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MASTER'S THESIS
**DIVERSIFICATION INTO MICE AND SPORTS TOURISM IN
COASTAL DESTINATIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURISM
DEVELOPMENT IN LLORET DE MAR**

Ljubljana, September, 2020

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List of Abbreviations

AMT	Alianza de Municipios Turísticos de Sol y Playa
ECM	European Cities Marketing
EMTM	Erasmus Mundus European Master in Tourism Management
FITUR	Feria Internacional de Turismo
ICCA	International Congress and Convention Association
IMEX	Worldwide Exhibition for Incentive Travel, Meetings and
ITB	Internationale Tourismus-Börse
LLCB	Lloret Convention Bureau
MICE	Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
USD	U.S. dollar
WTM	World Travel Market
WTTC	World Travel and Tourism Council

ABSTRACT

Coastal destinations, especially those at a mature stage of their life cycle, experience an increasing need for strategies that can help them enhance their competitive advantage. The tourism product diversification, which can be undertaken with different approaches, can be crucial to tackle some of their challenges. Research has shown the potential benefits as well as risks of this strategy in the context of tourism destinations. Yet, if considering two tourism products in particular, MICE and sports tourism, their inclusion in the diversification process of coastal destinations and the implications for their tourism development are often neglected in existing research. This study therefore aims to cover this literature gap, by investigating how the diversification strategy into MICE and sports tourism is carried out in the coastal destination of Lloret de Mar (Spain) alongside with the implications for its tourism development. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted, and the data gathered were examined by means of thematic analysis. The results illustrate the reasons for this strategy, the measures and actions undertaken and the resulting implications for the tourism development of the destination under study, pointing out its effectiveness in view of rejuvenation and making some considerations with regard to the unexpected new reality that the travel and tourism industry has to face due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: Tourism destination diversification, coastal destination, MICE tourism, sports tourism, tourism area life cycle, rejuvenation

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, a complex system consisting of a great number of elements and a key driver of socio-economic progress (Laws et al., 2011; UNWTO, 2011), is of primary importance in the world economy, representing its largest business sector and one of the fastest growing industries worldwide, having become progressively relevant for both developed and developing countries. With 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals and USD 1.7 trillion export earnings generated by tourism in 2019, travel and tourism accounts for 10.3% of global GDP (UNWTO, 2020a; WTTC, n.d.). It is evident how the sector incentivizes entrepreneurship and innovation and contributes largely to employment, with 330 million jobs globally in 2019 and one in four new jobs created by this sector (WTTC, n.d.), which demonstrates how this industry significantly drives economic growth and development (UNWTO, 2019). In fact, ten straight years of growth have been experienced by international tourism since the global economic crisis of 2009, with an economic growth rate of 3.5% outpacing the 2.5% of the global economy in 2019 (UNWTO, 2020a; WTTC, n.d.). However, the impact that the recent coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) has been having on global tourism cannot be disregarded, since it is causing enormous difficulties especially for those economies that are widely dependent on tourism (European Parliament, 2020). Although it is still early for an exact estimate of the full consequences that this unprecedented crisis will have on the travel and tourism industry, according to UNWTO (2020b) global international tourist arrivals could experience an annual decline of 60-80% depending on the travel restrictions, with a potential loss of USD 300-450 billion in international tourism receipts (UNWTO, 2020b). With the closure of accommodation facilities and cultural and natural attractions for several months as well as events postponement or cancellation, the loss of income and unemployment has been unavoidable and the tourism sector is calling for urgent responses (UNWTO, 2020b).

Within the travel and tourism industry, one of the oldest and largest segments is represented by coastal tourism, which started to develop in the late 19th century and has experienced a progressive growth since then, stimulating more and more the development of the so-called 3S tourism model, with tourists putting sun, sea and sand at the centre of their travel experience (Honey and Krantz, 2007). Coastal destinations have therefore experienced a rapid development, and a considerable number of them all across the globe (ranging from regions such as the Coral Triangle, Central America's Pacific Coast to East Africa and the Mediterranean, just to name a few) is, albeit at different levels, significantly reliant on the tourism industry (Honey and Krantz, 2007). Although this trend is expected to continue, suitable strategies have to be considered and put into place if many coastal destinations are to maintain or improve their competitiveness, especially those at a mature stage of their life cycle (Brandão et al., 2019).

In a context characterized by highly competitive tourism markets, more than ever it is crucial for tourism destinations to stand out, offer varied experiences and respond to changing tourists' tastes and needs, thus developing the most appropriate product mix (Benur and Bramwell, 2015). Destinations therefore need to offer products that meet at the same time tourist demand, the destination's integrity and the desires of local stakeholders (Benur and Bramwell, 2015). Although some destinations find product concentration a more suitable solution for them, others may suffer if a diverse mix of experiences, images and products is lacking, which may also result in the destination being more vulnerable and subject to risks (Bramwell, 2004a). Diversification can be taken into account as one of the potential strategies to implement, after exploring and evaluating thoroughly its appropriateness in aiding the destination in tackling its issues and reaching its objectives (Stevens et al., 2012). Besides being used in tourism firms, the strategy of product diversification can in fact find its application also in the context of destinations, since their products can be viewed as a result of cooperation activities as it happens in companies (Flagestad, 2002). This strategy, which can take different forms depending on the needs and objectives pursued, refers to the expansion into new markets and new products, with which the destination can be more or less familiar (Aziri and Nedelea, 2013; Johnson et al., 2008; Moutinho, 2000; Weidenfeld, 2018). Accordingly, destinations can implement diversification through distinctive approaches and develop it differently (Benur and Bramwell, 2015). It has found vast application in particular in the context of those destinations that are at a phase of their life cycle where the sector is stagnating and has reached a level of maturity that requires important decisions to be made and new alternatives to be considered (Brandão et al., 2019). The mass tourism model characterizing many of them has therefore called for the implementation of strategies that can contribute to the rejuvenation of the destination and the increase in its competitive advantage. Having relied heavily on the 3S model by focusing mainly on beach-related products and activities, greater product diversification has been advocated by policymakers as an effective solution to be put into place (Alegre and Cladera, 2006; Brandão et al., 2019; Farmaki, 2012).

Furthermore, especially in the current context caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, destinations have to adapt more than ever to a new reality that requires appropriate responses and strategies. In this regard, diversification can aid in avoiding dependence on one or a few markets or activities, and UNWTO has recognized the value of diversification and identified this strategy as a possibility for destinations to build resilience and explore opportunities not considered before (UNWTO, 2020b).

When taking into account the tourism products into which a destination can diversify, the possibilities are multiple, and the decision must be carefully evaluated, examining a wide variety of factors (Benito-Osorio et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2008; Moutinho, 2000). In particular, MICE and sports tourism can play a significant role in the diversification strategy of coastal destinations, given the advantages that they can provide.

While most studies have focused on tourism product diversification as a whole and the different mechanisms that can be adopted when undertaking such a strategy, to date the literature conducted on diversification in coastal destinations is limited, despite the important share that these types of destinations have in the tourism sector worldwide (Farmaki, 2012). The need to advance further knowledge has been pointed out by several authors, who identified the limited academic focus on the dynamics, development and planning of coastal destinations, whose product diversification strategies in particular have received little attention (Bramwell, 2004b; Brandão et al., 2019), in spite of the relevance that they have within coastal destination's general development framework (Farmaki, 2012). More specifically, when taking into account the MICE and sports tourism segments as products that seaside destinations can diversify into and the implications that these have for their tourism development, a review of the literature reveals not much knowledge related to the topic and the resulting demand for a relevant theoretical study.

Given the gap in the literature, which shows a lack of studies on the diversification into MICE and sports tourism in coastal regions, the author aims with this paper at delineating the diversification process carried out in a coastal destination, by exploring the reasons and causes, planning and implementation of such strategy. In particular, the implications of diversification for the tourism development of coastal areas have been often neglected in academia. Therefore, this research seeks to address them, especially given the relevance that they have for those destinations that have reached maturity and need to reconvert their tourism sector and reinvent themselves in order to move beyond, broaden their offer or find complementarities to the sun-sea-sand model on which they have been relying. Moreover, this thesis intends to outline specifically the role played by MICE and sports tourism in coastal areas and the attitudes of the informants of this research towards the diversification into these two products. The focus is on one selected coastal destination, namely Lloret de Mar in Spain, whose relevance for the present study is demonstrated by the multiple efforts made and the steps taken to differentiate its products by progressively developing MICE and sports tourism.

Hence, being aware of the abovementioned existing gap and with the aim to expand the knowledge in this field thus contributing to the research landscape, the following research question has been formulated:

“How is the diversification strategy into MICE and sports tourism developed in the coastal destination of Lloret de Mar and what are the implications for its tourism development?”

Having provided a brief synopsis of the main aspects that are on the basis of this thesis as well as the needs and reasons behind this study and its contribution to the field of tourism, a detailed review of previous research is presented in the first chapter. Selected scholarly works that constitute relevant academic literature serve as a sound theoretical background that examines an array of concepts used as reference points throughout the discourse, ranging

from the generic tourism destination and product to subsequently deepen into the life cycle of coastal destinations and the diversification strategy in tourism destination with a focus on the MICE and sports tourism products, which represent the core of the research. The following chapter is then dedicated to the presentation of the case of Lloret de Mar, delineating the reasoning for choosing it and its relevance within the field of study. Facts, figures and relevant information related to its tourism sector are provided, in order for the reader to become familiar with this tourism area examined. The research paradigm and approach as well as the data collection methods employed and the sample selected are outlined and justified in the third chapter, namely methodology. The analysis and discussion detail in the fourth and fifth chapters the findings of the research. The primary data obtained, through which the author seeks to answer the research question, are here organized and presented by means of thematic analysis. The last section presents the contributions to theory and practice as well as limitations and recommendations for further research. Recommendations for the destination are finally provided and conclusions are drawn.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The present chapter outlines the theories on which this thesis is based. In line with the main area of interest of this study, the following sections provide an analysis of the concepts of tourism destinations, coastal tourism destinations and their life cycle, tourism products and diversification with a specific focus on strategies in tourism destinations. As a final step, the features of MICE and sports as tourism products are discussed, providing the reasons behind their implementation in a tourism diversification strategy.

1.1 An Overview of the Concept of Tourism Destination and its Definition

One of the central aspects of tourism is the notion of destination, considered a complex concept (Cooper and Hall, 2008). A destination can be regarded as such if people from outside a location come visit it, by virtue of the elements available in it, namely physical and cultural attractions, facilities and services, infrastructure enabling accessibility, provision of information (Cooper and Hall, 2008). Researchers define and refer to tourism destinations at distinctive scales, from entire nation states or countries to regions, capital cities, towns or resort level (Gunn, 1988; Higham, 2004; Holloway, 2002; Metelka, 1990; Vukonic, 1997;). A multifaceted approach is therefore required to define it (Laws et al., 2011).

As emphasized by the recent work of Jovicic (2019), tourism destination notions have developed over time and they can be divided in three main concepts which have contributed greatly to the evolution of tourism theories. The first approach regarded by scholars is the traditional view to tourism destinations, with research essentially focused on the analysis of the geographical features defining a tourism destination, as well as the belief that specific criteria (i.e. accommodations, tourist attractions, transport) need to be met so that a destination can be considered as such (Burkart and Medlik, 1981; Framke, 2002; Howie, 2003; Mill and Morrison, 2012). Pike (2004) also recognizes a destination as a developed area which caters to the needs of temporarily based visitors. A broader understanding of tourism destinations adopts a “systemic approach” (Butler, 1999; Howie, 2003; Ritchie and Crouch, 2003; Wall, 1996). Destinations are interpreted as systems and networks of stakeholders actively engaging and managing destinations, where a high level of cooperation and interrelation is present to ensure the performance of the destination system itself (Baggio and Cooper, 2010; Leiper, 2000; Scott et al., 2008; Żemła, 2016). This holistic view is also supported by the definition of UNWTO cited in Lew and McKercher (2006) as well as the work of Reid et al. (2004), encompassing the role of the local community. Expanding on this view, Baggio and Sainaghi (2011) identify destinations as complex adaptive systems, highlighting their capability of keeping their stability, surviving and recovering when events and changes occur (Jovicic, 2019). The ongoing development of these complex systems together with the digital revolution has led to a third different approach, namely smart tourism destinations. With ICTs at the base, smart tourism destinations are receiving increasing attention by the academia (Baggio and Del Chiappa, 2014; Del Chiappa and

Baggio, 2015; Racherla et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2012), which describes them as destinations based on knowledge where innovative ideas and tourism-related information can be accessed by all stakeholders on a technological platform supplied by ICTs (Jovicic, 2019; Weidenfeld, 2018).

Drawing on the aforementioned aspects on which different researchers have focused to provide a definition, in this study a tourism destination is regarded as a geographical area in which a variety of interdependent elements are provided to cater to the specific needs of tourists, who interact at an economic and personal level with networks of stakeholders. These coordinate and plan tourism in a cooperative way taking into account the latest trends with the aim to guarantee the performance of this complex system.

1.1.1 Definition and Characteristics of Coastal Destinations

Considering the continuous growth of coastal tourism, which represents a relevant component of the tourism industry (Orams, 2002), and the key role played by coastal destinations in the tourism network, the breadth of literature devoted to it is significant (Benseny, 2014; Hall, 2001). Coastal tourism, which encompasses a wide range of leisure and recreational activities, occurs in coastal destinations, that have been characterized by a strong increase in demand over time (Hall, 2001; Navarro Jurado et al., 2013).

Considered a beloved scenario by tourists, the coastline is described as the meeting point or area of transition between the land and the marine environment, deemed as being rather fragile and vulnerable (Barrado and Calabuig, 2001; Craig-Smith et al., 2006). Scholars define the coast as an area where agricultural, fishing or industrial activities are placed side by side with opportunity for leisure and tourism activities (Hall, 2001; Kenchington, 1993). With the aim of catering to the needs of visitors, accommodations, restaurants as well as supporting infrastructure have been developed together with a wide range of tourism activities including swimming, snorkeling, diving, boating etc. If considering the geographic point of view, according to Benseny (2014), natural resources are consumed and transformed into a leisure zone, encouraging movement of people towards these areas. As further discussed by Psuty et al. (2004), much attention has been in fact given to coastal destinations by geographers, and Meyer-Arendt (2018) argues that coastal tourism continues to be a strong component of tourism geography. Additionally, scholars involved in cultural geography, cultural ecology, political economy and others have conducted research focused on the implications of coastal tourism for economic, environmental and cultural-political issues. The literature reveals that coastal destinations were already attractive since Roman times and they still are up until now, presenting rather similar characteristics in most parts of the world: accessibility, favorable weather, tourism infrastructure, safe bathing conditions and clean environment (Craig-Smith et al., 2006) are some of the relevant aspects drawing tourists to bathing resorts in North and South America, Australia, parts of the Caribbean as

well as Europe and South East Asia. The morphology and design of these resorts have then progressively changed with time to better meet the needs of the visitors (Butler, 2014).

Integrating the various perspectives from which a coastal destination is considered, this paper refers to it as a resort whose morphology and design are progressively transformed to meet the needs of its visitors, which is characterized by specific features that distinguish it from other types of destinations, and where geophysical resources are combined with appropriate infrastructure to provide a highly appealing coastal space (Benseny, 2014).

1.1.2 Butler's Tourist Area Life Cycle Model Applied to Coastal Destinations

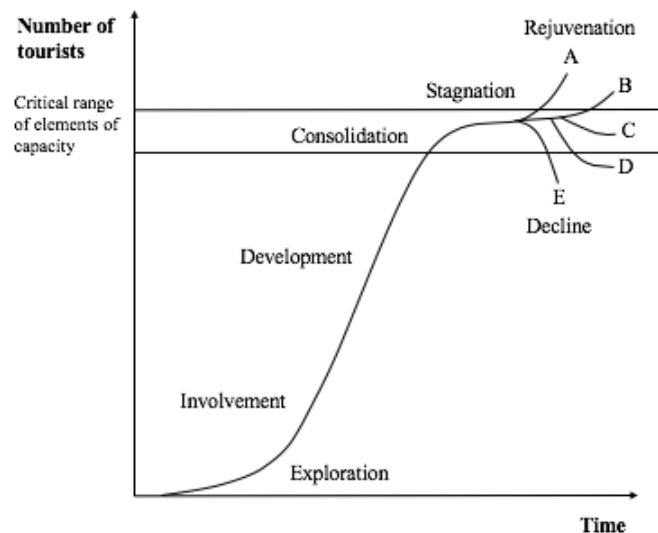
The development of coastal destinations can be explained by means of Butler's tourist area life cycle model (1980). This approach has attracted the most attention (Agarwal, 2002) among researchers and it has been extensively adopted to describe the development and growth of many destinations in various tourism contexts (Cooper, 1992). Thus, the tourist area life cycle (TALC) has also found application in coastal destinations, albeit with some differences and variations of the cycle stages depending on the visitor numbers, government policies, degree of development of the tourist area considered and its accessibility (Omar et al., 2015). The model, introduced by Butler in 1980 and influenced by early work of others, describes the development process of tourism areas and suggests a series of stages that the destination usually undergoes during its time of existence. Such stages are determined by the combination of the demand features (i.e. consumer tastes) with the components of the tourism supply (i.e. infrastructures and facilities) (Papatheodorou, 2006), and the number of tourists is measured on a time scale. The destination's life cycle curve, a basic asymptotic S-curve (Omar et al., 2015), varies depending on a wide range of factors that influence the length of each stage and of the cycle as a whole.

The six stages established in the model are illustrated in Figure 1, and each of them is characterized by certain attributes, briefly outlined as follows (Butler, 1980):

1. Exploration – The destination is visited by only a few tourists with their individual travel arrangements, attracted by the cultural and natural features. The area is unchanged by tourism and no particular facilities for tourists are present.
2. Involvement – Visitor numbers increase, and initial marketing and advertising efforts are put in place. A definite pattern of seasonal variation is noticeable and appropriate facilities are developed to cater to the needs of tourists.
3. Development – The physical appearance of the area changes as more developed and elaborate facilities appear. The tourist market area is now well defined, the original attractions are enhanced and supplemented by imported facilities and during peak periods the number of tourists may equal or exceeds the domestic population.
4. Consolidation – The growth rate of visitor numbers starts declining and the local economy is dominated by chains and franchises. Marketing and advertising activities aim now at expanding the destination both temporally and spatially.

5. Stagnation – The peak in demand is reached and the number of tourists stays the same or begins to decrease. Environmental, social and economic issues start to emerge as well as bed over-capacity. The area strongly depends on regular customers and the tendency towards organized mass tourism is clear. This represents a crucial stage for the destination, as important decisions need to be made for the future. Depending on them, the next stages will take the form of decline or rejuvenation.
6. Decline – If the destination is not capable of re-creating itself, it starts losing its appeal and may move out of tourism completely, with tourism facilities progressively being used for non-tourism related activities.
7. Rejuvenation – Contrarily, if alternatives are found and the destination is able to create new attractions or use natural resources which were untapped previously, a new development is feasible, and the destination is ready to follow a new avenue.

Figure 1: Hypothetical Evolution of a Tourist Area



Source: Adapted from Butler (1980) and Omar et al. (2015)

Despite some criticisms raised by various researchers, the model is applicable to different types of tourism destinations and provides a good understanding of the changes that can happen within their life cycle. Additionally, after two and a half decades, Butler (2006) has updated his model by considering elements that further support its relevance for tourism destinations, such as carrying capacity, spatial components, management and triggers. The TALC model can therefore be a useful forecasting tool as well as an instrument to evaluate the destination evolution and guide marketing and planning. It follows that it can assist destination's managers in making strategic decisions and analyzing how to best use strengths and resources to determine the optimal product portfolio. In some cases, this could require that a diversification strategy be carried out to guarantee a competitive advantage. It is therefore relevant to consider the TALC model for instance when analyzing various aspects of tourism development within destinations over time (i.e. overnight stays). Destinations'

managers can create life cycle patterns and examine them to draw conclusions regarding a wide variety of issues (i.e. seasonality) and consider potential solutions to tackle them, especially if destinations are experiencing declining tendencies. This can be applied in different types of destination, as much in mountain destinations – as already suggested by the studies of Schuckert et al. (2007) and Terler (2013) for Alpine destinations – as well as in coastal ones. By evaluating their specific life cycle patterns, ways to counteract potential difficulties can be evaluated and planned, including diversification strategies.

After a brief description of the concept of tourism product, the strategy of product diversification is outlined in detail in the next sections. First, its features are presented in the context of general and tourism-related companies and subsequently emphasis is put on how the strategy can be applied to tourism destinations likewise.

1.2 The Concepts of Tourism Product and Tourism Product Diversification

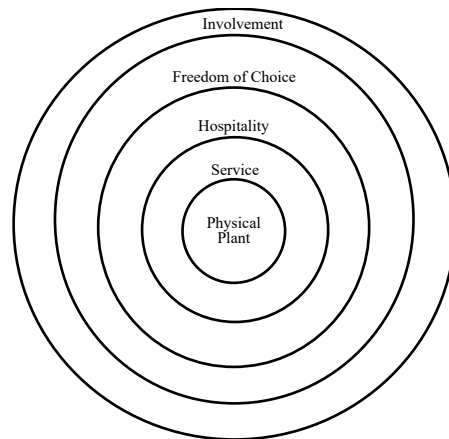
The concept of tourism product is key for tourism product diversification and attempts to explain its nature and definition have been made by several tourism researchers (Murphy et al., 2000).

As in any industry, where products have the aim to satisfy customers' needs, the tourism industry has brought about the development of tourism products (Xu, 2010), which are multifaceted (Cooper and Hall, 2008). Although the literature does not provide an agreed definition of tourism product and a significant debate regarding its nature has been generated (Cooper and Hall, 2008), there is a shared understanding that the tourism product aims at attracting travelers interested either in leisure or business activities (Xu, 2010). With its characteristics of intangibility, inseparability, variability and perishability (Madafuri, 2018), the tourism product has the function of facilitating tourists' travel activities when they move from their usual home environment (Smith, 1994).

Comprised of both tangible and intangible attributes (Cooper and Hall, 2008; Lumsdon, 1997) and representing a source of attraction and motivation to travel, tourism products are divided by Jansen-Verbeke (1986) into three main elements, namely primary, secondary and conditional elements. The primary elements normally represent the key factors motivating tourists to travel to a destination and comprise the activity place (those activities attracting tourists such as cultural and entertainment facilities, events, exhibitions etc.) and the leisure setting (physical and socio-cultural features of the place). While these represent the main reasons to visit a specific destination, the secondary and conditional elements serve as supporting or supplementary services and infrastructure. They complement the primary tourism products and enhance their accessibility and comfort, improving their overall quality (Jansen-Verbeke, 1986).

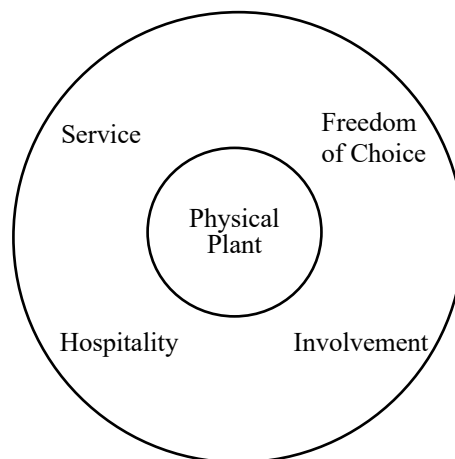
Building on the concept of primary tourism product and analyzing previous research related to marketing and supply-side perspectives, the model developed by Smith (1994) identifies the complex structure of the tourism product and breaks it down into five components: physical plant, service, hospitality, freedom of choice, and involvement. In his model, Smith (1994) suggests a series of concentric circles with the physical plant placed at the core and the other elements as encapsulating shells, assisting in the processes of tourism production (Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2014) and progressively representing declining management control and increasing consumer involvement (Figure 2). He argues that the tourism product consists of a synergy among the five components rather than just a mere combination of them. Therefore, in order to satisfy tourists' needs, a tourism product has to accurately integrate the five elements, taking into account that all of them may have a different degree of importance across tourism products, as underlined later by Xu (2010). As a result, building on Smith's framework, Xu (2010) proposes a new model with physical plant at the center and the other four as competing but complementary elements, which contribute to the creation of tourism experiences by adding value to the physical plant (Figure 3). Therefore, Xu (2010) describes the tourism product as being essentially a total experience, as already pointed out by previous authors (Gilbert, 1990; Gunn, 1988; Medlik and Middleton, 1973; Smith, 1994). Expanding on this, Benur and Bramwell (2015) suggest that what tourists are mainly interested in is not the tourism products' infrastructure and features themselves, rather the experiences provided by them, considering that the tourism consumer is increasingly seen as a co-producer (Cooper and Hall, 2008).

Figure 2: The Generic Tourism Product



Source: Adapted from Smith (1994)

Figure 3: Alternative Tourism Product Model



Source: Adapted from Xu (2010)

To ensure the growth of the sector, it is essential to develop and diversify into products that may have a certain degree of newness to the tourism firm or destination. An in-depth analysis of the concept of product diversification is therefore now provided. The existing literature is examined at first referring to the context of general businesses, narrowing it down later specifically to tourism firms and destinations.

1.2.1 Product Diversification in the General Business Context

In order to remain competitive in a global market where customer requirements evolve continuously, a business firm needs to frequently change and grow (Ansoff, 1957; Kumar, 2016). Its growth and strategic development can occur through four basic directions (or different types of product-market strategy), as explained by the Ansoff product/market

growth matrix, the most common model used to analyze the growth alternatives that an organization can choose from (Johnson et al., 2008).

As shown by Figure 4, the possible directions that an organization can follow are:

- Market penetration - Stick to the existing products and markets and penetrate deeper. In this case, the performance is improved by increasing sales volume to current customers or finding new customers for current products. The organization can make use of its existing strategic capabilities without venturing into the unknown;
- Market development - Keep the existing products but bring them into a new market (new segments, new users or new geographies), by adapting the product line to new aims;
- Product development - Develop new products or services, which have new or modified characteristics, for its existing markets. A great degree of innovation is required, and the technologies involved are different, implying that it is an expensive and risky activity;
- Diversification: diversify by simultaneously entering new markets and developing new products.

Figure 4: The Ansoff Matrix

		Products	
		Existing	New
Markets	Existing	Market penetration	Product development
	New	Market development	Diversification

Source: Adapted from Ansoff (1957)

Each of these four strategies implies a certain level of risk, with diversification being the riskiest among all (Evans et al., 2012). Before deciding on which strategic option to select, a careful opportunity analysis must be carried out in order to make the most appropriate choice and implement the selected strategy successfully (Stevens et al., 2012).

For the sake of this research, attention is focused specifically on the differentiation strategy. As pointed out by Johnson et al. (2008, p. 262), most of the time diversification is not as strict as described by the Ansoff matrix, since “a good deal of diversification in practice involves building on relationships with existing markets or products”. A great amount of academic discourse has been devoted to diversification. The general definition of diversification as growth achieved through new products and/or new markets is shared by several scholars (e.g. Evans et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2008; Kumar, 2016; Stevens et al., 2012). Additionally, Benito-Osorio et al. (2012) argue that views stemming in particular

from economists and financial researchers focus on the concept of diversification as the variety of a firm's business portfolio, emphasizing the differences in performance between diversified and non-diversified companies (i.e. Lang and Stulz, 1994; Bausch and Pils, 2009). The attitude towards product diversification was optimistic in the literature developed between the 1960s and 1970s (Benito-Osorio et al., 2012), underlining benefits that can be obtained through diversification, such as financial advantages, lower tax burdens and decreased bankruptcy risk (e.g. Berger and Ofek, 1995; Myers, 1977; Palich et al., 2000; Schmid and Walter, 2009), unlike the research of the 1980s and 1990s characterized by a more pessimistic view. All in all, after analyzing several performance studies, Johnson et al. (2008) argue that every specific case of diversification strategy needs to be carefully evaluated in itself. In fact, Benito-Osorio et al. (2012) point out that the performance reached through product diversification strongly depends on the specific environment of the country in which the firm operates as well as the time period considered. Generally, diversification as a strategic direction can be chosen for various reasons, including efficiency benefits, need for innovation, application of existing competences in new areas, increased market power, improved competitive advantage, and risk spread (Johnson et al., 2008).

1.2.2 Product Diversification in the Context of Tourism

The concepts just outlined also apply to tourism. Indeed, organizations operating in the tourism industry can choose growth directions as those mentioned above for businesses belonging to other sectors: they can decide to further penetrate into an existing tourism market, bring their products into a new market, develop new products or diversify them (Moutinho, 2000).

A growing body of literature has examined diversification in tourism, given its relevance to the tourism industry in general, and to practitioners, policy makers, scholars as well as other stakeholders in particular (Benur and Bramwell 2015; Giampiccoli and Mtapuri, 2014, 2015; Lejarraja and Walkenhorst 2007). Moutinho (2000) and Aziri and Nedelea (2013) refer to diversification specifically in the tourism context, defining it as a strategy aimed at seeking new customer groups or target markets through new or improved products. In order to stay ahead of the competition, it is very relevant to analyze the individual products and their markets to develop the right product mix. The reasons for which a tourism firm decides to diversify are not only related to the increase in sales. This strategy provides the most long-term potential, since current products and markets are not deprived of their sales (Reid and Bojanic, 2010). A tourism firm may choose to undertake diversification, among various purposes, also due to the need to spread the risks among multiple markets, the presence of a tourist market offering growth possibilities, as well as the opportunity to reduce seasonal patterns (Moutinho, 2000). Moreover, in his work, Moutinho (2000) also mentions some of the specific objectives that can be achieved when using diversification. This strategy, in fact, can fulfill the need for growth when present products or markets are already mature, provide

greater flexibility and profitability, and increase credibility to be more relevant in capital markets.

At the same time, as pointed out earlier, diversification involves the highest risk among all strategies. Some of the risks are related to essential structural and organizational adjustments as well as the need to develop new skills, competences and rely on staff motivation (Weidenfeld, 2018). In order to reduce such risks, before undertaking a diversification strategy, an organization has to determine whether this is the right path to follow by evaluating if (I) its current product/market opportunities no longer guarantee an adequate financial return; (II) the organization itself is knowledgeable enough about the new area in which it diversifies; (III) the new products provided are supported and backed appropriately, and (IV) the implications of diversification can be forecast on current product lines (Moutinho, 2000).

When it comes to implementing a diversification strategy, there is not only one single strict direction that has to be followed. Conversely, diversification can be achieved through a variety of forms (Moutinho, 2000; Johnson et al., 2008), which are described in the next section.

1.2.3 Forms of Diversification

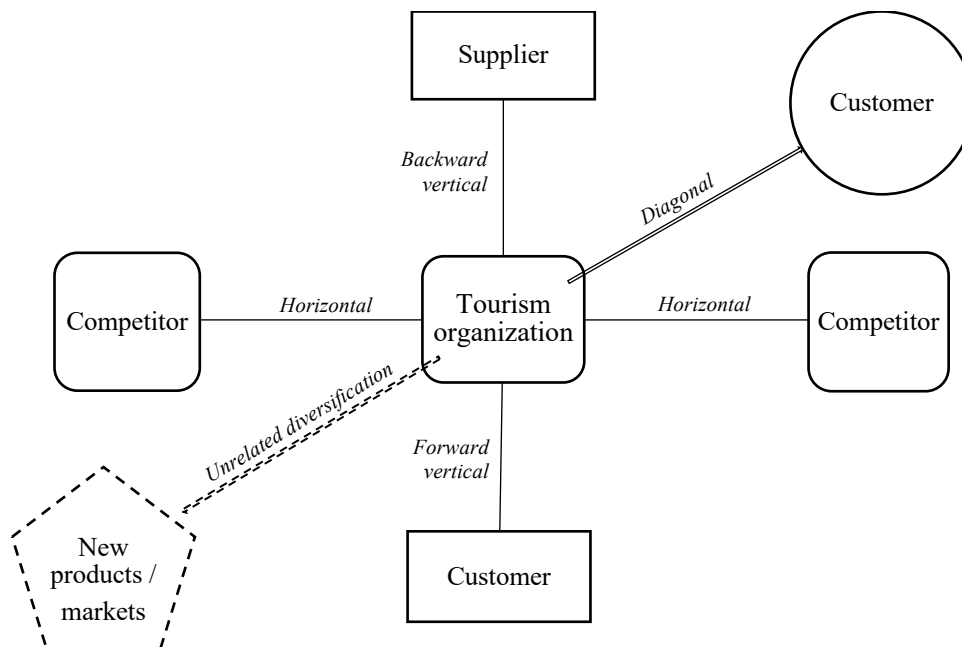
Tourism product diversification can take the form of related or unrelated diversification. Related diversification is described as development beyond the present products or markets into directions within the capabilities of the firm itself, and where there is still a certain level of relatedness with existing products and markets, with diversification risks being reduced. This type of diversification can follow three paths, namely vertical, horizontal and diagonal diversification (Johnson et al., 2008; Weidenfeld, 2018) (Figure 5).

- Vertical diversification (or vertical integration) occurs when a tourism firm takes over markets or products that belong to its vertical channel of distribution. It can take the form of forward diversification, when the organization seeks to develop into activities closer to the final user, that is, they are forward in the value chain (i.e. a tour operator acquiring a call center). It also includes backward diversification, when the firm integrates activities closer to the product source, using existing resources (i.e. a hotel operator having a stake in a hotel chain). In general, some costs can be saved by the tourism firm taking on the channel functions;
- Horizontal diversification (or horizontal integration) refers to the strategy of developing into complementary activities or diversifying into new products which are likely to appeal to current customers (i.e. a travel agency acquiring a company selling travel insurance). In this way, the tourism firm offers new products to customers that it already knows and whose buying habits is familiar with, having the possibility to satisfy their needs in a more efficient way. However, by investing in the same tourism market, the risks are not spread out;

- Diagonal diversification is related to the utilization of a common platform of information technology to target customers with closely related products (i.e. a bank getting involved in financial services related to travel). Economies of scope can represent the benefits derived by this strategy.

On the other hand, unrelated diversification strategies (or conglomerate diversification strategies) carry greater risks than related diversification options, since the firm grows into completely new products, set of customers and market areas beyond its current capabilities and familiarity (Johnson et al., 2008; Weidenfeld, 2018). This is an appropriate choice when growth potential in the existing markets are limited, and this option can lead to possible economies of scale as well as synergy opportunities (Evans et al., 2012).

Figure 5: Tourism Product Related and Unrelated Diversification



Source: Adapted from Weidenfeld (2018)

1.3 Tourism Destination Diversification

After having focused on the strategy of product diversification and its applicability in the context of organizations operating in various sectors as well as those providing products and services specifically in the tourism industry (i.e. tour operators, hotels, travel agencies), it is crucial to underline that this can also be extended to the context of tourism destinations.

In fact, research developed within management studies shows that, although tourism destinations cannot be looked at as formal organizations, if considering the view that their products are the result of cooperation activities, a tourism destination can be thus regarded

as “a collective producer in a firm-like structure coordinating complementary services according to needs and preferences of target market segmented and marketed as one unit under one brand” (Flagestad, 2002, p. 3). Therefore, the metaphoric perspective of a destination showing similarities to a company demonstrates the applicability of diversification to tourism destinations.

The need for tourism product diversification has been discussed by several scholars. As argued by Farmaki (2012), Hudson (2003) and Mowforth and Munt (2015), diversification in tourism destinations has become increasingly necessary because of the evolution of the tourism industry especially since the late 1980s, which was characterized by an exceptional scale and pace of market integration and capital restructuring. Gale (2007) and Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2015) further emphasize that diversification plays an important role under circumstances of high competition among destinations, technological innovation, and resource depletion. As underlined by Farmaki (2012), demand-side as well as supply-side market trends have led destinations to consider product diversification even more. On the one hand, destinations have felt the necessity of reconsidering and better understanding their market segments due to demographic changes, demand for more varied tourism products, and need for better value for money. On the other, a wide variety of issues such as market conditions, environmental matters and tourism seasonality have contributed to an increasing need for product diversity. Therefore, research shows that also tourism destinations, as well as firms, with the aim to gain and maintain competitive advantage, have to make sure to offer a mix of diverse products, which can have synergies and linkages among them (Benur and Bramwell, 2015; Farmaki, 2012; Jansen-Verbeke, 1986; Lawton & Weaver, 2006).

1.3.1 Approaches to Product Diversification in Destinations

Expanding on the concepts of related and unrelated diversification, Benur and Bramwell (2015) suggest that a destination can choose between two main different approaches to product diversification. One approach is related to the packaging and promotion of products that already exist, aiming at creating additional products by combining some of them, with the possibility for tourists to create their own customized combinations themselves. Another approach is to directly add new tourism products, which are different from those already offered in the destination. In this case, a destination may:

- develop large-scale tourism products (i.e. marinas, casinos, golf courses, conference and exhibitions centers), generally aimed at attracting up-market visitors, but with features of large, mass tourism markets, given the significant number of tourists brought to the destination (Bramwell, 2004b);
- develop alternative tourism products that emphasize particular characteristics of a destination, such as cultural, historical, ecological aspects. These are usually provided on a small scale, at least at the beginning, but with time they may also become more large-scale activities (Benur and Bramwell, 2015).

Additionally, tourism product diversification often involves the decision whether to develop niche or mass tourism products. The former usually target a smaller number of visitors and specialized markets, with less infrastructure required, as pointed out by Novelli (2005). On the contrary, the latter, characterized by intensive usage, involve larger tourists' number and high standardization and inflexibility (Benur and Bramwell, 2015; Milne & Ateljevic, 2001; Mowforth & Munt, 2009; Torres, 2002). Although these categories are sometimes extreme and not always fully descriptive of a real situation within a destination, they are useful when it comes to understanding the product tendencies and mix present in the destination itself (Benur and Bramwell, 2015).

As a final classification concerning the relations among diversified products, Benur and Bramwell (2015) also underline that tourism product diversification in destinations can either take the form of parallel or integrative diversification:

- Parallel diversification refers to primary tourism products that attract diverse customers and are developed and marketed differently. For this reason, generally they do not share costs, synergies or linkages;
- Integrative diversification occurs when there are linkages between diversified tourism products, thus creating complementarities and synergies.

Diversification in tourism destinations is viewed by several researchers as value-adding, given its potential of enriching the experience of existing tourists with a more varied product offering, and attracting other types of tourists who might decide to visit thanks to the new products (Giampiccoli and Mtapuri, 2014, 2015; Moraru, 2011). By drawing on relevant literature, it is therefore useful to discuss the potential advantages as well as disadvantages of product diversification in tourism destinations, keeping in mind that they are strictly related to the different approaches – just mentioned in this section – that destinations can follow when diversifying.

1.3.2 Potential Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages and arguments in favour of diversification in tourism destinations have been delineated in the literature. This shows that diversification can help them improve their competitiveness and better satisfy changing tourists tastes and behavior by developing varied activities and customized products (Benur and Bramwell, 2015; Moraru, 2011). Some researchers also draw attention to the fact that product diversification can foster sustainable development, thanks to alternative products that serve as an incentive to appreciate the authentic features and local businesses within the destination (Benur and Bramwell, 2015; Bramwell, 2004; Brunori & Rossi, 2000; Nordin, 2003). Bramwell (2004a) further underlines that if the range of products offered is wide, the destination may be less vulnerable to market fluctuations and stronger than destinations that do not diversify their products. Other authors point out that diversification can be useful in terms of exploitation of underused resources (Moraru, 2011), and sometimes it can leverage existing knowledge and

expertise to expand into new activities, obtaining costs sharing (Holland et al., 2003; Nordin, 2003). Internal competition among tourism actors belonging to the supply side may also be stimulated, leading to improved performance and quality (Ashworth, 2004; Moraru, 2011). In addition to this, Weidenfeld (2018) suggests marketing and social goals that can be reached through diversification, such as reorienting the market and staying away from tensions, improving social inclusiveness as well as extending the tourism season and overcoming seasonality by offering year-round products and targeting new markets. Policies aimed at this last objective can result in an increase in off-season visits, all-year employment as well as sustainable development of those destinations where tourism causes overcrowding and environmental issues (Moraru, 2011; Weidenfeld, 2018).

At the same time, when considering diversification, potential disadvantages must be taken into account as well. Nelson (2003) mentions possible conflicts about resources among tourism stakeholders in the destination that can represent an obstacle for good collaboration. Furthermore, already in his work of 1957, Ansoff underlines probable issues related to the coordination of the different products due to the increase in management complexity. Additionally, Benur and Bramwell (2015) emphasize potential disadvantages in terms of sustainable issues and commercial viability, and Benur (2013) suggests uncertainty as an aspect characterizing diversification, which is a complex process that requires interdisciplinary knowledge.

In addition to the risks outlined in the previous sections, diversification in tourism destinations has been associated with other specific ones. According to Glaesser (2006), it can result in confused destination image and loss of distinctiveness, especially when attempting to reposition the destination brand. With the same view shared by Moraru (2011), he also highlights the high investment cost involved given the need to expand physical, human and informational infrastructural capacity. Bianchi (2004) and Agarwal (2006) add that, particularly in mass tourism destinations, diversification may sometimes intensify standardization instead of avoiding it, since several destinations tend to restructure and rejuvenate similarly.

1.3.3 Tourism Product Diversification in Coastal Destinations

If considering the context of coastal destinations, researchers have pointed out the need for greater product and market diversification aimed at enhancing competitiveness, especially for those tourism destinations that have reached maturity and subsequent stagnation (Brandão et al., 2019). A redesign of the mass model that characterizes several coastal destinations is therefore necessary, and diversification can represent a valuable strategy to be integrated within the general development framework of seaside territories, which experience frequently a decline stage and need to engage in transformation processes (Brandão et al., 2019; Farmaki, 2012). Attempts are being made in these destinations mainly

reliant on the 3S tourism model (sun, sand, sea), to broaden their product offering and make them more appealing (Alegre and Cladera, 2006).

The literature provides various examples of coastal destinations that have implemented a diversification strategy to specifically move beyond a tourism primarily based on the 3S model towards the incorporation of new products and the attraction of different markets, showing in most of the cases that diversification can be beneficial for coastal destinations. Qatar tourism diversification strategy has been analyzed to give evidence on the positive results it has generated, due to the implementation of a strategy that goes beyond the traditional 3S to include other Ss (sports, shopping, surgery, skyscrapers) as reported by Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2015). Abu Dhabi has decided to take the path of cultural, architecture and shopping tourism, as well as upgrade and promote ecotourism (Giampiccoli and Mtapuri, 2014). Similarly, the 3S tourism concept has been reshaped with ecotourism in Belize, by emphasizing its barrier reefs and tropical forests and establishing marine reserves in sun, sand and sea destinations (Giampiccoli and Mtapuri, 2015; Medina, 2005). The Caribbean region has also been subject of study, demonstrating the presence of diversified tourism products that supplement the offer represented by the 3S model towards 3E (education, excitement, entertainment), as in the case of the Dominican Republic, that has developed complementary options to beach tourism ranging from adventure to cultural and ecotourism (Gonzales et al., 2012; Rettinger and Apollo, 2017). Another successful case, as discussed by Bardolet and Sheldon (2008), is the Archipelago of Hawaii, which has been able to diversify, amongst others, into cultural, business, wellness and adventure tourism. Further studies, specifically referring to the Mediterranean area, show movement beyond the 3S tourism model. For instance, Hall (2003) examines the diversification strategies pursued by coastal destinations in Croatia, Slovenia and Montenegro, revealing their different outcomes. Cultural and rural tourism have been embraced by several Croatian coastal destinations, while Slovenia has focused on diversification into active, thermal and nautical tourism, as well as increased emphasis on the inland. The diversification strategies of Montenegro have instead emphasized natural tourism products. Cyprus has also acknowledged the need to upgrade its coastal tourism products towards higher value-added products (Adamou and Clerides, 2009), and has pursued tourism diversification into rural tourism, which is regarded as an effective addition to coastal mass tourism, leading to the regeneration of rural areas and the mitigation of seasonality, alongside with further socio-economic and environmental benefits (Karyopouli and Koutra, 2012; Sharpley, 2001; Sharpley, 2002b). However, the process is challenging and the outcome rather questionable, as the island has been encountering difficulties in attracting higher-spending markets and obtaining sufficient levels of income from agrotourism, which requires great financial and technical support (Sharpley, 2002a). According to the studies conducted by Markwick (1999) and Theuma (2004), the Maltese tourism policy has progressively stressed the importance of diversifying the traditional seaside tourism of these islands, by encouraging in particular the growth of cultural tourism, which has become a relevant asset. The extensive

cultural and historical heritage has been successfully used as a diversification tool (Theuma, 2004), culminating in 2018 with Valletta becoming European Capital of Culture 2018.

As mentioned earlier, this study is based on diversification into MICE and sports tourism. For this reason, after having outlined the different diversification approaches and paths, as well as the potential advantages and disadvantages of undertaking a product diversification strategy in tourism destinations and some examples of coastal destinations carrying out such strategy, the next sections delineate the features of MICE and sports tourism and the existing literature dealing with diversification into these two segments. This study is in fact based on diversification into these two products, considering the significance to develop markets that diversify destinations product portfolios and attract visitors with higher spending propensity.

1.3.4 Features, Benefits and Requirements of MICE Tourism

Several studies have been conducted to discuss the relevance of the MICE tourism segment and its importance for destinations. The number of events organized worldwide is increasing year after year (Trišić and Arsenov-Bojović, 2018), and this is also demonstrated by the latest statistics released by ICCA (International Congress and Convention Association), confirming a solid growth of this market throughout 2018, with Europe hosting 52% of all meetings of the year, holding the largest share of the association meetings market (ICCA, 2019).

The literature underlines that the origins of this segment can be dated back to the beginning of civilization, with meetings being used to communicate and exchange knowledge in ancient Greece through the interaction of the participants, and fairs and festivals already existing from the earliest periods of human trade and barter, further expanded by the Romans who encouraged the exchange of knowledge and goods. The Industrial Revolution and the subsequent changes in economic and social organizations brought about the need to travel for trade purposes and, despite most of today's meetings being bigger and more international than in the past, they aim at the same objectives. (Chiang et al., 2012; Morar and Cotîrlea, 2014; Pizam, 2005; Schlenrich, 1999; Wood and Brotherton, 2008). Associations, corporations and other public institutions keep seeing participation in meetings, conferences, trade fairs and exhibitions as a fundamental strategy for face-to-face communication, growth opportunities and products and services promotion (Wood and Brotherton, 2008). In its official definition of tourism, UNWTO (n.d.) includes people who travel for business or professional purposes as actual tourists, spending at least one night out of their permanent residence place and taking part in all aspects of the travel experience (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2001). Furthermore, the abovementioned International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) defines business tourism as “the provision of facilities and services to the millions of delegates who annually attend meetings, congresses, exhibitions, business events, incentive travel and corporate hospitality” (n.d.). Many authors share the view of MICE tourism as a fast-growing segment of the tourism industry, as well as a multifaceted

and complex one, comprised of different elements (Chiu and Ananzeh, 2012; Dwyer and Forsyth, 2008; Dwyer et al., 2000; Ladkin, 2006; Oppermann, 1996; Ružić et al., 2003; Wang & Wang, 2008).

Meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions represent the components for which the acronym MICE stands for. In their work, Wood and Brotherton (2008) and Trišić and Arsenov-Bojović (2018) describe the features of each of them as follows:

- **MEETINGS** – These gatherings of people vary in duration and size, from a low number of participants until thousands. Communicate, exchange ideas, teach and train are only some of the multiple purposes that meetings can entail. They can either take the form of free-standing events or integrated with others. Examples of different types of meetings can be represented by assemblies, award/gala dinners, colloquia, panel discussions, presentations, roundtables, seminars, workshops and so on;
- **INCENTIVES** – Corporations make use of incentive travel as a significant tool to reward, motivate and recognize the excellent commitment and performance of their employees, who generally take part in high-quality leisure, sport and entertainment experiences, while enjoying and discovering the destination. These groups are given the opportunity to socialize and bond in a less formal way than in the usual workplace. Incentives usually involve also team building programs as well as award presentation ceremonies to encourage the achievement of future performance goals;
- **CONFERENCES / CONGRESSES** – Both terms refer to the exchange of business information. However, while conferences generally imply more discussion, problem solving and exchange of ideas, congresses are related to coming together of larger groups happening with a certain regularity;
- **EXHIBITIONS** – These events aim at bringing together manufacturers and suppliers of products, services and equipment to give the opportunity to show and demonstrate their products and services to the attendants. They differ from trade shows, which are normally held annually in the same location. Marketing budgets are extensively allocated by many companies to take part in these fairs, since they represent an important promotional and sales opportunity.

Given the growing importance of this product and rise of emerging destinations interested in it (McCartney, 2008), competition among destinations to develop and attract MICE tourism is on the rise, and the attributes of the destination play a crucial role, alongside the coordination of the many stakeholders involved to provide a quality service (Dwyer and Mistilis, 1999). In order for a destination to develop a competitive MICE product, some aspects must be carefully taken care of. In fact, as pointed out by several authors, the requirements of business tourists as well as their willingness to spend are higher, and quality of service, diverse cultural offer, capacity and quality of conference and sports facilities, efficient transportation connections and accessibility, high-standard tourism accommodation and closeness to the place of the meeting are much appreciated (Go & Govers, 1999; Lew

& Chang, 1999; Qu et al., 2000; Lee & Josiam, 2004; Sylla et al., 2015). On top of this, destination marketing organizations need to attentively plan and carry out a promotion strategy of the place as a business destination. With proper planning and management of MICE tourism, the negative impacts are minimized, taking into account that it is relatively much more difficult to manage the impacts of individual leisure tourists compared to business tourists' groups (Trišić and Arsenov-Bojović, 2018).

Hosting MICE events is regarded as beneficial by a vast number of scholars, who argue that the development of this product in the tourism strategy of a destination is viewed as highly lucrative MICE delegates are in fact usually high-spending visitors and tend to stay longer, providing high yield and return per capita. MICE tourism enhances competitiveness and international economic contact, besides contributing to local development, urban renewal and infrastructure improvement. Moreover, foreign exchange earnings can be increased and destination image and exposure at international level improved (Dwyer and Forsyth, 1997; Huo, 2014; Lau et al., 2005; Lockstone-Binney et al., 2014; Lawrence & McCabebe, 2001; Leong, 2007; Lim and Zhu, 2018; Rogerson, 2005; Yoon et al., 2001).. Additionally, these types of events occur generally outside the peak periods, making a destination less affected by seasonality and contributing to more employment opportunities (UNWTO, 2014) Even more importantly, an array of social programs and natural, cultural and sports activities are usually combined with the business events, meaning that business tourists are also engaged in the leisure aspects of the destination (Schaaf, 2017). Therefore, successful meetings, exhibitions and conferences represent an excellent marketing tool to attract new business and tourists to the area, as delegates who have a positive experience are likely to share it and return to the destination (Abbey and Link, 1994; Schaaf, 2017).

1.3.5 Features, Benefits and Requirements of Sports Tourism

Sport-based travel has grown dramatically in the last decades and further development may be expected (Mokras-Grabowska, 2016). Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier for business tourism, also travelling for sport purposes has been evident throughout history and its scope of activity is far from being recent (Gibson, 1998; Tassiopoulos and Haydam, 2008).

The concept of sports tourism is broad (Duglio and Beltramo, 2017), and a growing body of literature has examined the features and trends of this phenomenon (Weed, 2009). The term has been extensively discussed by several authors and the first publication dates back to 1966, outlining the role played by sport in holiday tourism (Anthony, 1966). Later, the work of Glyptis (1982) identifies two types of sports tourism participation, making a distinction between trips where the main purpose is taking part in sport (sport-dominant trips), and trips characterized by incidental sport participation (tourism-dominant trips). Given the multifaceted nature of sports tourism (Chalip, 2001), when it comes to a precise definition, Hinch and Higham (2004) argue that the contributions and interpretations have been multiple and diverse. However, Standeven and De Knop (1999, p.12) seem to provide a definition

that delineates and includes the broad range of aspects investigated in the study of sport tourism destinations, pointing out that sports tourism comprise “all forms of active and passive involvement in sporting activity, participated in casually or in an organized way for non-commercial or business/commercial reasons, that necessitate travel away from the home and work locality”. In addition to this, one of the most frequently quoted definitions is Gibson’s (1998). Drawing on Glyptis’ (1982) distinction between participative or non-participative sports activities (i.e. spectators) and encompassing both, she suggests three main categories into which sports tourism can be divided, which have been later adopted by many authors:

1. Active sports tourism, which consists of individuals who travel to be physically involved in competitive or non-competitive sport activities;
2. Event sports tourism, which concerns travel to experience sporting events. Some of the most broadly researched sport tourism events include the Olympic Games, the Rugby World Cup, the Soccer World Cup etc. This type of tourism not only refers to large-scale sport events, but also to smaller, non-elite competitor events;
3. Nostalgia sports tourism, which refers to visitation to sport museums, themed bars and restaurants, heritage events and halls of fame. It is increasingly developing, but the least researched so far.

A wide variety of sports activities are included in the concept of sports tourism, ranging from team sports to adrenaline and adventure sports. Destinations attracting this type of tourism have to make sure to provide the appropriate infrastructure to cater to the needs of this segment, including general infrastructure (i.e. accommodation, catering and sports facilities, transport infrastructure etc.) and, depending on what sport category is pursued, more specialized facilities if the tourists practice sports at higher levels (i.e. climbing walls, cycling circuits etc.). If sporting events are to be hosted, additional proper facilities, such as stadiums or sports halls, need to be part of the offer (Mokras-Grabowska, 2016; Pouder et al., 2018). Destinations attributes, imagery and descriptions can be an excellent promotion tool to attract both active sports tourists as well as spectators of sporting events. In turn, sporting events themselves are becoming part of destination marketing strategies, contributing to the branding and positioning of the destination (Dimanche, 2003). Expanding on this, researchers highlight that sports tourism in general and hosting sporting events in particular can provide a competitive advantage and be highly beneficial in terms of destination image enhancement and exposure (Getz & Page, 2016; Herstein and Berger, 2013; Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008), as well as a great revenue source (Getz, 2008; Gratton et al., 2000; Morgan et al., 2011), and a tool for urban development (Swart and Bob, 2007). Furthermore, Hinch and Higham (2004) and Pouder et al. (2018) point out that most of the time sports tourism brings in visitors during shoulder tourism seasons, thus providing a great support to tackle the seasonality issue.

1.3.6 Diversification into MICE and Sports Tourism

Having recognized the competitive advantage that MICE and sports tourism can provide to destinations, it is crucial to examine the studies that, although few, identify destinations using these products in their diversification strategies.

MICE tourism has been adopted by various destinations as a pivotal tool to offer a diversified product portfolio. Big cities like Singapore, Vienna and Madrid are already capitalizing on MICE (Schaaf, 2017). Qatar, beyond the products described earlier, is focusing on the MICE tourism segment as well, strengthening its position as a destination that caters for the needs of this market (Giampiccoli and Mtapuri, 2015; Weber, 2017). The Qatar National Tourism Sector Strategy 2030 underlines the efforts that are being made to further enhance its optimal mix of tourism products, and MICE is considered of primary importance. As argued by Benur (2013), the availability of quality infrastructure has played a crucial role for Tripoli's diversification into business tourism, whose conferences and business fairs are now attended by international tourists. At the same time, most of the literature related to diversification into MICE highlights that various destinations have acknowledged the potential of MICE tourism and are still taking the first steps to consider it as a relevant segment to focus on for their product diversification strategy. Among them, Macao is urgently attempting to diversify beyond gaming and become an attractive MICE destination (Sandy Sou and McCartney, 2015). Recent evidence (Abdelkafy and Hizah, 2016; Mwijarubi and Sabulaki, 2019; Schaaf, 2017) shows the endeavors of countries like Peru, Tanzania and Egypt to seize the benefits of the MICE product and reach global tourism markets.

Sports tourism has also been recognized as an important target market to focus on. Throughout the tourism-related literature, emphasis has been put on some specific case studies related to destinations that are considered to have ample opportunities to develop and implement sports tourism as part of their diversification strategy. One of them is Cyprus, whose need to move in a direction that develops and broadens its sports tourism role has been highlighted in Yiannakis (2009), Kartakoullis and Karlis (2002), and Kartakoullis et al. (2009), not to mention the more recent Cyprus Tourism Strategy (Republic of Cyprus, 2017), which confirms the potential of sports tourism for the destination as well as the appropriate actions to be taken for the successful development of this product to diversify the portfolio. On the other hand, research has also investigated successful diversification strategies into sports tourism that have been already put in place. Benur (2013) analyzes the diversified tourism products in Tripoli, that include sports tourism, like in the case of the Balearic Islands, which have increasingly promoted diversification and encouraged the development of sports tourism as part of their plans (Bartolomé et al., 2009). Similarly, as reported by Bull and Weed (2003), the sports tourism market has been exploited by Malta, which has been attempting to seek new products and decrease its reliance on mass tourism.

2. CASE STUDY - THE COASTAL DESTINATION OF LLORET DE MAR AND ITS NEED FOR DIVERSIFICATION

2.1 Selection of the Case Study: Lloret de Mar

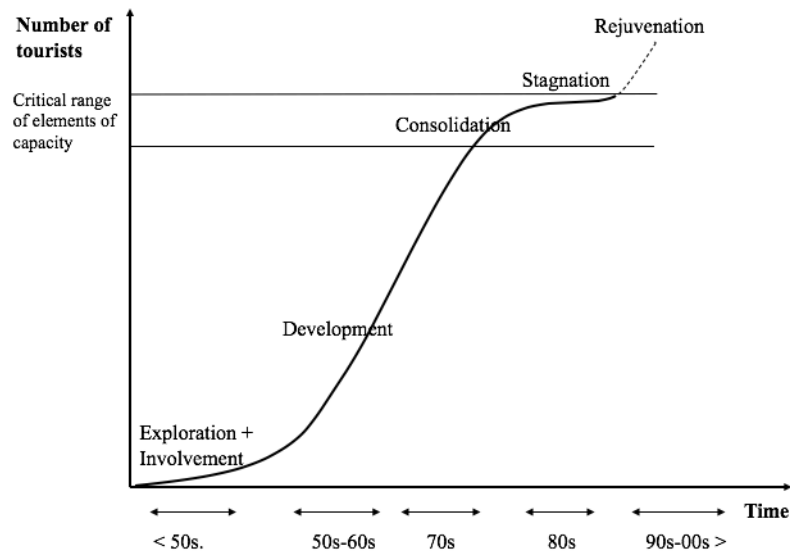
As mentioned previously, despite the little academic information existing in the specific area of study considered, examples providing evidence on coastal destinations diversifying into MICE and sports tourism exist, leading the author to conduct research about a specific case study. This research is in fact based on the examination of diversification in the coastal destination of Lloret de Mar, Spain. When dealing with a case study, the study of a single example – a case – of the phenomenon being investigated is involved in order to provide a deep understanding of it (Veal, 2006). Lloret de Mar was chosen as a suitable case study for this thesis given its efforts in diversifying its tourism products and, more specifically, its choice of strategically orienting towards the MICE and sports segments to complement and go beyond a 3S tourism model. This section presents a brief overview on some information about the life cycle of the destination alongside with its value proposition (i.e. its attractiveness, products and activities offered etc.) provided by secondary data.

2.1.1 The Tourism Area Life Cycle of Lloret de Mar

Lloret de Mar is located on the Costa Brava – the 220-km Northwestern Mediterranean Catalan Coast, a geographical setting renowned for its natural beauty and coastal landscape, seen today as a mature coastal destination. Although the whole Costa Brava can be currently considered in a period of strategic redefinition, it is important to point out that, despite some similarities, each coastal destination has followed in the first place slightly different patterns of life cycle and has reacted to the need of regeneration with diverse strategic actions. One of them, Lloret de Mar, is a town with an old history that dates back to Roman times, and from being initially a small fishing village, it turned with time into a resort dependent on tourism. Since Lloret de Mar can be considered a so-called “second wave” destination, its tourism development is suitable to be interpreted through the TALC model, compared to emerging “third wave” destinations. In these latter cases, in fact, the model may be less valuable as their tourism development may have been faster and “jumped” more stages within the cycle (Baum, 2006). The path of Lloret de Mar’s tourism development follows rather well the pattern delineated in Butler’s model (Figure 1). Lloret de Mar’s tourist vocation started in 1910 with the first hotel of Costa Brava being inaugurated. It was then from the 40s that tourism boomed greatly in the destination and from the 50s its internationalization began, reaching high ranks by the 60s in the entire Costa Brava. An ongoing, stronger development of tourism characterized the 70s, when consolidation was already reached, and stagnation progressively started to set in. During the 80s, the carrying capacity was saturated with supply outstripping demand, leading to price reductions, poor quality service and consequent lower visitor satisfaction levels (Figure 7). Additionally, socio-cultural and environmental issues were left secondary, taking mostly into account the economic benefits (Habitat Professional Forum, 2016; Lloret Turisme, 2020a; Priestley and

Mundet, 1998; Stankova and Amoiradis, 2019). As happened with other destinations along the coast, by the end of the century Lloret de Mar started to acknowledge the need for a well-designed tourism planning sustainable in the long run (Priestley and Mundet, 1998).

Figure 6: Possible Tourism Area Life Cycle of Lloret de Mar



Source: Adapted from Priestley and Mundet (1998) and Sardá et al. (2005)

Having reached the stagnation phase and the maturity of its tourism market, Lloret de Mar sought strategies to avoid decline and extend its life cycle through rejuvenation, with both public and private sector involved in various initiatives and restructuring measures. Diversification – part of some of the programmes aimed at maintaining the best aspects of the destination and introduce at the same time relevant quality improvements – represents one of the strategic actions chosen to revitalize the tourism sector in Lloret de Mar. The next chapter is in fact devoted to the empirical research and in-depth analysis of the diversification strategy undertaken by the destination and its implications for its tourism development. The various coastal destinations along the Costa Brava have taken slightly different directions when it comes to choosing what tourism products to focus on, and Lloret de Mar has been progressively aiming at MICE and sports tourism in its diversification strategy. Before proceeding with the analysis, some up-to-date information regarding the tourism sector of the destination are provided below.

2.1.2 Facts and Figures of Tourism in Lloret de Mar

One of the 22 towns into which the coastal fringe of the Costa Brava is administratively divided is Lloret de Mar, which is a major coastal resort in the province of Girona and belongs to an administrative regional division (or “comarca”) named La Selva. With a population of 38.373 (Statistical Institute of Catalonia, 2020), it covers an area of 48 km²,

70% of which is woodland, and has 9 km of coastline (Lloret Turisme, 2019). The town is situated in a strategic location, south of the French border. It is close to the motorway between Barcelona and France and well connected to the charter airport of Girona and the international Barcelona airport. A wide variety of places of interest can be reached from Lloret de Mar, such as fortified, fishing and medieval towns, natural parks, the South of France, the Pyrenees, the towns of Dalí and several other locations. Thanks to its mild Mediterranean climate, the destination can be enjoyed most of the year and it is ranked 5th sun-sea-sand destination in Spain in terms of hotel beds. Lloret de Mar can in fact accommodate national and international guests with various options: 122 hotels are present in this coastal destination, offering approximately 30.000 hotel beds, with 65% of accommodation offer being hotels of four stars or higher category and an average stay of 4 days in 2019. Additionally, tourists can choose among other types of accommodation as well, as there are also 4 campsites, 12 holiday apartment blocks and 3.300 private dwellings registered for tourist use (Lloret Turisme, 2020a). In 2019 Lloret de Mar could count on a total number of tourist arrivals of 1.303.651, which generated 5.801.478 overnight stays, representing an increase of 10% and 8% respectively compared to 2018 (Lloret Turisme 2020a). Percentagewise this coastal destination welcomes on average 20% of Costa Brava's visitors and 24% of the total overnight stays, confirming its position as one of the leading tourist destinations in Catalonia and Spain. It is important to underline the significant role that international markets play for Lloret de Mar, as 75% of hotel guests came from outside Spain in 2019. France, Germany and the UK represent in fact consolidated markets with which Lloret will continue working with, in conjunction with strengthening the development of strategic markets such as Eastern and Northern European countries. Additionally, the Spanish market also accounts for a relevant part, with 323.723 visitors from Spain in 2019 (Lloret Turisme, 2020a). With regard to 2020, it is however important to mention the negative impacts on Lloret de Mar tourism sector caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is posing unexpected challenges that will certainly affect the destination for some time.

2.1.3 Tourism Supply in Lloret de Mar

The tourism offer of Lloret de Mar counts on a broad range of products and activities, which are included under three main strategic products, namely Urban Beach, MICE and Sports. Urban Beach is described as a new coastal destination concept in which the typical sun-sea-sand attractions are complemented by various added values such as culture, events, leisure, gastronomy, family and shopping offers. Lloret de Mar's five beaches are all Blue Flag and offer various added values. The town has a number of historical and cultural resources whose appeal for tourists have been improved over time, complementing the conventional beach products. When it comes to festivals and events, Lloret de Mar offers a rich events calendar, especially during the summer months (i.e. Lloret Outdoor Summer Festival). Leisure activities are also a big part of Lloret de Mar's tourist offer, with a solid project ("Lloret Adventure") involving more than 30 leisure and adventure projects (diving, kayaking, Nordic walking, golf, water sports etc.). The destination is also making increasing steps

forward when it comes to gastronomy, by improving the quality of the town's restaurants as well as promoting local cuisine, which contribute to the two main axes of Health and Identity and to the coexistence of local traditions and international influences.

In addition to being part of the Alliance of Sun and Beach Tourism Towns (AMT) and having been certified as a Family Tourism destination by the Catalan Tourism Agency of the Catalan Government, Lloret de Mar stands out for its sports and MICE products, which are the central focus of this research and are investigated in detail in the analysis section, as they form part of its diversification strategy. However, it is relevant to underline already that Lloret de Mar has been certified Sports Tourism Destination in 2006 by the Catalan Tourism Agency. Moreover, Lloret de Mar also stands out for its efforts in the MICE segment, with the Lloret Convention Bureau being set up in 2009, which helps in promoting Lloret de Mar as a destination for meetings, festivals and events, bringing good results year after year.

3. METHODOLOGY

To investigate the areas of interest outlined in the introduction, given the aim of the thesis to examine the implications that MICE and sports tourism as part of diversification strategy have for the tourism development of the coastal destination of Lloret de Mar, a qualitative research approach was used. Moreover, this research adopted an inductive approach, and the following sections delineate in detail the research paradigm chosen and the qualitative research approach applied, as well as the data collection and sampling methods adopted, finishing with some considerations related to triangulation, trustworthiness and authenticity.

3.1 Research Paradigm

The present study was conceived and conducted under the interpretive social sciences paradigm (also known as constructivist paradigm), which adopts a relativist ontology, subjectivist epistemology, and a naturalistic array of methodological procedures (Jennings, 2010). This approach indeed considers the world as comprised of multiple realities and requires the researcher to enter the social setting, thus making the relationship between the researcher and the subject inter-subjective rather than objective (Jennings, 2010). Knowledge from the empirical world is gathered through a qualitative methodology, relying on methods such as case studies, focus groups, in-depth interviews and participant observation. By using an interpretive social sciences paradigm when undertaking tourism research, the researcher is able to obtain a comprehensive knowledge of the tourism phenomenon present in the empirical world. Therefore, this paradigm suggests an inductive approach to research, with the study commencing in the empirical world to subsequently develop explanations of the phenomenon of interest and generate knowledge from the observed data (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Jennings, 2010).

3.2 Research Approach

As mentioned previously, there is quite extensive research on tourism destination diversification with various studies having enriched the research landscape, like in the case of Farmaki (2011) who evaluated the tourism product diversification in Cyprus, or Terler (2013), who examined diversification as a solution to overcome seasonality in alpine destinations. However, the literature dealing specifically with diversification in coastal destinations is still rather limited, in particular if taking into account MICE and sports tourism as products to diversify into. For this reason, the present study aims at expanding the knowledge and contributing to theory creation by adopting a qualitative research approach. The decision to undertake a qualitative study instead of quantitative was made by the author in view of a wide variety of reasons, that make a qualitative approach particularly appropriate and suitable to reach the goals of this thesis.

Given its inductive nature, qualitative research has the purpose to generate new concepts and theories by drawing from the interpretation and description of phenomena from the point of

view of the population or individuals studied. Rather than testing existing theory or including statistical and empirical calculations, it provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied as well as people's attitudes, experiences, thoughts and points of view towards it. It is also imperative to underline that the researcher is an integral part of the research process, as he or she is directly involved with the participants when collecting data and interacts with them, subsequently delivering a richly descriptive and non-numeric product, making use of the words of the individuals participating (Mohajan, 2018).

As pointed out by Mills and Birks (2014), the methodology used is determined by the question asked by the researcher. For this reason, the research question – which reflects the intent of the research – guided the author of this study in the selection of the appropriate methodology and development of research design. Therefore, a qualitative approach was aimed at carrying out an in-depth analysis of the reasons, measures and implications of the diversification strategy in Lloret de Mar. In fact, in qualitative research emphasis is put on explaining what people think and why they think that way. Since the issue of tourism diversification is explored and stakeholders working both in the public and private sector alongside tourism students visiting and experiencing the destination are considered, adopting a qualitative research methodology is useful to investigate the different perspectives of the participants. The views of diverse groups of people are examined and may represent a significant source to reveal new or unexpected information and insights that could have not been evident if quantitative data had been used. Causes and reasons why a diversification strategy was needed in Lloret de Mar as well as its resulting effects are investigated, therefore the close involvement of the researcher with the stakeholders engaged in the process allows to gain an insider's view of the phenomenon, go beyond the information provided by secondary data and find issues that are often missed by the scientific enquiries. Moreover, opportunities to obtain more contents to develop new ideas and theories are provided, given the greater details that can be acquired when connecting with participants' opinions, feelings, behavior (Mohajan, 2018).

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Primary and Secondary Data

Both primary and secondary data are used in this study with the aim to provide findings and eventually answer the research question raised. Although most of the findings derives from primary data, whose collection methods are explained below in detail, a part of the information useful to provide the context and relevance of the case studied and contribute to the answer to the research question, is obtained through the employment of secondary sources. Referred to by Hox and Boeijs (2005, p. 596) as “data collected earlier by other researchers or for other purposes than research, such as official statistics, administrative records, or other counts kept routinely by organizations”, secondary data are considered here because they aid in extracting information needed for the purpose of this project. In fact,

even though new information represents the core of this research, existing data can complement and support it, and in tourism an important amount of data is generally collected by institutional bodies and associations, governmental agencies and promotional companies, as well as leisure and tourism facilities and services (Veal, 2006). It is necessary to emphasize that, when making use of secondary data, some requirements must be satisfied: their overall quality needs to be evaluated alongside with their relevance, accuracy, reliability and validity (Hox and Boeije, 2005). For this reason, the author has used secondary data in the form of official tourism statistics, brochures, promotional material, Strategic Tourism Plan and Destination Marketing Organization's documents and presentations, all retrieved or directly provided by verified and reliable sources or organizations.

3.3.2 Data Collection Methods

In view of the research objective, qualitative research methods are used for empirical data collection. In fact, qualitative research can be seen as an umbrella term which includes a variety of research methods using language data. They represent a form of "observations and interpretations of people's perception of different events and take the snapshot of the people's perception in a natural setting" (Mohajan, 2018, p. 23), involving an in-depth exploration with participants and written texts collected from documents, as well as data initially in oral form (i.e. interviews) and subsequently transcribed and turned into texts (Polkinghorne, 2005). More precisely, among the qualitative techniques usually adopted in tourism research (i.e. focus groups, interviews, Delphi technique, participant observation etc.) (Jennings, 2010), semi-structured interviews and focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate methods to collect the necessary data for this study and address the issues raised by the research question.

3.3.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Qualitative interviews are described as conversations in which the interviewee is guided by the researcher in a comprehensive discussion and, unlike survey research, each interview is different and unique, although part of the same study (Rubin and Rubin, 2004). The author found it relevant to adopt this method, as an extensive account of the interviewees' experiences can be gained, and unanticipated aspects emerged during the interviews can enrich the data collection. Moreover, through in-depth interviews, processes, events and experiences related to a particular phenomenon can be reconstructed (Rubin and Rubin, 2004) and this was regarded as significant to investigate in detail the steps undertaken in the diversification process of the destination considered and the implications for its tourism development.

The author decided to conduct semi-structured interviews because these give the possibility to discuss about predefined topics while leaving enough space to the interviewees to

elaborate freely on their answers (Jennings, 2010). Moreover, sometimes new questions were also asked depending on the information emerged throughout the interview. Open-ended key questions, compared to closed-ended questions, allowed the interviewees to share their own experiences and knowledge widely, and the researcher developed the questions taking into consideration the relevant academic literature. The interviews were conducted with stakeholders working in the tourism industry of Lloret de Mar, both in the public and private sector. For this reason, some questions in the interview guidelines were slightly modified and adapted depending on the stakeholder interviewed, in order to collect the most adequate data possible. Additionally, some opinions regarding the COVID-19 situation were also gathered during those interviews taking place after the outbreak of the pandemic in Spain, as they were considered relevant to add value to the present research.

The only face-to-face interview could take place in Lloret de Mar in February 2020, along with some occasional talks with stakeholders of the public sector, while all the others conducted between March and June 2020 had to be held via alternative technological means such as Skype, Zoom, telephone or e-mail because of the unprecedented circumstances described earlier, that made any type of travel and social contact impossible. Despite the challenging situation, the author was able to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon studied and create a collaborative relationship with the interviewees, who showed interest in the topic and willingness to contribute to the success of this project. Before the start of each interview, consent from the participant was asked to use the information collected for research purposes and confidentiality was assured. With regard to those stakeholders that were not available to schedule an interview due to the difficult circumstances and answered the questions via e-mail, a presentation letter describing briefly the study and stating its aims, as well as guaranteeing confidentiality, was attached to the e-mail alongside the document containing the interview questions. The face-to-face interview and the others carried out by phone or through telecommunications applications were captured on tape upon permission and transcribed afterwards, in order to avoid the risk of losing valuable information.

3.3.2.2 Focus Groups

Alongside semi-structured interviews, the researcher decided to enrich the study with further perspectives by using an additional method, namely focus group. This method is widely used, among others, as a form of qualitative research for academic purposes and it can be identified as a small group of interacting individuals that are gathered by a moderator with the aim to discuss and gain information about a specific topic (Barrows, 2000; Marczak and Sewell, 2006; Masadeh et al., 2016). The moderator (in this case the researcher herself) has to encourage the discussion among the participants, allowing them to speak freely with the objective to gain insights that cannot be achieved through pre-established surveys (Masadeh et al., 2016). Opinions and attitudes are encouraged to be expressed in an interactive way (Strielkowski et al., 2012). Interaction is in fact a key point in focus groups, as it gives the opportunity to unpack different meanings, understandings and perceptions held by the

participants, facilitating at the same time the emergence of multiple, and sometimes even opposing, viewpoints (Liamputtong, 2011). Focus groups are regarded as a cost- and time-efficient method for this study, since a large and varied amount of information in the form of detailed opinions can be collected in a relatively short period of time (Masadeh et al., 2016; Strielkowski et al., 2012). Moreover, this research technique is considered even more beneficial if combined with other methods of data collection, as in this case with semi-structured interviews (Masadeh et al., 2016).

Although the initial idea was to conduct only semi-structured interviews, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected particularly the travel and tourism industry and subsequently the availability of stakeholders to take part in this study, the author decided to re-orient the choice of the methods used by including focus groups with students currently enrolled or graduated from the same Master's Degree (Erasmus Mundus European Master in Tourism Management), the reasons and relevance of which are explained more in detail later. In this case, the interview guidelines were similar to those used when conducting semi-structured interviews, as the reasons, measures and implications of the diversification strategy undertaken in Lloret de Mar were investigated. However, substantial focus was put also on the perceptions that these "knowledgeable tourists" had before and after visiting the destination for study purposes, as well as on their opinions about the future tourism development in Lloret de Mar in the light of the effects that COVID-19 could have especially on the MICE and sports tourism segments. Following the focus group question guide proposed by Liamputtong (2011), the researcher directed the discussions with the aid of open-ended questions prepared beforehand, in order to cover the key issues and stimulate at the same time an engaging conversation among the participants. It is important to underline that the order of the questions sometimes changed during the conversations and additional and not pre-established questions were also asked, according to the issues raised throughout the discussions. After having explained the aim of the research, the reasons why the participants had been contacted to take part in the study and the objectives of the focus group, the researcher encouraged individuals to speak to each other and create a meaningful discussion, and pointed out that there were no right or wrong answers and that differing views were valuable to provide a rich range of perspectives on the topic. Introductory questions were therefore used to start the conversation and stimulate interaction, followed by transition questions aimed at narrowing down the focus, which led to key questions representing the core of the research. Summarising and concluding questions were eventually used to end the discussion. The focus groups took place in May 2020 in the form of online meetings organized through Zoom, an online platform for video and audio conferencing, which allowed the participants based in different countries to connect simultaneously. As in the case of interviews, confidentiality was guaranteed and permission to record the video meeting was asked.

3.3.3 Sampling

Since this study adopts a qualitative approach, the sample selected serves the purpose of gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon considered instead of generalizing the findings, which is instead the aim in quantitative studies. This does not imply that sampling plays a less significant role in a qualitative study like the present one. Conversely, it contributes greatly to the quality of the research undertaken (Altinay and Paraskevas, 2008), and it is therefore important that the sample is selected carefully.

The author applied a non-probability sampling approach to data collection and selection of the participants. This is considered particularly suitable for the purpose of this study, as it allows the researcher to select the sample purposively and not randomly, thus deciding who should be involved and who should not, since the chance of being selected is not identical for all the members of the population. The interest in fact is not in examining what proportion of the population replies in a certain way, but rather in exploring the ideas and perspectives that the interviewees and the participants of the focus groups have on the phenomenon investigated (Altinay and Paraskevas, 2008).

With regard to interviews, in order to determine the list of stakeholders to be included in the sample, purposive sampling (also known as judgmental) was used, based on the appropriateness of the interviewees for the aim of the study. People from which most can be learnt were selected because of their relevance in enriching the understanding of the diversification process in Lloret de Mar. Criteria that the researcher deemed as crucial were the experience and knowledgeability of the interviewees, since participants being first-hand experienced and knowledgeable about the research problem are decisive for providing accurate and significant results. The researcher did not have already an established network of relevant stakeholders to connect with, but some of the interviewees were contacted thanks to experts working at Lloret Turisme (Lloret de Mar Destination Management Organization), who supported the researcher in choosing the most appropriate and knowledgeable stakeholders. According to the research interest, various factors were considered when selecting them, such as the ability in providing relevant information regarding the diversification strategy, the professional experience in Lloret de Mar tourism sector, as well as the involvement in MICE and sports tourism segments. The interviewees chosen have different roles within the organizations they work in, and each of them was selected or put in contact with, because of his/her knowledge about the issues investigated in the study.

The requests to take part in the study were sent via e-mail, except for the first interview that was scheduled in person in the tourism office of Lloret de Mar. Although initially a greater number of stakeholders was expected to be interviewed, the author had to adapt to the unprecedented situation. Many of the potential participants communicated their difficulties in joining the research, while others did not provide any response at all. In total, 6 stakeholders agreed to participate and were interviewed in different ways (face-to-face

interview, Skype call, e-mail...), of which 2 work in the public sector and 4 in the private, in addition to a couple of occasional talks in person with stakeholders of the public sector. As can be seen in the Appendix A, their job positions range from Head of Marketing and Commercial Director, to Tourism Consultant and Product Manager.

Like in the case of interviews, a purposive sampling method was adopted for the focus groups as well. The participants were in fact chosen because the researcher believes that they suit the issue investigated and are therefore able to provide reliable information and contribute to the desired outcomes. A random sampling method is in fact not advisable for focus groups in particular, as a meaningful discussion would not likely be generated (Liamputtong, 2011). The author decided to recruit students currently enrolled in the 12th edition of the Erasmus Mundus European Master in Tourism Management, or already graduated from the 11th edition. Being part of the same Master's Degree, the researcher knew that these students had carried out a research project and delivered a consultancy report for the destination Lloret de Mar, which made it relevant to have them as participants of the focus groups, given the difficulties encountered in scheduling interviews with the tourism stakeholders within the destination due to COVID-19.

As part of the Tourism Destination Management class at the University of Girona, half of the 2017-2019 and half of the 2018-2020 cohort went to Lloret de Mar to undertake a field research. The field trips lasted 4 days and they took place at a distance of a year, more precisely at the beginning of October 2018 for the 2017-2019 cohort and at the at beginning of October 2019 for the 2018-2020 cohort. These students could not be considered as tourism professionals fully knowledgeable about the destination under study, however they were regarded as suitable for the aim of this study thanks to their academic and, in some cases, professional experience in the tourism field. The fact of having been intensively exposed to Lloret de Mar tourism industry, having been personally in contact with many of its tourism stakeholders and having experienced firsthand some products and services offered in the destination, can justify their appropriateness for this study. These participants can be therefore regarded as "knowledgeable tourists", able to provide multiple perspectives on the research problem and eventually enrich the study and generate relevant data. When it comes to the size of focus groups, there is no exact rule on the number of participants that should be involved. However, the author took into consideration that the size should not be too large as to hinder optimal participation, nor too small that it does not provide more significant coverage than an interview with only one individual (Merton et al., 1990). Since a total of 17 individuals accepted to take part in the study (4 from the 2017-2019 cohort and 13 from the 2018-2020 cohort), three focus groups were formed, of which two consisted of 6 participants and one of 5 (Appendix B). All the potential participants were recruited via phone using the researcher's personal network and were given an explanation of the reasons for contacting them, alongside the research objectives.

Ultimately, it is important to highlight that a purposive technique was used for the selection of the case study as well. Due to the primary role played by tourism as well as the efforts made to diversify the sector and the results obtained so far, the Spanish coastal destination of Lloret de Mar was chosen as relevant case study for the present research, as explained in detail in the next chapter.

3.3.4 Triangulation, Trustworthiness and Authenticity

When relying on qualitative methods, it has been argued that more appropriate terms to discuss about the validity and reliability of the study are trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln et al., 2011; Veal, 2006). In order to ensure that this study is trustworthy and authentic and that its findings are sounder, triangulation was applied. This implies that a single phenomenon, in this case the diversification strategy implemented by Lloret de Mar and its implications for tourism development, is considered and looked at from different sources of data. The research problem is therefore elaborated, made clear and validated through information coming from different angles, thus enhancing the generalizability of the study and reducing methodological and personal biases (Decrop, 1999). Among the four different types of triangulation identified by Denzin (1978), namely data, method, investigator and theory triangulation, this thesis employs data and method triangulation, since various data sources are utilized in the form of both different types of material and stakeholders, and two different methods are adopted. In fact, comprehensive data are ensured through a variety of perspectives and points of view provided by different stakeholders who belong to diverse settings (i.e. public and private sector). In this sense, the phenomenon studied is approached and better understood through the involvement of multiple participants (Polkinghorne, 2005). Additionally, as mentioned above, secondary data resulting from other documents listed previously represent an additional information source next to interviews and focus groups that provide primary data. In this way, triangulation can lead to richer and more valid interpretations, thus showing the convergence of different independent sources. It ultimately allows to take into consideration different views and to approach the phenomenon through various accounts (Polkinghorne, 2005).

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

Once collecting the data in the form of documents, interview transcripts, audio- or videotapes or others, the researcher must analyze it and, although this process may start earlier already while gathering data, an in-depth and complete analysis is carried out later. Through analysis, the understanding of such data is improved, theory expanded and knowledge advanced (Neuman, 2006). When dealing with qualitative data, the analysis process involves the classification and interpretation of linguistic or visual material (Flick, 2014) to turn data into information that is subsequently transformed into knowledge and eventually wisdom (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). The researcher plays a relevant role in focusing on details without losing sight of the bigger picture, acting as the primary analytical instrument to develop a systematic and creative product (Chenail, 2012; Patton, 2002).

3.4.2 Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)

Qualitative research analysis can be conducted with the aid of a wide variety of software available nowadays, defined as “computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software” (CAQDAS) (Rettie et al., 2008). The term refers to those software programs that facilitate the researcher involved in a qualitative study in data reduction, effective searching, analysis of large data sets, systematic coding and other tasks (Rettie et al., 2008). Nevertheless, it is relevant to note that the main role of these software is to support the researcher in the analysis and interpretation process rather than do the whole analysis or make any kind of judgment (King, 2004; Lewis-Beck et al., 2004; Rettie et al., 2008; Thorne, 2000). In fact, human factors are still of primary importance and computer software cannot replace the intellectual abilities as well as the intuitive and interpretive aspects of analysis that only the researcher can provide (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). Therefore, with regard to this study, the software assisted the author in the management of data as well as in the increase in effectiveness and efficiency of learning outcomes coming from the data collected.

The researcher carrying out this study decided to make use of NVivo, known also as NUD*IST Vivo, to be aided in the qualitative analysis of the data gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. This software program, designed for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis, supported the author in better sorting and organizing the data and eventually answering the research question, while also giving the opportunity to look at the data and learn from them in such ways that could have not been explored if the information had been managed without the software (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Using NVivo allowed the researcher to better manage and visualize data and ideas, ensuring higher rigor when interpreting and analyzing the set of data.

3.4.3 Thematic Analysis

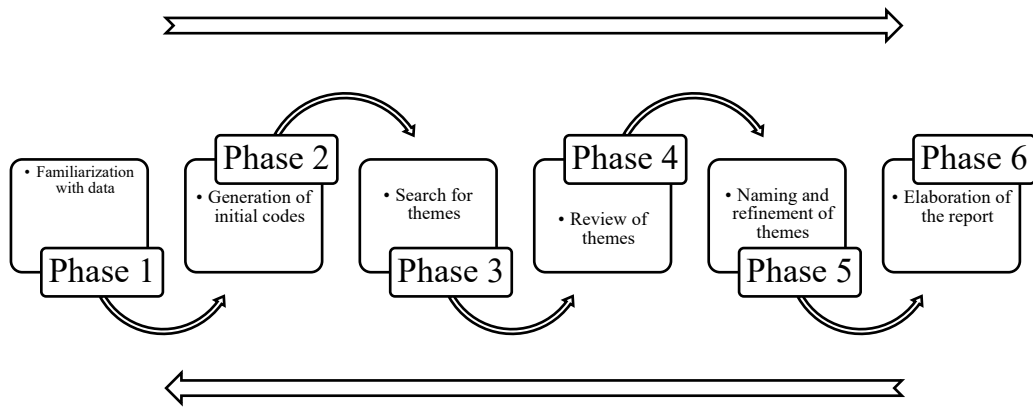
Although rather uncommon in the field of tourism studies, where content analysis has a wider use, thematic analysis is regarded as a versatile research tool which provides a flexible approach that can be adapted to different types of studies (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Walters, 2016). Its value with regard to tourism research was acknowledged (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and it may find application in several situations within the tourism context. It is suitable for the interpretation of both written and visual texts (Walters, 2016), thus being selected for this research thanks to its adaptability and appropriateness to address the research question.

Thematic analysis, described as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 6), allows the key features of a large data set to be summarized and handled in a well-structured way (Nowell et al., 2017). A central role for this type of analysis is played by recurrent themes, which capture relevant features about the data with regard to the research question and “represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 10). Since there is no exact proportion of how often a theme needs to display evidence in the data set in order to be considered as such (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the researcher had to undertake the task of carefully judging the “keyness” of each potential emerging theme as to whether it contributed answering the research question.

It should be noted that the different themes identified from the interviews and focus groups were data driven. A variety of ways can be used to conduct thematic analysis (Ryan and Bernard, 2003), and the researcher followed the 6-step process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) when analyzing the data obtained. As depicted in Figure 8, the first phase involved the familiarization with the data collected. After transcribing the interviews and focus group sessions, the author read the data repeatedly, searched for patterns and started developing ideas for initial codes. The latter were then generated in order to organize the data into groups, tagging and naming selections of text and keeping in mind to code for as many potential themes as possible. Once the initial codes were established, the researcher arranged them into potential broader themes. Some of the codes were combined, while others discarded. In the fourth stage the themes were reviewed in order to evaluate their relevance and consider if some of them had to be merged or separated. At this point the author had a clearer idea of the themes and how they fit within the entire data set, and moved to the next stage, which involved naming the themes and further refining them. Lastly, the final phase consisted of presenting the findings of the research and constantly taking into consideration the relation to the research question. Here, the detailed analysis for each theme was performed, supported by evidence (i.e. direct quotes from participants) to demonstrate the points made. Furthermore, the trustworthiness of the research findings was assured throughout the analysis process, and in view of this it was necessary to frequently move back and forth between the different stages, since thematic analysis is more a recursive process

rather than a strictly linear one (Braun and Clarke, 2006), as also indicated graphically by the arrows in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Process of Thematic Analysis



Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006)

4. RESULTS

This section of the paper reports the findings obtained from in-depth interviews with stakeholders working in the tourism sector of the destination examined, combined with the outcomes derived from the three focus groups carried out with students and graduates of the Erasmus Mundus European Master in Tourism Management (EMTM), whose opinions are mostly regarded as perceptions that they held of Lloret de Mar before visiting it and after engaging with tourism stakeholders and experiencing products and activities offered in the destination. Through a careful analysis and interpretation of the data collected, the author identified 17 recurrent themes, which were grouped under five categories that emerged during the interviews, which can be referred to as different phases of the diversification process undertaken in the destination. Noteworthy direct quotes were also included to give evidence of the themes emerged as well as support the findings and their relation to the research question initially developed.

4.1 Challenges and Problems to Be Faced

The interviews carried out with experts working both in the private and public sector of Lloret de Mar tourism industry confirmed how tourism developed in the destination in accordance with the life cycle delineated earlier. Described as a beautiful seaside town, the stakeholders pointed out how the tourist vocation of Lloret de Mar was already evident during the first decades of the 20th century, being one of the first holiday destinations of the country. Although its tourism industry developed a long time ago, it was between the 50s and 60s that Lloret de Mar started to be well-known also abroad. It attracted foreign visitors who recognized its qualities and contributed to the ongoing development of the sector, which reached its saturation already in the 80s. Most of the interviewees referred to Lloret de Mar as a destination that over time specialized in mass tourism and did not take into account wisely the consequences that this type of management could have had for its future development. Characterized by plenty of offer, with more and more hotels being built and a tourism satisfaction index going down, the direction where Lloret de Mar was heading did not look positive. On the contrary, its tourism development seemed far from having a long-run perspective and a future which could be sustainable in all aspects.

The conversations with tourism professionals revealed a series of problems and challenges that the destination was going through before the diversification strategy was formally recognized as an appropriate path to follow. Moreover, the discussions generated through the focus groups touched on some of the points also made by the tourism professionals and, at the same time, they conveyed varied perceptions useful for this study in terms of understanding the issues present in the destination from the perspectives of tourists and the images held in their mind about it based on their countries of origin.

Through the analysis of the data gathered, three overarching themes could be identified with regard to the problems that Lloret de Mar had – and in part still has – to face, each of which includes in turn a series of related issues discussed.

4.1.1 Lack of Structure and Control

It was not until 1993 that the tourism sector was given a formal organization with the creation of the Lloret de Mar Tourism Board, demonstrating that for a long time this industry had been left mainly uncontrolled. The effects of this type of management are still partially visible today as highlighted by the focus groups, which pointed out that the impression perceived was that of a seaside town that developed unregulated, with hotels that appeared without following precise and coherent guidelines.

In fact, despite not desirable for the destination, Lloret de Mar's accommodation offer was mainly in the hands of tour operators, as strongly emphasized by one of the interviewees. This led to a situation where the hotels were essentially exploited by tour operators because, given the very high number of hotel beds present in the destination (32.000-34.000), intermediaries are necessary for all that quantity to be sold. Therefore, many hotels started to get agreements with tour operators because, unlike smaller destinations with fewer hotel beds, Lloret de Mar needed, and still needs, to be tour operated. A part of sales can be made directly with final customers, which is commission-free, more optimal in general and hotels can get a better control of their clients, but in a context like this, it is unthinkable to fill such number of hotel beds by relying on direct sales only. However, this does not imply that the destination wanted this strategy, since not everything depends on the destination management itself. These agreements were made between hotels and tour operators and for the destination management it was hard to take control over it.

- “This is the most difficult part for the destination management. All of a sudden you realize that hotels get these agreements with tour operators and there's not much that you can do. [...] When you think about managing the destination, it is not easy, because not absolutely everything depends on you and this is how the situation looked like in Lloret” (Tourism Consultant, Universitat de Girona).
- “[...] Maybe something to structure more was needed, and we had to have a strategy” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).

As a consequence, the competition among the many hotels increased more and more, leading inevitably to a progressive drop in prices. With a mentality mainly focused on selling as much as possible in order to fill the capacity, Lloret de Mar became a low-cost vacation destination, particularly attractive for young people during the summer season, as explained in detail when discussing the challenges related to the image of the destination.

- “[...] And because of the capacity as well, the prices were low, and this attracted very young people during the summer” (Tourism Consultant, Universitat de Girona).
- “Big hotels were doing very low prices and they were getting full, so they were making a lot of money during a short period of time, and for them this was okay” (Hotel Manager, Hotel Acapulco).

This pricing policy therefore contributed greatly to making the destination look cheap and missing the opportunity to capitalize on other resources, products and services that were lacking structure, a formal organization and a proper strategy in which to be included.

4.1.2 Uncompetitive Tourism Sector

The low-value destination that Lloret de Mar turned into attracted in particular a market segment with low purchasing power and, in general, undesirable features for the tourism sector of a destination as a whole. Due to low prices and a concentrated agglomeration of bars and clubs, Lloret de Mar became a paradise for young people who had a tight budget and were looking for fun, beach and nightlife. Some of the interviewees in fact explained in detail how many young Europeans between 15 and 18, once having finished their school or college, have a break and they generally use this time for a first holiday with their group of friends, looking for a relatively cheap place, nice beaches and a lot of nightlife. Having all these features, Lloret de Mar started welcoming during the summer season (especially between mid-July and the end of August) very high numbers of youngsters who, once in the destination, only wanted to party, get drunk and have a good time. Despite the economic return, the high occupancy rate and the positive results experienced by nightclubs and other nightlife-related businesses, this segment proved to be truly problematic.

As mentioned by most of the experts interviewed, the party tourism segment could not match with another one which was particularly desirable for the destination, namely family tourism. Two of the interviewees provided some examples to demonstrate how different these two target markets are, explaining that a “peaceful coexistence” between them is very complicated. A family with kids, for instance, could end up having a room next to young people always laughing, making noise or partying. The clash is inevitable, considering the different objectives and motivations that these two segments have when choosing the destination for their vacation. Families do not want to mix with youngsters and the other way around, as the former tends to wake up early, have breakfast, go to the beach or do other activities, have lunch, take a nap and go to bed early. On the contrary, the latter has totally different rhythms, since at 10 pm they are still thinking of where they want to go that night and they come back the next morning at 6-7 am. Additionally, besides not matching with other types of tourists, young people can represent a serious issue in terms of degradation of the destination and its infrastructure, as they do not care too much about the facilities they are using provided in private or public spaces, thus damaging and contributing to a faster deterioration of the infrastructure. Given the less amount of money available to spend,

complementary services like restaurants other than cheap fast food chains, local shops as well as excursions, cultural visits or, in general, activities of various kinds are not used as much by young people, meaning that revenue opportunities for many local businesses decrease. The tourism model on which Lloret de Mar was based was therefore mainly reliant on party tourism alongside 3S tourism (sun-sea-sand), coming in only to enjoy the sun and the beach during the summer months (mostly June to September), which contributed to making the destination highly seasonal. The fact of being able to fully operate only for some months of the year and putting quantity over quality by attracting certain types of customers, was not leading the destination to a long-term direction.

- “It was something that you could not keep up doing in the long run. [...] It brings money at first but then it doesn’t really last too long” (Product Manager, Sportcontact).
- “So they were like “I open 3 months, make the money and save for the rest of the year” but it’s a short-term mindset” (Director, Hotel Acapulco).
- “A lot of hotels would have to be closed and the direction where Lloret de Mar was going was not in a long run” (Product Manager, Sportcontact).

This kind of mindset, which claimed to make as much money as possible in a short period of time without thinking of the future implications for the destination, was highlighted both in the interviews and focus groups as being short term and unsustainable if Lloret de Mar was to survive and compete in the future. The experts interviewed, whether belonging to the private or public sector, acknowledged in the same way that a 3S tourism model could not provide benefits and competitiveness for long, and it affected the brand of Lloret de Mar as a whole, as specified in the next theme.

4.1.3 Destination Image

On the one side, the interviews showed that one of the hardest challenges that Lloret de Mar had to face, and still does in part nowadays, was the shift of its destination image. This was confirmed on the other side by what emerged from most of the perceptions conveyed by the focus groups participants. One of the interviewees pointed out in this regard the problems that Lloret de Mar had with its brand. It is in fact easier to create something from zero than change things that already existed and happened before and that now have been in the mind of people for many years. The interviewee referred to the fact that measures and actions taken in the past impacted the image that people had, and still have partly even in the present, about the destination. All of the interviewees underlined how the young people coming to Lloret de Mar just to party and enjoy the nightlife were contaminating its image. However, in addition to those tourists visiting the destination and experiencing firsthand the strong presence of the party tourism segment during the high season, this kind of image did not entirely form in their mind spontaneously. Communication campaigns created in the past contributed in fact to the image of Lloret de Mar. Being a result of past actions and behavior,

the negative reputation of the destination was fomented by those campaigns showing, for instance, besides beach and sun, the large number of bars and clubs located there, advertising Lloret de Mar as the place with most bars on the Costa Brava. As a consequence, the image built in people's mind was related to bars, parties and nightlife. The big issue is that the process of changing an image already formed takes a lot of time and cannot happen overnight.

- “Lloret’s perceptions were mostly related to sun, beach, vacation and parties” (Commerical Director, L’Azure Hotel).
- “Communication campaigns were based on beach, sun and nightlife” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).
- “It’s something that we created in the past, so it’s not something that people just imagine or because someone told them” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).

In this regard, it can be also pointed out that the lack of structure and control described earlier was also reflected in the image as well, as the destination was already offering some products other than beach and nightlife, but these were not properly communicated and promoted, therefore people did not really know about them before their actual visit (i.e. cultural tourism products).

In addition to the information collected through Lloret de Mar’s tourism professionals, it is relevant to integrate the perspectives discussed in the focus groups, which provided insights and perceptions more attributable to the demand-side points of view. While some of the participants’ perceptions about the destination were generated thanks to previous trips there, others were influenced by word of mouth or different kinds of media. However, despite the diverse sources of image formation, most of them acknowledged what was emphasized by the interviews and confirmed that the destination is still attempting to modify the image that it has been carrying from the past - a long process that needs time and endeavors, on which Lloret de Mar is still working. Moreover, the fact that the nightlife area is concentrated in the heart of the city contributes greatly to the creation of the perception of Lloret de Mar as party holiday destination.

Most of the participants who did not visit Lloret de Mar prior the field trip undertaken were influenced by word of mouth through friends, colleagues, acquaintances and so on. One of the most recurring images brought up during the discussions was that of Lloret de Mar as a party holiday destination. Moreover, given the different countries of origin of the participants, it could be revealed how the destination is perceived in some European and non-European nations, or if an image about it is not present at all. In particular, participants from some countries in Europe pointed out that what is said about Lloret de Mar in their lands refers mainly to parties and nightlife. For instance, an Italian mentioned that some friends of her compared it to Rimini and Riccione (coastal holiday destinations in Italy particularly known for their young target and lively nightlife), thus creating an association

of Lloret de Mar with fun, party, and nightlife. The same was emphasized by a Portuguese participant, who explained that she thought of Lloret de Mar as a not-serious destination, since it was – at least mostly in the 90s – one of the places chosen by 17 or 18-year-old high school students for their senior trip during spring break only to have fun. Participants from the same country in which Lloret de Mar is located, Spain, had diverse viewpoints. Some highlighted the bad image that it has due to troubles caused by young tourists. In the region of Catalonia, in particular, it has been known for long as a party place where young Europeans from the UK, Germany and other countries go to party and damage the city and its reputation. Another participant outside the region of Catalonia, on the contrary, revealed that he did not have any negative perception about Lloret de Mar, pointing out that in his area party tourism is more associated with destinations like Mallorca, Magaluf, Marbella, and that Lloret de Mar could have been identified as popular party destination more in the 80s-90s. Among the countries represented in the focus groups, the one that seemed to have the strongest and most established image of Lloret de Mar was Germany, which was also mentioned in some of the interviews as one of the main source markets for party tourism together with the UK and the Netherlands. This coastal destination is in fact seen in Germany as a low-value, cheap destination and it is well known there for its parties during the summer season. What gave a big contribution to its bad image in this country was a Reality TV show called “We love Lloret – the summer party of our lives!”, which was broadcast in 2012 on German television. Showing the party holidays of eight German teenagers in Lloret de Mar, the image given of the town was inevitably of a pure party destination. This received a lot of media coverage in Germany as well as criticism from Lloret de Mar’s side, as it increased the challenges that the destination had been already trying to face to get rid of such image. The influence of media on the image of Lloret de Mar was also underlined by one of the interviewees working in Lloret de Mar’s private sector, who mentioned that, because of being of French origins, when watching French TV channels, the only news about Lloret de Mar was bad news showing youngsters having fun and being drunk in the middle of the street, which brought only bad publicity to the destination and moved away other targets that could have been more beneficial. Besides this negative image, participants from Russia identified Lloret de Mar as a family tourism destination, agreeing that the perception held in their country is of a sun-sea-sand, family holiday destination. Another perspective showed that in Serbia Lloret de Mar is viewed as an attractive, almost high-end destination, not associated with negative elements. The Spanish coastal town was neither known by other participants nor seen as a key destination: for instance, people from Canada, Norway, Iceland, Vietnam and the Philippines were not aware of what Lloret de Mar was all about and their opinions were neutral about it, confirming that its image of party holiday destination is mainly perceived in the European markets, as highlighted in some of the interviews. As explained later, although most of the images emerged from the focus groups discussions were still portraying Lloret de Mar as a low-cost, sun-sea-sand, party destination, after visiting and experiencing it the perceptions and opinions changed in most of the cases.

This section provided evidence of some of the challenges that Lloret de Mar had to face and the urgent need to find alternative paths if the destination wanted to stay competitive in the market. The development of the destination was not undertaken in accordance with precise guidelines and strategies, thus resulting in lack of structure and only focusing on what could bring more money in the shortest possible time. Having become a low-value, non-competitive, highly seasonal destination with standardized products, a change was unquestionably necessary, as the whole destination was dealing with the consequences of past actions, and its image, in particular, was already affected, carrying some negative perceptions up until today.

4.2 Call for Diversification

The stakeholders interviewed pointed out that during the 90s the tourism industry in Lloret de Mar started to be acknowledged as fragile and in need of change, especially by the accommodation sector. As outlined in the previous chapter presenting the case study, first initiatives to improve the industry in its entirety were organized during that decade in order to offer better quality of the products and services as well as enhance the destination image (Priestley and Mundet, 1998). These culminated in the creation of the “Local Agenda XXI” for the sustainable tourism development of Lloret de Mar in 1998 and the execution of the Tourism Excellence Plan in 2000 (Lloret Turisme, n.d.-a). However, no significant change or addition of products was officially considered yet. It was only with the new century that diversification started to be formally taken into account as an opportunity to overcome the several challenges that the destination was encountering.

When exploring diversification as a suitable path to follow for Lloret de Mar, a wide variety of reasons, motives and advantages related to this strategy emerged during the interviews and focus groups, thus leading the author to group them under two main broader themes.

4.2.1 Need for a Change

All the interviewees stressed the necessity that Lloret had to strive for a change, since the sector was progressively losing market and declining. It was therefore fundamental to revitalize and extend the tourism life cycle of the destination, and at this stage it became particularly important to develop a conscious and suitable decision-making process that could shape the sector in a way that the choices made could be beneficial in the long term. Not only was the rejuvenation of existing tourism resources taken into consideration, but also it was necessary to acknowledge that something more had to be accomplished in order to “reinvent” and “relaunch” Lloret’s tourism sector (Baum, 2006) to build a competitive advantage, and diversification could serve this purpose. In this respect, it should be noted that the interviewees underlined the pivotal importance of the creation of Lloret Turisme, a management body (almost entirely municipally funded) set up in 2001, which has been playing since then a crucial role as a driver for change and a guide for the tourism sector of

this coastal destination. From the planning and coordination to the implementation and supervision of tourism policy, this is the main public organization behind all the actions carried out to better manage, change and improve Lloret de Mar as a tourist destination (Lloret Turisme, n.d.-a), including the efforts made to work on the diversification strategy, demonstrating how significant its establishment has been for the provision of a more precise direction, structure and control of the tourism sector.

Another point often made by the interviewees during the empirical research was the exigency to acknowledge and meet the tastes and needs of a market in constant change, resulting once again in the necessity to adjust, diversify and innovate a sector which was outdated and in need to stay ahead of the competition. A stakeholder working in the accommodation sector pointed out in this regard the important role played by the internet, and the need now more than ever to satisfy and exceed the expectations of the customers, as online opinions and reviews are publicly visible and the suitability of a certain product or service in meeting own tastes can be judged even before the actual visit to the destination.

- “Many different things at the same time happened and they made us say “Okay, we have to change if we want to have a future” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).

4.2.2 Choice of MICE and Sports Tourism

The decision to diversify therefore resulted from the urgent necessity to tackle the several problems that the destination was facing. Multiple factors, alongside market studies, made the destination decide that diversification was an appropriate path to follow, deemed as potentially effective for Lloret de Mar. First of all, the interviewees pointed out the opportunity provided by diversification to offer more varied and higher-value products that could contribute to making the destination more competitive. Both the tourism professionals interviewed and the participants of the focus groups underlined that Lloret de Mar was losing more and more its appeal, as other competing destinations were growing and offering something more unique and of higher quality. Those destinations were not only “next-door neighbours”, but also competitors located thousands of kilometers away. Diversification was therefore seen as an opportunity to help the destination stand out in an oversaturated market and bring a higher-quality tourism. The interviewees acknowledged the suitability of this strategy for seaside destinations relying on a seasonal offer, especially for a mature one like Lloret de Mar which was experiencing a decline stage.

Besides further highlighting and developing cultural and family-related products, the destination decided to diversify specifically into MICE and sports tourism, and this choice was backed by strategic research and market studies from other similar destinations that were already working with those types of segments. In particular, the accommodation sector decided to support this strategy, and its orientation towards these two segments was further explored by means of industry fairs, networking and fundamental information obtained

through hotel partners, public institutions, incoming travel agencies as well as many reports that contributed to the decision-making and implementation process.

These two tourism products were deemed as suitable to diversify into also because they represented a solution in terms of optimization of facilities and resources present in the destination, which would have been otherwise underused during the shoulder and low season. Given the growing importance and advantages of the MICE and sports tourism products, together with the possibility to capitalize on knowledge and facilities that Lloret de Mar already had in part (i.e. meeting rooms, municipal sport facilities, spaces for events etc.), the choice of “venturing” into MICE and sports seemed to be almost natural. Considering the presence of sport facilities and the difficulties for big hotels in reaching their maximum capacity, Lloret de Mar saw this as an opportunity to build quality from something that was there and had potential but needed more structure and the right strategy to bring concrete and successful results to the tourism industry of the destination.

- “The challenge was to create a different tourism model betting for congresses, incentives and leisure” (MICE Manager Assistant, Evenia Hotels).
- “They almost tried to map out what they had, and they were like “Okay, what is going to benefit us in the long run and what do we already have?” (Participant 5, Focus Group 1).

4.3 Building Up the Implementation of the Diversification Strategy

Given the interest and willingness to improve its tourism sector, the destination had to take action in order to make of MICE and sports tourism two strategic products which could have positive impacts on the tourism development of Lloret de Mar. Besides developing and working on other products which today are encompassed under the so-called star product “Urban Beach”, the destination has progressively taken steps to diversify into MICE and sports tourism. The interviewees, who experienced firsthand the progress in development of the diversification strategy, and the participants of the focus groups, who could give useful insights based on what they observed and found out through the involvement with professionals of the sector, provided information that could be grouped into three themes. These delineate how the process was built up and made it possible to successfully diversify Lloret de Mar’s tourism sector, thus leading the coastal town to be formally recognized as a MICE and sports tourism destination.

4.3.1 First Efforts and Initiatives

Before diversification was included in Lloret de Mar forward-looking tourism plans and formally recognized as part of its strategy, the destination was already putting some effort into MICE and sports. However, a common and well-organized strategy for the management and promotion of these two products still needed to be formalized. In this regard, the

interviewees underlined the relevance of the private sector in the whole diversification process, as initiatives put into place by those actors were of primary importance to encourage and give the right push and support to work on these two products at a destination level. Various tourism stakeholders were already working with MICE and sports tourism, realizing the potential that they could have for the destination. For instance, some hotels offered already facilities to cater to the needs of business tourists (i.e. meeting rooms), and some sports facilities were already present in the destination, but, although it is hard to identify exactly when the diversification process started, actual awareness and a common strategy to work on both products were progressively developed once the public sector intervened and firmly recognized the need to implement a diversification process, linked to market segmentation.

- “Stakeholders were working on the MICE and sports segments. For example, the MICE product wasn’t structured, and people didn’t have the view that it was happening, they didn’t know that it was a product. It was like “We have some groups coming, we have a congress going on...”. But that was it. Then we realized that we had to give them a real structure” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).
- “We had corporate groups years ago but with the inauguration of the Olympic Congress Center we started to implement more resources” (MICE Manager Assistant, Evenia Hotels).

Although the destination had already some knowledge in MICE and sports tourism before diversification was officially undertaken, these products were not however aimed at appealing to the same types of customers that Lloret de Mar was usually attracting. This strategy was in fact implemented by taking into account market areas and products which could offer growth potential and benefits to the destination in order to tackle its issues.

4.3.2 Plans

As underlined by the interviewees, although first initiatives came from the private sector, a determinant that pushed further the implementation of the diversification strategy was the Strategic Tourism Plan 2010-2014. Diversification represented in fact an important part of this plan, whose guidelines are still at the base of the work of Lloret Turisme, demonstrating the significant recognition that has been given to this strategy since then. The plan is deemed as a tool to foster and manage the transformation of Lloret de Mar, and if taking a closer look at it, it focused considerably on joint efforts aimed at developing a tourism model encompassing competitiveness and greater diversification. While acknowledging the presence of sports and conference facilities, it also outlined future projects to cater to the needs of MICE and sports segments. More specifically, the operational action plan included a wide variety of programmes aimed at the reconversion and relaunch of the destination, and the development and consolidation of five strategic products was one of them. The plan in fact recognized sport and conferences and meetings as part of Lloret de Mar’s product

portfolio and put emphasis on the need for synergic efforts in order to benefit the tourism development of the destination. Guidelines to reach such objectives and to attempt to overcome the problems that had been affecting the destination for long were provided, confirming what some of the professionals interviewed argued, that is the need to finally give a real structure to these products and make them play a substantial role in Lloret de Mar (Lloret Turisme, 2010).

- “Then they realized that this was the strategy to follow and they put all the money, investment and efforts to try to achieve it” (Tourism Consultant, Universitat de Girona).

The destination wanted to continue in this direction, since results of the relaunch of its life cycle could already be seen. Besides other initiatives to support and strengthen the efforts to change its tourism model and diversify its offer (i.e. seminars, workshops, various projects...), the commitment of Lloret de Mar to become a diversified and highly competitive destination were carried on with the drawing up and implementation of the Lloret de Mar Tourism Reconversion Plan 2015-2020. In this regard, Lloret de Mar can be considered a pioneering destination in Catalonia, as this plan represented an innovative initiative characterized by joint actions between the public and private sector, serving as a pilot plan that can be extended to other mature Catalan destinations (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015).

In line with the objectives set in the Strategic Tourism Plan 2010-2014, the Lloret de Mar Tourism Reconversion Plan 2015-2020 proposes several actions, among which product diversification plays a relevant role. MICE and sports tourism are identified under the category related to the creation and consolidation of three strategic products (Urban Beach, MICE and sport). The strengths of both products and the progress made by Lloret de Mar to become a first-class MICE and sports tourism destination are outlined. Moreover, new goals and projects to be carried out for an improved offer aimed at these segments are delineated (i.e. wider offer of sporting events, creation of new sports facilities and construction of a space capable of hosting large-scale events and congresses etc.) (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015).

4.3.3 Promotion

It is important to note that the plans as well as the interviews highlighted the significant role played by the Lloret Convention Bureau and by the seal that recognizes Lloret de Mar as a sports tourism destination. From the beginning, they represented in fact crucial factors in support of the diversification strategy and they were – and still are – fundamental tools to promote and create opportunities for the further development of Lloret de Mar as a high-quality diversified tourism destination. Both of them aid in the implementation of the

diversification strategy, as they help creating awareness and recognition of Lloret de Mar as a standout destination for the MICE and sports segments.

More precisely, the Lloret Convention Bureau, set up in 2009 as a division of Lloret Turisme with the participation of the private sector, has the significant aims to promote the destination for MICE tourism and provide event organizers and professionals with a wide array of services that range from thorough knowledge of the destination and advice on activities and facilities, to connection with companies and local public entities (Lloret Convention Bureau, n.d.). With regard to sports tourism, a great help in developing and achieving the diversification of Lloret de Mar into this product is provided by the certification that Lloret de Mar obtained by the Catalan Tourism Agency in 2006, which awarded the municipality with the Sports Tourism Destination Seal. This can be regarded, amongst others, as very favorable for the image of Lloret de Mar, as it means that the destination meets the requirements in terms of high-quality services and resources for amateur, elite and professional sportsmen, along with tourists interested in sports activities (Lloret Turisme, n.d.-b). Besides pointing out how essential the Lloret Convention Bureau and the recognition of Lloret de Mar as sports tourism destination are, several interviewees and focus groups participants identified the promotion efforts carried out by both private and public sectors as central in the implementation stage of the diversification process. Beyond promotion performed through social media, specialized magazines and e-mail marketing, supply-side stakeholders involved in MICE and sports tourism, depending on the size and budgets of the tourism organization they are part of, participate regularly in workshops and national and international trade fairs such as IMEX (Worldwide Exhibition for Incentive Travel, Meetings and Events) specifically for the MICE segment, and Bike Show, Expo Sports Outdoor and CMT – Fahrrad & Erlebnisreisen for the sports segment, as well as ITB (Internationale Tourismus-Börse), WTM (World Travel Market) and FITUR (Feria Internacional de Turismo) for both, and many others throughout the year (Lloret Turisme, 2020a) (Appendix C).

Their presence is also significant at multiple presentations and commercial visits as well as other events of different kinds, such the ECM International Conference & General Assembly and ECM Summer School. These last professional events organized by ECM (European Cities Marketing - the association for Tourist Boards, Convention Bureaux and City Marketing Organizations in Europe) are attended by representatives from Lloret Turisme, as underlined by its Head of Marketing, who revealed how interesting it is to participate in them, because they give the opportunity to not only promote Lloret de Mar and learn from other destinations, but also to understand that many of those are going through similar challenges, which help with the generation of new ideas and potential solutions to improve the management of the destination as a whole and of the diversified products in particular. Given the image of Lloret de Mar shaped strongly in the mind of people for long time, as reported previously, the findings revealed that it is hard for the destination to convince even professionals of the sector that Lloret de Mar is undertaking a considerable change. The

efforts to be made are therefore greater and one interviewee underlined that sometimes there is still a firm belief that Lloret de Mar is exactly the same of the past, while in other cases there is more open-mindedness and willingness to understand the steps that the destination has been taking to consolidate its leadership position as a diversified coastal destination.

- “Sometimes you have to go person by person and say one by one “It was like that but now we are different...” You know, it’s a hard work. [...] When we say that we are from Lloret de Mar their question is “Oh, what’s there? Is it still the same?”. So we tell them that “No, we are changing”, but you know it’s funny because when they talk about their cities, they know that their cities are changing but when you talk about Lloret de Mar, they are like “Oh okay Lloret de Mar is still the same” But no! We are doing the same as you are doing in Madrid, in London, obviously in a smaller scale. [...] Some people actually ask and are interested, while others are still convinced about their opinion” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).

The efforts that are being made to increase the awareness that Lloret de Mar is undertaking a transformation and is adapting to a changing environment are also conveyed through public-private collaboration in terms of substantial promotional material, merchandise, on-line and offline communication actions specifically tailored to draw the attention of the MICE and sports tourism segments, complying with the objectives set in the marketing, promotion and sales programme within the framework of the Strategic Tourism Plan as well as the more recent Tourism Reconversion Plan discussed above. An appropriate and effective communication plan is in fact at the base of success and beneficial implications for the destination, and the findings revealed that tourists as well as other potential collaborators involved in MICE and sports tourism, if informed properly, are key when implementing a diversification strategy.

- “For instance, in the campaign that we have now we are also talking about culture, we are talking about sports and MICE [...]” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).

4.4 Implications for Tourism Development

Having recognized the problems that Lloret de Mar has been dealing with and the considerable work done so far to turn the destination into a point of reference on the Mediterranean coast aimed at a competitive tourism model, the interviews and the focus groups proved that the diversification strategy has been an appropriate path to follow. In fact, a wide variety of aspects were discussed, and the author grouped them subsequently into themes which identify the implications of diversification into MICE and sport tourism for the tourism development of Lloret de Mar. As explained in detail, in some cases the results are already evident, while in others the changes take more time and are still underway. Although some minor negative issues cannot be disregarded, it can be noted that

diversification resulted for the most part in beneficial impacts, making it a good opportunity to revitalize and improve the tourism sector of Lloret de Mar.

4.4.1 Wider Offer

Being typically known as a sun-sea-sand destination, thanks to the diversification strategy Lloret de Mar is benefiting considerably in terms of expansion of its product portfolio. Considering that the destination was initially solely focused on beach tourism along with nightlife and party tourism during the summer months and senior tourism in the lower season, the progressive development and success of the MICE and sports tourism products contributed to making this Spanish town a diversified coastal destination, able to provide a comprehensive offer that attracts wider audiences and generate more diversified revenues. In the matter of sports tourism, being recognized as Sports Tourism Destination as mentioned earlier, Lloret de Mar offers the possibility to practice a wide variety of sporting disciplines and it is officially certified for football, athletics, cycling, swimming, team sports and more recently (2019) for triathlon as well (Lloret Turisme, 2020a). Additionally, thanks to the ongoing private-public collaboration, Lloret de Mar offers its long-time expertise to propose the destination as a setting for the organization of events and to provide a strong product that made it become one of the Costa Brava's leading destination for MICE tourism.

- “We figured out that this place which didn't seem worth it, it actually has a lot to offer” (Participant 2, Focus Group 2).

In this regard, the wide offer proposed is an additional opportunity to promote the diversity of the destination and its versatility. In fact, there is a strong willingness to highlight those products that are frequently not taken into account when thinking about Lloret de Mar, and Lloret Turisme is especially taking care of this effort.

- “We want to complement and also highlight something that is here but people don't see, because sometimes when you come here you have just seen the brochures of the Tour Operators, and those focus more on some kind of products, but there are also others which are here but are not mentioned by them” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).

Expanding on this last quote, a point frequently made during the interviews and the focus groups discussions was that of complementarity. The goal of diversification was not in fact to completely eliminate and replace the type of tourism that the destination had been reliant on for a long time, especially because the economic impact derived from it cannot be underestimated. Conversely, the new products offered, without disregarding what was already in the destination, can complement it while helping to decrease to a certain degree the numbers related to the problematic segment of party tourism, showing that Lloret de Mar is more than just parties and beaches.

- “In our promotional campaign we are still talking about beach and about bars and disco, that’s fine, it’s something that we offer and we cannot disregard that, but our job is to say “There are a lot of other things as well...” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).

Beyond the high season, in which the number of MICE and sports tourists is, however, not particularly large and prevents from creating additional crowd, these products are well manageable because the segment of customers that they attract do not clash, but rather complement pretty well with those typically coming out of the main summer months, such as elderly people.

- “[...] As for the low season, we have been focusing more on two groups, that is the seniors and the sports tourism segment, because they can match. If we wanted to focus our strategy on the young partiers, they could not match with the other segments [...] Sports tourism is advantageous because it is complementary. If we have this product in our hotel, it does not imply that we have to say no to the other segments. The rest should also be seniors, couples, families, which can share this space with no issues” (Hotel Manager, Hotel Acapulco).

All the informants stressed frequently the importance of having a diversified portfolio of tourism products, and in the specific case of MICE and sports tourism this entails positive impacts on the seasonal patterns, by which coastal destinations are generally characterized. The lack of tourism activities during the off-season represented in fact a wasted potential for Lloret de Mar, and the diversification into sports and MICE tourism, that do not rely heavily on seasonal fluctuations, has been contributing considerably to the tackling of this issue. As expressed by one of the interviewees, it is not difficult for Lloret de Mar to have people during the summer because of its weather, beaches and multiple activities to do. It is instead much less easy to attract people when some of those selling points cannot be leveraged, and that is when products like MICE and sports play an important role, since those tourists tend to come in lower season when they can engage in their activities while enjoying at the same time a relatively warm weather for a lower price.

- “Lloret de Mar has now, compared to other destinations on the Costa Brava or in other places, a long season and it’s something that happens thanks to the efforts made with this kind of products, which help us to lengthen the season, so it’s very interesting for us to develop them more and more” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).

This is also confirmed by the statistics which show, for instance, that most sports tourists in Lloret de Mar in 2019 came in the month of April (11.254), and even in very low season months such as December (3.045), January (1.235) and February (1.951) the numbers were

higher compared to those registered in August (363), which usually records the largest number of tourists of the whole year, demonstrating the beneficial contribution of this segment to deseasonalization (Lloret Turisme, 2020a). The same can be said for MICE tourism as well, given that conferences, meetings and other business-related events are spread throughout the year.

This implies the optimization of several facilities as well as better employment opportunities: with more tourists coming off season, a higher number of hotels are open and other businesses (i.e. travel agencies, event organizers, restaurants, transportation providers etc.) can count on additional revenue which could not be obtained if diversification was not implemented. As pointed out during one interview, in Spain a seasonal worker is required by law to work a minimum of 6 months in order to be eligible to get financial help from the state in case of unemployment in the remaining months. The city has successfully lengthen the season and instead of having a 4 to 6-month season, several establishments in Lloret de Mar can now work up to 8 months or even more, and in a city mainly reliant on tourism this can also be considered as a meaningful economic and socio-cultural implication of diversification, since more families can count on a continuous financial security, reducing the struggles caused by seasonal jobs. It should also be noted that many hotels in Lloret de Mar are family-run, thus meaning that most of them are not able to relocate their Staff in other hotels during the low season, like hotel chains can do. As a result, diversifying into MICE or sport was deemed as a good opportunity for some of them.

- “We are in total about 50 team workers, there are 50 families depending from our work. So, our staff is our family and we want the best for our family, and we always try to be open at least for 6 months. Having guests like sports tourists coming in low season is a great opportunity” (Hotel Manager, Hotel Acapulco).

Moreover, another interesting point that was made refers to the linkages and synergies that can result between the products that Lloret de Mar diversified into as well as with other ones developed in the destination, such as the cultural product. For instance, typical activities taking place during MICE events can be mixed with some dynamic sports activities when it comes to teambuilding or even only when those business travelers have free time. People coming from Northern European countries, as discussed in an interview, are particularly passionate about sports activities in open air and appreciate them a lot besides the networking part, and Lloret de Mar can cater to this need thanks to its wide sports offer (i.e. kayaking, hiking etc.). Furthermore, Lloret Turisme is currently planning to strengthen the promotion of the product “MICE & sport” with initiative such as specialized workshops.

It can be therefore noted that, as much as the products offered within the destination may be different, complementarities and linkages can still be found, in order to provide a comprehensive and cohesive offer.

4.4.2 Generation of Collaboration

A theme emerged from one of the most highlighted aspects in the interviews and in the focus group discussions was the importance of the role played by collaboration in the diversification process, without which the destination would have not been able to achieve the results that can be noticed today. The findings revealed that collaboration among private and public stakeholders in Lloret de Mar was essential to foster the continuous development of the MICE and sports tourism products. Furthermore, the realization that the diversification strategy is undoubtedly working for the destination stimulates further cooperation as well as new partnerships and initiatives that make a great contribution to the ongoing development and promotion of Lloret de Mar as a leading MICE and sports destination. The tourism professionals working in the public sector underlined the importance of having a private sector that is willing to collaborate and support the strategy put into place by the destination management. On the other side, all the stakeholders interviewed who are part of the private sector emphasized that a non-stop collaboration with the public sector is the basis to improve their own business alongside the tourism industry of the destination as a whole. More specifically, they all underlined that the public sector in Lloret de Mar is particularly helpful when it comes to listening to them, which results in a positive relationship that is key for the successful growth that they have been experiencing. The fact that things have been changing for the better motivated these stakeholders to not “row against the current”, but rather follow the direction suggested by the public sector, including the strategy of diversification.

- “I think that collaboration is basic. It’s essential that private and public sectors need to collaborate. So in this sense, I am personally involved in the public with the Mayor and Lloret Turisme, and some representatives of different sectors (shops, gastronomy, other hotels). We are working together and now things are improving, and we need to keep collaborating because in our city the major activity, almost 80%, is tourism. So, there is no reason to not work together” (Hotel Manager, Hotel Acapulco).
- “You can do a destination of MICE and sport, which they are doing very very well, but if the private sector is not with you, it’s very difficult” (Tourism Consultant, Universitat de Girona).
- “We have a very close collaboration and it is essential” (MICE Manager Assistant, Evenia Hotels).
- “Thanks to the management and promotion of MICE and sports tourism in Lloret there is a big change and much collaboration” (MICE Manager Assistant, Evenia Hotels).
- “There is very good collaboration and I think that is one of the keys to the successful growth we are having” (Commercial Director, L’Azure Hotel).

The major part of the stakeholders is trusting this process and is in line with this strategy, given the numerous benefits that it can lead to. The collaboration enhanced thanks to the

diversification on which the destination has focused is also reflected, with regard to MICE tourism, in the participation of private sector companies as members of the Lloret Convention Bureau, and in relation to sports tourism, in the recognition of several private stakeholders as being certified for sports tourism by the Catalan Tourism Agency. Respectively, to date a total of approximately 50 tourism-related companies are members of the Lloret Convention Bureau (i.e. hotels, congress centres, transportation providers, specialized agencies, restaurants etc.), and 14 hotels and 2 specialized agencies are certified for sports tourism alongside 15 hotels and 1 incoming agency holding cyclotourism certification (Lloret Turisme, 2020a).

- “I think that a big part of the sector is following us” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).
- “The major part of the stakeholders is in line with this strategy” (Hotel Manager, Hotel Acapulco).
- “I think that everyone wants to go to those types of markets, because then it’s the best for everybody” (Product Manager, Sportcontact).

The findings outlined that diversification was a good starting point and encouraged stakeholder engagement, with Lloret Turisme making strong efforts to reach out to as many stakeholders as possible and try to get them engaged. It is also important to mention that developing Lloret de Mar as a diversified destination also strengthened its participation in collaborative projects, such as the Olot-Girona-Lloret project, set up in 2016. This is an alliance aimed at creating a common product among these three municipalities that encompasses the mountain, the city and the sea in order to promote the specialization of each of them in different MICE segments and leverage the complementarities and synergies to emphasize the province as a MICE tourism destination (OGL Meetings, n.d.).

From an outside perspective, most of the participants of the focus groups shared the perception of a good public-private collaboration among the stakeholders they engaged with, confirming what was claimed by the interviewees. Although the possibility of having been presented with some of the most collaborative stakeholders within the destination was pointed out, the discussions revealed that the willingness to work together and achieve common goals was perceived. The participants noticed that the passion for what the tourism stakeholders are doing, and the additional motivation generated by seeing that some objectives have already been reached, make many of them acknowledge the importance of working as a cohesive team, which is key for further improvement.

- “To us, it looked like they stand up as one team and they create something unique” (Participant 6, Focus Group 1).
- “You could perceive that there was good communication between the tourism management of the city and, for instance, the Hotel Managers” (Participant 5, Focus Group 3).

- “It seemed that they are actually trying to build a community, a network and to make everything work” (Participant 4, Focus Group 3).
- “I was really surprised by the collaboration that they had. At the beginning I thought that it was just chaos and nothing was happening, but afterwards I realized that there was a lot of collaboration” (Participant 4, Focus Group 2).

Although many stakeholders are in line with the strategic decisions made by the destination management and are satisfied with the diversification as well as with the overall tourism model that Lloret de Mar is pursuing, a part of them does not agree with this strategy. In particular, the informants acknowledged that the stakeholders involved in businesses related to party and nightlife are not happy with the path that Lloret de Mar is following. Although many young people still come to party to Lloret over the summer, the tendency is decreasing, and the numbers of people received by venues such as discos are diminishing. This makes them feel unsatisfied with how the destination is now managed and excluded by the overall vision of the destination, creating tensions and clashes. Even if the destination management is not completely disregarding this part of the private sector, the goal sharing is in this case much more difficult to achieve. Additionally, some other stakeholders show no interest in changing their targets and collaborating on the diversification strategy, since they are content with the economic results that they have and do not experience particular problems with this segment. Therefore, they do not feel the need to change and collaborate for a project that they do not completely share.

4.4.3 Upgrade

The need to provide adequate services and facilities to cater to the needs of the MICE and sports tourism segments further encouraged a process of upgrade started years ago and still going on nowadays. The accommodation sector, in particular, has been making a lot of efforts to renovate and adapt its offer to the needs of the current demand, considering how poor-quality the service was and how obsolete and outdated many buildings were before a change of mentality started to arise. The significant investments made resulted in a considerable increase in the offer of four- and five-star hotels, confirmed by the data of the Hotel Trade Association of Lloret de Mar, through which it can be noted that the destination has currently 4 five-star hotels, 10 four-star-superior hotels, and 41 four-star hotels. If these numbers are compared for instance to those of 2007, the difference is evident: 1 five-star hotel, no four-star-superior hotels, 21 four-star hotels back then (Lloret Turisme, 2020a).

As mentioned before, some hotels adjusted specifically their offer to meet the needs of MICE tourists and sportsmen, as demonstrated by those that are members of the Lloret Convention Bureau and the ones certified for sports tourism. In these cases, the services offered are particularly adapted to these segments, offering for instance meeting or conference rooms, spaces equipped for events as well as services that comply with requirements of athletes (i.e. specific menus, schedule flexibility etc.). One of the interviewees pointed out that, since

2012, the hotel for which he works has been undertaking changes to keep up with trends and increase its competitiveness. Its category changed from three to four stars, and, more recently, the diversification strategy into sports tourism gave the opportunity to this family-run hotel to open its doors to this new segment and deal with triathlon and football teams, as well as cyclists and other types of athletes. Additional investment has been recently made in this hotel, now certified for sports tourism, and adjustments also aim to suit the needs of sports tourists – cyclists in particular: facilities have been remodeled to provide a gym, a massage area, a room to store bikes, along with customized changes in the menu according to the dietary needs of the athletes. The hotels in which other interviewees work have also progressively undertaken refurbishments to offer quality services and facilities for tourists coming to Lloret de Mar because of business or sport. One of them in particular, L’Azure Hotel, represents a concrete evidence of significant transformation and upgrade from being considered an extremely low-quality hotel (described as one of the worst hotels in Spain by Bild, the German tabloid newspaper), to a new concept of hotel which can compete with some of the best. Some interviews revealed that this hotel (whose previous name was H Top Gran Casino Royal), although being in a central and advantageous location just beside the bus station, had very bad reviews, low-quality food and it was selling low-cost all-inclusive packages. Fully renovated, it will offer now a completely different experience and it will seize the opportunity to welcome MICE tourists by providing suitable services and facilities, such as a 600m² venue to organize events.

Although not all tourism actors acknowledge the need to invest, follow the trends and upgrade their offer, the change of mentality has been expanding over time in Lloret de Mar, and many stakeholders see that the benefits produced by supporting diversification and the overall tourism strategy could be of advantage both for them and for the city and its tourism sector overall. The interviewees therefore underlined the virtuous circle generated within the destination: some stakeholders, that initially wanted to stay the same and did not agree with the strategy undertaken, decided eventually to change and admitted that following this kind of direction leads to many beneficial effects. Besides offering specialized services for MICE and sports tourism, several hotels also moved to “adults only”, appreciating the gains in terms of profit, image, type of target as well as the good done for the city itself. Both focus groups and interviews put emphasis on one specific case, namely Hotel Delamar, close to the beach and in the middle of the main nightlife area. It was completely remodeled in 2016 and it implemented many transformations successfully, which made it obtain, amongst others, the award as “Travellers Choice Hotel” by TripAdvisor and the seal for cyclotourism. The Hotel Delamar marked a turning point in the private sector’s commitment to the revitalization of Lloret de Mar’s tourism sector and inspired many other stakeholders to start thinking differently and choose what is best in the long term. By observing that the investments and improvements are working and bringing good results in the competitors, more and more hotels are then encouraged to switch their own mindset and gain competitiveness.

- “A lot of hotels had very old buildings and they are trying to modernize. Delamar is one of them and also Gran Hotel Flamingo changed a lot of stuff as well. Very different hotels are trying to offer a better service. And then you can see that it is working because for example Delamar last year was pretty busy. This will be positive for everybody and the customers will be happier as well” (Product Manager, Sportcontact).
- “Its strategy worked and now a lot of hotels are doing the same, because they see that they can raise prices, they can lengthen the season, so they understand that it’s something that is worth” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).
- “I felt like the hotel was an amazing oasis in the middle of the party area and we couldn’t believe when we walked in” (Participant 5, Focus Group 1).
- “There are still some hotels which are not improving and investing in their offer, they are not taking care of this revitalization, but the major part (70-80%) is not acting like this, because we know that our guests now do not expect the same of 5 or 10 years ago” (Hotel Manager, Hotel Acapulco).

Besides the upgrade of the accommodation sector, characterized by an increasing number of hotels putting now quality over quantity, differentiating themselves from the others and increasing their prices, much has been invested in terms of public and private sports facilities, as well as conference centres. With the strengthening of diversification, more importance has been in fact given to the construction and improvement of sports facilities and equipment. Lloret de Mar can in fact currently count on numerous municipality sports services, such as 3 football fields, a municipal athletics track, 3 sports pavilions, tennis and padel courts, a municipal Olympic swimming pool as well as open water swimming. Not only has the growing importance of this segment led to the further development of Lloret de Mar’s sports facilities, which have also the advantage of being located in the heart of the city, but also it has generated collaboration between this destination and the Blanes Sports Complex (located in Blanes, a town nearby) for the use of this big sports pavilion. As regards MICE tourism, besides the increasing number of meeting rooms being offered to meet the demand of this market, new facilities opened in 2010 and to date 3 conference centres (Costa Brava Conference Centre, Lloret Theatre and Olympic Conference Centre) allow a wide variety of possibilities to hold events of different kinds (Lloret Turisme, 2020a).

As pointed out in the focus groups, all these improvements and upgrades may not be immediately visible in the eyes of all types of tourists visiting the destination, making the process of recognizing that Lloret de Mar is actually undertaking transformations slow. Nevertheless, although the changes are gradual and the shift of mentality takes time, the abovementioned results can already be regarded as proofs that the diversification strategy carried out in Lloret de Mar is contributing to the rejuvenation of the destination.

4.4.4 Better Targets Attracted

If counting those tourists who made use of municipal sports facilities, in 2019 the destination welcomed 61.229 visitors linked to sports tourism, of which 38.456 were athletes and 22.773 accompanying people. Furthermore, more than 25.000 tourists involved in the MICE sector come to Lloret in average per year because of meetings, congresses, conventions, festivals etc. (Lloret Turisme, 2020a). Although the destination's largest numbers of visitors are still mainly connected to the sun-sea-sand tourism products during the summer season, these two markets are gaining a larger share year after year, meaning that their influence and implications for the destination are increasing.

Compared to the party tourism segment on which the destination focused in the past and that, as explained before, contributed to an unsustainable development of its tourism sector, by currently focusing on attracting also MICE and sports tourists, a better and more sustainable tourism model is advocated and more beneficial effects are created. The information gathered showed in fact that the characteristics of these types of tourists enable the destination to work towards a tourism of higher quality. Most of the interviewees pointed out that the destination realized that these kinds of clients have better behavior patterns and are of great advantage overall. In the first place, MICE tourists are deemed as optimal for Lloret de Mar, since they generally come off season and during the week, stay in four- or five-star hotels because their companies provide for them, they are involved during the day in business events or other activities, and they normally have a higher purchasing power, thus having the tendency to spend money on complementary services. Sports tourists are also engaged in their activities for most of the day, willing to spend money afterwards in the destination to relax and enjoy their stay. The interviewees additionally underlined that this latter segment is also important in view of the fact that it aligns with the current trends related to the growing importance attributed to physical activity and healthy lifestyle. In particular, Lloret de Mar is also working on a project focused on gastronomy and well-being, and within this, a specific programme is being developed to combine gastronomy and sports tourism and facilitate particular offer for athletes in specialized establishments. According to what outlined in the interviews, many belonging to this type of tourism are still young people, but they are clearly healthier and give a better image of the destination.

The findings also made it clear that, given the higher-quality services required and the higher purchasing power distinguishing both of these target markets, the sale of cheap packages offering full board treatment for an average of 25 euro decreases, leading to a better pricing policy that aims at attracting a different kind of customer and reducing the dependence on those tour operators that brings in young people only interested in partying. However difficult especially during the summer, the destination management together with an increasing number of hotels put strict rules and fines to better regulate and control this segment, in order to either oblige it to stick to the rules or discourage it from coming.

- “[...] You can say “look, if you come, you need to follow these rules”. And you can put very strict rules, for example not drinking in the street, no more than 4 people in one room and things like this and you have to put fines. And if you fine some of your clients, they would say “we don’t want to go there, they are too strict. We go to Magaluf, to Mallorca, or to Salou or to Benidorm”. So, you move them away” (Tourism Consultant, Universitat de Girona).

4.4.5 Visibility and Awareness

Besides the important role played by marketing and communication actions in promoting Lloret de Mar as a destination offering MICE and sports tourism products, as outlined in the previous section related to implementation, thanks to the high number of MICE and sporting events taking place throughout the year the destination can benefit from increased visibility and awareness. The expertise gained over time with MICE tourism is demonstrated by the many events, meetings, conferences, conventions and incentive trips organized and hosted yearly in Lloret de Mar. Some of the interviewees mentioned an event which was particularly important to raise awareness of Lloret de Mar as a destination that offers more than beach and nightlife. In 2015 Lloret de Mar hosted in fact TBEX Europe 2015, the world conference for travel bloggers, influencers and travel industry professionals. 700 participants and 50 speakers from 39 countries attended this big event (Costa Brava Girona Convention Bureau, n.d.) and it is easily understandable how this represented a great opportunity for the destination to show its qualities and become known around the world, considering the participation of online travel content creators. During one interview, the importance of this event was particularly underlined for the positive implications that it had for the reputation and image of the destination, since a lot was written and shown about Lloret de Mar. Sporting events also play a crucial role in enhancing the visibility of the destination. 446 sports activities such as tournaments, competitions and other kinds of events took place in Lloret de Mar in 2019 (Lloret Turisme, 2020a), among which Globasket, Gran Fondo Lloret Costa Brava, Night Trail Lloret and many others (Appendix C). Additionally, some interviews highlighted in particular the “MIC” Football and Basketball (Mediterranean International Cup), well-known Spanish youth football and basketball tournaments.

All this kind of events that Lloret de Mar hosts represent a good means for the destination to be recognized as a reference point for sports and MICE, as well as show its cultural and natural aspects and enhance its image as diversified year-round destination. What is also very relevant of them is that the participants experience the destination as a whole and they can be a good source of word of mouth.

- “Sometimes we have here 200-400 people that are part of an event, but they are also individuals, so when they go home, they talk about it, they help a lot to share” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).

The combination between MICE and sports has been advanced by Lloret de Mar with the willingness to develop and promote the “MICE & Sport” product, which can also see its reflection in events such as the Tour de MICE, which was hosted in October 2019 and offered the experience of linking networking with cycling. In addition to this, 2020 was declared Sports Tourism Year by the Catalan Agency of Tourism and Lloret de Mar was selected to host the UNWTO World Sports Tourism Congress, initially scheduled for May 2020 but postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, some interviewees underlined that this event would be a great promotion for Lloret de Mar and extremely beneficial for the destination to raise awareness and show the results of the efforts that have been made so far at a destination level and aimed at MICE and sports products in particular, enabling also to reach different markets at the same time. This event was also considered by one of the stakeholders interviewed as a good moment to “bring to the table” a new product that has been developed by the company he works in, as it would give the opportunity to have the attention of everybody and obtain visions, opinions and potential clients for it.

- “I think that this kind of events are important to us, they are international events and they help us with other markets, so not only the Spanish, the French...and it’s difficult to actually go to every market to raise awareness of the destination. We have an important budget but if you want to cover every market it’s never enough...so we have to allocate a little bit here, a little bit there. But sometimes with this kind of events we have many people at the same time, either 200 or 2000, and this helps a lot” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).

All in all, the findings therefore revealed that the efforts made and the resources used to hold MICE and sporting events in Lloret de Mar successfully contributed to raise awareness, in different markets, of the destination as a strong place to both visit and choose as location to organize an event. This is confirmed by the rich events calendars that Lloret de Mar is able to propose year after year and that eventually help the destination to demonstrate that it is a coastal town that can go beyond the typical 3S tourism model.

4.4.6 Destination Image in Transition

The experts interviewed and the participants of the focus groups outlined the effects that the diversification into MICE and sports tourism is having on the destination image. As explained in the first section of the analysis, Lloret de Mar has been suffering for long from a bad reputation mainly caused by the party tourism segment and removing such an established image from the mind of people is not easy. The characteristics of the MICE and sports tourism segments delineated earlier contribute to the improvement of the destination image in the sense that they help the destination shifting from its perception of cheap place of fun. In particular, in the case of sports tourism, this helps Lloret de Mar conveying a healthier image of the destination. The perception of Lloret de Mar that goes beyond parties and offers good sports opportunities seems to be well accepted by sports tourists.

Conversely, the findings revealed that with regard to MICE tourism, the situation is more complicated, but once the destination is visited and MICE products tested, the changes and professionalism are felt, and the perceptions improve. Moreover, the work done to change the image seems to be more acknowledged in Spain than in other European countries, where opinions are more mixed. One interviewee underlined that tourism professionals from Catalonia in particular, probably because they see the message as much closer to them, show slight stronger recognition of the transformations that Lloret de Mar is undertaking. However, a participant of the focus groups coming from Catalonia argued that this is not always the case if considering locals and tourists from the same region who, unlike experts working in the industry that know better what the destination management is doing, still hold most of the times negative perceptions about Lloret de Mar. When it comes to destination image, social networks play a very relevant role and another tourism professional interviewed, referring to that, explained that a recent study showed that the number of mentions of Disco Tropics (a big and famous nightclub in Lloret de Mar, a sort of destination within the destination) in social media like Instagram and Twitter, despite still being the most recurring ones, have decreased over the years, proving that the perception of the destination is gradually undergoing a slight change.

Although Lloret de Mar is trying to change its image and some results can be visible, one interviewee pointed out that once a destination develops a certain bad reputation, it is extremely difficult to change it quickly, as the process may be very long. As a consequence, if many things are done in the right way and even one only negative episode occurs, people tend to remember that one bad thing because of preconceived images. The interviewee provided the example of an incident related to a fight occurred in Girona and one in Lloret de Mar, emphasizing that the one happened in the coastal town would be in all newspapers, compared to that of Girona, which would be barely reported. This further demonstrates that the process is very long and that it is not fully achieved yet.

- “They are doing very well, the image is changing, although it is not a thing that changes in one day” (Tourism Consultant, Universitat de Girona).

In addition to this, the participants of the focus groups provided contrasting opinions regarding the image that they had before and after visiting the destination. The images present in their mind before going to Lloret de Mar were already delineated previously. The discussions then revealed that, once visiting the destination, some participants changed their image about Lloret de Mar, while others did not, taking also into consideration that their visit did not take place during the summer peak months. Some of them pointed out that seeing how diversified the offer of the destination was, positively influenced their perception, especially due to the fact that they were informed about the work that is being done and presented with the products and related initiatives on which the destination is focusing its diversification strategy. Others argued that they had a neutral image of Lloret de Mar as an average sun-sea-sand destination, while additional different perceptions

referred to the destination as looking cheap in some of its parts, thus not leaving a positive visual impression.

- “It’s not actually that bad at all for me, but then it’s also possibly because we went there and it was not particularly high season” (Participant 1, Focus Group 3).
- “For me, it’s still kind of neutral. It started kind of neutral, and also after the trip I still feel neutral about it” (Participant 1, Focus Group 2).
- “I think I changed my perception a couple of times... from not having any perception, to negative, to something more positive” (Participant 3, Focus Group 2).
- “I think that the extremely negative perception that I was introduced to by other people was not really how I have perceived it after the field trip. I felt like the destination has done some big changes and that it will continue with them” (Participant 4, Focus Group 2).
- “Our perception also changed because we got to experience different activities” (Participant 2, Focus Group 2).
- “I experienced the sports products but some time ago, but actually even at that time they were pretty well developed and then going there last year and seeing again the establishments, everything they had done more, I think they are pretty well developed in terms of sport” (Participant 4 – Focus Group 3).

It should be mentioned that a potential risk derived from offering diversified products in the destination is a certain degree of confusion that can develop in people’s mind, and this issue was identified by the focus groups as well. As pointed out earlier, the destination does not want to eliminate completely its party tourism segment, and it is now in a moment of change, seeking to reduce the negative influence of this segment on the destination image, but at the same time trying to find a balance. The fact of keeping everything can therefore create some confusion, as discussed by some participants of the focus groups. A comparison with Niagara Falls was made by one of them, highlighting that the big signs, flashy lights and nightlife attractions present in the main avenue leading to the beach of Lloret de Mar resemble the cheap-looking main strip towards the majestic waterfall, which creates a sense of disorientation. Additionally, the mixture of fancy hotels, fast food restaurants, renovated infrastructures and old buildings can be very confusing from the tourist perspective, who would not completely understand which direction the destination is following.

- “We are now in a moment of change, so we are still keeping everything you know... It’s a long-term strategy. [...] We are in a moment in which we still try to balance everything. So sometimes it’s more difficult because you have groups of sports and MICE, and just next to them there is a group of young people...” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).
- “That’s why in the end the whole image is so confusing and kind of just spoilt” (Participant 6, Focus Group 1).

- “[...] It is such an upscale hotel and then you step out and it’s like cheap. It’s just a bit jarring and I was not surprised when the person was saying that a lot of people just go there to relax, stay in the room and in the resort itself and some people don’t even venture out” (Participant 3, Focus Group 1).
- “That doesn’t leave a positive visual impression of the destination” (Participant 3, Focus Group 1).
- “The main street looks very cheap, with fast food restaurants and stuff. So, when you have a hotel which is in line with the vision and that is doing something, that completely goes along with the line that they want, still when you go out of the hotel you just go back to reality” (Participant 2, Focus Group 1).

Despite the potential destination image improvement that the diversification into MICE and sports tourism can lead to, it is important to note that not always it is known about the work that is being done, especially because it is not immediately visible when visiting the destination, meaning that from a tourist’s point of view the change may not be immediately noticeable.

- “The most noticeable changes that we could see as tourists are the visual ones, and there weren’t that many of them” (Participant 2, Focus Group 1).

Therefore, it follows that it is still quite difficult to measure to what degree the destination image has been actually subject to a transition. However, the stakeholders interviewed recognized the contribution of the MICE and sports tourism products to the enhancement of the image of Lloret de Mar, pointing out that the process is long and still underway. The perceptions are more likely to change once visiting the destination and experiencing the professionalism characterizing the tourism sector and its wide offer, as emphasized during both the interviews and the focus group discussions. Either in a direct way or because of the consequences and changes that the diversification into MICE or sports is generating, it can be concluded that the image is one of the aspects that the diversification strategy is affecting to a greater or lesser extent.

4.4.7 Competitive Advantage

For a coastal destination like Lloret de Mar, which is located on a coast particularly rich in a large number of tourism destinations, it is very relevant to build competitive advantage in order to stand out in a market that offers many substitutes. MICE and sports tourism products are deemed in this regard as suitable to contribute to the increase in competitiveness, and the interviews and focus group sessions provided information on how Lloret de Mar has been able to capitalize on them to provide a diversified and specialized offer. The diversification into MICE and sports tourism incentivized the destination to further leverage on its existing resources and attributes, while improving at the same time its features and making new investments with the aim to gain competitive advantage over its competitors which, as

pointed out earlier, are not necessarily only those on the Costa Brava, but can also be thousands of kilometers away.

According to what the interviews and the focus groups underlined, Lloret de Mar recognized its strengths to become a first-class MICE and sports destination and was able to use them as unique selling points, which in turn benefit the tourism development of the destination as a whole. The findings revealed that what makes Lloret de Mar a competitive destination for sports tourism, apart from its strategic location and good infrastructures, is the possibility to walk everywhere without the necessity to take any transportation to reach the sports area, since it is located in the centre of the city, very close to both the beach and the hotels. It is therefore very convenient to organize a sporting event there, as it involves lower costs and less time wasted. Moreover, lower prices compared to nearby destinations (i.e. Girona, Barcelona) make it more appealing, not to mention the Mediterranean climate and the beach at hand, which are especially good selling points for the people from the Northern countries who do not have sun during the whole year, are very sporty and have normally higher spending power, allowing Lloret de Mar to take advantage of these destination's features to attract them.

- "For me what makes it so special and it is a good selling point at least, is that you have very good infrastructures next to the beach and the hotel. You can walk to go anywhere" (Product Manager, Sportcontact).
- "Our location is great, we are about 400 meters away from the beach and also from the athletics stadium in Lloret de Mar, so it's a good place for them to rest at our hotel" (Hotel Manager, Hotel Acapulco).
- "Something that I remember that they pointed out, a very big strength is that it is a small place, so the facilities for sports and hotels are very close. As a result, you cut down a lot of costs. You got a lot of it in a very small physical space, and you still have the sea, the nature, and you are close to Barcelona so you can still visit it, but you have amenities and facilities for a lower price" (Participant 2, Focus Group 1).

In relation to MICE tourism as well, the same features were pointed out as crucial in providing competitive advantage. However, in addition to those already mentioned, the diversification into MICE gives the possibility to the destination to show its competitiveness in terms of heritage offer, meeting and conference infrastructures, teambuilding and incentive activities and other strengths which are also highlighted in the video "The top 10 reasons to organise your event in Lloret de Mar" created by Lloret Turisme.

Another point made by some of the interviewees and emerged also in the focus group discussions referred to the fact that both the public and private sector really strive to provide customized products and services tailored to the needs of MICE and sports tourism, which helps the destination gaining additional competitive advantage. Compared to other destinations, especially where the demand is particularly high and the single specific

requirements and desires are not considered much and taken care of meticulously, the supply of Lloret de Mar is exceptionally cooperative and ready to find solutions for special requests that each of the customer may have, meeting many desires at one time and providing diversified activities.

- “We have to adapt our offer as much as possible to the needs of our customers. Our decisions have to be in line with what they ask for every time” (Hotel Manager, Hotel Acapulco).
- “So, the advantage that we have is that we have always solutions for special requests. For example, if they ask me for a football tournament on these dates, as we have multiple range of providers, we can give them this package that not everybody can give. Let’s say something more customized” (Product Manager, Sportcontact).
- “I don’t think that there’s anything more valuable than having a supply, in this case Lloret, being cooperative with you. It would be nice to go to Barcelona but you have a budget and if you have specific requirements, usually places like Barcelona, Madrid, Berlin, those big cities have lots of demands and they don’t care about your requirements that much, but if you go to Lloret they are trying to be super cooperative” (Participant 1, Focus Group 1).

On top of all this, the skills and professionalism of the tourism sector and the historic hospitality that distinguish Lloret de Mar further contribute to making the MICE and sports tourism products stand out and enhance the competitiveness of the destination, which in turn also leads to Lloret de Mar being chosen among many competitors for several important MICE and sporting events thanks to its experience.

- “We will host the UNWTO World Sports Tourism Congress, and this kind of events are important to us, because we are chosen to do that. Sometimes we are competing with some other bigger and important cities and nevertheless we are the one being selected. [...] I think that’s because of the experience we have, I mean, we have been working for the tourism sector for such a long time” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).
- “Now we have the luck here in Lloret that the private sector is very professional. You know, maybe in other destinations is not the case, but people here instead are so professional that they help us, which increases our competitiveness” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).
- “We always say that what we can do, we DO. We don’t promise something and then don’t keep it” (Hotel Manager, Hotel Acapulco).

The findings therefore demonstrated that the diversification into MICE and sports tourism contributes to the increase in Lloret de Mar’s competitiveness. By capitalizing on the unique selling points of the destination, the customized products and services offered and the

professionalism of the tourism sector, the public and private efforts and investments provide a competitive advantage over other destinations with similar features.

- “If you just go to destinations next to Lloret de Mar, you have plenty of destinations where there are hotels. But where you have the most services and the most different options and hotels is in Lloret de Mar. Then that’s where the people get more competitive and where you get the best for your money. Because there are that many people fighting in the same place that they have to get better or lower the price” (Product Manager, Sportcontact).
- “[...] Now Lloret is a very powerful place” (Tourism Consultant, Universitat de Girona).

All the actions put into place and the implications of diversification for the tourism development of the destination outlined throughout the analysis facilitate the strengthening of a competitive tourism model which gives the opportunity to Lloret de Mar to reconvert and restructure its offer and better compete at a national and international level.

4.5 Future Outlook

The destination has been working now for quite some time on the diversification strategy and the interviewees and focus groups participants have been asked about how this process will keep developing in the future based on their knowledge and perspectives, and how it will contribute to the further tourism development of the destination, taking especially into consideration the situation of great uncertainty caused by COVID-19. As a result, two main themes were identified which encompass their views on potential future scenarios for MICE and sports tourism products as contributors to the diversified tourism sector of Lloret de Mar.

4.5.1 Need for Ongoing Effort and Innovation

The interviewees underlined that, given the benefits that the diversification strategy into MICE and sports tourism has brought to the destination so far, efforts to further develop and consolidate these two products are expected and hoped. Some of them mentioned that new projects are underway with regard to both MICE and sports tourism products (i.e. new women’s football tournament). Moreover, all the stakeholders showed great willingness to keep improving these products and collaborating with the tourism actors of the area. The interviews highlighted that what is particularly important is the need to be dedicated to this strategy and improve year after year, keeping in mind that this is a long-term strategy that requires a forward-thinking vision and needs to take into account the trends, the changing environment and the possibility that adjustments may be necessary at any time in order to stay ahead of the competition, because something that works now may not work in the future and will need to be modified consequently. Although many things should have been done

differently in the past, it is crucial to focus on the present and on what can be done to improve even more the future, as emphasized by one of the interviewees.

- “I think that for us and also for the private sector they are two very important products so we will keep working on them. Diversification was and still is an effective strategy for Lloret de Mar, so it’s going to be a long strategy and we have so good results now, and we also expect that this will persist in the future” (Head of Marketing, Lloret Turisme).
- “We plan on expanding marketing efforts for these products, as these are key segments for us” (Commercial Director, L’Azure Hotel).
- “I don’t want to lose my time thinking “But what should have been done 30-50 years ago? It’s no sense. We are here, we are now, we have to deal with this situation right now” (Hotel Manager, Hotel Acapulco).

Additionally, the findings also revealed the necessity to further innovate and take risks in order for these products to keep growing and bringing benefits to the destination. The market offers many opportunities, but it is essential sometimes to take bigger risks than usual. One interviewee pointed out the need to not stay in the comfort zone even when things are currently working, rather to progress, adapt, work on new products, look for new clients and not rely only on those that have always come as they can suddenly shift their choice if someone else gives them a better offer.

4.5.2 COVID-19

The unprecedented situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the tourism sector and for a coastal destination like Lloret de Mar, whose economy is mainly reliant on tourism, the challenges are numerous and complex. Considering that a scenario like this never occurred before, the prompt responses from the destination management are of primary importance together with the collaboration of all the stakeholders of the public and private sector, in order to save the summer season as much as possible, help the sector to recover and be prepared for a future which is still uncertain.

After months with no business, Lloret de Mar’s hotels, restaurants and shops reopened, and the destination made intensive efforts in order to ensure that all necessary COVID-19 safety measures were established. In the time frame between the start of the lockdown in Spain in mid-March and the official end of the “state of alarm” on 21st June 2020, Lloret de Mar put into place many actions to support the tourism sector and the citizens. Among them, it is worth mentioning the digital campaign “Let’s share Lloret from home” launched with the aim to show that the destination was looking forward to welcoming back its tourists soon (Lloret Turisme, 2020b), as well as a four-stage comprehensive plan of prevention measures to prepare the destination for the summer season 2020 carried out by a work team composed of multiple stakeholders (i.e. Lloret Town Council, Lloret Turisme, travel agencies,

representatives of leisure and nightlife companies and of tourism workers etc.), in order to discuss action areas such as workers training, management and measures for public spaces, tourist accommodation, restaurants and bars, nightlife venues, leisure activities and many others (Lloret Turisme, 2020c).

Considering how quickly the situation evolves, at the time when the interviews took place, the interviewees did not know what exactly was going to happen, and they showed both concerns and hopes. Additionally, it was pointed out how easily influenced the tourism sector is and how fast it needs to respond and adapt to the changes, especially now like never before. The MICE and sports tourism products have been inevitably affected by this pandemic and the destination needs to rethink of how to manage and adjust them in the best way possible. In this regard, the focus groups discussed possible scenarios and perspectives on how the destination will have to deal with these products in order to keep benefitting from them. Most of the participants agreed that MICE tourism may be one of the segments that will encounter most problems and will need more time to recover, given the restrictions on travel and gatherings of large number of people. Moreover, many companies may cut back on their expenses for MICE events or organize them through online platforms, as they may not be willing to take the risk to plan them during such an uncertain period, at least in the short or medium term. This will obviously have negative impacts on the destination, which already had to cancel many events scheduled after March 2020. However, some of the focus groups participants pointed out the importance of providing alternatives, such as having conferences still happening in Lloret de Mar with the main organizers and speakers actually on site and the other delegates unable to come attending in a virtual manner. Potential solutions are many and depending on how the situation will evolve, the destination will have to react accordingly.

Also sporting events were deemed as problematic by the participants due to the current context, but active sports tourism comprised of individuals travelling to practice sports was considered a potential strong segment to focus on. The necessity to be outdoors and be active after months spent at home are good points in favour of this type of tourism. Lloret de Mar is in fact already trying to capitalize on it, by fostering the practice of sport on the beaches following safety measures and proposing the “Lloret Nature Summer”, which offers a wide variety of possibilities related to active tourism. The focus group sessions also identified the possibility to take the positive from this situation as far as possible to re-establish a stronger relationship with domestic tourists and try to further develop other economic activities which do not directly rely on tourism. On top of all this, some of the participants pointed out the important role played by communication in this context, in order to convey an image of a destination which is safe and ready to welcome tourists with nothing left to chance.

Therefore, it follows that particularly in such unexpected circumstances it is very important for a destination – especially if characterized by seasonal patterns – to have a diversified

offer and not rely on one type of tourism product only, but rather be able to capitalize on certain products while adapting the others to the changing conditions.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study, which takes as a reference the case of the coastal destination of Lloret de Mar, showed that tourism developed in the destination in accordance with the life cycle delineated by Butler (1980), experiencing all the stages up to stagnation, as in the case of several other coastal destinations that reached maturity (Brandão et al., 2019; Farmaki, 2012). As underlined in the literature, in fact, the TALC model can be a useful tool for the management of the destination (Butler, 2006), as it can aid in making strategic decisions and finding potential solutions. In the case of Lloret de Mar, it can be argued that the model was deemed as a convenient instrument to recognize the decline process that the destination was going through as well as a useful tool for the planning and design of diversified products (Omar et al., 2015). According to the interviews and the focus groups conducted, it can be seen how this coastal destination had progressively changed to meet the needs of the visitors, confirming what was discussed in Butler's study on coastal tourist resorts (2014) and it was on the verge of declining. The decline started in fact to be acknowledged and the results of this research outlined some challenges that had to be faced, which diversification could contribute to overcome. The lack of structure and proper management and strategies of the tourism sector of the destination did not guarantee an appropriate product mix and a sustainable future for the tourism industry of Lloret de Mar. The study revealed the strong relevance that a negative destination image can have to encourage the implementation of a strategy like diversification, which was not stressed as much in the literature reviewed in the first chapter. The importance of the destination image is in fact unquestionable, as it affects the tourist's perceptions, behavior and choice of a destination over another (Vengesai, 2003). Moreover, the role played by tour operators especially in mass tourism destinations and a subsequent unsustainable pricing policy also provide additional reasons to diversify, beyond those outlined by previous researchers, who referred in particular to diversification as advantageous when it comes to overcoming seasonality (Moraru, 2011; Weidenfeld, 2018). Coastal destinations are in fact dependent on seasonal patterns by nature, considering that they are chosen for vacationing mainly because of their favorable climate and recreation activities and thanks to their scenic beauty (Mendoza-González et al., 2018). The need to move away from a tourism model solely based on the 3S, as underlined by Alegre and Cladera (2006) was confirmed by the findings of this study, which pointed out in particular the problem of relying on one specific segment that could be unfavorable for the image and tourism development of a destination, being party tourism in the case of Lloret de Mar. Moreover, the increasing need to meet the tastes of a tourism market in constant evolution (Benur and Bramwell, 2015; Moraru, 2011) further demonstrated the necessity of diversifying the offer of the destination.

Although diversification into MICE and sports tourism could seem almost as an obvious path to take for the destination thanks to the resources and knowledge that Lloret de Mar could already count on, the results revealed the significance to carry out a careful opportunity analysis, as emphasized by Stevens et al. (2012) and Moutinho (2000), to reduce the risks and evaluate in the first place the actual potential and benefits of diversification in comparison to other directions that could have been taken such as those illustrated in the Ansoff Matrix (Ansoff, 1957). Research, market studies and other actions that were performed demonstrated the willingness of both public and private sector to finally give the destination a strategic direction, by undertaking efforts, amongst others, for the further development of MICE and sports tourism. If referring to the different forms of product diversification, the one undertaken by Lloret de Mar can be considered an unrelated type as per the definition by Evans et al. (2012), Johnson et al. (2008), and Weidenfeld (2018). Lloret de Mar in fact could already boast some expertise and resources that could find their use for MICE and sports tourism, but initially these products were not really recognized as such, as they were lacking proper structure, and with them the destination aimed at attracting different set of customers and market areas. Furthermore, referring to the approaches to destination product diversification suggested by Benur and Bramwell (2015), it can be argued that Lloret de Mar, opting for MICE and sports tourism, decided to invest in large-scale tourism products, such as conference centers and sport facilities, while involving at the same time MICE and sports tourists in customized and alternative tourism experiences that highlight the natural and cultural features of the destination.

Strategic planning is crucial when rejuvenating destinations, as it provides a framework for coordinated actions and policies (Cooper, 2006). In this sense, the case of Lloret de Mar shows the pivotal importance of integrating the diversification strategy in the tourism plans elaborated in collaboration between public and private sector in order to set objectives and develop a common strategy to reach them, as well as the relevance of the promotion efforts (Trišić and Arsenov-Bojović, 2018) in contributing to the increase in awareness of Lloret de Mar as a diversified coastal destination.

The results that diversification has been bringing to the destination were discussed in this study by taking into account the different perspectives provided by supply-side tourism actors and individuals whose perceptions could be partly regarded as those of the demand side, thus providing different and, in a few cases, conflicting points of view. Previous research emphasized the advantages of providing a wider range of tourism products as well as the beneficial effects of MICE and sports tourism when it comes to the extension of the tourism season and reduction of seasonal fluctuations (Bramwell, 2004a; Moraru, 2011; Weidenfeld, 2018). These implications were confirmed for the case of Lloret de Mar as well, and furthermore, thanks to the year-round nature of these products, the usage of facilities ranging from congress centres to municipal sporting facilities generally utilized only by the locals is optimized, as previously pointed out by Moraru (2011) in terms of exploitation of underused resources. Moreover, in accordance with what Moraru (2011) and Weidenfeld

(2018) suggested, the lengthening of the season represents also a crucial factor in terms of Lloret de Mar's employment. As underlined by the findings, diversification into MICE and sports resulted also in synergies, which can in fact occur in the case of integrative diversification, as argued by Benur and Bramwell (2015), and although MICE and sports tourism have different features, they have some common points on which the destination is currently trying to leverage. The findings also underlined an important point not often considered by previous researchers, as only Reid and Bojanic (2010) acknowledged it among all the authors considered in this study, namely the complementarity of these tourism products with those present in the destination, which is undoubtedly beneficial for its tourism industry. The additional collaboration among tourism stakeholders generated thanks to the diversification strategy was not considered by previous researchers, although this study proved it to be a positive implication for a destination. It cannot be excluded that the establishment of such a collaborative working environment may also lead to the generation of additional beneficial implications for the destination, not solely related to the diversification strategy. At the same time, clashes may be generated as well and these can be regarded as risks and potential negative consequences of undertaking a diversification strategy, considering the increased complexity of managing and coordinating different products, as Ansoff (1957) underlined. The infrastructure improvement identified by several authors was similarly pointed out in this research in terms of upgrade of services and facilities, leading to a change of mentality and virtuous circle. It can also be noted that some of these facilities can have the twofold purpose of being used by both locals and tourists, meaning that efforts made to offer high-quality services for tourists affect positively the local community as well. Additionally, many scholars recognized the benefits for the destination to appeal to both MICE and sports tourists (Dwyer and Forsyth, 1997; Getz & Page, 2016; Herstein and Berger, 2013; Huo, 2014; Lau et al., 2005; Lockstone-Binney et al., 2014; Lawrence & McCabe, 2001; Leong, 2007; Lim and Zhu, 2018; Rogerson, 2005; Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008; Yoon et al., 2001 etc.). Parallel to these studies, it can be acknowledged that the type of customers attracted by diversifying into MICE and sports tourism (with sports tourists in Lloret de Mar mainly falling into the categories of active and events sports tourism as per classification by Gibson (1998)) is undoubtedly beneficial for Lloret de Mar, especially if like in its case the sector was reliant on a segment with rather negative features. This implies that the tourism of the destination becomes overall of higher quality. MICE and sporting events also contribute to the tourism development of the destination by raising additional awareness of Lloret de Mar together with its natural and cultural offer, as these tourists are also often involved in such activities. In a similar light, increased exposure at national and international level as well as the possibility of word of mouth thanks to these events were also described in accordance to what Abbey and Link (1994) and Schaaf (2017) argued. The diversification strategy in Lloret de Mar is also supporting the long process of improving the destination image, as outlined by several researchers such as Getz & Page (2016), Herstein and Berger (2013), Shonk & Chelladurai (2008), although this study reveals that it is one of the hardest challenges to face, as demonstrated by the perceptions of some of the focus groups participants. A confused destination image may in fact be caused, and

this is reflected in the work of Glaesser (2006). Overall, greater competitive advantage is provided and, in line with what argued by a significant number of previous researchers with regard to the important role played by diversification in improving competitiveness, the destination seems to follow the right direction towards becoming a highly competitive diversified coastal destination. In addition to the points emphasized in the literature, the findings also add the importance of capitalizing on its unique selling points as well as its customized products and professionalism.

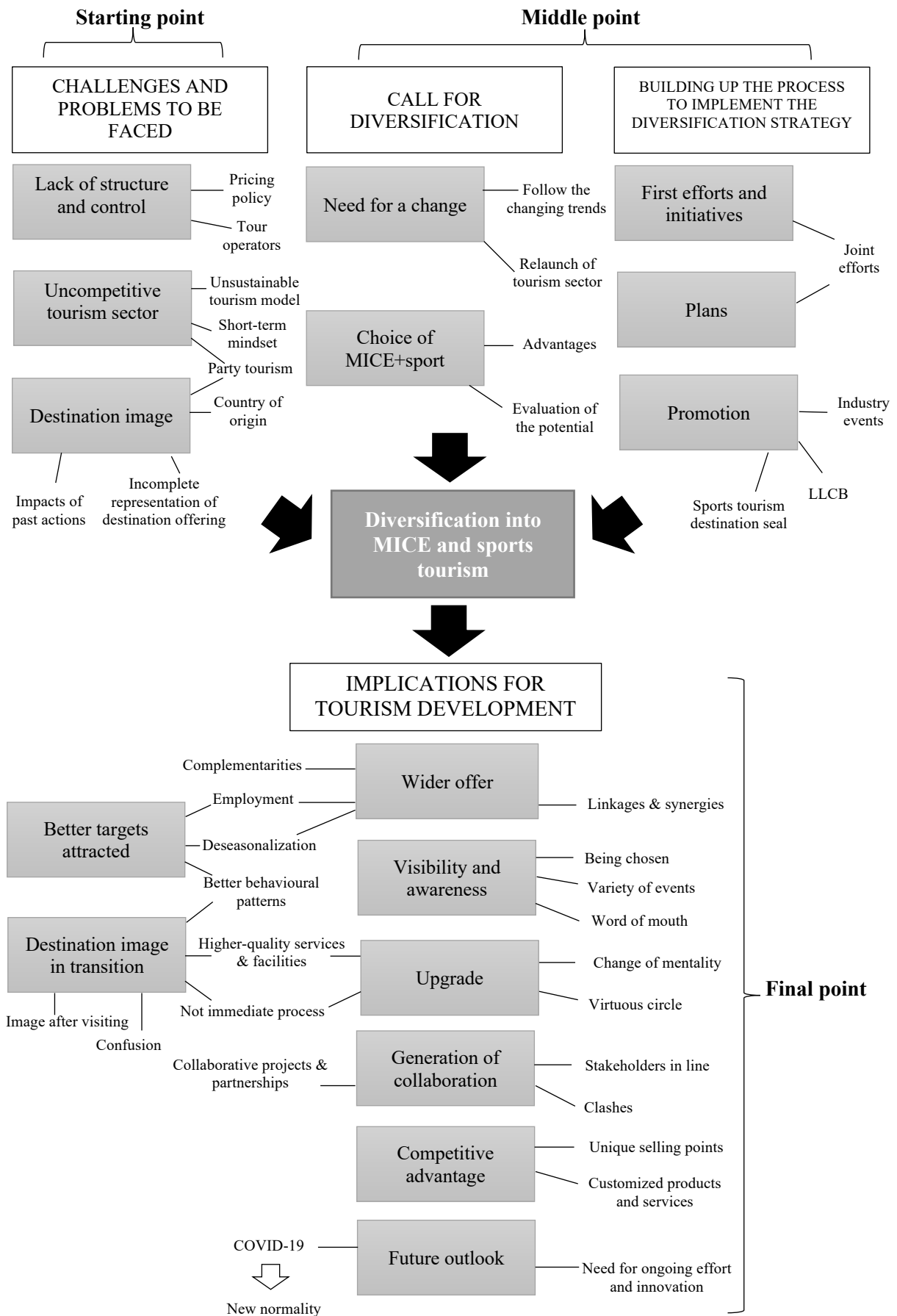
It can therefore be argued that the diversification strategy undertaken by the destination under study has been having positive implications for the tourism development of Lloret de Mar, despite some minor issues arisen from it, such as clashes among stakeholders holding diverse viewpoints on the strategy followed or a possible confused destination image. Having said this, the author would like to point out that, in the framework of the tourist area life cycle model by Butler (1980), it seems that the measures implemented to diversify the tourism sector of Lloret de Mar are largely contributing to the rejuvenation of the destination, as can be demonstrated by the findings of the present study.

On top of this, given the current situation caused by COVID-19, it is important to recognize the advantage of having a diversified tourism sector, considering the possibility generated from it to rely on different products. Diversification may help to shift away from a mass tourism that, at least in the short-medium term, will not exist in the same way anymore, to a more sustainable tourism, for instance particularly focused on sports like in the case of Lloret de Mar. Moreover, given that the spring and most of the summer season have been lost because of the pandemic, the potential contribution that the MICE and sports tourism products may give on the upcoming lower season represents an opportunity for the destination not to be underestimated, depending on the future developments of the current situation and the possibility to hold larger events anytime soon. The strength and resilience of the tourism industry has been demonstrated over time thanks to its ability to adapt and innovate (UNWTO, 2020a), however, now more than ever it is necessary to develop and put in place new solutions and responses in order to continue benefitting from a wide offer of tourism products.

To conclude, the themes identified throughout the analysis were then organized into the model reported below (Figure 8), which illustrates the relationships among them. In this regard, it is important to highlight the global theme “Diversification into MICE and sports tourism”, the organizing themes that support it, and the respective contributing basic themes which build up the organizing themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Based on the work of Walters (2016), the author of this study therefore developed a thematic network which represents visually the findings obtained through the contribution of the stakeholders involved in the research (interviewees belonging to public and private sectors and focus groups participants) alongside some supporting secondary data. The starting, middle and final points represent how the strategy was developed, keeping in mind that the middle and final points may still

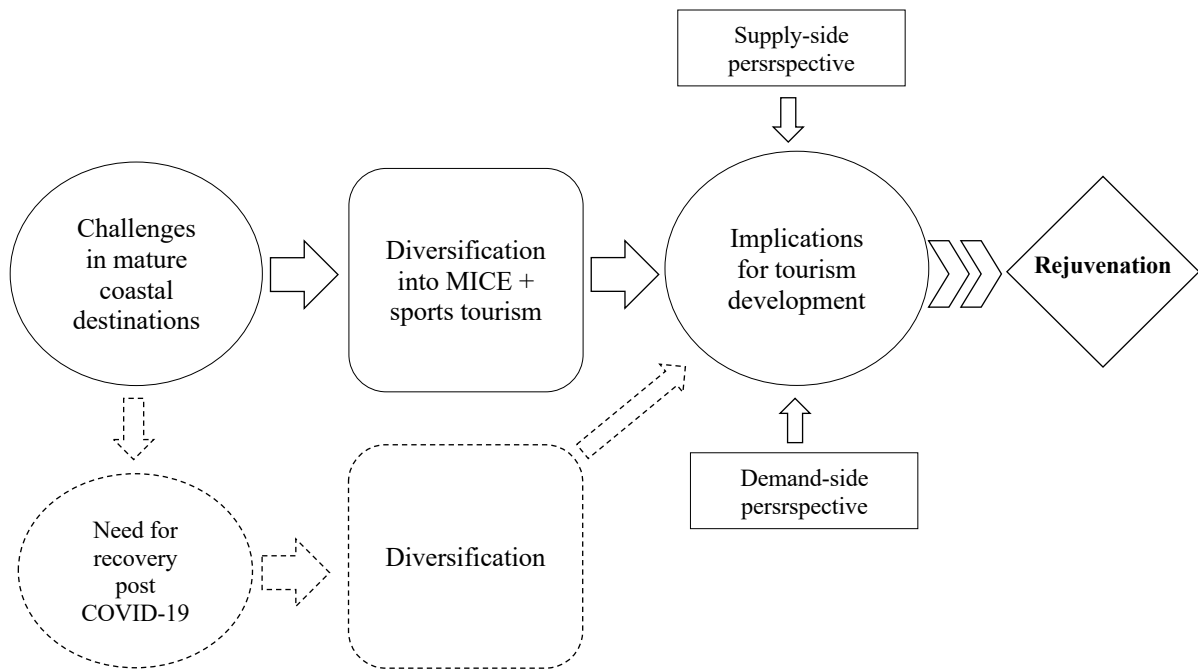
be subject to change as time passes. Taking these three points as a basis, the destination-specific representation was then generalized by developing a second model (Figure 9) referred to coastal destinations as whole, and structured in a way that proposes diversification as a potential solution to challenges in mature coastal destinations (the additional issue of COVID-19 is integrated here as well) and it emphasizes the importance of encompassing views stemming from both the supply and demand side when considering the implications of such strategy.

Figure 8: Thematic Network of Diversification Process in Lloret de Mar



Source: Author's own elaboration

Figure 9: Diversification Strategy in the Context of Mature Coastal Destinations



Source: Author's own elaboration

5.1 Contributions to Theory and Practice

The analysis of the diversification strategy of tourism destinations has grown in importance among researchers, as they recognized the relevance of such strategy not only in the context of firms, but also at a destination level (Benur and Bramwell, 2015; Farmaki, 2012; Jansen-Verbeke, 1986; Lawton & Weaver, 2006). However, not as much knowledge has been advanced with regard to the investigation of diversification into MICE and sports tourism in the specific context of coastal destinations. This research therefore contributes to the existing theory, as some studies dealt with the diversification strategy of destinations into MICE or sports tourism and others provided examples of coastal destinations implementing diversification, but when combining both, there is no prevailing study that outlined the diversification process of coastal destinations particularly into these two products. Previous research discussed in fact the attempts made by some seaside territories to diversify their tourism sector by offering products such as rural and ecotourism, culture, wellness, adventure, but no focus has been put on MICE and sports tourism and no potential connection between them has been recognized and established. More specifically, when considering the concrete implications that the diversification into these products have for the tourism development of coastal destinations, especially those that have reached a maturity stage, this paper plays a role in the literature by providing findings that show the actual impacts, mostly beneficial, that diversification has brought to the destination considered to tackle its issues. In many cases these challenges are common for coastal destinations experiencing a decline stage, thus potentially generalizing these implications to coastal destinations with similar development patterns. New findings, such as, amongst others, the synergies between MICE and sports tourism products and the collaboration generated thanks to diversification are identified and can contribute to the enrichment of the academic world.

Additionally, the results of this study may be important for policymakers and practitioners at destination level, as they point out strategic plans, initiatives and actions undertaken by stakeholders both in the public and private sector aimed at developing a diversified tourism destination, which can be of use as examples of good practices in the sphere of destination management. Moreover, having in mind the tourism area life cycle model by Butler (1980), the author can propose with the present research the strategy of diversification as an effective approach to be taken into consideration in view of the rejuvenation of coastal destinations, although each case must be considered and evaluated singularly. Finally, this paper can also be regarded as a starting point for future research to examine the implications in other coastal destinations that are facing similar challenges and are attempting to diversify their offer, as well as other types of destinations that, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19, are considering diversification as a potential solution for the recovery of their tourism sector.

5.2 Recommendations for Practitioners

The author developed the following recommendations with the idea in mind to promote a destination characterized by a strong identity, able to contrast and effectively compete with coastal destinations with similar features. Although referred to the specific case of Lloret de Mar, some of the suggestions reported below could be adopted by other coastal destinations with comparable assets. Moreover, the impacts that COVID-19 has had so far and will have on the tourism sector cannot be disregarded, resulting in some recommendations specifically formulated to cope with the new situation that will inevitably call for new actions and responses.

1. From the findings emerged that the change of the image of Lloret de Mar is a complex process and, given the fact that the direction that the destination is following may not be immediately clear and perceptible in the eyes of tourists resulting in confusion, it is advisable to create a clear distinction among the products that are present in the destination. The city has much more to offer than just beach and nightlife and it is demonstrating it very well, by recognizing the strengths of its resources and offering them in the form of culture, nature, gastronomy, festivals, sporting and business events and so on. Combining all of them into one overarching image is not easy, as they are such different products. Despite the benefits of providing such a comprehensive and varied offer, the threat is in fact that confusion and disorientation may be created in the mind of tourists, impacting negatively the efforts that the destination is putting into place. It would be therefore recommendable to decide on a specific “red thread” to follow, in order to better blend the products and convey a clearer and more defined image of the destination. For instance, the destination is undergoing an upgrade of several of its accommodations, looking at more up-scale markets. In line with this, most of the cheap fast-food restaurants should be replaced by more local offers. Moreover, the type of nightlife could be oriented to an older and more exigent audience instead of young people, willing to pay higher prices to have a unique experience. Disco Tropics for instance was included in the list of “The World’s 100 Best Clubs” in 2019 by the International Nightlife Association, which demonstrates that by leveraging on its already-established fame as nightlife centre on the Costa Brava, Lloret de Mar has the potential to become a reference point in the international scene by attracting a more sophisticated market, thus positioning itself alongside places such as Ibiza and Miami. A clear definition of what Lloret de Mar wants to be would also be beneficial for the domestic tourism, which has also partly a rather negative perception of the destination.

2. One of the main problems that contributes to giving a negative reputation of Lloret de Mar as a party tourism destination is the location of its nightlife, highly concentrated in a delimited area right in the heart of the city. If the destination is really committed to changing its image, the nightlife offer should be driven out of town and transportation to reach it should be improved accordingly. Given the fact that this part of tourism cannot be removed completely, even because it would be financially counter-productive for the destination,

some of the nightlife-related businesses should be moved out of the center, which would “clean up” the area and result in a better visual impression of the destination, ultimately contributing to less confusion in the mind of tourists.

3. The certification as Sports Tourism Destination already demonstrates the crucial role played by sport in Lloret de Mar. It can be therefore suggested that the destination continue focus on this segment and make investments to further benefit from it. In view of this, the destination shows potential to become a real sports hub on the entire Costa Brava, and besides offering a wide variety of sporting activities, Lloret de Mar could also become a reference point for wellness and fitness. Wellness tourism does not only refer to typical spas, thermal springs, retreats and so on, but it rather encompasses also the wellness lifestyle as a whole, which nowadays is often incorporated during travel experiences. Lloret de Mar is already working on gastronomic projects aimed at creating a destination where health and identity are at the core. Healthy nutrition could be therefore combined with activities that involve physical exercises, experiences in the nature, fitness routines or other specific sport-related opportunities, aimed at both younger and older targets. In this regard, fitness centres, specialized studios, healthy food stores could be developed. Products merging these activities could be created and promoted with the aim to attract to the destination not only professional or amateur athletes, but also travelers seeking a pleasant environment to relax and/or stay active while enjoying healthy food options. Especially with the stressful rhythm of life of today, the possibility to recharge through sports and spend time to do something good for the mental and physical health is valuable, and Lloret de Mar could position itself as a destination able to satisfy these needs. Some accommodation facilities in Lloret de Mar, for instance, already provide wellness and fitness areas, thus facilitating the destination in the process. These types of activities would also further benefit Lloret de Mar in terms of seasonality, since they could take place all year round and appeal to customers looking for a tranquil place during the wintertime. Moreover, the collaboration with the Blanes Sports Complex could be leveraged even more and would represent an additional benefit that would help Lloret de Mar in being recognized as a standout destination for sports, wellness and fitness.

4. With reference to the previous point, in practical terms Lloret de Mar could incentivize the creation of packages that have health and fitness at the core. By doing a benchmark analysis with other similar coastal destinations, Lloret de Mar could in fact adopt some improvements that would fit its strategic line. For instance, the author noticed the presence of health and fitness travel experiences offered in the form of holiday packages in other coastal destinations in Spain. Lloret de Mar could consider developing programmes that mix services and facilities offered in collaboration between the private and public sector that promote the Mediterranean lifestyle and would ultimately make the destination even more appealing to upper-scale markets. Moreover, some of these wellbeing programmes could be also integrated as part of the MICE tourism leisure and free time offers.

5. When it comes to MICE and sports tourism products, the destination seems to be already successful, taking effective steps and proceeding in the right direction. However, the author would suggest using the great potential provided by social media as a tool to further promote the services and facilities offered by Lloret de Mar aimed at these targets. For instance, official Instagram pages specifically tailored for these two segments would help raise awareness and visibility of the destination among businesses as well as MICE and sporting events attendees. The online presence is very crucial nowadays and it would help positioning the brand of Lloret de Mar as standout MICE and sports tourism destination in order to reach and engage potential and current customers while contributing to the formation of a desirable image.

6. Considering the importance of sustainability, in order to make the MICE and sports tourism segments even more competitive, the author suggests integrating specific sustainability principles and practices in the management of these products given the economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts that they may have on the destination's tourism development. In this regard, some participants of this research mentioned the little involvement of the locals in the travel experiences of tourists in the destination. For instance, exchanges between residents and individuals belonging to the MICE and sports segments would enhance the experiences of both parties, thus potentially incentivizing those tourists to communicate to other visitors the interaction with locals and the authentic cultural exchanges that they had, which could result in promoting indirectly the destination and enhancing its attractiveness. At the same time, the local community would also benefit from this in terms of cultural exchange and increased job opportunities derived from the development of new products (i.e. community activities in which the tourists can participate after their business or sporting events).

7. In light of the significant threats posed by COVID-19, a destination with a tourism-dependent economy like that of Lloret de Mar needs to implement mitigation measures to limit as far as possible the socioeconomic impacts on tourism caused by this global pandemic. As mentioned above, several measures have been put in place to date by this coastal destination to manage the crisis and stimulate recovery. However, much will still need to be done to prepare for a rather uncertain future. By taking this situation as an opportunity to think of tourism in a slightly different way than before, the destination could include the local people as integral part of its recovery strategy. Involving the local community (i.e. tourism activities in which the tourist is engaged with locals, in line with what mentioned in the previous point) has the twofold purpose of offering a more authentic experience to visitors and bringing positive impacts at a local level.

Moreover, once the summer season is over, domestic tourism and neighbouring tourism should be the ones still strongly engaged, since possible travel restrictions from other countries are rather difficult to be predicted and could occur at any moment. It is advised to promote a sustainable and slow form of tourism with nature and sports at the centre, similar

to what the destination is doing with the “Lloret Nature Summer”. Given the long period of inactivity, and in line with the strategy proposed previously to become a reference point for wellness and fitness, the destination could offer a variety of activities combining nature and sports during the wintertime as well , thus being promoted as a healthy hub given its facilities and natural scenery, especially to domestic and vicinity markets. This would help in turn to tackle seasonality during a year that cannot rely considerably on off-season events.

With social distancing and appropriate health measures being respected, partnerships with universities and higher education institutions could help revitalize the nightlife in a more respectful and sustainable manner, thus demonstrating that Lloret de Mar is not only for young foreigners, but it can actually offer good options for locals. Moreover, this could represent a potential chance to modify the rather negative perceptions of the destination, also common among young people in the area.

8. Although the MICE segment can be regarded as one of the most affected, its relevance for the destination is very high, and actions need to be taken in order to manage a period that could be characterized by restrictions in terms of travel and large gatherings. The MICE industry should be used as a vehicle to drive recovery, considering how these events allowed in the past the generation and sharing of knowledge and best practices, which is important to keep doing. Events in fact create a great value and our society needs them. Although a higher number of companies and associations may re-allocate their budgets and opt for online meetings and conferences, face-to-face events cannot be replaced in the long term, given the important role played by networking and interaction, not to mention the great impulse given to the economy by the activities of the innumerable professionals that participate in the organization of events. In this regard, Lloret de Mar will need to reinforce its established position as MICE destination. Concrete measures to be implemented are difficult to recommend, considering the very high level of uncertainty and unprecedented conditions to which the destination is subject. Nonetheless, the author suggests taking into account the key steps provided in the manifesto developed by the Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC), which encourages the use of business events as tools for post-pandemic economic recovery and renewal.

Until it will not be completely possible to go back to the usual format, hybrid events seem to be a reasonable solution, mixing physical and digital. Moreover, following the example of Convention Bureau Tirol, teambuilding activities could be proposed in a format that put emphasis on social distancing and sustainability, capitalizing on the possibility that also Lloret de Mar has to carry out activities immersed in nature. The destination needs in fact to adapt quickly to the transformations that are considerably changing the way that the MICE industry works, since more events may just take place online and it may take time for people to feel comfortable to attend events physically again. In this regard, communication needs to be regarded as a crucial tool to ensure that no negative image is present. Promotion should be aimed at building trust and giving an image of the destination to customers and

collaborators as a safe and suitable setting to organize events in a post-pandemic era. Finally, partnerships and collaborative projects should be further strengthened in order to unite the efforts, create synergies and obtain more beneficial, common results. All in all, despite the multiple problems that will need to be faced, this could represent an opportunity for further new rejuvenation, showing sides of the destination that were not as much visible so far.

5.3 Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

It is important to note that the findings reported herein should be considered in the light of some limitations. First of all, the unexpected circumstances caused by the global pandemic of COVID-19 heavily affected the travel and tourism industry, which in turn resulted in difficulties for the author to obtain the availability of many of the stakeholders that were initially chosen to be part of the sample to participate in the research, leading to the choice of slightly reorienting the study by including an additional method, namely focus group, in order to integrate a diversity of perspectives to the research. It is perhaps advised that future studies include a higher number of interviewees, or also the points of view of other stakeholders of the destination, such as MICE and sporting events attendees or the local community in order to obtain different perspectives and be able to gain a more complete vision of the phenomenon under study. In this regard, quantitative methods such as surveys could be used to reach a more substantial number of participants.

Another limitation of this research is related to the fact that the data were gathered in one selected coastal destination, which may prevent from fully generalizing the findings to other coastal destinations. In fact, Lloret de Mar presents its own features, strengths and challenges, meaning that if the research is conducted in other destinations the results may differ. It could be therefore recommended that future researchers compare different coastal destinations that have undertaken similar diversification strategies in order to understand similarities and differences in the ways that the diversification process is carried out and the implications that this has for their tourism development.

Time constraints also pose limits to this study, which had to take place in a certain time frame that especially in this case was characterized by uncertainty, travel restrictions and delays in meeting some deadlines due to COVID-19. The researcher therefore was unable to get to know the destination firsthand and engage with stakeholders as much as planned initially, as well as attend MICE and sporting events which could have represented opportunities to gain insights from additional tourism professionals. The phenomenon was therefore looked at throughout this period, and for a more comprehensive understanding from now on it may be interesting for future studies to consider how the destination will respond to the challenges posed by this pandemic especially for its MICE and sports tourism products, and how diversification could be leveraged for the recovery of its tourism sector and what further implications it will have for the destination, particularly in the light of this exceptional situation.

CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this research was to analyze the product diversification strategy undertaken in a coastal destination by exploring the reasons and causes to choose such strategy, actions and measures implemented and the final resulting implications for the tourism development of the destination. The tourist area life cycle model (Butler, 1980), adapted to the destination considered, was used as a reference to understand the progress of tourism within the destination alongside the reasoning behind diversification as well as its impacts on its further tourism development.

With the aim to achieve the objectives of the present study, Lloret de Mar (Spain) was selected as an appropriate case to analyze. Research was conducted in this coastal destination due to the great efforts made and the results obtained from the diversification of its tourism sector into two specific products, MICE and sports tourism. The study was carried out in a period of time of six months, and despite some difficulties encountered, as explained in the limitations section, semi-structured interviews with public and private stakeholders and focus groups with students and graduates of the Erasmus Mundus European Master in Tourism Management (EMTM) were conducted to provide relevant information and interesting perspectives on the diversification process of Lloret de Mar. The interviewees as well as the focus groups participants were chosen by means of a non-probability sampling approach. The author selected them purposively, taking into account specific criteria in order to identify informants that could be knowledgeable enough about the destination and suitable to reach the goals of the study.

The data collected with these methods were analyzed with the support of the software program NVivo and by means of thematic analysis. The author identified in fact several themes, each of which highlighted different aspects and phases of the diversification strategy of Lloret de Mar. The findings revealed how tourism developed in Lloret de Mar, which gradually became a mass tourism destination whose future seemed to be unsustainable in the long term. The challenges that Lloret de Mar was facing, and is still partly nowadays, were highlighted, putting focus on the situation before diversification as characterized by an unstructured tourism sector reliant on tour operators that offered low-cost, all-inclusive packages that gave a cheap image of the destination. Its tourism model was highly seasonal, attractive for the party tourism segment and mainly focused on a short-term mentality. Moreover, the image of the destination was one of the biggest challenges that had to be faced, as it resulted in negative perceptions about the destination, which are still in part present today. The research then outlined why diversification was deemed as a suitable strategy to focus on, explaining also the reasoning behind the choice of MICE and sports tourism products. The destination was in strong need for a change and had to take into account the changing trends if it wanted to be competitive in the long term. Given some knowledge and resources for MICE and sports tourism that the destination could count on, the diversification into these two products was considered a suitable strategy to improve its

tourism sector. Furthermore, the study showed the importance of the actions and initiatives put in place, highlighting the relevant role played by the private sector in this regard, and the significance of the plans implemented in collaboration between public and private sectors. On top of this, the informants explained the great support given by promotion in showing how the destination is undertaking a change.

Most importantly, the study outlined the implications that the diversification strategy has been having for the destination, demonstrating that this is an effective strategy to help it facing some of its problems. Given its expanded product portfolio, Lloret de Mar can now provide a more comprehensive offer with complementary products, and the results showed the relevant role played by diversification in tackling the issue of seasonality alongside with more year-round employment opportunities. Unexpected findings resulted from the interviews and focus groups, such as the synergies that MICE and sports tourism can have and the collaboration among stakeholders further encouraged and enhanced thanks to diversification. At the same time, the clashes and disagreements that emerged because of undertaking such strategy should not be disregarded. Attention was also given to the upgrade attained in terms of services and facilities, and the change of mentality that has been generated, which has been ultimately supporting the destination in its transformation. Beyond the unquestionable better targets attracted, MICE and sporting events were discovered to be crucial in leading to enhanced visibility and awareness. Moreover, the study also outlined the contribution given by diversification to the transition of its destination image, although this is acknowledged to be a very complex and long process. Overall, the research revealed that Lloret de Mar can benefit from improved competitive advantage derived from a diversified tourism sector, whose professionalism alongside with customized MICE and sports tourism products and services contribute to making the destination stand out and be chosen for events of national and international importance.

Considerations related to the future outlook of the tourism development of this coastal destination were also included, pointing out how the two tourism products into which Lloret de Mar diversified may continue contributing to the tourism sector of the destination, especially in the light of the unexpected “new reality” caused by COVID-19, which tourism destinations have now necessarily to deal with.

It can be therefore concluded that this dissertation reached its aim by accurately exploring how the diversification strategy is undertaken in a coastal destination, analyzing the whole process from the situation before such strategy was implemented until the implications that this has been having for its tourism development so far, and integrating some thoughts about potential future scenarios. Some findings confirmed what was delineated in the literature review, and at the same time some unexpected ones arose while carrying out the research, providing the academia with additional interesting insights. With the results obtained, the author could propose diversification as an effective strategy to be implemented in coastal destinations in view of rejuvenation. Contributions and implications for theory and practice

were then provided, as well as recommendations for further research, in the light of the acknowledged limitations. Finally, recommendations regarding how to further capitalize on the diversification strategy were given, by suggesting some measures that could be implemented with the aim to enhance competitiveness and sustainability while taking into consideration the new challenges that destinations have to deal with due to COVID-19.

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Appendices

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Appendix A: Interviews Conducted

Semi-structured interviews		
Company / Institution	Sector	Position
Evenia Hotels	Accommodation – <i>private sector</i>	MICE Manager Assistant
Hotel Acapulco	Accommodation – <i>private sector</i>	Hotel Manager
L’Azure Hotel	Accommodation – <i>private sector</i>	Commercial Director
Lloret Turisme	Destination Management Organization – <i>public sector</i>	Head of Marketing
Sportcontact (Traveltec)	Travel Agency – <i>private sector</i>	Product Manager
Universitat de Girona	Education – <i>public sector</i>	Tourism Consultant and Associate University Lecturer // Former Marketing Director Costa Brava Pireneu de Girona DMO
Occasional talks		
Lloret Turisme	Destination Management Organization – <i>public sector</i>	Managing Director
Lloret Turisme	Destination Management Organization – <i>public sector</i>	Head of Promotion

Lloret Turisme	Destination Management Organization – <i>public sector</i>	Head of Lloret Convention Bureau
Municipality of Lloret de Mar	City of Lloret de Mar – <i>public sector</i>	Mayor

Appendix B: Focus Groups Conducted

Focus Groups			
	Participant N°	EMTM Cohort	Country of origin
Focus Group 1	1	2018-2020	Spain
	2	2018-2020	Serbia
	3	2018-2020	Canada
	4	2018-2020	Germany
	5	2017-2019	Norway
	6	2018-2020	Russia
Focus Group 2	1	2018-2020	Vietnam
	2	2017-2019	Russia
	3	2018-2020	Ukraine
	4	2017-2019	Iceland
	5	2018-2020	Spain
Focus Group 3	1	2018-2020	Philippines
	2	2018-2020	Portugal
	3	2018-2020	Slovenia
	4	2018-2020	Italy
	5	2017-2019	Italy
	6	2017-2019	Spain

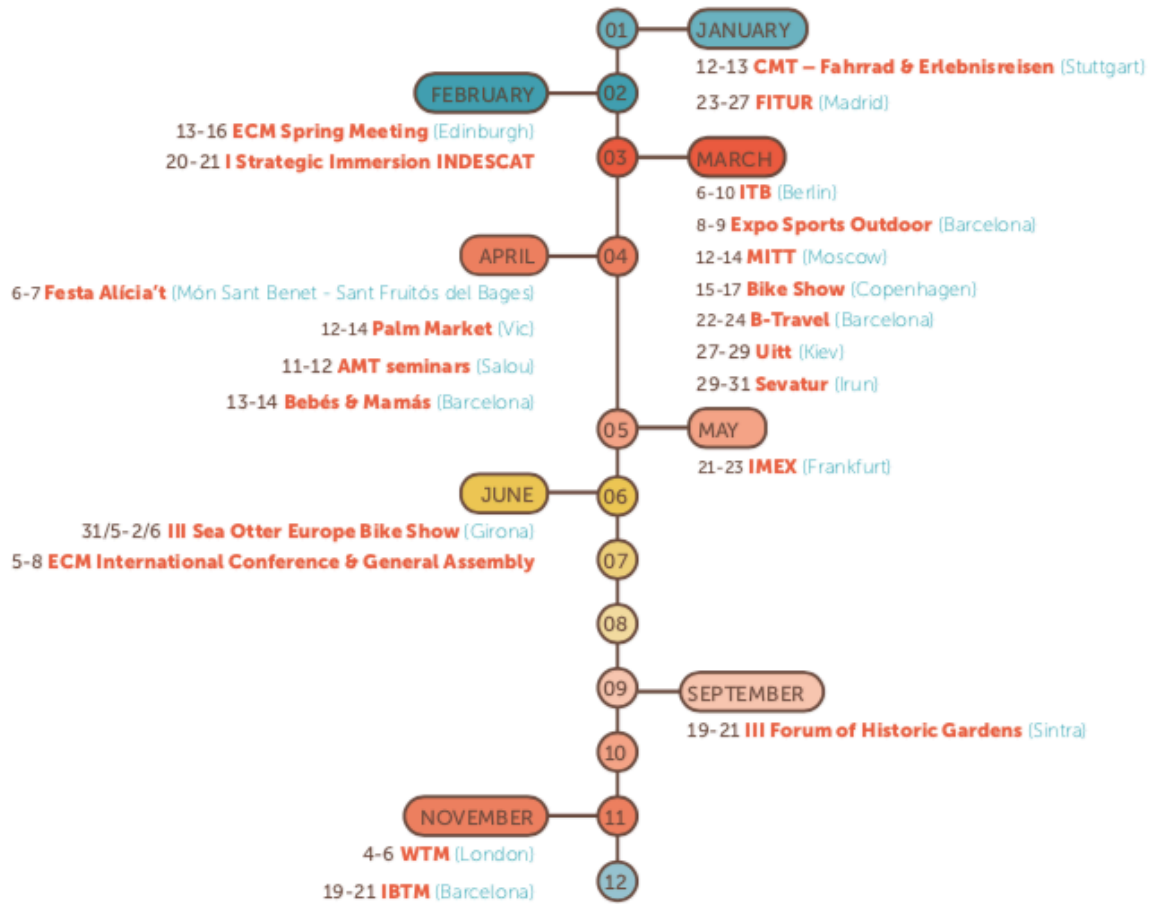
Appendix C: 2019 Sporting Events and MICE and Sports Promotional Fairs

Image 1: 2019 Sports Calendar



Source: Lloret Turisme (2019)

Image 2: 2019 Calendar of Promotional Fairs and Professional Events



Source: Lloret Turisme (2019)