

Delusional Leadership and coopetition in North African Postcolonial Tourism

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Abstract

Leadership in tourism management plays a critical role in shaping stakeholder interactions, fostering coopetition, and ensuring sustainable destination development. This paper explores the impact of public-sector leadership on coopetition among tourism stakeholders in postcolonial developing economies, with a specific focus on the Grand Agadir region. The findings reveal that while the literature emphasizes transformational, ethical, and participatory leadership as essential for fostering innovation and stakeholder engagement, leadership in the region remains predominantly bureaucratic and hierarchical. Conceptual ambiguity, weak communication, and postcolonial administrative structures contribute to a form of delusional leadership, where decision-makers perceive their leadership as effective despite structural inefficiencies and limited and ineffective stakeholder engagement. This study contributes to the discourse on leadership and coopetition by highlighting the need for inclusive and adaptive leadership approaches to address postcolonial leadership challenges.

Keywords: Leadership; Postcolonialism; Network Coopetition; sustainable tourism

1. Introduction

Leadership in tourism management is a critical determinant of organizational performance, service quality, and sustainable destination development. As tourism increasingly serves as a mean for economic growth, cultural preservation, and infrastructure expansion, particularly in developing economies, the role of leadership becomes even more significant. The complex nature of the tourism and hospitality sector has led scholars to explore leadership through multiple disciplinary lenses, including psychology, organizational behaviour, sociology, public policy, and economics (Okumus, 2020). These perspectives underscore the necessity of effective leadership in balancing stakeholder interests, promoting inclusive development, and ensuring that tourism contributes meaningfully to national and regional sustainability objectives (Du Cros & McKercher, 2020; Hoang, Wilson-Evered & Lockstone-Binney, 2021).

A crucial aspect of leadership in tourism management is its role in shaping coopetition within tourism networks. Public-sector leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering a strategic balance between competition and collaboration among tourism stakeholders (Pechlaner et al., 2009). Through adaptive leadership, strategic vision, and conflict management, leaders can create an environment where coopetition enhances innovation, supports sustainable development, and strengthens destination competitiveness (Tourish, 2014; Northouse, 2012). Given the rising pressures on tourism markets due to economic shifts and political uncertainties, further research is needed to understand how different leadership styles influence coopetition across diverse tourism markets and governance levels.

The growing global demand for tourism has placed additional attention on the challenges faced by vulnerable tourism destinations, particularly those in postcolonial regions with developing economies. While tourism is often positioned as a tool for economic advancement, these regions face significant structural weaknesses that complicate the realization of sustainable tourism development (STD) (Ayikoru, 2015). The chronic economic vulnerability of these destinations (Pan et al., 2018), social fragility (Amado & Rodrigues, 2021), weak or rigid leadership structures (Juganaru et al., 2008), and gaps in sustainability knowledge (Roxas et al., 2020) create substantial barriers to long-term tourism success. Additionally, fragile supply chains, intensified international competition, and entrenched stakeholder dynamics further exacerbate the challenges of effective tourism management (Wondirad et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2022).

In this context, stakeholder interactions in tourism development play a decisive role in shaping the sector's sustainability. Whether through cooperation, competition, or the more complex strategy of coopetition, these interactions directly influence value creation, resource distribution, and long-term destination resilience (Dwyer et al., 2009). While coopetition—a simultaneous pursuit of competition and collaboration—has been identified as a beneficial mechanism for enhancing regional tourism performance, its paradoxical nature presents both opportunities and risks (Christ et

al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2022). In postcolonial contexts, these coopetitive dynamics are further complicated by leadership challenges, power imbalances, and socio-political tensions, including forms of “othering” that hinder effective stakeholder engagement (Towner, 2018). Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of leadership strategies that not only facilitate productive coopetition but also support broader goals of equity, resilience, and sustainable tourism development.

Against this background, this paper aims to critically examine the role of public sector leadership in fostering and or deteriorating coopetition among tourism stakeholder networks, particularly in postcolonial regions with developing economies. By analysing leadership approaches, stakeholder interactions, and the inherent tensions in coopetitive strategies, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on how tourism can be leveraged as a sustainable development tool in vulnerable destinations.

Accordingly, the aim of this research is to explore leadership and its impact on network coopetitive interactions of tourism stakeholders for sustainability in postcolonial settings. To reach this aim, the following research objectives are considered:

- Research objective 1: To examine the role of public-sector leadership in shaping coopetitive dynamics among tourism stakeholders in postcolonial developing economies.
- Research objective 2: To critically examine the challenges and opportunities of leadership in shaping coopetition within tourism stakeholder networks, focusing on leadership styles, and postcolonial power dynamics

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Leadership for tourism management

Leadership in tourism management is the process of influencing and coordinating diverse stakeholders—public institutions, private enterprises, and community organizations—to achieve common tourism development goals through strategic collaboration, governance, and innovation (Valente et al., 2014). It extends beyond individual decision-making to include both formal governance structures and informal influence, shaping destination management through networking, strategic vision, and stakeholder engagement (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009; Chemers, 2014). Effective tourism leadership is characterized by adaptability, stakeholder mobilization, and governance legitimacy, essential for competitiveness and sustainability (Baggio et al., 2010; Pechlaner et al., 2009).

In the public sector, leadership in tourism is often exercised through regional tourism organizations, government agencies, and public-private partnerships. The effectiveness of public-sector leadership in tourism has been debated, with some scholars arguing that public entities are better positioned to develop strategic policies and ensure long-term sustainability, while others contend that bureaucratic rigidity can hinder adaptability in responding to market shifts (Vernon et al., 2005; O'Toole, 1997).

Public-sector leadership in tourism tends to emphasize governance, transparency, and participatory decision-making, which are essential for maintaining legitimacy and stakeholder trust. In some cases, hybrid governance models, where leadership is shared between public institutions and private actors, have been suggested as more effective in balancing market efficiency with broader societal interests (Wilson et al., 2009). Research on leadership in regional tourism highlights the need for inclusive leadership styles that can mobilize stakeholders, articulate a clear vision, and navigate the complexities of public-private collaboration (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Therefore, leadership in tourism management requires adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and a strategic vision to address the evolving challenges of the industry.

Leadership in tourism management is shaped by a variety of leadership styles, each influencing organizational performance, employee engagement, and destination governance in different ways. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision-setting, motivation, and adaptability, is widely recognized for its ability to enhance service quality and foster innovation in tourism enterprises (Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Karatepe & Kaya, 2020). In contrast, ethical leadership is essential in addressing ethical dilemmas in tourism, such as workforce exploitation and sustainability concerns, by fostering fairness, integrity, and responsible business practices (Schwepker & Dimitriou, 2021). Similarly, servant leadership, which prioritizes employee well-being and stakeholder inclusivity, has been linked to improved job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviour, particularly in service-oriented tourism businesses (Liden et al., 2008). Another emerging style is empowering leadership, which grants employees greater autonomy, encourages innovation, and fosters a proactive approach to problem-solving, making it particularly effective in hospitality and tourism settings where frontline decision-making is crucial (Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2019; Sharma & Kirkman, 2015). Meanwhile, in the public sector, bureaucratic leadership remains dominant, ensuring regulatory compliance and structured governance; however, it often struggles with inefficiencies and a lack of flexibility in responding to market changes (Wilson et al., 2009). Given these variations, effective tourism leadership often requires a hybrid approach, integrating elements of different leadership styles to address the unique challenges of managing tourism organizations and destinations.

Historically, leadership in tourism management was primarily influenced by transactional and bureaucratic leadership styles, which focused on maintaining stability, efficiency, and regulatory compliance. Transactional leadership, which emphasizes structured roles, task delegation, and performance-based rewards, was widely used in early tourism management, particularly in large hospitality organizations and government-led tourism initiatives (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). This leadership style was effective in ensuring operational efficiency but was often criticized for its lack of innovation and adaptability. Similarly, bureaucratic leadership played a dominant role in public-sector tourism governance, emphasizing rigid structures, centralized decision-making, and adherence to policy frameworks. While this style ensured governance stability and regulatory compliance, it often led to slow decision-making

processes and inefficiencies in responding to dynamic market changes (Wilson et al., 2009).

During the late 20th century, leadership in tourism began shifting towards more collaborative and participatory approaches, particularly in destination management and public-private partnerships. The introduction of stakeholder collaboration models recognized the need for shared leadership among government bodies, private enterprises, and local communities, leading to the rise of facilitative leadership, where tourism leaders acted as mediators rather than authoritative figures (Bramwell & Lane, 2003; Fyall & Garrod, 2005). This evolution laid the groundwork for transformational, ethical, and empowering leadership, which are now more prevalent in contemporary tourism management. However, the remnants of traditional leadership styles persist, especially in state-controlled tourism organizations and policy-driven tourism governance.

2.2 Leadership and network coopetition

Effective leadership plays a crucial role in fostering and sustaining coopetition within tourism networks, where stakeholders—such as government bodies, private businesses, and local communities—engage in both competition and collaboration to achieve shared tourism goals. Coopetition (simultaneous cooperation and competition) is a fundamental aspect of tourism management, as different stakeholders often have overlapping interests yet must work together to enhance destination competitiveness and sustainability. However, the success of coopetition depends largely on the quality of leadership within the network. If leadership is strategic, adaptive, and trust-driven, it can enhance coopetitive relationships, ensuring that stakeholders align their interests, share resources, and jointly solve industry challenges (Slabbert, 2003; Hoang, Yang, & Luu, 2023). Conversely, weak or ineffective leadership exacerbates conflicts, deepens mistrust, and leads to fragmentation, ultimately deteriorating tourism management effectiveness (Bengtsson, Raza-Ullah, & Vanyushyn, 2015; Raza-Ullah et al., 2018).

While research on coopetition capabilities has traditionally focused on the skills required to manage the paradox of cooperation and competition, less attention has been given to the role of leadership in mitigating coopetitive tensions (Santolaya-Sanz, Mora-Valentin, & Ortiz de Urbina Criado, 2017). Leadership within a tourism coopetition network involves balancing stakeholder interests, facilitating knowledge-sharing, and maintaining trust while mitigating competitive friction (Raza-Ullah & Bengtsson, 2018). Without strong leadership, conflicts can intensify due to misaligned objectives, power struggles, and resource competition, undermining collective tourism strategies. Existing leadership frameworks and conflict management theories have rarely been applied in a coopetition setting, despite their relevance in guiding leaders to navigate interorganizational tensions (Di Guardo & Galvagno, 2007).

Public-sector leadership in tourism often requires a combination of transformational, ethical, empowering, and laissez-faire leadership styles to mediate conflicts and

enhance stakeholder engagement (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Transformational leadership is particularly effective in reducing conflicts by fostering a shared vision and encouraging cooperative problem-solving (Podsakoff et al., 1990). Ethical leadership ensures transparency, fairness, and accountability in tourism governance, which are essential for sustaining long-term coopetitive relationships (Hoang, Wilson-Evered & Lockstone-Binney, 2021). Empowering leadership, by delegating authority and promoting decentralized decision-making, strengthens stakeholder autonomy, encouraging collaboration rather than rivalry (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015). In contrast, laissez-faire leadership, characterized by a hands-off approach where leaders avoid involvement in decision-making, has been found to weaken stakeholder trust and cooperation in coopetitive environments (Spadaccini, 2021). While this style may allow for flexibility, it often results in a lack of direction, increased conflicts, and inefficiencies in tourism governance (Olivier, Poltras & Chenevert, 2008).

Trust-building and strategic leadership are key success factors in a coopetitive tourism network (Chin et al., 2008). Leaders must balance cooperation and competition by fostering transparency, creating shared value, and promoting open communication among stakeholders (Seepana, Paulraj & Huq, 2020). The ability of a leader to manage coopetition conflicts, address power asymmetries, and align network actors toward collective goals determines the long-term viability of a tourism destination. By applying a structured leadership approach, tourism leaders can transform conflicts into opportunities, ensuring that coopetition remains a driving force for innovation, destination success, and sustainable tourism development. Leaders who can navigate paradoxical tensions and develop flexible strategies are more likely to achieve higher performance outcomes and organizational effectiveness (Smith & Lewis, 2012).

In the context of public-sector leadership, government agencies and regional tourism organizations play a crucial role in establishing frameworks that encourage coopetition (Hall, 1999). Public entities can facilitate platforms for dialogue, provide regulatory support, and incentivize collaborative initiatives among competitors (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003). However, bureaucratic rigidity within public institutions can sometimes hinder adaptability and responsiveness, emphasizing the need for leadership that is both flexible and inclusive (Wilson et al., 2009). Hybrid governance models, where leadership responsibilities are shared between public institutions and private actors, have been suggested as effective in balancing market efficiency with broader societal interests (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Such models can leverage the strengths of both sectors, fostering an environment where coopetition can thrive (Fyall & Garrod, 2005).

The integration of conflict management strategies within leadership practices is essential for sustaining coopetition (Bradford, Stringfellow & Weitz, 2003). Leaders equipped with skills in negotiation, mediation, and collaborative problem-solving can navigate the complexities of inter-stakeholder relationships more effectively (Guttman, 2004). By proactively addressing potential conflicts and fostering a culture of open communication, leaders can prevent the escalation of disputes and maintain a cooperative atmosphere (Oliver, Potras & Chenevert, 2008). This approach not only

enhances the functionality of the tourism network but also contributes to the resilience and adaptability of the destination in a competitive market (Erzen & Armagan, 2015).

2.3 Postcolonial theory

Tourism research has evolved into a diverse, multidisciplinary field, marked by various methodological and epistemological shifts (Airey, 2015; Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). However, the postcolonial perspective remains largely neglected in both academic discourse and practical applications, despite its significance in examining stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, behaviours, and interactions within the tourism industry. Given its relevance, postcolonial theory offers a valuable lens for exploring tourism contexts (Hall & Tucker, 2004; Pastran, 2014).

A critical understanding of colonial legacies is fundamental to grasping contemporary global and local processes, particularly in tourism, where stakeholder interactions often reflect persistent postcolonial structures rooted in historical power imbalances (Adie, 2020; Said, 1978; Spivak & Riach, 2020; Tucker, 2019). Existing postcolonial literature primarily focuses on the perspectives of the dominant, colonizing forces, whereas examining postcolonial impacts from the viewpoint of the dominated offers an important and underexplored contribution to academia and practice.

Subsequently, this study foregrounds the experiences of the "subaltern"—those who have been marginalized, dominated, and silenced in the wake of colonialism—rather than reinforcing the perspective of the colonizer. By engaging with key postcolonial concepts such as ambivalence, counter-discourse, hybridity, othering, and the centre/margin dichotomy, the research aims to amplify the voices of the formerly colonized, challenging the dominant historical narratives imposed by colonial powers. Ultimately, it seeks to deepen the understanding of postcolonial dynamics in tourism, advocating for a more equitable distribution of power and resources while bringing attention to the lived realities of subaltern individuals and communities (Tucker & Akama, 2009).

3. Methodology

This study explores public sector leadership and coopetition interactions in the tourism network of a postcolonial tourism destination. For this, the study employs a subjective ontological stance to examine how social actors shape these interactions (Saunders & Lewis, 2016). The chosen research design facilitates the inclusion of diverse perspectives, ensuring that the experiences and viewpoints of various tourism stakeholders are captured (Wilson, Nielsen & Buultjens, 2009).

This research is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology as it seeks to unravel the complexities of business interactions by focusing on subjective experiences and meanings attached to coopetition (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991; Saunders & Lewis, 2012). Given the study's postcolonial emphasis, ethical considerations and the influence of value systems are carefully addressed to uphold research integrity (Mertens, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

An inductive approach is adopted to gain deeper insights into stakeholder behaviours within the intricate socio-political and historical landscape of postcolonial tourism (Saunders & Lewis, 2016). The study employs a qualitative methodology, as it is particularly suited to uncovering nuanced social interactions and complex behaviours, emphasizing stakeholders' lived experiences within their cultural and political frameworks (Carson et al., 2001; Saunders & Lewis, 2016).

To provide a comprehensive examination of tourism leadership and the interplay between indigenous identities and postcolonial influences, this research adopts a case study strategy (Yin, 1984; Nunkoo, 2015). This approach enables an in-depth exploration of cooperative interactions, offering a rich understanding of how tourism stakeholders collaborate and compete to foster sustainable development in postcolonial settings.

3.1 Case study context

This case study is conducted in the Grand Agadir region, situated within Morocco's Souss-Massa area, is home to diverse population, with the Amazigh—the indigenous people of North Africa—constituting a significant majority (Handaine, 2019). Historically, Amazigh territories have undergone successive colonization by various powers, including the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, and Europeans. The most recent colonial influences were exerted by the French and Spanish from the west, while earlier waves of dominance originated from the east through Arab expansion.

Following Morocco's independence, policies of Arabization and French acculturation exerted considerable pressure on Amazigh culture, language, and traditions (Handaine, 2019). The state's adoption of Jacobinism, a French governance model promoting a unitary nation with centralized authority, a singular cultural identity, a single language, and a uniform religion, conflicted with Morocco's inherently diverse social fabric (Handaine, 2019). This systemic marginalization extended into political structures and education, reinforcing negative portrayals of Amazigh history and identity. Official records highlight a sharp decline in the percentage of Tamazight speakers, dropping from 85% to 28% over a span of 48 years, illustrating the impact of cultural suppression.

In the context of tourism, the presence of a marginalized indigenous population introduces complexities that can influence cooperation among stakeholders. Historical tensions and cultural disparities may affect collaborative efforts, shaping the dynamics of tourism public sector leadership and sustainable development in the region.

3.2 Data collection

This study investigated stakeholder interactions using a conceptual framework derived from existing literature, which systematically identifies, categorizes, assesses engagement, and examines the critical success factors of network cooperation. The empirical research was grounded in the literature, which highlights the primary

stakeholders in tourism as the public sector, private sector, and host community. Given the study's exploratory nature, a sequential and adaptive sampling strategy was employed during fieldwork (Patton, 2015), allowing for validation of sample groups and the identification of participants as the case study evolved.

A combination of network, emergent subgroup, chain, and opportunity sampling methods was applied (Patton, 2015). Snowball sampling initiated with key informants from the Regional Delegation of Tourism in Agadir, expanding through participant referrals. Network sampling leveraged initial contacts ('seeds') to facilitate access to government institutions. Emergent subgroup sampling adapted to include new interviewee groups as the study progressed, while also excluding some due to access limitations. Opportunity sampling was used to seize spontaneous data collection moments, such as conducting multiple interviews through a single contact. These four strategies were integrated to construct the final research sample. The researcher's personal networks were instrumental in building trust and overcoming access barriers. Data collection continued until all potential participants were engaged or until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new themes emerged from additional interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Saunders, 2012).

The study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews to capture stakeholders' perceptions and behaviours within postcolonial tourism contexts, ensuring a flexible yet structured approach that minimized bias while enabling rich insights (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Knox et al., 2020). Interview questions were tailored to the three stakeholder groups—public sector, private sector, and host community—progressing logically from broad inquiries to specific topics related to coopetition (Saunders et al., 2016; Qu & Dumay, 2011). Face-to-face interviews were preferred, with locations and schedules adjusted to align with local cultural norms, ensuring participant comfort and willingness to engage (Bougie & Sekaran, 2016; Saunders & Lewis, 2016).

Despite challenges such as trust issues and reluctance toward recorded interviews, the research employed strategies like network sampling and leveraging social connections to facilitate participation and establish rapport (Kvale, 1996). Ethical considerations were central to the study, with strict confidentiality maintained through consent forms and adherence to ethical guidelines. However, given participants' hesitance toward recordings, the researcher had to adapt by handling data collection sensitively and employing alternative methods for documentation.

3.3. Data analysis

The qualitative data analysis process involved systematically converting interview data into meaningful insights through a structured yet adaptable thematic analysis. Following the principles outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Clarke and Braun (2017), the analysis unfolded in three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This process enabled the research to identify, organize, and interpret patterns within the three stakeholder groups—public sector, private sector, and host community—without relying on a pre-imposed framework.

Data reduction entailed selecting, coding, and categorizing the collected interview data, a crucial step in managing the extensive information gathered. Initially, a systematic coding approach was applied to distinguish between semantic codes (direct participant meanings) and interpretative codes (researcher-driven interpretations) (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The coding framework was then refined iteratively to ensure it encompassed a broader range of data while accurately capturing emerging patterns. This process led to the identification of key themes that shaped stakeholder coopetition within the postcolonial Grand Agadir tourism context.

The coded data were then organized and visually displayed to facilitate further analysis and comparisons among the three stakeholder groups. Tools such as mind maps and tables were employed to uncover cause-and-effect relationships and illustrate the connections between different codes. This visual representation helped highlight variations and commonalities in stakeholder perspectives, deepening the overall analysis.

The final stage involved synthesizing the coded data into well-defined themes using Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase approach, which provided a structured yet iterative framework for theme development and refinement (Saunders et al., 2016). The initial themes were continuously revised to ensure alignment with the research questions and the broader conceptual framework. This process ultimately resulted in four central themes which explain stakeholder interactions in coopetitive settings and their implications for sustainable tourism development in the Amazigh Grand Agadir.

To maintain transparency in the coding and theoretical development, the entire analysis process was meticulously documented. Each phase was guided by theoretical underpinnings, with consistent reference to the conceptual framework. The researcher's role was instrumental in directing, interpreting, and validating the data, uncovering deeper meanings and hidden patterns. This detailed and iterative approach provided a clear pathway from raw data to the conceptual themes presented in the findings, offering a robust understanding of stakeholder interactions in the given context.

4. Findings

4.1. Effective leadership as a coopetition CSF for STD

Leadership plays a critical role in fostering coopetition—the balance between competition and collaboration—within sustainable tourism development (STD). However, findings reveal that the region adopts a top-down leadership style, where decision-making remains centralized, limiting stakeholder engagement and collaboration. Despite attempts to shift towards a bottom-up approach, the lack of a clear understanding of engagement prevents effective implementation. Conceptual ambiguity, identity crises, and postcolonial legacies further obstruct this transition, reinforcing hierarchical structures that undermine cooperative leadership.

A major challenge in redefining leadership is the deeply embedded "knowledge supremacy" mindset within public administration, where higher-ranking officials assume superior expertise over lower-ranking ones, and foreign (notably French) perspectives are often prioritized over local knowledge. This hierarchical structure discourages collaboration, maintaining a system where the centre dictates, while the periphery follows. The bureaucratic control over tourism stakeholders, including professionals and community members, continues to reflect the postcolonial legacy—where public administration is perceived as an authoritative power rather than a cooperative entity.

"[...] The problem is that when you tell them it does not work like this, they answer you: we know better than you... how come you know better than me when you spend hours in your office the door closed on you and you say I am the person who knows and say you do not know to the person who is in the fieldwork? NO! Come and listen to me...I understand that I do not know everything, but I am the person to give you the reality, I will tell what is going to happen to you, I will tell that it is not going to work and that locals do not understand in that way [...]" PS-Interview2

"Before France brought with them the model of the "pays d'accueil touristique" PAT. We told them that the programme PAT was for France and framed by French people for French people. It is the result of the work of 244 locals for themselves. We cannot import success. However, each country has its specificity." PS-Interview5

Additionally, the region faces an identity crisis, with no consensus among public and private stakeholders on the vision for tourism development. While some actors push for a sun-and-sea model, others advocate for nature-based tourism, yet without collaborative decision-making, these competing narratives create confusion and weaken strategic positioning. The lack of a shared identity further prevents the transition to a bottom-up leadership style, as stakeholders struggle to align on common objectives.

Effective leadership is essential for coopetition in STD, yet it remains constrained by deep-rooted structural and ideological barriers. Without conceptual clarity, stakeholder consensus, and a shift towards decentralized decision-making, the region's leadership model continues to stifle cooperation and innovation. To move forward, breaking free from postcolonial hierarchies, fostering inclusive engagement, and redefining leadership as a participatory process are crucial steps in achieving sustainable tourism development.

4.2 Communication and coordination

Effective leadership in public sector tourism depends on clear communication and strong coordination, yet conceptual ambiguity and information de-democratisation severely undermine these functions. Findings reveal that key concepts like collaboration and stakeholder engagement are misinterpreted, leading to fragmented governance and ineffective decision-making. Collaboration is often mistaken for bureaucratic procedures, preventing meaningful cooperation and delaying tourism

development. Beyond conceptual confusion, restricted information flow weakens leadership, preventing timely decision-making and strategic alignment among stakeholders. A lack of a synchronized tourism information system results in delays, inefficient resource allocation, and lost opportunities, while public sector bodies operate in isolation, unaware of overlapping efforts. Poor coordination destabilizes tourism identity, with conflicting marketing strategies further weakening the sector. Ultimately, leadership in the public tourism sector remains reactive and ineffective. The reliance on outdated administrative tools stifles innovation and strategic agility, preventing progress in sustainable and competitive tourism development (STD). Addressing conceptual clarity, transparency, and coordination is essential for effective tourism leadership.

A key issue highlighted by tourism public sector interviews is related to the understanding of key concepts inherent to vision and strategies under development and implementation. Concepts such as cooperation, collaboration, stakeholder engagement, sustainable tourism are perceived and understood in different ways among the different public sector bodies and agents of these bodies.

For instance, sustainable tourism is interchangeably used with other terms such as sport tourism, rural tourism, green tourism among others. However, these forms of tourism do not always align with the core pillars of sustainable development.

Not all public sector agents are aware of this conceptual ambiguity—though some, like the regional council, have acknowledged the issue:

“There is a confusion between sustainable tourism, rural tourism, sportive tourism, natural tourism, solidarity tourism and responsible tourism. People still do not know the difference between these types of tourism” PS-Interview7

A similar definitional challenge arises in the context of collaboration. Initially, all participants used terms like cooperation, collaboration, engagement, involvement, and participation interchangeably.

Interviewees were asked about their approach to collaboration, and their responses were largely limited to occasional meetings where opinions were gathered. Only a small number of interviewees confirmed this practice, highlighting a lack of understanding of key concepts and limited self-awareness regarding the managerial challenges faced by tourism public sector bodies. In this context, the DRT official specifically identified the issue with defining collaboration:

“Collaboration is at the level of meetings [...] We have a problem in the definition of collaboration and how it must be applied [...] For them it is just meetings, giving remarks and opinion [...]” PS-Interview1

In a similar vein, the manager of a four-star hotel pointed out that the concept and practice of collaboration often appear to be synonymous with bureaucratic procedures, ultimately hindering the industry's dynamism.

“Collaboration is a must. We still did not reach collaboration, we think we are doing it, but in reality... collaboration for us is bureaucracy, lots of papers to sign and authorization to get everywhere. This freezes the dynamic nature of tourism sector.”
PS-Interview4

In addition to collaboration being perceived as bureaucratic, which stifles its dynamism, this quote highlights an important finding regarding the impact of ambiguity surrounding key concepts. The statement: *“we think we are doing it [collaboration]” is a sign to a delusional management where regulating-agencies “do not know that they do not know”*. PS-Interview1

The illusion of believing that collaboration is being carried out correctly can have serious leadership and managerial consequences. It can slow down the development process, as recognizing and addressing the issue will take considerably longer. Additionally, the misapplication of collaboration may lead to unintended negative consequences.

At this stage, having clear definitions of key concepts would significantly enhance the effectiveness of coopetition in sustainable tourism development (STD). However, data analysis revealed a lack of trust in communication and information exchange. This directly affects leadership success.

As a result of the top-down leadership style, information de-democratisation is evident hindering the development of effective and inclusive leadership. Passive communication and repressive discourse reflect the current model of leadership. While information should be transparently and equitably shared among public sector bodies and stakeholders to foster inclusive communication and improve governance, it instead operates under a restrictive framework—hence the term “de-democratisation.” For example, the CRT vice-president pointed out the issue of weak, hesitant and “shy” coordination among regulatory bodies at the regional level.

“This coordination is weak. I cannot talk about the national level, but at the regional level, it is weak, it is shy, very shy” PS–Interview3 “

Now if we don’t do a meeting to know what the other is doing, we do not know it until 1 year, 6 months, 5 months is gone...each one has his own agenda but with a gap [...] works, but there is no impact” PS- Interview9

This “shy” coordination is coming from poor communication among these bodies, causing delays and requiring additional resources to relay information. As a result, operational management suffers from inherent inefficiencies. The CRT vice president described this as a lack of synchronization between two key stakeholder groups—public sector bodies responsible for execution and those providing recommendations. This disconnection leads to misdiagnosed issues, often influenced by bias and uncertainty.

“This synchronization between suggestion and execution, it faces problems and we do not even know who is the responsible of the problem” PS– Interview9

Consequently, leadership is weakened by the lack of an efficient information system that enables real-time sharing of data among public sector bodies.

“We cannot talk about these axes without governance, and we want to have this governance through a regional touristic information system which will link all the actors of the public sectors, and the private sector to give information and receive information immediately” PS–Interview9

This breakdown in communication can be attributed to outdated leadership tools, such as reliance on paperwork, which has proven inadequate in modern-day Agadir. This inefficiency results in significant costs, both in terms of effort and budget dispersion.

“...we cannot manage tourism by papers anymore. We need a digital system of Information that can allow a synchronization between tourism stakeholders” PS–Interview9

Besides, there is a noticeable lack of responsiveness between public sector bodies and the host community, and small tourism businesses, and even established industry players. A manager from Taghazout Bay, part of the AKWA Group, expressed frustration over the unavailability of tourism data, which hinders their decision-making process and therefore blocks leadership flows.

“We need to know as professionals the numbers of tourists with their profile.” PRS-Interview13-

Public sector bodies have also been characterized as passive communicators, often remaining silent in situations where tourism businesses or residents seek guidance, opinions, or decisions.

“8 companies that had contracts with the biggest tour operators, and you do not even inform them, and tell them later that they are not getting a contract the coming year? That I am not giving you anymore the contract of flights” PS-interview10

Although information system is an indispensable part of good and effective leadership, the region's primary challenge remains passive communication and the absence of information, leading to significant budget and efforts dispersion. Consequently, the absence, delay, or ambiguity of information helps explain why leadership remain ineffective and why sustainable tourism development (STD) is not advancing in the region.

4.3 Operations management

Effective operational management is a cornerstone of strong leadership in public sector tourism, yet findings reveal that efforts dispersion and a lack of accountability significantly undermine its effectiveness. Poor coordination, fragmented decision-making, and misaligned strategic visions have led to the inefficient use of time, resources, and workforce, ultimately weakening the leadership's ability to drive sustainable tourism development (STD). Public sector bodies often operate in isolation, each following its own agenda, with limited synchronization of efforts. This

lack of coordination results in duplication of work, delayed responses, and minimal impact, as stakeholders remain unaware of parallel initiatives. Conflicts of interest further exacerbate the issue, diverting resources towards political and financial agendas rather than collective progress.

The absence of clear accountability mechanisms compounds these inefficiencies. Leadership in the region is hindered by nepotistic hiring practices, where recruitment is based on personal connections rather than expertise, leading to a workforce ill-equipped to manage strategic operations. Respondents highlighted how this culture of favouritism erodes professional standards and prevents the enforcement of performance-based management. The lack of an effective audit system allows dominant actors to manipulate governance processes, while political immaturity prevents constructive criticism and necessary reforms. Without accountability, poor decision-making persists, public funds are mismanaged, and development initiatives lack direction and oversight.

The term "efforts dispersion" refers to the inefficiency and wastage of resources—whether time, workforce, funds, goods, or energy—resulted from the region's poor and ineffective management. As previously mentioned, the information system in the region, which is responsible for collecting, storing, processing, analysing, and distributing information, fails to support the effective leadership of the tourism sector. This is primarily due to challenges such as the lack of information synchronization, weak communication, and limited cooperation among public sector bodies.

Public sector bodies acknowledged that they operate independently, each following its own agenda, with occasional meetings serving as their only source of information. As a result, they may receive updates on a project as late as a year after its initiation, rendering their efforts largely ineffective.

“Now if we don’t do a meeting to know what the other is doing, we do not know it until 1 year, 6 months, 5 months is gone...each one has his own agenda but with a gap...we say that there is nothing and nothing is done, but everyone works, but there is no impact [...]The efforts done annually does not reach all the community, they do not really see it...” PS-Interview9

The issue of effort dispersion can also be explained by the lack of a unified and clear vision. Combined with the absence of a synchronized information system, this leads to situations where multiple stakeholders may unknowingly work on the same issue, either duplicating efforts or overlapping with ongoing initiatives.

“We do not have a common vision means [...] that sometimes the same issue is tackled by various stakeholders while we could work on it all together” PS- Interview7

The dispersion of efforts is further intensified by conceptual ambiguity. As a result, public sector bodies may assume their leadership is effective, believing they are successfully engaging local communities. However, due to misinterpretations and the

overall confusion in regional leadership, the true impact of this engagement often goes unnoticed.

“Everyone works, but there is no impact” PS-Interview9

Furthermore, conflicts of interest undermine the effectiveness of efforts. Financial and political agendas may be key factors in the misalignment of strategic vision, leading to wasted efforts and ineffective leadership.

“Some people defame that discourse for personal interests” PS-Interview2

Another example of effort dispersion caused by conflicts of interest in the region is the repeated road maintenance work carried out by the council in the tourism zone. According to the host community, the primary explanation for this recurring expenditure is the public money detournement.

“Fixed it a second time, then what happens? We ask them about public money. Where is that money? you fixed the road and then its destroyed? Where is the management?” HC

Moreover, the lack of competencies within public sector bodies means that the resources allocated for strategy and project implementation fail to yield any meaningful impact on the region. Interviewees attributed this skills gap to nepotistic hiring practices, commonly referred to in Morocco as “Bak Sahbi” translated to English as “your father is my friend,” where individuals are employed based on personal connections rather than merit. This practice not only undermines efficiency but also reflects a broader issue of accountability. As a result, there is a growing demand for clearly defined mission statements in the hiring process to ensure competence-based recruitment.

“Managers should be well trained and have good skills to manage a whole region. You know our problem here is that people are employed for the only and one reason, “your father is my friend”. PS-Interview14

“a mission statement should be made for professionals. It should state a minimum of experience, minimum of skills and minimum of diplomas.” PS-Interview14

In brief, the dispersion of efforts highlights the inefficiency of the leadership adopted in the region. However, the question to be raised in this context is the accountability.

A lack of accountability—or what respondents described as the “shyness” of accountability—is a key critique of the region’s operations management system. This issue similarly affects leadership, which in turn impacts cooperation for sustainable tourism development (STD), much like the dispersion of efforts does. Without accountability, efforts become fragmented, communication remains ineffective, and valuable development opportunities are lost.

The region’s specific postcolonial context provides insight into the root causes of this accountability gap. Many respondents pointed to the “Bak Sahbi / your father is my

friend” mindset, which adds a socio-cultural burden to those responsible for enforcing accountability. Within this system, applying penalties within one’s network is considered a great source of shame, reflecting values rooted in Eastern-Bedouin traditions—a lingering postcolonial legacy.

Another factor contributing to weak accountability is the absence of an effective audit management system, which could otherwise mitigate or restrain the ambitions of dominant incumbents. Respondents noted that these incumbents often employ various tactics to safeguard their interests, including corrupting or intimidating public sector agents. Implementing a secure digital auditing system could have addressed these challenges. Additionally, the inefficiency of current audit practices is partly due to unqualified personnel who lack the expertise to conduct thorough evaluations.

Political immaturity further exacerbates the accountability deficit, as public sector bodies tend to reject criticism outright. This results in either a repressive-aggressive discourse—where critics are directly attacked—or a passive stance, where no response is given to concerns. Consequently, the region’s coopetitive environment does not support sustainable tourism development.

This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes accountability as a fundamental component of achieving SDG17 (Global University Network for Innovation [GUNI], 2018). Ultimately, the absence of accountability serves as a direct barrier to effective leadership of the sustainable development of the tourism sector.

4.4 Marketing

Marketing conducted by public bodies of the Grand Agadir tourism destination is deeply tied to leadership effectiveness, yet poor governance, fragmented vision, and weak stakeholder coordination have led to ineffective branding. Conflicting narratives and lack of coopetitive interactions create a fragmented destination identity, confusing tourists and weakening the region’s appeal. The absence of strategic alignment has fuelled a territorial identity crisis, where seaside hotels push a sun-and-sea image while others promote rural tourism, without coordination. Additionally, postcolonial superiority-inferiority dynamics contribute to undervaluing local heritage, further misrepresenting and devaluing tourism offerings. Marketing failures is due to leadership deficiencies. Without clear communication, collaboration, and a unified branding strategy, the region struggles to position itself competitively. Addressing these gaps requires stronger governance and coordinated efforts to create a cohesive and sustainable tourism identity.

The ineffective marketing strategies adopted in the region reflect the broader leadership and managerial challenges previously discussed. The flawed leadership model and outdated managerial tools have led to vision myopia, a lack of information, and weak stakeholder engagement—all of which are essential for effective marketing. Furthermore, marketing as a managerial process fails to embrace coopetitive interactions due to the absence of information exchange and a poor understanding of the products and services being marketed.

Findings suggest that postcolonial superiority-inferiority dynamics play a significant role in challengers undervaluing their own heritage, which in turn leads to the misrepresentation and devaluation of local tourism products and services. Additionally, issues such as vision myopia, poor communication and coordination, and conflicts of interest have triggered a territorial identity crisis. For instance, seaside hotels market the region as a sun-and-sea destination, while other businesses promote alternative brands that contradict or undermine this image.

“Many people were not convinced [...] we are seaside resort; we must remain as so. We tried to explain to them that we still seaside but not only seaside. [...] Hopefully, seeing that there is a global movement about ecology, ecological tourism, and nature tourism, they were obliged to get engaged with us in this orientation. The ministry then sent us the programme Karyati for nature-based tourism [...] The urban area [...] used to say that we are only sun and sea, but recently, they started to understand that this is not enough” PS-Interview

This results in destructive competition, where conflicting marketing messages create a fragmented and confusing identity, leaving tourists with a negative perception of the destination.

In this context, marketing suffers from a lack of cooperative efforts, which, in turn, weakens competitive strategies, preventing the region from achieving a unified and effective tourism destination marketing approach. Ultimately, these findings highlight the harmful effects of unsuccessful cooperation on tourism marketing, an aspect that has not been explicitly examined in previous studies.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The literature on tourism leadership underscores the importance of adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and hybrid governance models in fostering sustainable tourism development (Valente et al., 2014; Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009; Pechlaner et al., 2009). While transformational, ethical, and empowering leadership styles are championed as effective for balancing stakeholder interests and fostering innovation (Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Karatepe & Kaya, 2020), the findings of this study indicate that these leadership approaches remain largely absent in the Grand Agadir tourism sector. Instead, a persistent reliance on bureaucratic and top-down leadership, influenced by postcolonial administrative structures, has created rigid hierarchies that suppress cooperative interactions. The findings reveal that knowledge supremacy, conceptual ambiguity, and identity crises further obstruct stakeholder engagement, contradicting existing literature that emphasizes the role of inclusive and decentralized leadership in promoting network cooperation (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 1999; Wilson et al., 2009). While scholars advocate for participatory decision-making and cross-sector collaboration in tourism leadership, this study highlights how bureaucratic inertia, and a lack of shared vision limit the effectiveness of cooperative tourism development strategies in Grand Agadir.

Leadership in tourism coopetition is often conceptualized as a mechanism for mitigating conflicts, fostering knowledge-sharing, and aligning stakeholder interests (Slabbert, 2003; Raza-Ullah & Bengtsson, 2018). However, this study demonstrates that weak leadership structures exacerbate rather than resolve coopetitive tensions, as public-sector leaders fail to facilitate strategic alliances or effectively mediate stakeholder conflicts. The literature posits that transformational and ethical leadership can cultivate trust and transparency in coopetitive networks (Podsakoff et al., 1990; Hoang, Wilson-Evered & Lockstone-Binney, 2021), yet the findings suggest that trust remains a critical challenge due to information de-democratization and weak coordination among tourism stakeholders. Instead of strategic alignment, the study reveals misdiagnosed challenges, duplicated efforts, and a fragmented tourism identity, which hinder coopetition and sustainable tourism development. These findings challenge the assumption that leadership naturally facilitates coopetition and instead highlight the necessity for governance reforms, enhanced accountability, and an emphasis on stakeholder-driven leadership approaches to foster sustainable tourism in postcolonial settings.

Postcolonial influences further complicate leadership dynamics, as historical governance structures continue to shape leadership styles and stakeholder relationships. The legacy of centralized authority inherited from colonial rule has perpetuated a leadership culture that prioritizes control over collaboration. This study highlights the necessity for a paradigm shift towards more adaptive and transformational leadership models that emphasize inclusivity, empowerment, and decentralization. Transformational leadership, characterized by vision-setting, motivation, and adaptability, is particularly crucial for fostering coopetition in tourism networks, as it encourages proactive stakeholder engagement and cross-sector collaboration (Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Karatepe & Kaya, 2020).

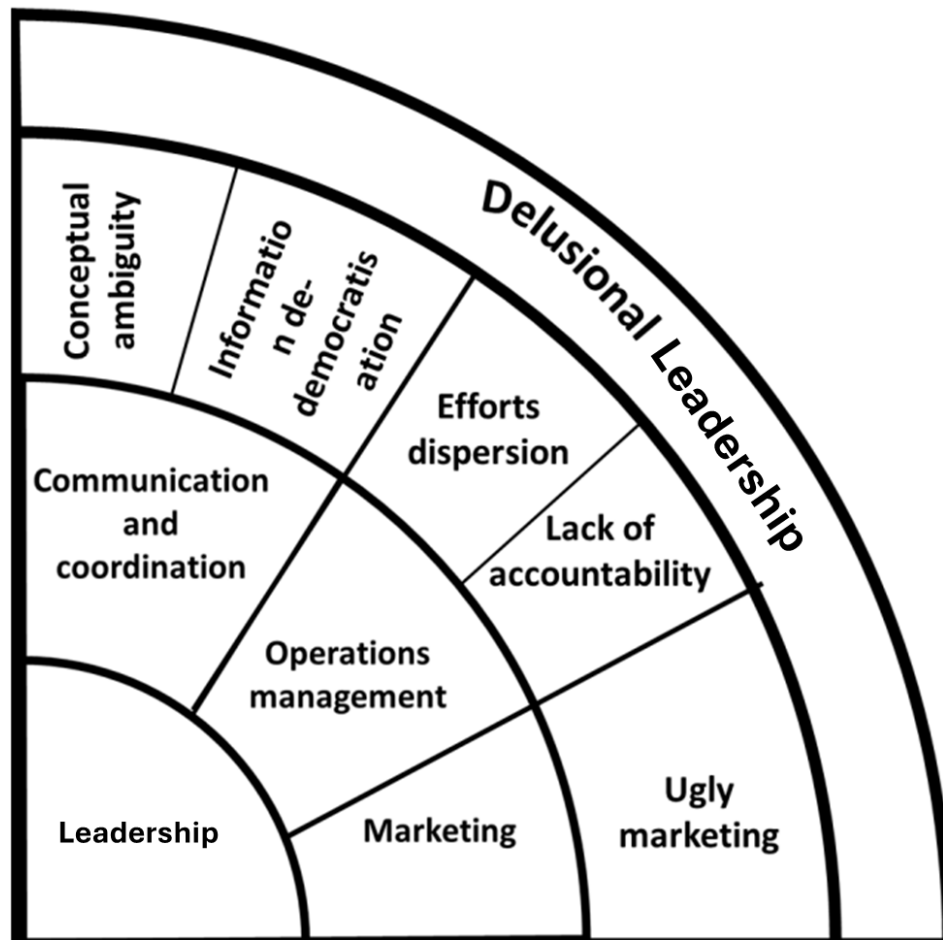


Figure 1: Summary of leadership challenges

Our study provides critical insights into the role of leadership in shaping coopetition among tourism stakeholders and underscores the need for leadership reforms to enhance sustainable tourism development. The findings indicate that leadership in Grand Agadir must evolve beyond rigid bureaucratic structures towards more inclusive, participatory, and transformational models that support stakeholder engagement, innovation, and strategic alignment.

5.1 Theoretical contributions:

This study advances the literature on leadership and coopetition in tourism by integrating a postcolonial lens into the analysis of stakeholder dynamics within developing contexts. While existing research largely treats leadership and coopetition as technical or strategic processes, this paper demonstrates how these are deeply shaped by historical legacies, hierarchical power structures, and socio-political contexts inherited from colonial governance. In particular, the study introduces and conceptualises two emergent constructs—efforts dispersion and information de-democratisation—as analytical tools for diagnosing structural inefficiencies and epistemic asymmetries in tourism governance. These contributions extend current

understandings of leadership by emphasizing not only the formal roles of actors, but also the ideological frameworks and colonial residues that inform their behaviour, perceptions, and relationships. Moreover, by foregrounding the experiences of subaltern voices within the tourism sector of Grand Agadir, the study offers a situated and context-sensitive approach to leadership theory—challenging universalist models that overlook the complexities of postcolonial environments.

5.2 Managerial Contributions

The findings offer actionable insights for tourism managers, policymakers, and public-sector leaders operating in postcolonial, developing regions. First, the research highlights the urgent need to move beyond bureaucratic control models and adopt leadership approaches that are adaptive, inclusive, and participatory. Public authorities must prioritize stakeholder trust-building, transparency, and decentralised decision-making in order to foster meaningful coopetition across sectors. Second, to reduce efforts dispersion, public institutions should invest in integrated digital information systems that allow real-time information sharing between stakeholders and governance bodies. Third, addressing information de-democratisation requires reforming communication structures to ensure open, horizontal channels of dialogue with private actors and host communities. Lastly, training programmes for tourism officials should include awareness of postcolonial dynamics and emphasize intercultural competence, reflexivity, and community-led development models. By implementing these managerial strategies, tourism governance can evolve from symbolic consultation to substantive collaboration—strengthening the sector’s resilience, equity, and sustainability.

Future research should further explore the intersection of leadership and coopetition by examining the role of leadership styles in fostering stakeholder trust and cooperation. Additionally, longitudinal studies could assess the long-term impact of leadership reforms on tourism performance and destination competitiveness. Investigating the integration of digital transformation in tourism leadership could also offer valuable insights into improving communication, coordination, and strategic planning.

Effective leadership is essential for transforming the tourism sector into a resilient and sustainable industry. By embracing adaptive leadership approaches, tourism public sector leaders can enhance coopetition, promote collaborative innovation, and ensure that tourism serves as a vehicle for economic growth, cultural preservation, and sustainable development in postcolonial contexts.

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