation planning during cooperation is important for destination promotion [18] to achieve the various advantages of cooperation among tourism actors. Cooperation can provide opportunities to countries at the macro level to sustain the rising competitive pressure of the global tourism environment [19], but locally, partnership can potentially improve the effectiveness of local strategies to build sustainable outcomes [20]. Although cooperation is frequently cited as an enabler of a more comprehensive and sustainable promotion of a destination, the existing literature has not deeply investigated the

sustainable results that can be achieved through cooperation in destination promotion. This also needs to be investigated in light of the fact that cooperation coexists with competition: partners need to allow their interests to converge in order to be able to share resources while simultaneously competing [21,22]. In fact, this is true not only in tourism, but in any industry.

Bramwell and Lane [16] proposed the idea that collaborative advantages (mutual benefits) yield greater benefits than competitive advantages. Czernek [23] considered willingness to cooperate as determined not only by economic factors and a simple calculation of costs and benefits (although this is essential, especially at the beginning, in order to begin cooperation) but also as determined by social and cultural factors [23,24]. Additionally, mutual learning [16] should be considered a determinant for cooperation, facilitating concurrent learning and adaptive management. Factors impeding or facilitating cooperation in tourism should be viewed in a broad context, in their relationship to national culture, economic and political history of the country, social capital, etc.

The literature has addressed some of the factors involved in cooperation in tourism. For instance, Waligo [24] suggested that cooperation is needed for increasing tourism development effectiveness, while others have focused on the most important conditions for there to be effective collaboration and, thus, successful tourism development. This includes evaluating the diversity of partners [15] (cognitive and affective levels), trust among the involved stakeholders and coordination (relating units or decisions so that they fit with one another, operating reasonably, consistently and coherently). Coordination is needed to achieve comprehensive development of the destination [18] while reducing misunderstandings, conflicts and overlapping agency goals; it can take place between government agencies, levels of administration, same-level polities, and the private and public sectors.

The organizational level of cooperation in tourism should, therefore, consider both coordination activities and how power is distributed among partners (Saito and Ruhanen [25] list four different power distribution models: coercive, legitimate, induced, and competent), taking into account their influence on operations and on the possibility of reaching the cooperative group's aims [9]. In tourism, cooperation considers the extremely fragmented nature of destinations [16,26]. For instance, Huybers and Bennett [27,28] considered the use of shared environmental resources by clusters in areas where tourism is driven by the natural environment, while Wilson et al. [21] focused on intercommunity cooperation as a factor fostering tourism in rural areas. Although intercommunity cooperation represents a very interesting perspective, as it may lead to effective destination development and promotion, it seems harder to create the conditions necessary for intercommunity cooperation and collaboration. Among the most common causes of concern for local governments is that developing tourism through collaboration could jeopardize their control over local decision-making [9,29,30], thus pushing the limits of cooperation, particularly for long-term relationships—for example, due to partners overexploiting resources.

2.2. *Virtual Enterprise in a Turbulent Environment*

Globalization refers to an increased volatility of the external, rapidly changing environmental conditions that limit the validity of strategic planning. The particular pattern of a global environment includes turbulence [31], which encompasses ongoing changes that are numerous, continuous, substantial (disruptive), uncertain and unpredictable, and which force businesses to move toward agile [32] and flexible [33] solutions.

Agility was first defined by Hardwick and Bolton [34] as the ability to be profitable tomorrow—presumably being better, faster, cheaper—and was introduced during the 1990s in order to address the lack of management tools for responding to unexpected change [34].

Flexibility and agility from a microeconomic perspective relate to the dimensions of choice and speed at various levels [35], while new technologies are enablers and facilitators of flexible and agile adaptation of strategic and tactical decisions. Agility and flexibility, realized through dynamic capabilities, are considered a source of the competitive advantage

in the global environment. Wu and Su [32] have found that dynamically reconfigurable virtual enterprises can substantially contribute to achieving both by reducing the amount of time required and providing the pool of resources needed to implement new strategies [36].

Confirming this idea, Ming and Lu considered competition between companies as multilayered, with the simultaneous presence of single entities and aggregation in the same competitive arena [37,38]. Different forms of aggregation play a fundamental role in reducing competitive pressure on the market and sustaining a rational use of limited resources. It has also been recognized that network structures can be a source of rigidity that may hinder the coordination of complex organizational tasks, highlighting the need for agility and flexibility to react to ecological and socioeconomic changes [39,40]. As new ways to compete have emerged over time, the “agile enterprise” model is meant to accommodate the concept of a dynamically reconfigurable virtual enterprise [32].

The Virtual Enterprise (VE) concept originated in the manufacturing industry in the study of the virtualization of interfirm production processes and logistics, but it can be widened and adapted to other industries.

In manufacturing, the virtual enterprise concept was introduced to provide a well-defined aim when taking advantage of fast-changing opportunities in a turbulent environment. Sari (2007) describes this cooperation as a customer solution delivery system created from temporary and reconfigurable information and communications technology (ICT), enabling aggregation of competencies and enabled by information and communications technology (ICT). More than one definition of VE exists in the literature. Among the first was that introduced by Davidow and Malone [41,42], who stated that the VE is an interfirm network with a common aim of delivering a lower-cost, higher-value product than the supply chain as a whole can efficiently and quickly produce; a few years later, Childe [43] described a VE as an organizational paradigm arising from interfirm aggregation—a conceptual business unit or system that consists of a purchasing company and suppliers who collaborate closely in such a way as to maximize the returns to each partner. Furthermore, Browne and Zhang [44] stress the importance of robustly defining aims, markets, resources and costs. One of the most recent and complete definitions of VE comes from Rabelo et al. [45], who emphasized the dynamic and temporary nature of VE, in which partners maintain autonomous management and are geographically dispersed. Table 1 gives an overview of the main contributions.

A VE is a temporary network of independent companies (suppliers, customers, and even rivals) linked by IT to share skills, costs, and access to one another’s markets. To ensure a VE’s smooth operation, adequate use of communication and IT tools and protocols is therefore vital [46,47]. Furthermore, a VE can be considered a collection of different business domains that cooperate by sharing business processes [48].

Goel [49] introduced the idea of partners needing a dynamic attitude, considering they should be “free” to be part of or to exit the VE—which itself is temporary—at any time, but Rabelo et al. [45] focused on two fundamental qualities particularly fitting global markets—the dynamic and the temporary—also pointing out that partners are geographically dispersed. This implies the importance of a VE’s heavy reliance on ICTs.

A VE is usually based on a contract—a system of generic information detailing timing, a business opportunity to pursue (purpose) and other relevant features (resources, organization, and legal status) that support a VE’s operability [48,49]—along with the pool of skills, competencies and resources that the partners jointly contribute to the project [49].

Table 2 compares the VE with two similar but distinct concepts: the interfirm network and the extended enterprise.

Table 1. Main features of a virtual enterprise according to the literature.

Author	Features				
Camarinha-Matos et al. [47]	- Business opportunity	- Temporary alliance	- Shared skills	- Shared resources	- Supported by several tools (e.g., computer networks, IT)
Davidow and Malone [42]	- A common aim	- Minimizing costs	- Maximizing efficiency	- Realizing an aggregate value chain	
Childe [43]	- Purchasing company	- Several suppliers	- Common aim	- Shared returns	
Browne and Zhang [44]	- Specific aim	- Specific markets	- Shared resources	- Shared costs	
Ouzounis and Tshammer [48]	- Different business domains collected	- Shared business processes			
Goel et al. [49]	- Business opportunity	- Temporary alliance	- A common goal	- A common manifesto	- Partners completely free to join or drop out at any time
Rabelo et al. [45]	- Dynamic and temporary aggregation	- Logical aggregation	- Partners are autonomous	- Partners are heterogeneous	- Partners are geographically dispersed

Table 2. Summary of different characteristics of VE and other paradigms.

	Purpose	Organizational Structure	Costs and Resources Involved		Lifetime	Technology	Participation	Reconfigurability	Dynamicity	Partner Dependency
Virtual enterprise	Exploit a specific business opportunity	Controlled by common goal and manifesto	Low cost, labour-related.	Mainly indirect	Ad hoc, temporary	Necessary to make it effective	Partners join or drop any time; may be involved in multiple VEs	Very high	Very high	Low
Extended enterprise	Seamlessly integrate external entities/partners	Controlled by a main enterprise, who extend its boundaries vertically in the value chain	Moderate to low cost, labour-related.	Mainly indirect	Long-term and Stable	Not directly connected	Participants may join exclusively	Low	Moderate	Moderate
Interfirm network	Increase competitiveness	Differs depending on cases	Direct and indirect (HR, knowledge, infrastructures, etc.)		Long-term and Stable	Not directly connected	Participants may join the network exclusively	Low	Moderate	High, competencies

VE operability is achieved through orchestrated access to (and management of) shared resources so that partners' knowledge, skills and competencies respond better and faster to business opportunities [50]. In order to create and manage a VE, a sequence of elements and phases generating the VE life cycle must be carefully planned. Several authors have considered the VE life cycle as representing the whole existence of a VE. The model proposed by Ouzounis and Tshammer [48] categorized the actions taken by the partners into three main categories:

- Establishment: This stage defines and configures the relationship between partners, establishing an initial discussion on the resources and business process interfaces that each participant can devote and the conditions for it (such as security, reliability, authentication, payment and fault tolerance).
- Provision: This represents the operability of the VE.
- Termination: The access rights, interfaces, and implementations of the provided business processes and services can be modified by the VE partners.

This basic VE life cycle seems to underestimate a VE's inherent dynamic capabilities—the basis for an effective VE in global markets. A few years later, Camarinha-Matos and Afsarmanesh [47] adapted the schema by adding the “evolution” stage, thus clearly drawing attention to reconfigurability—the ability to properly handle decisions and solutions commensurate with unexpected problems (and opportunities) that could appear during the operation phase.

The “Findings” section considers the four-stage life cycle while adapting it to the tourism industry and the features of turbulent global environments.

3. Methodology

This work intends to offer a model of flexible, agile cooperation in tourism for effective and sustainable heritage promotion based on the literature and on empirical evidence, with particular relevance for cases in which the destination management organization is involved.

Taking into account the specific features a VE should have in the tourism sector, the conceptual schema in Figure 1 shows how various factors can affect a Virtual Enterprise in tourism (VEt) positively and negatively.

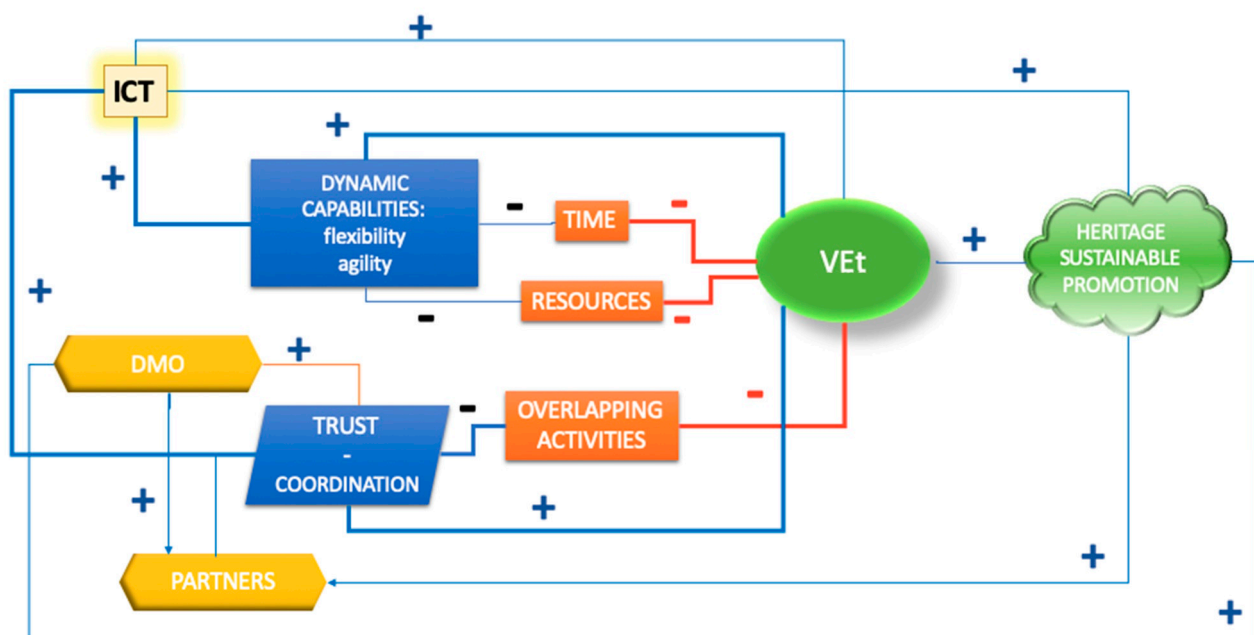


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for virtual enterprise in tourism.

The first hypothesis (H1) to validate postulates that there is a negative association between a VEt and the following (the red boxes in Figure 1):

- time;
- resources (to run strategies and activities);
- overlapping activities of the autonomous parties.

The second hypothesis (H2) to validate considers dynamic capabilities (namely, the capabilities managed with flexibility and agility), trust and coordination as having a positive connection with the virtual enterprise in tourism, while the same factors are considered mediators of the negative impacts of time, resources and overlapping activities on the VE (blue boxes in Figure 1).

Thus, a third hypothesis (H3) to validate emerges: that there is a positive relationship between the DMO and partners, and between both and the VEt. A positive impact of the use of information and communication technologies is also postulated (Figure 1).

The “Findings” section theorizes the virtual enterprise model for tourism, testing the hypotheses mentioned above through direct observation of the empirical case described in the next section.

The destination is a multifaceted system, where independent actors—both public and private—work, interact and compete at the same time [51]. Cooperation is thus considered a natural response to complex destination features and can guarantee sustainable development if its positive effects are devoted to the whole destination [52].

In this study, we intend to generate a VE model for heritage development in global tourism markets. For this reason, the four-stage life cycle model, elaborated in a basic design by Camarinha-Matos and Afsarmanesh [47] (the authors distinguished four different stages in a VE life cycle: creation, operation, evolution, and dissolution—Figure 2), is further implemented by considering the short-term lifespan and the dynamicity (high reconfigurability), which are fundamental prerequisites for succeeding in global markets.

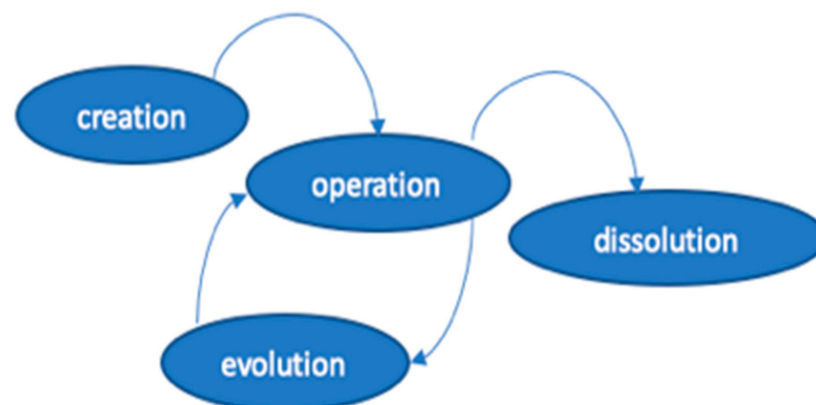


Figure 2. The macrophases of the VE life cycle (adapted from Camarinha-Matos and Afsarmanesh [46]).

This conceptual schema helps further develop the VEt model by dividing the four stages into more detailed substages, described in the “Findings” section.

This work focuses on a particular VEt, considering the direct involvement of a DMO [53] in its roles as a facilitator [54] and coordinator [55] of the relationships among local private and public entities. The DMO should sustain a positive atmosphere among partners in order to generate trust; selection of trustworthy partners and trust building are important in virtual domains as they can significantly affect the success of a VE [56].

In a leadership role such as this, the DMO is in charge of elaborating the common project in detail by considering the comprehensive development of the destination, a mission that is facilitated by finding and engaging partners that accurately represent the whole destination.

4. Case History

This section describes an empirical case in light of the aim of this paper. In this case, there is a particular organizational structure for heritage promotion headed by Bresciatourism. This DMO, a nonprofit company promoting tourism in Brescia and supporting the whole local tourism industry, provides support for operators and is directly committed to spreading information on the Brescia province and its heritage in order to attract tourists from all over the world. The company facilitates the organization of trade fairs, workshops, educational tours, and marketing drives both in Italy and abroad. Additionally, the DMO coordinates efforts from local public and private tourism entities and heavily engages in digital communication to foster knowledge about Brescia's rich local heritage nationally and abroad. Bresciatourism is widely recognized as responsible for a large inflow of tourists in the Brescia province each year, more than 50% of which are foreign (Table 3; according to a local authority, 10,017,206 tourists came to Brescia in 2017 (Movimento dei turisti negli esercizi ricettivi, 2018)).

Table 3. Major Bresciatourism figures.

YEAR	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Average Days Stayed	3.83	3.73	3.73	3.72	3.72
Arrivals	2,308,488	2,480,647	2,687,679	2,809,688	2,799,559
% Foreign	54%	55%	57%	57%	57%

Authors' revision based on Provincia di Brescia public data.

Bresciatourism conducted a content analysis of official social media pages managed by tourism actors (such as local authorities, institutions and other tourism operators) and identified significant limitations: news, events, and general communications were in Italian, and most translations were only provided in English, highlighting the need to improve content readability in order to generate interest in the local heritage and increase willingness to travel.

After a preliminary investigation, Bresciatourism took advantage of a new option offered by Facebook, who, at the beginning of 2016, enabled a new digital function for the instantaneous translation of posts among 45 available languages. Since its introduction, this new function led to a large rise in posts being read (based on data measuring 5000 Facebook pages and posts, with 70 million views daily, 36% of which were translated into different languages) [56].

Considering the opportunities, this could provide for spreading destination promotions, the flow of tourist arrivals by year was analyzed. During the last decade, foreign tourist flow increased by 50.7%. In 2018, foreign arrivals accounted for 57% of the total flow. The most common foreign language in use by tourists was German (38% of the tourists visiting the area), with English as a distant second (10%), followed by Dutch (9%) and French (see Table 4).

Table 4. The top four most-spoken languages by foreign visitors to the Brescia province.

Languages	Tourist Stays	%
German	3,826,685	38.2
English	1,019,731	10.18
Dutch	914,051	9.12
French	338,733	3.38

Authors' revision based on Provincia di Brescia public data.

In line with its role in supporting local players, Bresciatourism intended to develop a multilingual project involving several partners interested in promoting local heritage through a widespread enhancement in the readability of social media posts. To bridge part of the existing communication gap, relevant content was planned to be provided in

key languages. The idea was that generating a system of online information in different languages and increasing the availability of visual material about the destination would help stimulate readers and increase their willingness to travel. While increasing awareness of the local heritage, the project could also educate tourists on the facilities and tourism experiences to take advantage of during their visit to the Brescia province, generating a sustainable approach to the destination's heritage promoted by both visitors and the local community.

The goals of the common communication project were as follows:

- fill the information/communication gap by providing key content in different languages;
- provide better info-promotional content and promote interchanges between local tourism operators;
- attract prospective travelers interested in visiting the province;
- improve awareness of local attractions abroad;
- educate tourists about the rich heritage of the Brescia province;
- support the tourism experience;
- enhance cooperation and communication between local areas of the province;
- increase the touristic and digital skills of the local tourist operators.

Bresciatourism solicited the partnership of several entities to ease the systematic generation of content for the whole destination; collaboration was mainly requested of public entities (such as local institutions or tourism consortiums) to guarantee the representativeness of the destination. The province was split into subareas, geographically identified through criteria already in use locally, and Bresciatourism canvassed public entities and consortia working in the subareas, asking them to contact them if interested in partnering.

Several criteria drove the partner selection stage. First of all, every area had to be represented through the partners, avoiding repetition or over-/under-representation, although some subareas attract more tourism than others. Several prospective partners showed interest in the promotional project. The selection depended on the availability of resources the prospective partner intended to contribute to the project.

Table 5 lists the 14 partners involved with their corresponding subareas.

Table 5. Partners involved in the VE by main subarea.

Main Subareas	Partners Involved
Brescia city and Hinterland	Assessorato al Turismo del Comune di Brescia Fondazione Brescia Musei Strada del Vino Colli dei Longobardi
Garda Lake	Consorzio lago di Garda Lombardia Strada dei Vini e dei Sapori del Garda
Iseo Lake	Visit Lake Iseo
Franciacorta	Consorzio Franciacorta Strada del Franciacorta
Idro Lake and the Sabbia Valley	AGT Valle Sabbia e Lago d'Idro
Camonica Valley	DMO Valle Camonica Comprensorio Pontedilegno-Tonale
Trompia Valley	Comunità Montana di Valle Trompia
Lowlands of Brescia	Fondazione Pianura Bresciana Fondazione Castello di Padernello

The role of Bresciatourism in this VE fits the suggestion of van der Zee and Vanneste [53] that the role of the government should be restricted to coordinating economic and social agents [55], such as facilitating the relationships between actors [54]. During the initial meetings, partners agreed that Bresciatourism would head the project and be in charge of the agenda, along with the VE consortium. Particular attention was paid to planning

detailed agendas and activities. A folder was created and shared among partners that included posts' content, timing and templates.

4.1. Content and Templates

Partners were fully responsible for the activities each was in charge of: to write in Italian a post of no more than 200 text characters (hashtags excluded) following a given agenda. Bresciatourism also recommended partners to supplement written content with visual material (videos or photos). Although a basic template was given by Bresciatourism, each partner was free to organize their shared content on a rotation of eight main topics given by Bresciatourism in advance:

- art and culture, UNESCO;
- food and wine, itineraries, main events;
- sports;
- environment, protected areas, natural parks, mountains, lakes;
- wellness and health;
- intangible heritage and historical villages;
- religious tourism, itineraries and pilgrimage;
- lifestyle and luxury.

The post template consisted of three parts, supporting the main text:

- Follow-up link: In order to enhance content dissemination, each post must contain a direct link to the DMO's website and/or the partner's website.
- Hashtags: Hashtags are allowed and recommended. The main one is the official one for Bresciatourism (#visitbrescia), and partners could add their own. A list of suggested hashtags was defined and shared.
- To create the best post to be viewed by potential tourists, each partner was requested to add copyright-free photos or videos about the destination or the event being promoted.

Since posts were planned to be released through Bresciatourism's Facebook page, no trademarks (or any other signs or symbols) could be left on material. Any parts of the content authored by third parties strictly required their license to anonymize and use them.

4.2. Timing

The project followed the planned timing, according to which posts were released from 1 March to 31 December 2018 in a weekly rotation among partners.

Suitable cross-postings were also expected, with a concurrent dissemination among Bresciatourism's page and the partners' pages in order to boost the readability of the shared contents. Partners were also strongly encouraged to share the posts and their information through their websites.

4.3. Localizing Content in Different Languages

As the idea behind the project was to leverage the dissemination of tourism content through different languages, the posts would not rely on automatic translation but would actually be written in the selected language, thanks to a team of native-speaker consultants for the chosen languages with social media skills. Table 6 shows the different-language versions of the first post, released on 13 March.

Data analysis showed an unexpected but significant rise in the partners' Facebook page followers over the course of the project. The winter season brought a 73% increase in new followers over the autumn (Table 7).

Partners did not share specific dates from their web page analytics, but Bresciatourism's website, incorporating content in the four selected languages and independently managing their data, gave detailed information about its foreign readers, summarized in Table 8.

Table 6. The project's first Facebook post.

Language	Post Content	Link
ITA	Prenotate uno spettacolo di opera, danza o musica al Teatro Grande, uno dei più bei teatri classici italiani. Godetevi un caffè tra gli affreschi veneziani dello sfavillante foyer. Brescia, che sorpresa!	Bit.ly/TeatroGrande
DE	Buchen Sie eine Opern-, Tanzoder Musikaufführung im Teatro Grande, einem der schönsten klassizistischen Theater Italiens. Genießen Sie einen Kaffee unter den venezianischen Fresken des glänzenden Foyers. Brescia, was für eine Überraschung!	Bit.ly/TeatroGrandeDN
EN	Book a ticket to the opera, a dance or a music show at Teatro Grande, one of the most beautiful classical Italian theatres. Enjoy a coffee amidst the wonderful Venetian frescos in the sparkling foyer. Brescia, never fail to surprise me!	Bit.ly/TeatroGrandeEN
FR	Réservez un spectacle d'opéra, de danse ou un concert au Teatro Grande, un des plus beaux théâtres anciens d'Italie. Dégustez un bon café dans le splendide foyer, décoré de fresques vénitiennes. Brescia, quelle surprise!	Bit.ly/TeatroGrandeFR
NL	Boek een heerlijk avondje opera, dans of muziek in het Teatro Grande, een van de mooiste klassieke theaters van Italië. Geniet van een heerlijke espresso onder de Venetiaanse fresco's in de indrukwekkende foyer. Brescia, wat een verrassing!	Bit.ly/TeatroGrandeNL

Table 7. Trend of followers by season.

Time	Followers				
	#	++	--	# Variation	% Variation
Spring *	92,192	1117	840	277	25%
Summer	92,217	645	674	-29	-4%
Autumn	92,442	521	438	83	16%
Winter **	92,780	654	174	480	73%

* Since the project's kick-off on 1 May 2018. ** to 31 December 2018.

Table 8. Bresciatourism website user trend data.

User Language	2018	2019	2020 (January–February)
Dutch	+539.40%	+629.90%	+301.62%
French	+245.45%	+257.33%	+63.41%
English	+188.03%	+231.25%	+85.58%
German	+151.39%	+288.96%	+113.75%

Data provided by Provincia di Brescia and elaborated by the authors.

Based on these results, in a final meeting, Bresciatourism and the project partners considered the project to have been efficacious and the mission of the trial project fully achieved. Therefore, with the project ended, the aims of the temporary aggregation disappeared, and the group had no further reason to collaborate. In the end, the VE disaggregated.

To answer H1 (there is a negative link between the virtual enterprise model and the following three items), it is possible to confirm that:

- The time needed to run a project such as this is huge, but it is reduced when sharing with partners, delegating all of the organizing activities to a head (the DMO), and focusing on the activities each one is in charge of, following the agenda and the due date.
- Resources (to run strategies and activities) are well-defined at the beginning of the project: the DMO is in charge of several activities, while each partner only needs to generate posts and send visual material about their local heritage.
- Overlapping activities of the autonomous parties are quite limited due to the given content, templates and timing.

This implies strong coordination among partners, thanks to the plan released by the DMO and subscribed to by the VEt participants, confirming their trust in the project (and indirectly, in each other (H2)).

H2 also considers dynamic capabilities (namely, those capabilities managed with flexibility and agility) as positively linked to the VEt and negatively with time and resources. Involved in the common project, the partners showed their ability to follow a common plan, managing the resources contributing to flexibility: the more able the partners' delegates are, the less time needed for the activities and the less resources used. Additionally, the VEt showed high reconfigurability and dynamic adaptability, allowing for further evolution of the VEt itself.

The last hypothesis to validate postulates a positive relationship between the DMO and partners, in which information and communication technologies (ICTs) constitute the foundation of the VEt, saving time needed for collecting information and other materials, sharing folders among partners and presenting content to prospective visitors in the best way. All of this clearly emerged for the described case history.

5. Findings

This study applied the virtual enterprise model to interpret the case under examination, a communication project entailing a particular temporary shared organization. The study based its concept on the destination as a system of different, independent actors, both economic and public, entering complex relationships with or against one another [51]. Therefore, collaboration can emerge naturally as a strategy that enables local players to participate in a sustainable solution to their common need: to develop the whole destination [52].

Although the VE model is considered a winning temporary cooperation idea that fits the global tourism industry in a broad sense, this work was spurred by a need to develop a model of destination heritage promotion. It thus adopts the perspective introduced by van der Zee and Vanneste, and it makes authorities, such as DMOs, enablers of positive relationships [53,54] and coordinators among the involved actors [55]. This definition fits this study's VE model perfectly, as it describes the role of the DMO as promoter of the VE and heading the activities run during the project. Trust plays a pivotal role in managing a virtual enterprise in tourism (VEt). Selection of trustworthy partners and trust building are important in virtual domains as they can largely affect the success of a VEt. [57].

The DMO as a coordinator should drive the comprehensive development of the destination, which should include partner selection in which the whole destination is equitably and nonexclusively represented.

To develop an appropriate life cycle model for the VEt, this study developed the simplified four-stage life cycle, as shown in Figure 2 [46,47], emphasizing the temporality and high reconfigurability (dynamicity) of the VEt.

From this initial conceptual schema, the VE model for tourism is further developed by dividing the four stages into substages, resulting in a nine-stage life cycle model, as shown in Table 9. The stages underline the main features of a VEt, directly related to a joint, inclusive and comprehensive promotion of the destination. The DMO heads the VEt and supervises every stage. The last stage in Table 9 suggests a further evolution of the VEt that could cause it to last longer than originally planned.

This suggests a possible evolution of the VE into a different kind of cooperation, one that is steady and long-lasting, or into a new VE (Figure 3).

These further possibilities for maintaining the cooperative relationships provide one possible reason for a VE to be generated for the short term: it could be considered as a trial collaboration before the involved parties agree to cooperate in a more permanent and structured way.

The virtual enterprise life cycle in terms of the test case is summarized in Table 10.

Table 9. The VEt life cycle.

Substages	
Creation	Common aim identification (purpose) Partner selection Resource attribution
Operation	Collaborative VE planning (timing, milestones, etc.) Operation of the virtual enterprise
Evolution	Mid-process check Mid-process adaptation of collaborative VE planning
Termination and Dissolution	Achievement of the common aim Dissolution of the VE or further evolution in a new VE/in cooperation

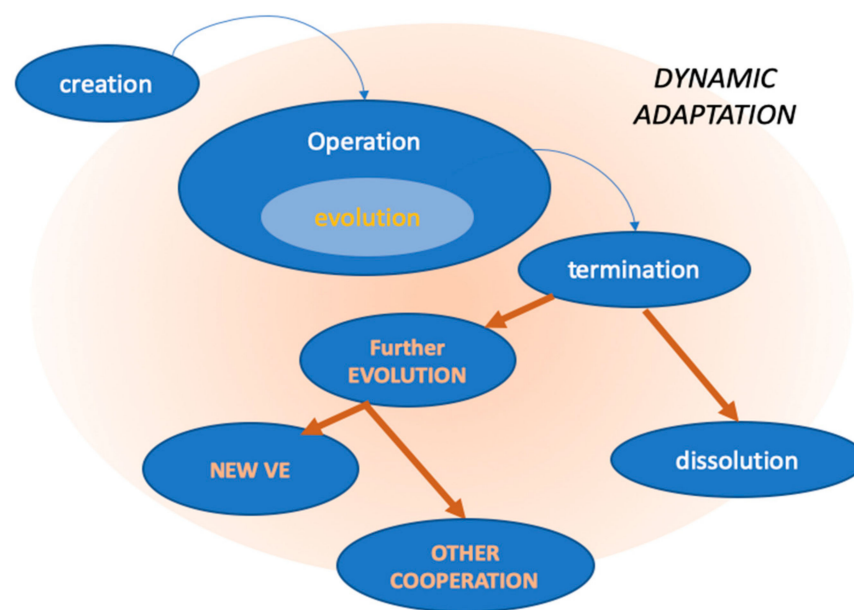


Figure 3. VE life cycle in tourism.

Table 10. VE life cycle stages for the test case.

Virtual Enterprise Life Cycle Stages		Bresciatourism VE: Localization Strategy to Promote the Destination through Social Media
Creation	1. Common aim identification (purpose)	1. Development of a localization social media strategy for the comprehensive and effective promotion of the overall destination.
	2. Partner selection	2. Partner selection adopts two criteria: inclusion of every area; relevance in terms of tourism attraction ability.
	3. Resource attribution	3. Partner decided to devote a chosen slack each, to make the project effective.
Operation	4. Collaborative VE planning	4. Detailed VE planning was released
	5. Operation of the virtual enterprise	5. The VE operation activities started 1 March 2018, with the first post released.
(Evolution)	6. Mid-process check	6. A mid-process check was planned at the halfway point of the project.
	7. Mid-process adaptation of the collaborative VE planning	7. For the specific project, no mid-process adaptation was required.
Dissolution	8. Achievement of the common aim	8. The project was intended to close on 31 December 2018, with the last localized post released.
	9. Dissolution of the VE or further evolution in a new VE	9. In a follow-up period, partners agree to dismantle the VEt for the achievement of the aim.

The main characteristics of a virtual enterprise in tourism are presented in Table 11. The VEt is generated to exploit a particular business opportunity by incorporating upscale service attributes, lowering the costs charged to each of the partners, which can benefit all due to cost management, while pursuing their promotional activities (the well-known “best cost provider strategy” [58]). This should emerge from a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis of the destination and should be varied, ranging from common communication projects to the development of more focalized marketing projects (e.g., a promotional path for religious tourism that includes the whole destination). A strong connection with the use of information and communication technologies is a fundamental prerequisite for making the VEt effective while reducing the time and resources each partner devotes to the project. Since the main driver for identifying the VEt’s purpose is the comprehensive development of the destination, not every project aiming at a specific area can be considered the basis for a VEt involving the DMO, even temporarily.

Table 11. Main features of a VEt.

Purpose	Achieve a particular aim (business opportunity) in sustaining the whole destination’s heritage promotion.
Coordination and Trust	The DMO plays a pivotal role in generating both the system of partners and the common rules, coordinating resources, activities and efforts and measuring results. Heading the system, the DMO should generate trust among participants.
Partner selection	Should be representative of the whole destination for comprehensive development.
Participation	Participants are entities dynamically involved in more than one VE at the same time but with no overlapping aims (nonexclusive basis).
Partner Dependency	Low, but mainly because coordination intends to avoid overlapping for the activities run by the VE.
Organizational structure	Controlled by a common goal and manifesto, requires a formal business plan. Activities should be planned, and timing should be defined. The DMO can serve as facilitators and coordinators of partners’ actions.
Lifetime	Ad hoc and temporary, depends on the VE’s purpose (or intention).
Costs and Resources involved	Low cost, mainly indirect and labour-related.
Technology	Conditio sine qua non to make it effective: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. For intra-VE connection; 2. For the VE activities.
Reconfigurability	Very high, mid-process adjustments.

While no destination is unique, partner selection should respect the main criteria of representativeness of the entire destination. Partners are independent and can cooperate with each other during the course of the project while competing in other activities they run independently (thus, the actors build “co-opetitive” relationships in their tourism environment).

Partners also:

- agree to devote a defined share of their resources (financial, materials, information, human resources and time) in exchange for mutual improvement and in pursuit of the VEt’s goals.
- plan and develop the project under the coordination of the DMO in such a way that it will be optimally run. Timing is fundamental to plan the temporary cooperation and to achieve the best results from it.

Mid-process checks should be performed to adjust the VEt’s plan and operation as needed. This is a fundamental process to have in place to evaluate results and to adapt the strategy in use when possible in order to effectively realize the VEt’s aim.

The last check is considered a sine qua non condition for a VEt’s temporary existence. When the VEt’s lifetime has expired or the aim has been achieved, the VEt will dismantle,

and the partners' involved resources are freed. Dissolution of the VEt can be performed when the VEt has promoted the destination's heritage as intended in the establishment stage. The VEt can also dissolve prior to the expected deadline (having not accomplished the aim) upon the partners' evaluation and mutually agreed choice. Developing the idea of dynamic adaptation, the last stage can also involve the evolution of the VEt. A possible path on which the VEt may evolve, emerging while managing activities, is the development of a steadier and more long-lasting cooperation.

By generating the VEt model, four conditions for effectiveness emerge (Figure 4):

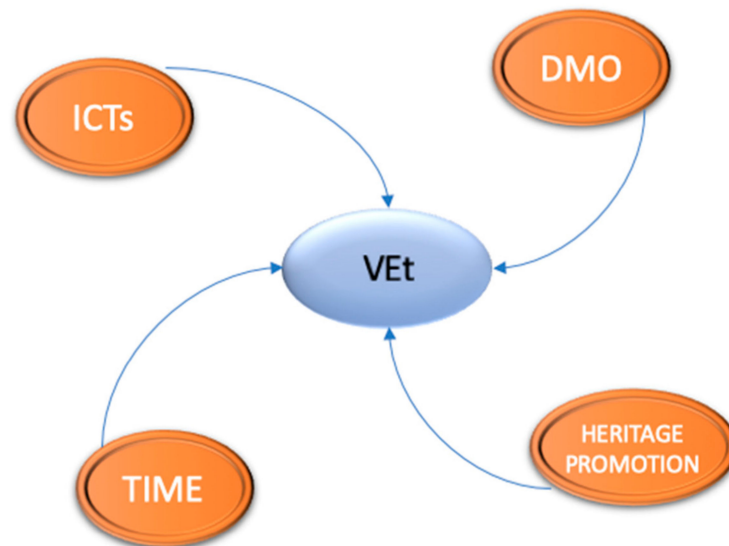


Figure 4. *Conditio sine qua non* for the effectiveness of a VE.

- The DMO should head the VEt and partners should trust and recognize the DMO as crucial.
- Time has a strongly negative association with the VEt: The VEt usually requires a short-term commitment to accomplish the temporary cooperation; moreover, it emerges indirectly through dynamic capabilities and mid-process checks.
- Information and communication technologies support optimum VEt operability, enabling the benefits of the relationship at lower costs. Both the VEt structural system and its operation benefit from strong dependence on ICTs.
- The heritage of the whole destination is promoted through the VEt.

6. Conclusions

Cooperation is considered a natural answer to global markets' competitive intensity. It aims to increase market power while decreasing the resources contributed. The topic is well-known in the field of tourism and the literature has stressed the relevance of sharing processes while pursuing common goals, but little attention has been given to it in light of a dynamic perspective. This work recommends cooperation to be adapted to the main features of global markets, suggesting a focus on time as a competitive issue to manage by developing cooperative relationships within the same tourism industry.

This work offers an overview of a particular model, the virtual enterprise, that can fit tourism's need to promote a destination's heritage; in detail, the suggested model focuses on whole destination development, an opportunity that naturally implies the direct involvement of the local destination management organization as the promoter. The main features of the VE are explained in terms of a specific life cycle model, subdivided into nine steps, tailored for the best VE effectiveness in tourism. The main features of this model outline the comprehensive development of a destination as fundamental. The pivotal role of the DMO's commitment to the overall development of the area in promotion was also emphasized, while partners remain independent but achieve several advantages by

devoting a limited share of their resources to pursuing the VE's (common) aim. Information and communication technologies, as indispensable tools for interconnection, are also essential to the VE's optimal functioning. These technologies work both as facilitators for partners' relationships and as tools for accomplishing individual partners' VE obligations.

To support the theoretical model elaborated, an empirical case was selected and described for its relevance in an area with a well-developed tourism industry. Upon examination, this case confirmed the characteristics of the model based on a dynamic focus on time, reliance on ICTs and a robust commitment to promote the whole destination.

This should encourage heritage managers to rethink their strategies toward fostering relationships that validate Sustainable Development Goal 17, introduced at the beginning of this paper. It suggests that benefits from cooperating can be attained while overcoming a systematic lack of resources and with a short-term, dynamic perspective.

In the present case study, the partners' delegates (the ones in charge of generating content, participating in meetings, etc.) showed a limited ability to interact with technologies and needed to be educated in the use of social media for businesses and about the opportunities digital tools can offer. This points to a possible need for specific educational programs to be released by the DMO with the potential for high attendance.

Additional results were achieved: the first refers to substantial knowledge enrichment about the tangible and intangible heritage of the area. Even a quite limited store of information and visual material about the local legacy revealed how the value of traditions and other folkloristic events should not be underestimated. This qualifies, represents and distinguishes the destination among others and represents a primary motivation for prospective travelers.

Finally, teaming up in a virtual enterprise has greatly improved the project's results in terms of both time and quality, boosting mutual engagement in the destination's promotion.

Further empirical investigation should be performed in the future to strengthen and expand the model. Other hypotheses can be tested, such as that when the DMO is not involved, the whole destination's development will not be a priority. Further research should also be devoted to investigating the model's validity in tourism under different conditions—for instance, when the partners are all private, profit-driven entities.

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