

TOURISM PRODUCT CLUBS: THEORY, ADDED VALUE AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Purpose – Tourism products clubs (TPC) are a relatively recent form of collaboration of stakeholders in a destination. Contrary to the many available examples of existing practice, research on the topic is limited. The paper aims to contribute to expanding the scope of existing research by reviewing the current practice and investigating the practical potential of its implementation by exploring the benefits, the feasibility and the willingness to fund a culture-based TPC on the Cres-Lošinj archipelago.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Qualitative research is used to contribute to the synthesis of new findings about TPCs and serves as the basis for quantitative research. A structured self-administered online questionnaire is used to collect data from the entire population (census method) of top and middle managers of the largest company on the archipelago.

Findings – TPCs establishment is considered unfeasible without support of the local municipality as well as relevant local, national and regional tourism authorities. Stakeholders consider TPC benefits obvious and their positive attitude towards TPCs is confirmed. The TPCs built around cultural and creative industries are less common than those related to nature or gastronomy.

Originality of the research – The paper proposes a concise definition of TPCs and defines their key features thus offering a scientific contribution to the limited theoretical framework on the topic. At the same time, quantitative data analysis addresses the feasibility of establishing a culture-based TPC in Croatia, on the Cres-Lošinj archipelago.

Keywords tourism product club, tourism product, service innovation, cultural and creative industries, Cres-Lošinj

INTRODUCTION

The paper discuss tourism product clubs (TPCs) as an emergent form of stakeholder networks on the tourism market. Notwithstanding that TPCs are relatively common in practice in a number of countries, such as Canada, Spain, Italy or France for example, research on the topic is scarce.

Companies on the tourism market operate in a specific context where their competitors are not only those within the destination or region but any company satisfying a need of a given tourist in any destination worldwide. For this reason, companies within a destination need to cooperate to make the overall destination more attractive over other destinations globally. In tourism, a synergy of stakeholders is a critical success factor.

The paper aims at contributing to the limited literature framework covering the topic of tourism product clubs by first presenting the theoretical determinants of TPCs, including the etymology and definitions of the concept and its main features.

Quantitative research is used to determine the potential of establishing a TPC in Croatia. Relevant national or regional authorities do not support the financing of TPCs in Croatia, unlike in all countries where TPCs have been established. The potential of cultural and creative tourism products on Cres-Lošinj is also considered. This is explored by analysing the perceived benefits, the feasibility and the willingness to fund a culture-based TPC on the Cres-Lošinj archipelago, home of the famous Apoxyomenos statue.

1. THEORETICAL DETERMINANTS OF TOURISM PRODUCT CLUBS

The innovation potential of TPCs derives from the cooperation of various stakeholders. The most important outcome of this cooperation is to share knowledge, skills and best practices among the involved enterprises (Cooper and Hall 2008, p. 239), which leads not only to innovation in tourism products and services but also within the enterprise. TPC, as a form of tourism stakeholder association, contributes to lowering the costs for the involved stakeholders, innovate and differentiate tourism products and services, improve their supply and increase competitiveness.

This section will discuss the origins of TPCs, the definition of the concept, typology based on available practical examples, its key characteristics, benefits and objectives.

1.1. Origins of tourism product clubs

Tourism product clubs were first established in Canada as a tool for the creation of a new tourism offer. The *Canadian Tourism Commission's Industry and Product Development Committee* launched its *Product Club Programme* in 1996 (Cooper and Hall 2008, p. 238). The programme emerged from the market analysis of the perception and demand related to the Canadian tourism offer.

TPC is a relatively recent concept representing one of the key elements of tourism strategies in some countries. Examples of successful tourism product clubs serving as the basis for theory elaboration within the paper have been presented in different professional and research papers as well as Internet sites of single TPCs, tourism offices or other available Internet sources. Besides English, the languages of the sources were Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and German while TPCs analysed for the purposes of the paper were those in Canada, Spain, Italy, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil and Germany.

TPCs have been established in France to improve market research and facilitate the market penetration (Herrero 2012). One of the first TPCs in Spain was *Estaciones Náuticas*, which coordinates activities of a nautical tourism product in a geographically limited area of Spain, with 21 different *Estaciones Náuticas* established since late 1990s (Herrero 2012). After this TPC, other TPCs have been established throughout Spain, such as *Rutas de Vino* (wine routes) as first TPCs involving non-tourism stakeholders – vineyards, wine cellars and wine-related shops. Under the guidance of Turespaña, the national tourism authority in the country, other TPCs have also been established. Examples found in Italy suggest that all TPCs in the country are

destination-based. However, none of these is related to the overall destination but to a strictly defined tourism product in a given destination. As an example, I Borghi Più Belli d'Italia TPC promotes the historical, cultural and art tradition in the off-the-beaten-track towns in several regions (I Borghi più Belli d'Italia 2017), while La Toscana TPC promotes wine and olive oil production in the region of Tuscany.

The analysed initiatives are not stakeholder-driven. On the contrary, TPCs are formed, as a rule, under the guidance of a national tourism board or other relevant tourism authority in a country, which proposes the methodology for the TPC establishment and covers its initial costs of operation. A thorough analysis of all available sources suggests the same for all TPCs, without exceptions.

As a form of stakeholder associations, TPCs have a great potential to innovate tourism products and increase tourists' satisfaction for a longer period of time. TPCs share some of their characteristics with other forms of collaboration, the closest one being clusters (Stipanović et al. 2016). The main difference is that clusters are destination-based, while TPCs are not destination-dependent and can involve stakeholders from multiple destinations (Stipanović et al. 2016, p. 447) working on the same tourism product.

1.2. Defining a tourism product club

Professional and scientific literature offers many definitions of a tourism product club. Selected definitions are given below:

- „a group of companies that have agreed to work together to develop new tourism products or increase the value of existing products and collectively review the existing problems that hinder profitable development of tourism“ (Secretaria de Estado para el Turismo de Mexico, 2006, in Del Campo Gomis et al. 2010, p. 27)
- a strategic alliance between public bodies responsible for planning tourism development, tourism service providers and institutions managing the resources on which a tourism product is based with the aim to jointly develop a tourism product through planning, promotion, commercialization and evaluation of the product itself (Blanco 2013)
- „a management and planning tool where a group of companies and organizations agree, in the framework of public-private collaboration, to work together in an organized way, with the objective of developing new products or increasing the value of existing ones, for a specific market segment. (Experalia 2012)
- A group of companies who work together to develop new products or to improve products (European Commission 2014),
- Partnership with companies sharing a common vision to develop a specific product or niche (Canadian Tourism Commission, in Cooper and Hall 2008, p. 238)
- Association of tourism business providers working together to offer an integrated service (Vas 2011, p. 1).

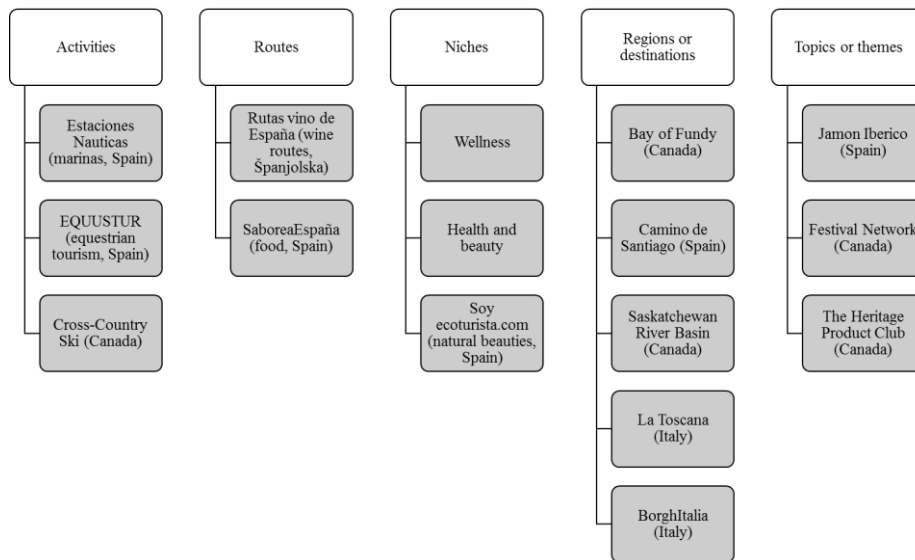
The many definitions above suggest two common concepts; the first one is partnership and the second one collaboration of different stakeholders on the tourism market. The definition arising thereof is that a tourism product club can be defined as *a joint*

formalized effort of multiple public and private stakeholders aiming at improving an existing or creating a new tourism product.

1.3. Typology of tourism product clubs

Worldwide examples of TPCs in all the countries for which sources could be found were analysed and categorised as shown in Figure 1 below. Every TPC is unique, depends on the product itself, each club member, joint vision of all members, the club's goal, work methodology and other elements. If any of these changes, the final product changes as well.

Figure 1: Tourism product clubs categories



Source: authors

An example of a culture-based tourism product club is the Canadian *Heritage Product Club*, which promotes French culture in western and northern Canada (Hawkins, 2004, p. 300). In the classification above it is categorised under „Topics“ but if the focus of such a TPC would be a cultural offer of a Canadian region instead, it could fall under „Niches“ or „Regions“, depending on its goals.

1.4. Key characteristics of tourism product clubs

A thorough analysis of all existing sources allows drawing conclusions on the main characteristics of the TPC. These are:

- A tourism product is a common denominator of all stakeholders within the tourism product club,
- Common interests have a priority over individual ones, consequently financial contribution is required by each of the club members as a guarantee of commitment,

- a formalized partnership,
- Every TPC defines and requires its service quality standards,
- Destinations involved in the TPC are promoted through the tourism product,
- TPC operates under its own tourism product brand.

1.5. Potential benefits of tourism product clubs for different stakeholders

The benefits of joining a TPC, shown in Figure 2 are divided into benefits for the members of the TPC, benefits for tourist and benefits for the tourism destination according to Del Campo Gomis et al. (2010).

Figure 2: **Potential benefits of tourism product clubs**

TPC Members	Tourists	Destination*/Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial synergies among participants • Greater market opportunities and income at a lower cost • Increased forecasting of seasonal demand • Increased certainty for market shares • Increased competitiveness • Improved credibility • Improved company image • Encouraging innovation through knowledge and experience sharing* • Emergence of new business opportunities* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater alternatives of consumption • Greater diversity of offer in destination • Increased certainty of purchase • Increased confidence in the quality of service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced employment opportunities • Increased forecasting demand • Increased confidence in destination's own ability • Improved destination image • Increased destination income from tourism services* • Improved overall local economy*

Source: authors, adapted from Del Campo Gomis et al. (2010)

*added by authors

As seen in Figure 2, authors have adapted the benefits reported by Del Campo Gomis et al. (2010) based on the analysis of practical examples.

1.6. Objectives of tourism product clubs

Canadian Tourism Commission defined the main objectives of TPC as follows (Wight 2001, p. 146):

- to bring small and medium enterprises (SMEs) together to improve existing and create new tourism products,
- to encourage interactions among tourism SMEs,
- to work with SMEs to advance tourism as industry.

Cooper and Hall mentioned the following main TPC objectives (2008, p. 239):

- to create new tourism service packages,
- to find new ways to improve the quality of tourism services and products,
- to find new ways to create unique and innovative tourism experiences,
- to create new tourism offer ensuring year-round tourism season.

The model and implementation mechanism of TPCs has been specific in every country, thus the objectives differ.

2. CULTURE-RELATED TOURISM PRODUCT CLUBS AND ITS POTENTIAL FOR CRES-LOŠINJ ARCHIPELAGO

The analysis of world-wide TPC examples (see Section 1.3.) indicated that the only culture-based tourism product clubs found were the Canadian Heritage Product Club, which promotes French culture in western and northern Canada (Hawkins 2004, p. 300), categorised under „Topics“ and BorghItalia (see Section 1.1.), categorised under “Regions”. If culture is perceived in a broader sense, to involve wine and gastronomy, then there would be more examples, such as both TPCs listed in the “Routes” category (see Section 1.3.).

Cultural tourism gained importance in the second half of the 20th century while the term creative tourism followed in early 21st century (Richards 2001). Creative tourism is „a tourism which offers creative attitude together with high quality services ... and with the opportunity to be in touch with local inhabitants in different destinations“ (Campbell 2010, in Kiráľová 2017). Richards (2013) states that exogenous solutions lead to uncreative copy-paste results and are thus “uninteresting” for tourists which implies the importance of endogenous cultural and creative offer. With the sun-sea-sand concept being outdated, cultural tourism could be an important tool to achieve diversification (Vasiliadis et al. 2016, p. 70).

The island of Lošinj is well known for wellness tourism and the archipelago can further promote its excellence and gain added value by promoting its cultural and creative offer among tourists. The archipelago has already become world-famous for the Apoxyomenos statue retrieved from the sea in 1999. The statue originates from the 2nd or 1st century B.C. (Domijan and Karniš 2006) and is invaluable as the only exceptionally preserved statue of its kind. Parallel to the restoration process, while the Museum of Apoxyomenos was planned and its construction ongoing, the statue toured the world’s most famous museums such as the Louvre in Paris, Riccardi Palace in Florence, British Museum in London and Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The statue finally returned home in April 2016, when the Museum of Apoxyomenos opened.

The archipelago hosts several historical architectural sites, such as Osor; cultural events, the traditional classical music festival Osor Musical Evenings (Visit Lošinj 2017) and occasional cultural events, such as concerts. Cultural tourism should be routed in cultural traditions, while creative tourism should be based on workshops and

interactive events allowing tourists to become active participants in the learning process about the archipelago's cultural heritage, its customs and traditions.

All of the above suggests that the potential of culture-based TPCs is high in diversifying a tourism offer but is also insufficiently explored and implemented in practice according to the authors' best knowledge.

Based on its rich cultural heritage and some well-renown events, Cres-Lošinj archipelago could have a high cultural potential of both tourism and general economic development. Indeed, it has been recognised in local development strategies (Institut za turizam 2013). A culture-based TPC could be based on e.g. underwater Antiquity tours, festival network or historical routes.

3. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research for theory building was implemented in order to explore the concept of a TPC, widely present in practice but scarce in research literature. The main findings stemming out of qualitative research allowed framing down the research questions to be explored through quantitative research:

- Are the benefits of tourism product clubs obvious to the Lošinj archipelago tourism stakeholders?
- Is the establishment of a culture-based TPC on the Lošinj archipelago feasible?
- Would the largest company on Lošinj be willing to fund a tourism product club?
- Do stakeholders think that public authorities such as national, regional or local tourist boards should cover the major cost of operation of a tourism product club?

Following the research questions, four hypotheses, fully grounded in qualitative research, have been submitted to data analysis to explore the benefits, the feasibility and the willingness to fund a tourism product club as well as stakeholders' opinion on the main funding source for a culture-based TPC on Lošinj. Tourism authorities in Croatia do not support such a programme and the paper thus explored the potential of its establishment on the example of a culture-based TPC on the Cres-Lošinj archipelago. The archipelago is already well known for wellness tourism. Thus, it can further promote its excellence as the island of vitality and gain added value by promoting its cultural and creative offer among tourists and visitors.

The research hypotheses are the following:

- H1: The benefits of TPCs are obvious to the Lošinj archipelago tourism stakeholders.
- H2: The establishment of a culture-based TPC on the Lošinj archipelago is feasible.
- H3: Stakeholders think that the public authorities such as national, regional or local tourist boards should cover major cost of operation of a TPC.
- H3: The largest company on Lošinj is willing to fund a tourism product club.

3.1. Population

While keeping the research aims and questions in focus, to achieve the aim of this research the narrow population for this survey was defined (N=32). Given that the aim of the quantitative research is limited to the Cres-Lošinj archipelago it was decided to survey the management of the largest company on the archipelago. The top and middle management of Lošinj's largest company was surveyed to assess whether the company, as the only stakeholder on the island with funds available to fully support the establishment of the TPC, would be willing to fund such an initiative. Taking into account the available literature, which indicated that, without exemptions, TPC establishment, was technically and financially supported by relevant tourism authorities, it seemed a reasonable population choice. The company in question leads the island's development as the strongest overall stakeholder on the island. Given the aim of the study and the research questions, generalisation was avoided and unnecessary since the whole population was surveyed, thus census method was applied.

The population consisted of 32 top and middle managers (N=n=32). The specific demographic subgroupings could therefore not be considered for statistical analyses, to avoid representation bias and because their margin of error would be extremely high. Therefore, only the main characteristics of the sample are given. The population consisted of 11 male and 21 female respondents. Nine (9) respondents belonged to the age group between 30 and 39 years old, 17 respondents 40 to 49 years-old, one (1) respondent 29 or younger and five (5) 50 year-old or older.

3.2. Data collection

A structured self-administered online questionnaire in Croatian was used to collect data from the entire population. The questionnaire opened with a half page introduction to the topic and aims of the study and was followed by few demographic questions (age, gender and position in the company) before those related to the questioned constructs were asked. Survey responses had been collected from 23 February to 5 March 2017. The questionnaire was anonymous. To ensure adequate response rate, it was distributed by e-mail from the office of the chief executive officer (CEO) of the focus company. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 20.0.

The constructs questioned were the perceived benefits, feasibility, the main expected funding authority and the willingness of the focus company to fund the TPC in question.

3.3. Measurement and scale reliability

All measured constructs were unidimensional. The attitude on who should fund the TPC in question was explored by asking respondents' to rank relevant stakeholders from the most important (1) to the least important (10) in terms of their share of funding for the culture-based TPC on Lošinj. The willingness to fund a TPC in question was deducted from the ranking of the focus company. Other constructs were explored using the five-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), with (3) indicating "no opinion". All replies were mandatory.

With the aim to address the research questions, the questionnaire was constructed following the questionnaire design methodology. As usual with new measurement methods, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the scales' internal consistency (McCrae et al. 2011). According to DeVellis (1991) all constructs demonstrate high internal consistency. Open-ended questions were avoided because TPC is unknown in Croatia and it is highly unlikely respondents are familiar with the term. It was improbable they could form a well-defined opinion towards this concept only based on information available within the questionnaire.

Graphical techniques and descriptive statistics were used as appropriate. Taking into consideration that the entire population was surveyed and descriptive statistics allow to explore exactly the collected data, together with calculated frequencies and histograms, it was sufficient to make reliable conclusions for the surveyed constructs (Baguley 2012, p. 5; Lawner Weinberg and Knapp Abramowitz 2008, p. 2).

3.4. Results

In relation to the first hypothesis stating that the benefits of TPCs are obvious to the Lošinj archipelago tourism stakeholders, a 10-item construct on a 5-point Likert scale was used to explore respondent's attitudes. The Cronbach's alpha for this construct was 0.91 indicating high validity (DeVellis 1991).

It was found that data was either moderately or highly skewed. For 9 out of 10 items there was a leptokurtic distribution. For this reason, the median values (Mdn) were used instead of mean values (M) (Verma 2015). The median for all items within the construct was four (4) on the scale of five (5), which at first sight indicates that benefits generated by the Culture TPC are obvious to the respondents. However, further investigation was needed to give a definite statement for each individual item, i.e. benefit. Given that the Likert-scale in this case could be treated as ordinal scale and that median was used instead of mean, Inter-Quartile Range (IQR) of each item was calculated to measure dispersion. Table 1 shows medians and Inter-Quartile Ranges for each surveyed benefit.

Table 1: **Important descriptors of surveyed potential TPC benefits**

Benefit	Mdn	IQR
Lowering TPC members' costs	4	0.25
Higher number of tourists out-of-season	4	0
Increased competitiveness of the focus company	4	1
Increased image of the focus company	4	0.25
Innovation through knowledge and experience exchange	4	0
Increased tourist expenditure	4	1
Increased diversification of services and products in destination	4	1
Increased destination image	4	1
Increased competitiveness of the local economy	4	0
Creation of new tourism products	4	0

Source: authors

Taking all of the above into account, it can be concluded that respondents generally agree the culture-based TPC would lead to the following benefits: “Lowering TPC members’ costs”, “Higher number of tourists out-of-season”, “Increased image of the focus company”, “Increased competitiveness of the local economy” and “Creation of new tourism products”.

To further explore the meaning of IQR as the measure of dispersion where $IQR=1$, frequencies were computed and histograms made to visualise data and state definite conclusions. In that regard, data analysis confirms that respondents generally agree that the culture-based TPC would lead to the “Increased competitiveness of the focus company”, “Increased diversification of services and products in destination” and “Increased destination image” but also suggests respondents have only a slightly positive opinion on whether a culture-based TPC would lead to the “Increased tourist expenditure”.

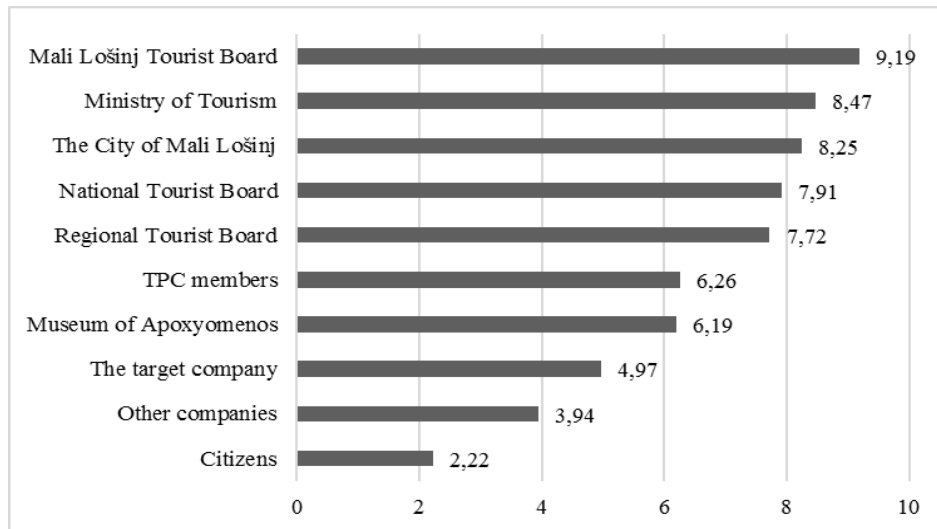
To test the second hypothesis, stating that the establishment of a culture-based TPC on the Lošinj archipelago is feasible, a 7-items construct was used. The Cronbach's alpha for this construct was 0.81 and thus considered acceptably high (DeVellis 1991).

Respondents are undecided on the overall feasibility of the TPC ($Mdn=4$, $IQR=1$, $Q1=3$) or whether the questioned company should initiate a culture-based TPC ($Mdn=4$, $IQR=1$, $Q1=3$) but generally agree that the company should make part of the TPC, shall benefit from being a member and should join if the TPC is initiated by another institution ($Mdn=4$, $IQR=1$, $Q1=4$). Also, there was no general agreement on whether the culture-based TPC would be feasible in terms of the ease of collaboration of members of the TPC ($Mdn=3$, $IQR=1$, $Q1=3$).

The third hypothesis stated that stakeholders think that public authorities such as national, regional or local tourist boards should cover the major cost of operation of a TPC. The respondents were asked to rank the listed stakeholders from the most important (1) to the least important (10). Given that the ranking explored the *share* of funding for the culture-based TPC on Lošinj, the responses were re-coded in data analysis to allow a more intuitive representation of data where (1) indicates the lowest share of funding and (10) the highest, as given in Figure 3 below.

The findings partially support the hypothesis. Namely, even though the first five ranked stakeholders are public entities and the national and regional tourist boards were ranked fourth and fifth respectively, respondents’ rankings suggest an important share of funding should come from local public authorities such as local tourist board and the local municipality, ranked first and third respectively.

Figure 3: Respondents' rankings of stakeholders (share of TPC funding)



Source: authors

Making inference from the above, respondents ranked the target company as seventh out of 10 stakeholders. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis stating that the largest company on Lošinj (target company) is willing to fund a tourism product club, was not supported. Further research should explore the reasons for such an opinion.

3.5. Research limitations

The population size is relatively small. Census method was thus applied to minimise bias. In addition, given that the focus of the research was only a culture-based TPC on the Cres-Lošinj archipelago, it was considered reasonable to survey the management of the only stakeholder with funds available to carry such an initiative. Such a narrow scope certainly has limitations but still contributes to the limited scholarly articles on the topic.

Considering research results, which indicate respondents think that the major cost of operation of a TPC should be covered by local, regional and national public authorities, the population of further studies should involve these stakeholders as well, but this falls out of the scope of this research. Also, the costs of operation of existing TPCs should be further explored to establish whether they represent an obstacle to TPC practice when not covered from dedicated funding schemes.

CONCLUSION

To contribute to the understanding of the TPC phenomenon, the paper used qualitative methods to systematically overview the existing practice and define the concept of TPC, its objectives, classification, key characteristics and benefits thus contributing to the limited literature framework on the topic. The paper proposes a concise definition of a tourism product club as a joint formalized effort of public and private stakeholders aiming at improving an existing or creating a new tourism product.

Three research hypotheses were either fully or partially confirmed but the one stating that the largest company on the island would be willing to cover major costs of operation of the culture-based TPC on Cres-Lošinj could not be supported. In addition, respondents were undecided regarding the feasibility of the Culture TPC but generally agreed that the company should join the TPC if initiated and supported by another institution. The archipelago can further promote its excellence as the island of vitality and gain added value by promoting its cultural and creative offer among tourists.

Previous research indicates that, without exemptions, relevant national tourism authorities technically and financially supported TPC establishment. Tourism authorities in Croatia do not support such a programme and the paper explored the potential of its establishment on the example of a culture-based TPC on the Cres-Lošinj archipelago. The results confirmed respondents favourable opinion on TPC benefits besides for the increase in tourists' expenditure. Positive stakeholders' attitude and the interest of stakeholders to join a culture-based TPC has been confirmed but they remain reluctant to embark this journey without such support, which makes the effort's feasibility unsupported in the current context.

The findings suggest that future research should further enquire the feasibility of a culture-based TPC on Cres-Lošinj in terms of the funding potential. The population of such a survey should be the local municipality as well as local, regional and national tourism authorities indicated by respondents as stakeholders which should have a major role in funding such a TPC.

In addition, the findings are seen as the driver for further research on the role of TPCs in the creation of added value for the enterprise, destination and society as a whole on the dynamic global tourism market. The benefits of TPCs go beyond tourism and involve entities whose intended customers are not primarily tourists, such as wine or food producers, allowing all of these to exploit new market segments and new customers. The latter should be further explored in terms of its potential benefits for the development of tourism-dependent destinations. In addition, the role of TPCs for sustainable development of destinations and their innovation potential should be further explored.

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