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## Article

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Article

# Marketing Communication and Creative Tourism: An Analysis of the Local Destination Management Organization

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**Abstract:** Delivering a positive tourism experience is an expanding concern of destinations because of the growth of the tourism industry. The emergence of creative tourism has led to a continued necessity for local destination management organizations to pursue innovative and versatile strategies. This study aims to evaluate the organizational capabilities of local destination management organizations to promote a creative tourism context and develop related activities. The conceptual model was tested using a mixed-methods approach, combining a focus group with local destination management organizations with a quantitative study using multivariate statistical analysis through structural equation modeling. The findings showed that local destination management organizations ought to prioritize organizational culture by coordinating learning and effective knowledge training to strengthen marketing communication capabilities while focusing on potentiating their resources to develop the destination by implementing a local creative tourism destination, thereby generating value for a greater creative tourism local destination where tourists play an active role.

**Keywords:** local destination management organization; destination tourism development; co-creation; organizational capabilities; marketing capabilities



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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, tourism has continuously expanded as a fundamental industry in the global economy. To strategically organize the tourism sector in a sustainable but competitive manner, tourism destinations are required to enhance their current positions [1]. As a result, as the concept of tourism destinations expands globally [2,3], destination management organizations (DMOs) are an important asset in sustaining the industry's growth. These organizations can develop their tourism destinations to strategically position themselves in a highly competitive tourism market. Keeping in mind that achieving a high level of tourist satisfaction and intensifying the intention to revisit are among the goals of tourism destinations, periodic research and the constant adjustment of the provided tourism activities should occur since tourists are becoming more demanding because of the elevated number of tourism competitors and want to experience novel, high-quality activities and services [4].

The development of tourism has generated a necessity to stimulate and increase the value of tourism destinations, thereby emphasizing creative tourism initiatives to guarantee that these destinations can retain creativity and distinguish themselves from other destinations, contrasting with the conventional models of cultural tourism [5]. The creative tourism concept emphasizes obtaining genuine and creative experiences in tourism destinations because of an active interrelationship among the residents, tourists, and destination [6]. For example, “authentic experiences”, “creative potential development”, “active participation”, and “skills development” are a few characteristics linked to creative tourism [7].

This study focused on establishing the role and importance of local DMOs towards the development of tourism destinations when striving for a highly creative tourism context destination. To this end, we aimed to analyze the relationships between organizations and market performance and, more specifically, explore creative tourism from an LDMO's perspective. The LDMO aims to create an environment in which tourists can actively participate, while also taking into account the need to provide marketing communication capabilities and define key success factors for a competitive tourism destination.

According to the World Tourism Organization [8], the DMO is responsible for the management and marketing of minor regions rather than, for example, a national tourism organization. Hence, a DMO is compelled to develop dynamic and innovative strategic approaches and form competitive tourism destination brands [9,10], as is a local destination management organization, which is accountable for the same responsibilities as a DMO, with the unique difference being the density of the managed area.

Local destination management organizations (LDMOs) were created to provide structural strategies for destination development so that destinations could grow and keep up with tourists' needs. Although several other factors influence destination marketing, LDMOs have become active players in tourism destination management by focusing on the creation and promotion of unique experiences for tourists, rather than just being perceived as management and marketing organizations [7,10]. However, there is still a lack of research regarding how and if these parties can bring success to tourism destinations and increase competitiveness [11]. In line with the discussion above, tourism destinations focus on delivering memorable experiences and innovative activities to their tourists rather than providing products and services. Furthermore, the notion of co-creation in tourism has expanded—it is believed that tourists can create exceptional value for themselves by co-creating their experiences with residents and the tourism destination. Creativity provides a relevant tool in the successful application of creative tourism strategies, where differentiation among tourism competitors is privileged. On the other hand, the precedents, and major implications of creative tourism and co-creation for destination development, on the other hand, remain unexplored [12,13].

There are many parameters to take into consideration before the arrival of a tourist. In other words, to guarantee a quality and gratifying experience, LDMOs must effectively prepare all of the tourist destination's components [11]. However, a literature review demonstrated that few existing studies have established a connection between the main effective components of the LDMO's role and the tourism destination's development [2], whereas an abundance of researchers have concentrated on analyzing tourism destinations' development from the tourists' viewpoint [14]. Despite the importance of this topic, limited research has been conducted regarding the role of the LDMO in developing creative tourism destinations, thus raising the questions: What are the capabilities that an LDMO should focus on to expand its tourism destination? What characteristics and skills should an LDMO possess in a creative tourism context? In what ways is the LDMO capable of enhancing the tourism destination's development? Additionally, two more questions emerge: How do strategies implemented by the LDMO affect the tourism destination's development in a creative context? Does the provision of a larger number of creative and dynamic activities boost the image and perception of a tourist destination from the tourist's viewpoint?

To mitigate the research gap, the general objective of this study was to understand the local destination management office's role in destination development through creative tourism, and to this end, explore to what extent their strategies affect creative tourism destinations' performance and competitiveness. The five specific objectives were set to determine the set of characteristics and skills of the LDMO in the creative tourism context; to describe the role of the LDMO in the tourism destination's development; to establish the set of capabilities that an LDMO should employ to facilitate the positive expansion of tourism destinations; to suitably establish effective strategies and key success factors for tourism destinations' development in the creative context; and lastly, to estimate whether

implementing activities within the spectrum of creative tourism can influence tourists' perceptions of a tourism destination.

By using Portugal as a basis for this research, this study contributes to the existing body of empirical studies by establishing that focusing on an LDMO's learning commitment capabilities and management skills, while also investing in marketing communication capabilities and defining a set of key success factors, can stimulate a creative tourism-context destination where innovation, authentic experiences, and tourists' skill development are observed and where the tourist can feel involved in the activities that the tourism destination provides. As previously mentioned in the definition of creative tourism, these co-creating tourism experiences allow destinations to achieve differentiation from competitors, thereby establishing solid ground under a sustainable and competitive approach.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Creative Tourism and Destination Management

At the beginning of the century, the tourism industry was evolving, although mostly through cultural tourism [15]. At that time, authors argued that to obtain a competitive advantage, innovation in the type of tourism had to occur. Additionally, because of globalization, cultural homogenization was rapidly growing. This explains the foreseen need to change the saturation of cultural tourism that had developed up to that point [16].

Accordingly, creative tourism developed as a form of tourism in which tourists are provided the possibility of active engagement in the activities they choose. Tourism thus becomes a dynamic experience in which visitors can learn about the destinations' characteristics and traditions [16]. Taking this definition into account, creative tourism was established as a unique experience based on the tourist's participation with residents, connecting the two to expand the tourist's knowledge of the arts, heritage, or special character of a tourism destination [17]. However, creative tourism's definition has been heavily modified and expanded [7,12].

In conjunction with the now-congested global market, it has been suggested that to truly involve tourists and remain competitive, products and services should be replaced with experiences and activities. Hence, cities and regions are choosing creative and sustainable strategies that complement the distinctive and notable images of their destinations [18,19].

Creative tourism, as defined by the OECD [20], has evolved into a creative and knowledgeable environment in which managers, visitors, and destinations use technology, know-how, and expertise to produce attractive creative experiences. Richards [5] stated that this form of tourism has extended into engaging experiences that lead to great informal learning conditions.

Morrison et al. [21] described, in a general context, the role of the destination management office in five different functions: "economic driver", through creating employment, incomes, and taxes; "community marketer", through communication plans to promote destination and brand image as well as attractions to the tourist market; "industry coordinator", through attempting to decrease industry fragmentation; "quasi-public representative", through legitimizing the industry; and finally, "builder of community pride", through striving for quality-of-life improvements for locals and tourists. D'Angella and Go [22] highlighted the destination management office's networking capability, declaring that DMOs also play an active part in decision making regarding strategic planning in the organization and connections in the networking environment, taking into consideration the economic accomplishments of the DMO and stakeholders who rely on these. In concordance with this, Ritchie and Crouch [23] stated that the destination management and marketing office was a suitable agent to lead and coordinate a tourism destination.

Goeldner and Ritchie [24] established tourism destinations as specific geographic areas that tourists can appreciate, and the attributes of which tourists can value via a diverse set of travel experiences. Regarding the supply perspective, a destination is a region of dense tourism demand, tourism supply, and social, economic, and environmental effects,

among others [25]. Accordingly, destinations are demanding in terms of management because of the complexity associated with the stakeholder context in tourism. Therefore, to maximize the tourist's experience, balanced management of the destination's resources should be ensured. The starting point should be research, and the endpoint should be development. Destination management can be identified as an approach to creating meaningful and distinctive products and services in a collaborative environment to achieve various socioeconomic benefits [26]. In this spectrum, destinations are now concentrating on committing to the reinforcement of effective tourism marketing strategies in the interest of capturing tourists' attention.

According to Jeuring [27], tourism marketing strategies support the social structures of destinations in addition to the compliance of stakeholders. Industries and businesses have focused on co-creation, which is defined as a participative role for the tourist in physically and mentally interacting with an engaging activity, among other elements of the surroundings in the tourism experience [28]. In this manner, co-creation is relevant and enables value creation for stakeholders, visitors, and residents as well as the tourism destination, which benefits from a display of uniqueness and authenticity [29]. Co-creation is a recent tendency in the evolution of creative tourism. Tourists are portrayed as the co-producers and co-consumers of the destination's experiences [5]. To face competition, tourism destinations prioritize market research to understand how to establish unique co-creation experiences, which contradicts serial reproductions of culture. Co-creative experiences provide value and memorability for visitors, since tourists are attaining more power and influence [29]. By incorporating such experiences into their lives, tourists hope to encounter meaningful activities within tourism destinations, and hope to have personal exchanges companies and other stakeholders within said destinations [30,31].

Apart from seeking to achieve an environment where co-creation is key, tourism destinations must establish a variety of strategies in agreement with their resources and capabilities and the external environment's opportunities. Therefore, creating dynamic relationships with their competitors and partners, namely knowledge sharing and the integration of processes, can potentiate fundamental synergies [32].

In concordance with Bendapudi and Leone [33], a vigorous co-creation position can benefit tourism organizations by amplifying active participation while improving and consolidating tourists' experiences, thus increasing visitors' contentment with a positive experience, and influencing customers' loyalty towards the tourism destination, which can lead to intensifying customers' intentions to revisit [34].

## 2.2. Destination Management Organization's Organizational Capabilities and Capability Embeddedness

### 2.2.1. Learning Commitment

A resource-based view encompasses an approach that has the objective of considering resources and capabilities as vital tools to achieve an excellent organizational performance, thereby allowing the firm to benefit from sustained competitive advantages. For this reason, organizations focus on searching for resources, either tangible or intangible [35]. Complementarily, dynamic capabilities are noticed as portraying a certain degree of strategic significance in the dynamic capabilities-based view approach, which is capable of accelerating innovation as well as renewing the organization's resources and capabilities [36].

Zach [37] points out that a DMO is an innovative driver for the development of destinations instead of just the organization itself, by being capable of cooperating with other destination's enterprises while contributing to the expansion of novelty services. In this spectrum, organizational learning as a multidimensional conception is a strategic dynamic capability [38] that, by using creation and transferring knowledge, can result in sustainable advantages. In this manner, within organizations that center their resources on creating a learning environment, staff feel motivated to learn, as well as to exchange knowledge between them, thus promoting knowledge integration, which results in a greater organizational performance [28].



Furthermore, employees who have traits of creativity can generate and develop original and out-of-the-box solutions [39], thereby influencing the way that external communication, such as marketing and advertising programs, is executed, along with building an effective brand image for the tourism destination in question. In addition, the characteristics of the tourism destination's staff can also play a positive role in the way they communicate with visitors, thereby providing active customer service [40]. Alongside this, stakeholder articulation with tourism organizations plays a significant role in providing the required information that leads to innovative developments as well as improvements [16]. In this manner, it represents a great system to measure and create key success factors towards the development of the tourism destination. Based on the above statements, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

**H1a:** *Organizational learning commitment capability positively relates to marketing communication capabilities.*

**H1b:** *Organizational learning commitment capability positively relates to defining key success factors in tourism destinations.*

Furthermore, tourism destination management has gradually evolved on account of the growth of tourism competition among destinations [41]. In agreement with this, Presenza et al. [42] assert that to address this competitiveness, tourism destinations must engage directly with each other, either regionally, nationally, or internationally. Hjalager [43] points out that tourism organizations commonly embrace existing services and offerings, adding their creativity and enhancements to these, rather than creating great innovative discoveries. Furthermore, inter-organizational learning is associated with the development of dynamic capabilities within tourism destinations as well as collaboration among other players in the industry [44]. In this way, tourism destination organizations can build co-creative activities with the tourist [5,16] that can boost the possibility of providing a feeling of unique involvement from the tourist's point of view. With these statements taken into account, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H2a:** *Marketing communication capabilities mediate the relationship between organizational learning commitment capability and a creative tourism context destination.*

**H2b:** *Marketing communication capabilities mediate the relationship between organizational learning commitment capability and the unique involvement for tourists.*

### 2.2.2. Managerial Competencies

For organizations, human resources management, which can assemble a great, coherent staff that is genuinely involved, is essential [45]. Hence, Bosnić et al. [26] indicate the management of entrepreneurship and innovation as a fundamental way of expanding within the sector, as well as preparing the destination's development to maintain tourism elements while being perceived as an attractive destination by tourists. Accordingly, the DMO has an important role in guaranteeing stakeholders' expectations and providing leadership and coordination [23].

To overcome the difficult talent acquisition and retention of employees, it is expected that these employees have cross-cultural training and staff training across all categories, in accordance with the target tourists due to the close relationship between the tourist and employee [28,46]. Streimikiene et al. [47] also state that human resources are extremely important within organizational tourism destinations due to being one of the key elements that directly address the local community. Nevertheless, competitive advantages, which are vital for a tourism-sustaining destination [5], will be difficult to obtain if only well-rounded human resources are presented with no proper management and direction [46]. Ritchie and Crouch [23] discuss how several managers have deficiencies regarding expertise, skills, resources, and capabilities, leading, in this way, to the non-efficient and non-suitable management of organizations.

Effective knowledge management facilitates the establishment and implementation of competitiveness in tourism destinations, considering that it represents a very active and progressive method [40]. As a result, to develop a sustainable and competitive tourism destination, a tourism destination must invest in strategic key planning and management [26]. Hence, the following proposed hypothesis is:

**H3:** *LDMO's management skills positively relate to defining key success factors in tourism destinations.*

Moreover, the tourism destination office is compelled to offer appealing experiences such as local traditions to visitors, which encourages active interactions between them and the tourism destination as well as the residents [6]. Regardless, market analyses to understand the type of co-creating activities that tourists are seeking should be taken into consideration due to the disparity between tourists' desires and consumption [19]. As specified by Bosnić et al. [26], DMO ought to plan, organize, and control, but also inspire their workers to invest in education and training. Within destination management, coordination between DMO and interested stakeholders is a fundamental factor to address issues such as a lack of resources and create great synergies [6]. Therefore, the following two hypotheses are put forward based on the aforementioned arguments:

**H4a:** *The definition of key success factors in tourism destinations mediates the relationship between LDMO's management competencies and a creative tourism context destination.*

**H4b:** *The definition of key success factors in tourism destinations mediates the relationship between LDMO's management competencies and the unique involvement of tourists.*

### 2.2.3. Marketing Capabilities

Marketing capabilities have tremendous relevance in organizations [35] and are described as resources that are acquired through external market analyses that involve competitors, customers, and stakeholders, along with the organization's standing reputation and capabilities [46]. For instance, dynamic capabilities can facilitate the implementation of novelty tactics to appropriate existing resources by converting them in several distinctive ways to efface the ongoing market alterations and reduce costs that come from creating new resources [48]. These capabilities can also have an effective role in information collection regarding customers' needs and the surrounding markets, which is afterwards internally diffused, thereby delivering the required data to managers. This information is therefore used to strategically plan and execute decision making by them [49]. Moreover, given the complexity of expertise and knowledge aligned with these capabilities, if correctly defined and executed, these will be transformed into the organization's routines [48].

In this competitive tourism environment, Halkier [50] emphasizes that destinations ought to establish themselves as innovative in the spectrum of engaging with the visitor, who is provided with several different options when selecting a destination. Therefore, innovation regarding tourism activities and experiences is prevailing [15,31] and, parallelly, co-creation emerges by redefining who develops these activities and what is presupposed [51]. Accordingly, tourists and organizations' collaboration in experiences results in co-creating unique value [52]. Chathoth et al. [53] indicate that unique involvement for tourists is achieved by the destination tourism office's effective communication, thereby implying a sense of co-creation. Formally, the following hypotheses are suggested:

**H5a:** *Marketing communication capabilities positively relate to a creative tourism context destination.*

**H5b:** *Marketing communication capabilities positively relate to a unique involvement for tourists.*

### 2.2.4. Market Performance

According to management and marketing tourism destinations, the competitiveness of tourism destinations has prevailed as a significant element in attracting and corresponding to tourists' needs, thus allowing tourist consumption growth [54]. Moreover, the contribution of the DMO in striving for and maintaining competitiveness in the tourism market is highlighted [54].

Destination competitiveness is defined by Kozak et al. [14] as an ongoing and proactive process in which the well-being of residents is augmented and tourists are presented with a high sense of satisfaction. Therefore, organizations can improve destinations' competitiveness as well as their own through innovation, risk taking, cooperation, and efficiency strategies [23]. Additionally, the proper management of destinations is also assured by the close relationships between a destination's stakeholders [55], in which tourists are likewise included, creating an environment of knowledge and skills through co-creation, which increases life quality in these destinations [5]. The development of a great network of tourism stakeholders is crucial in terms of the development of a creative tourism destination due to the elevated degree of participation and involvement that is required [56]. In alignment with this, the following hypothesis was created:

**H6a:** *The definition of key success factors in tourism destinations positively relates to a creative tourism context destination.*

Furthermore, these destination networks that are composed of suppliers lead to a lucrative and valuable tourism destination through a more integrated and organized destination, where unforgettable experiences for tourists prevail [37]. Consequently, the following hypothesis was proposed:

**H6b:** *The definition of key success factors in tourism destinations positively relates to a unique involvement for tourists.*

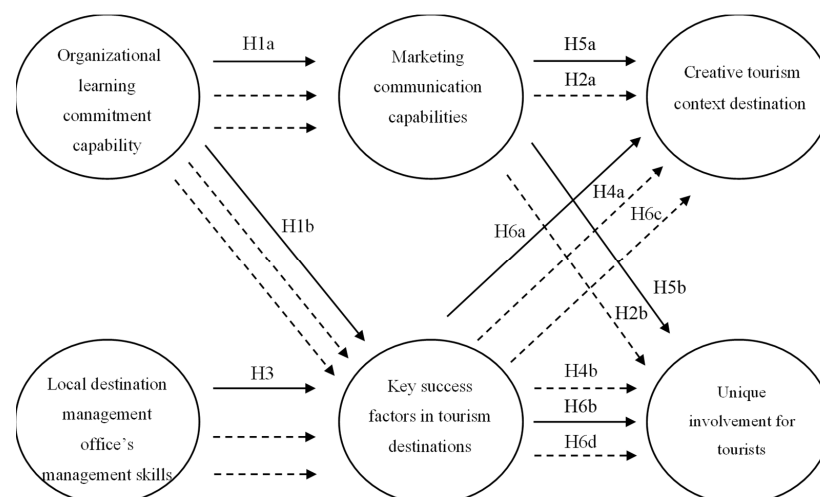
As clarified earlier, creative tourism promotes attractive tourism destinations where the experience environment emerges to allow communities to feel real involvement in the co-creation experience [29,34]. Such experiences are therefore associated with novelty, innovation, learning, and creativity, which generate promising results in tourism destinations [5].

Destination management supports the construction of unique products and activities [26]. Richards and Wilson [18] emphasize that destination managers who desire to engage in creative tourism activities should reconsider and outline new forms of promoting strategies. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H6c:** *The definition of key success factors in tourism destinations mediates the relationship between organizational learning commitment capability and a creative tourism context destination.*

**H6d:** *The definition of key success factors in tourism destinations mediates the relationship between organizational learning commitment capability and the unique involvement for tourists.*

Concerning the theoretical concepts discussed above as well as the hypotheses presented in this section and depicted in Figure 1, the following conceptual framework was developed to analyze the subject in more detail.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model. Note: Dashed lines represent indirect relationships.



### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

The first phase was to collect secondary data by conducting a review of the existing literature and existing studies regarding LDMO and creative tourism to develop research hypotheses. Afterward, primary data were collected throughout two different studies; thus we resorted to a mixed-methods approach, which, in business studies, is highly thought of as a way of answering the relevant questions and obtaining results [57]. A qualitative study was conducted to analysis in depth the role of LDMO in creative tourism and to concretely identify the questions that should be asked on an internet-mediated questionnaire to achieve the research objectives.

The first study was a focus group involving six LDMOs from different organizations. This was followed by a self-administrated and internet-mediated questionnaire with standardized questions to ensure no fluctuations in the respondent's interpretations, involving one hundred and sixteen (116) LDMOs within Portugal. In this way, the inclusion criterion was applied, ensuring that the primary points of the study were reached and that all participants had the main attributes needed to answer the internet-mediated questionnaire. To establish reliability, all participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity.

The objective of this second study was to assess the role of an LDMO in enhancing the tourism destination's continuing development when resorting to strategies and marketing initiatives that aim to promote creative tourism destinations and actively attract tourists to these, thereby establishing how they learn and follow tourism activities' evolutions and market trends, as well as determining how they assimilate and absorb learning into their strategies.

In this spectrum, throughout the collection of data and the literature review, as well as exploratory qualitative and quantitative research, the relationships of the variables in question are analyzed and interpreted, and the hypothesis is validated, as is the conceptual model, and tested using structural equation modeling.

#### 3.2. Qualitative Study

As emphasized by Vernon et al. [58], resorting to a focus group when investigating an underexplored subject could be a positive approach. Accordingly, the major benefit of this method is that instead of just answering to the interviewer in an individual interview, the participants create a dynamic environment that inspires them to also interact amongst themselves. Therefore, in addition to being able to gather the needed answers, this method also benefits from extensive interpersonal communication, group's perceptions, new ideas, attitudes, and experiences they share among themselves [59].

In this manner, to acknowledge and explore the complexity of the topic and the variables in the proposed conceptual model, taking into consideration that possible adjustments would be made and to better understand the co-creation organic of the LDMO, the first study considered is qualitative research. To achieve homogeneity in the focus group, the six participants are LDMOs with the position of senior managers, who were sampled from the center region of Portugal. Although, taking into consideration that the dimensions of each one differs in terms of the number of tourists visiting the destination, they do have common ground in the creative environment context. Notwithstanding this, before conducting this study, preparation was key, aiming to ensure that credibility was demonstrated and the participant's confidence was attained.

Regarding the study's preparation, an analysis of the organization's reports and other forms of information and publications was performed. In addition to this, a guide was drawn to verify that when conducting this study, it would be possible to establish correlations between the research topics. The focus group occurred after a tourism conference in Lisbon, in a quiet room where no interruptions could occur, and privacy was privileged. It was made up of six different LDMOs and one moderator, who is the person who guides the group and decides on the points to be discussed, with a previous written guide or script,

while still in a flexible scenario, thus ensuring a comfortable and dynamic environment to guarantee interaction [60].

The session, which had a duration of two hours, was recorded through audio in this way, enabling active listening and observation of the interviewee's expressions. At the beginning, participants were asked if they consented and were reminded that the session was confidential since the names of the tourist destinations would be removed, while also being assured that the information collected would be kept in a safe location.

Afterward, the moderator communicated to the participants that they should say if they had questions regarding the concepts utilized, explained the objectives of this research, and aligned the definition of a DMO, LDMO, and stakeholders in this study, since the concepts and terminology must be coherent [61]. Despite this, the selection criterion for this sample is that each participant has direct involvement within tourism destination management and has a leadership role in tourism, which, in a concrete form, was the inclusion criteria that were applied. To address data quality issues such as validity, there was a high rate of remarks to clarify questions and meanings, and the topics were debated from various perspectives and angles [62]. Additionally, concerning the beginning of the focus group, each participant was asked to explain their role within the organization and the organization itself.

### Qualitative Results

The running of the focus group was divided into two stages: in the first stage, participants introduced themselves and their organizations, whereas in the second stage, the group interview took place. During the process, notes were taken with the purpose of not only serving as a backup for an eventual malfunctioning of the audio recording but also to demonstrate to the participants the importance of their answers.

The main goal was to determine the role of the LDMOs and understand how these organizations, in the creative tourism context in Portugal, follow market trends and the evolution of this sector, which is known for its constant innovation, when aiming to stimulate the tourism destination's development. This is in line with the types of strategies that the tourism entities in Portugal resort to when promoting and attracting tourists to their destinations, and more specifically, to establish how they learn and keep up with the tourism activities' evolutions, to determine how they assimilate and absorb learning in their strategies, and finally, to recognize how the results of these strategies affect the design and management of tourism initiatives.

In the questionnaire elaboration, long questions were not included since it is confusing for the participant to exactly answer each aspect of it when asked more than one question at a time [63]. In this spectrum, when the focus group was concluded, a complete compilation of the records and contextual data was elaborated to avoid losing any valuable information and the exact nature of explanations [63]. During the analysis process, the data collected were condensed, transcribed, categorized, and then restructured into a narrative with the discussion of the results by acknowledging patterns and relationships in the existing literature.

From the participants' perspectives, it was established that the most relevant roles of the LDMO are contributing to communities by developing the tourism destination, coordinating with the stakeholders, and the consequent role as a networking creator and promoting sustainability. In concordance with this, as stated earlier, an LDMO is inserted in the creative tourism context, and the comments about this were the following:

"In my organization, I see myself as a mediator and announcer that through networking, can create tourism strategies and practices to enhance destination's performance."

"In addition to just visiting the destination, providing experiences is essential to the tourist. These diverse experiences are also achieved if there is a regional cross-selling."

"One of our focuses is to effectively work together with third actors in the field, who can also complement our activity. For example, in the absence of built heritage, we work with a destination that is known for this."

Considering the answers of the participants, the adequacy of the key success factors in the tourism destinations' variables used in this study was verified. To measure and achieve these, all organizations resort to an informal gathering of direct information from the stakeholders in that tourism destination (restaurants, hotels, and craft fairs), along with observing the demand through the number of tourists that visit their offices. The close relationship between the LDMO and stakeholders was highlighted. Additionally, it was stated, in agreement with this, that information sharing does not occur systematically, representing, in this way, a challenge. One of the participants explained the pioneering project to measure and monitor the social and economic impacts of wealth-generating activities in low-density territories. In other words, this is a way of facing the gap in the collection of statistical information in these territories and the lack of quantitative data.

Additionally, the majority of tourist destinations also consider the information obtained through the Wi-Fi networking project that provides free Wi-Fi to all tourists and the implementation and installation of beacons, which are small devices that, by emitting signals through Bluetooth low-energy technology, which can be reached by smartphones and tablet apps, can gather direct information about the number of tourists and their profiles due to recognizing the preferred paths chosen within the tourist destination. In conjunction with this, the importance of the existing satisfaction questionnaires for tourists was also referred to, where information regarding new interests and trends that they would enjoy seeing and being provided for in the tourism destination was retracted. Participants emphasized that, while recognizing that it would be a great indicator of a destination's development, there is a need for a higher level of brand awareness, thus understanding that effective marketing initiatives are required, especially for tourism destinations with limited access through promotion and advertising.

Participants stressed the importance of aligning and designing the tourist profile over the next three years. Nevertheless, it was indicated that the human resources' technical knowledge was inadequate, such as not knowing foreign languages and not having a prior tourism background or education. In this spectrum, one improvement agreed upon was to ensure that the needs of tourists are taken into consideration. Aiming to address this question, an LDMO's management skills variable was accounted for in the model, also due to the relevance interviewees expressed in resorting to LDMO when assessing tourists' needs and their desirable activities.

From the participants, the organizational learning commitment capability's adequacy was also confirmed since it was highlighted that, to prevail in the tourism sector, participants were aware that their employees should also be innovative, have power in decision making, and be comfortable in a changing environment. Additionally, the preferred methodology when dealing with knowledge dissemination is face-to-face meetings. However, when this is not conceivable, and due to the necessity of a fast answer when identifying an emerging new trend or challenge, LDMOs use e-mail. Marketing communication capabilities such as brand image and public relations were also verified. For instance, some of the participants statements were:

"In conversation with tourists, we found that they visit more than one tourist destination at a time, which means that it is important to continue the work of articulating and promoting more than one tourist destination simultaneously. In other words, mutual help within destinations is fundamental".

"Since being present at a variety of craft fairs, we have come to realize that we are receiving an increasing volume of tourists. They effectively affirm that they learned about the tourism destination through the presence of these fairs".

Accordingly, the verification of the creative tourism context destination and unique involvement for tourists was established through the participants' acknowledgment of the importance of providing and investing in creative tourism experiences, because of the changing trends in a tourism experience. In this manner, correlations between what is recognized in the focus group and the existing theory are established, hence overcoming one of the setbacks in this form of interviews and enhancing the significance of these

findings [64]. Therefore, the variables are organizational learning commitment capability, the LDMO's management skills, key success factors in tourism destinations, marketing communication capabilities, creative tourism context destination, and unique involvement for tourists.

### 3.3. Quantitative Study

The validation of the hypotheses obtained with the proposed conceptual model was carried out through a quantitative research method, believed to be the most adequate in obtaining the results in question. The research set is constituted by Portuguese LDMO's. Thus, data were collected by applying a self-administrated and internet-mediated questionnaire, executed by email, which ensured a low possibility of distortion of the respondent's answers since; in most cases, the person answering is the owner of the email account.

To improve measurement accuracy, a multivariate statistical analysis was conducted, such as structural equation modeling, which is highly applied in empirical research as a statistical tool [65]. Therefore, partial least-squares path modeling was implemented to assess the quality of the conceptual model and minimize the amount of unexplained variance. A reflective measurement model was applied to maximize the overlap between interchangeable items and the constructs of organizational learning commitment capability, marketing communication capabilities, the LDMO's management skills, key success factors in tourism destinations, creative tourism context destination, and unique involvement for tourists.

#### 3.3.1. Data Collection and Sample

For this primarily exploratory research, all Portuguese LDMOs were invited to participate. They account for 308 participants, and this internet-mediated questionnaire was developed through Google Forms. Firstly, an introductory English version of the internet-mediated questionnaire was designed, taking into consideration other different authors with already defined measures of the subject. Secondly, to verify the representativeness and suitability of the questions as well as to ensure that there were no misinterpretations, in other words, certify that the questionnaire is worded, a pilot test was run on ten individuals, which is the minimum recommended number [66].

The list of addresses of the Portuguese LDMOs was collected through a database, so they were contacted via email, receiving within it the explanation of the objective of the study alongside the direct web link to the final version of the online questionnaire. The data collection for this study was from April 2020 to June 2020, and throughout this period, the sum of complete answered questionnaires formed a total of 119. Within this timeframe, three attempts were made to communicate with the offices that did not answer. However, by conducting an exploratory statistical analysis with visual methods, two cases were considered outliers due to atypical answerers and one was straight lined, so a total of three were removed from the sample. Notwithstanding this, one hundred and sixteen (116) questionnaires remained and were aligned with the minimum sample size requirement for structured equation modeling [67].

Concerning the total response rate of 38.6%, according to Baruch [68], this percentage is reasonable considering it is higher than 35% and involves top management organizations. Taking into consideration the 116 LDMOs, 40 have fewer than 10 employees (34%), 13 have 11 to 50 employees (11%) and 63 have more than 50 employees (54%) within the organizations they represent. Regarding the number of years of inactivity, 28 have been in operation for less than 20 years (24%), 54 organizations opened their doors 21 years to 100 years ago (47%), and 34 of the 116 have been inactive for more than 100 years (29%). The average estimated number of visitors per year is 385.663 in the tourism destinations in question, and 31 tourism destinations have fewer than 1000 tourists per year (27%), 32 of the 116 have 1001 to 10,000 visitors per year (28%), and 53 have more than 10,000 tourists visiting their destination (46%).

### 3.3.2. Variables

Variables were measured by adopting existing scales. As such, organizational learning commitment capability was measured using a four-item scale adapted from the work of Jerez-Gómez et al. [69]. LDMO's management skills variable was measured by applying three items adapted to a tourism optic by Grewal and Slotegraaf [70]. Marketing communication capabilities were measured by resorting to a three-item scale adapted from Morgan et al. [71] and Vorhies and Morgan [72]. Four items were used to measure key success factors in tourism destinations, adapted from Bornhorst et al. [11]. The last variable that was adapted, which is unique involvement for tourists, in this case from Ali et al. [73], was measured using a two-item scale.

Creative tourism context destination variable was measured on a four-item scale and based on a literature review, resulting in the following items: "In my tourism destination, internal stakeholders have complete knowledge of what creative tourism is; in my tourism destination, a high percentage of companies fit into the creative tourism context; Creative tourism activities have grown in the last five years; If there is a wider range of creative tourism activities provided, tourists will participate more". These items were validated by three tourism scholars. A seven-point Likert-type scale was used to assess organizational learning and commitment capability, LDMO management skills, and key success factors in tourism destinations, with one corresponding to "strongly disagree" and seven corresponding to "strongly agree". The marketing communication capabilities were assessed by asking the LDMOs to rate their organization on a seven-point scale, with 3 indicating "much worse than your competitors" and +3 indicating "much better than your competitors". Tourist involvement was measured using a standard five-point Likert-type scale with values ranging from one to five, with one being "Strongly disagree" and five being "Strongly agree". Finally, the creative tourism context destination was assessed using a five-point Likert-type scale with the anchors of "Strongly oppose" (one) and "Strongly support" (two).

### 3.3.3. Quantitative Results

To test and validate the conceptual model, partial least squares (PLS) were employed, resorting to SmartPLS 3 software [74]. This was followed by an assessment of the quality of the measurement model, taking into consideration multiple criteria that were required since it is a reflective measurement model [75]. Additionally, an evaluation of the structural model was conducted as well as an interpretation of the results.

To verify the quality of the measurement model, the reliability and validity of the latent variables were established [76]. Internal consistency reliability was confirmed since each of the standardized factor loadings of the items was higher than 0.6. Consequently, the lowest value was 0.738, and all were significant with a  $p$  of 0.001 [76]. Cronbach's alpha was applied and provided evidence for the internal consistency reliability due to the value of each construct being higher than 0.7 (0.871 was the lowest value) [76] (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, average variance, correlations, and discriminant validity.

	CA	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6
Organization learning commitment capability	0.803	0.871	0.627	<b>0.792</b>	0.747	0.632	0.640	0.585	0.595
LDMO's management skills	0.835	0.903	0.758	0.619	<b>0.871</b>	0.700	0.893	0.723	0.745
Marketing communication capabilities	0.896	0.935	0.827	0.559	0.609	<b>0.909</b>	0.595	0.601	0.614
Key success factors in tourism destinations	0.931	0.951	0.829	0.561	0.787	0.551	<b>0.910</b>	0.699	0.824
Creative tourism context destination	0.846	0.897	0.686	0.49	0.610	0.529	0.625	<b>0.828</b>	0.632
Unique involvement for tourists	0.908	0.956	0.916	0.528	0.648	0.564	0.758	0.557	<b>0.957</b>

CA—Cronbach alpha, CR—composite reliability, and AVE—average variance. Bold numbers in diagonal are the square roots of AVE. Below the diagonal elements are the correlations between the constructs. Above the diagonal elements are the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratios.



Convergent validity was also established as all items loaded are significant and positive within their constructs, in conjunction with these presenting values higher than 0.7 of consistency reliability. Additionally, the average variance extracted is higher than the critical value of 0.50, indicating that, on average, all constructs justify more than half of the variance of its items [75] (Table 1). In keeping with Fornell and Larcker's criterion [77], discriminant validity was tested by assessing whether the square root of each construct's average variance is greater than the highest correlation with any other construct, as demonstrated in the bold values in Table 1. As a further consideration, each reflective indicator's outer loadings on the associated construct are greater than all the loadings on other constructs. In addition, to determine the discriminant validity, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations criterion (HTMT) was assessed. As demonstrated in Table 1, the HTMT ratio for all the constructs are below the required value of 0.85 [65].

To proceed with the assessment of the structural model, it is necessary to verify the collinearity issues in the inner model and each predictor construct's tolerance. In other words, variance inflation factor values were taken into consideration and were higher than the required value of 0.20 and below 5, since the lowest value was 1425 and the highest was 4858 [65,76]. In this manner, evidence of no collinearity is provided. Afterward, the significance and relevance of the structural model relationships were tested [75]. In terms of the inner model, the LDMO's management skills are the variable that has the strongest effect on key success factors in tourism destinations (0.713), while organizational learning commitment capability has an impact of 0.119 on key success factors in tourism destinations. Furthermore, this last exogenous variable has a 0.559 effect on marketing communication capabilities. The variables that have the most relevance in creative tourism context destinations are key success factors in tourism destinations, with a value of 0.480, and marketing communication capabilities (0.264). In addition, key success factors in tourism destinations also have the strongest effect on unique involvement for tourists (0.643), followed by marketing communication capabilities (0.209). The hypothesized paths in the model are statistically significant due to the standardized path coefficients of the variables being higher than 0.1. For this reason, organizational learning commitment capability, the LDMO's management skills, marketing communication capabilities, and key success factors in tourism destinations are moderately strong predictors of both creative tourism context destination and unique involvement for tourists.

In this way, the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) for the endogenous latent variables marketing communication capabilities, key success factors in tourism destinations, creative tourism context destinations, and unique involvement for tourists is, in order, 30.60%, 62.10%, 43.00%, and 59.90%, which are all superior to 10%, establishing the measurement of the model's predictive accuracy [78]. In concordance with evaluating the magnitude of  $R^2$  values, it is necessary to measure the model's relevance, which was analyzed through Stone-Geisser's  $Q^2$  values that were higher than zero. In concordance with this, the  $Q^2$  values of all endogenous variables were 0.454, 0.843, 0.286, and 0.730, respectively. Therefore, the relevance of the model is determined, suggesting that the model has predictive relevance for the constructs. To test the significance of the structural path, the bootstrapping procedure was used with 5000 subsamples [76].

Regarding the results of this six variables researched (two endogenous, two exogenous, and two mediating variables), as shown in Table 2, organizational learning commitment capability has a significantly positive effect on marketing communication capabilities ( $\beta = 0.565$  and  $p < 0.001$ ), thus providing support to H1a; in contrast, organizational learning commitment capability does not have a significant effect on defining key success factors in tourism destinations ( $\beta = 0.126$  and  $p = \text{n.s.}$ ), dismissing H1b.

Notwithstanding this, the LDMO's management skills have a significantly positive relation with defining key success factors in tourism destinations ( $\beta = 0.709$  and  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H3. The direct effects of marketing communication capabilities on a creative tourism context destination and a unique involvement for tourists are significant with ( $\beta = 0.261$  and  $p < 0.01$ ;  $\beta = 0.209$  and  $p < 0.05$ ), correspondingly. These findings support

H5a e H5b. In concordance with this, defining key success factors in tourism destinations also has a significantly positive effect on both a creative tourism context destination and a unique involvement for tourists ( $\beta = 0.485$  and  $p < 0.001$ ) and ( $\beta = 0.640$  and  $p < 0.001$ ), respectively. These results support H6a and H6b.

**Table 2.** Structural model assessment.

	Path Coefficient	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	p Values
Organizational learning commitment capability → Marketing communication capabilities	0.565	0.076	7.319	0.000
Organizational learning commitment capability → Key success factors in tourism destinations	0.126	0.089	1.336	0.182
LDMO's management skills → Key success factors in tourism destination	0.709	0.090	7.934	0.000
Marketing communication capabilities → Creative tourism context destination	0.261	0.088	3.009	0.003
Marketing communication capabilities → Unique involvement for tourists	0.209	0.087	2.395	0.017
Key success factors in tourism destinations → Creative tourism context destination	0.485	0.083	5.754	0.000
Key success factors in tourism destinations → Unique involvement for tourists	0.640	0.076	8.486	0.000

As demonstrated in Table 3, the bootstrapping procedure was applied to assess the relevance of the indirect effects via the mediators, therefore testing the mediation hypotheses [65,76]. The indirect effects of organizational learning commitment capability in a creative tourism context destination and the unique involvement for tourists via the mediator marketing communication capabilities are significant with ( $\beta = 0.149$  and  $p < 0.01$ ) and ( $\beta = 0.119$  and  $p < 0.05$ ), correspondingly. Therefore, the mediation hypotheses H2a and H2b are supported. Accordingly, the indirect effects of LDMO's management skills in terms of increasing the creativity of the tourism context destination and the unique involvement for tourists via the mediator key success factors in tourism destinations are also significant with ( $\beta = 0.343$  and  $p < 0.001$ ) and ( $\beta = 0.453$  and  $p < 0.001$ ), respectively. In this spectrum, H4a and H4b are validated. In contrast, the indirect effects of organizational learning commitment capability in terms of increasing creativity in the tourism context destination and the unique involvement for tourists via the mediator key success factors in tourism destinations are not significant, with ( $\beta = 0.062$  and  $p = \text{n.s.}$ ) and ( $\beta = 0.081$  and  $p = \text{n.s.}$ ); thus, H6c and H6d are not supported.

**Table 3.** Bootstrap results for indirect effects.

	Path Coefficient	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	p Values
Organizational learning commitment capability → Marketing communication capabilities → Creative tourism context destination	0.149	0.057	2.582	0.010
Organizational learning commitment capability → Marketing communication capabilities → Unique involvement for tourists	0.119	0.055	2.109	0.035
LDMO's management skills → Key success factors in tourism destinations → Creative tourism context destination	0.343	0.073	4.697	0.000
LDMO's management skills → Key success factors in tourism destinations → Unique involvement for tourists	0.453	0.078	5.865	0.000
Organizational learning commitment capability → Key success factors in tourism destinations → Creative tourism context destination	0.062	0.046	1.244	0.214
Organizational learning commitment capability → Key success factors in destinations → Unique involvement for tourists	0.081	0.058	1.314	0.189

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. *Organizational Learning Commitment Capability in Creative Tourism: An Approach to Managing Tourism Destinations*

In an organization's spectrum, management figures are responsible for guaranteeing that their staff is aware of how learning in a constant format is important, considering one of their roles is to implement positive human resource management practices and learning development [79]. One vital element of organizational learning capability is organizational learning commitment [69], i.e., if management determines a strategic view towards learning, longstanding results would be possible to obtain [80]. The results reveal that it is important that an LDMO proceeds to cultivate an innovative and dynamic environment moved by elaborative changes when tourists' tendencies shift but also manages to foresee these, motivating their human resources with the power to be independent and to make decisions themselves.

Parallel to this, interviewees stated that their employees are crucial since they have close contact with tourists when granting information in the offices as well as in the actual realization of activities, in this way recognizing that organizational learning commitment capability is a relevant factor in tourism destination management. Nevertheless, as the results showed, effective marketing communication capabilities also have a fundamental role in successfully managing an innovative and creative tourism destination. In agreement with organizational learning, with strategic management and marketing, it is also possible to achieve a competitive advantage, and there exists a positive relation between marketing orientation and the organization's performance [4,31].

Accordingly, DMO is responsible for designing strategies that are difficult for competitors to imitate [48] and are incorporated in their organizations, such as marketing communication capabilities, which represent capabilities in the individual "marketing mix" processes, and enable organizations to effectively address this in their market environment [44].

The results show that marketing communication capabilities are also fundamental for DMO since, in this manner, organizations can adequately act in response to the tourism market, considering the development and implementation of advertising projects, which also puts into effect a strong brand image of the tourism destination. The participants of the focus group confirmed this by stating that the volume of tourists who visited their destination increased and there is a continuous tendency when they decided to be present at fairs and heightened communications with tourists. Additionally, due to the indirect link between organizational learning commitment capability and the creative tourism context destination, as well as unique involvement for tourists, the importance of marketing communication capabilities is emphasized, thereby displaying as a critical element that LDMO is still to take into an even higher account. These results provide a better understanding of how organizational performance with strong leadership and an active role of an LDMO can provide impact towards a higher creative tourism destination where tourists can experience unique involvement activities.

### 4.2. *The Relation between Key Success Factors in Tourism Destinations and the Management of LDMO*

As mentioned, generating competitive advantages emerged as inevitable to ensure a tourism destination's enhanced development [11]. To guarantee positioning and promotion as a competitive tourism destination, a boost in the development of tourism facilities, programs, images, and events should occur. Aside from this, acknowledging a set of measurements of key success factors in tourism destinations becomes a requirement to achieve the destination's competitive development sustainably.

One way of evaluating this is by producing effective marketing initiatives that will attract tourists where the LDMO must consider the perceptions and images that are conceived about their tourism destinations [81]. In compliance with the qualitative study, interviewees identified a gap in producing tourists' awareness through advertising and a strong destination image that can distinguish these as unique destinations and implement positive word-of-mouth. However, they perceive this as a potential improvement point and

key success factor. Furthermore, brand awareness is also vital to reach a higher network of stakeholders that are aligned with quality services and activities, which can potentiate tourism destinations' development.

Another key factor that enhances tourism destination development is the strong capacity to interact and collaborate with internal destination stakeholders as well as maintaining a close relationship and engagement with them, thus providing quality experiences and activities within the tourism destination [11]. This is consistent with open innovation dynamics where collaborative networks play an important role in product development [82]. In conjunction with this, the results demonstrated that an LDMO also considers their close relationship with stakeholders and the creation of these synergies as a fundamental factor to interpret tourism destination's development, since stakeholders can collect information and feedback from a different perspective, such as tendencies and preferences due to their informal relationship among tourists.

In terms of a more pragmatic parameter, economic indicators were also noticed as a form of measuring key success factors by the results obtained from the internet-mediated questionnaire and the statements of the interviewees that expressed the tendency to apply mechanisms to access economic performance as a way of portraying the destination's development. Therefore, analyzing the volume and growth of tourists in attendance at activities, money spent in the tourism destination, and overall revenues generated by the activities provided by the tourism destination's management is essential. In concordance with this, interviewees confirmed the importance of satisfaction in an internet-mediated questionnaire that was given to tourists at the end of an activity and after visiting a tourist destination to obtain improvement points, assess the customer experience, and give their ideas about what they would enjoy having as a future option, considering the relevance of revisiting tourist destinations [6]. Additionally, participants in the focus group reinforced the new progress of beacons that are being installed, with one of the advantages being the collection of this type of statistical information.

Despite the great magnitude of these key success factors in tourism destinations, before the tourist arrives at the location, prior preparation is required, such as attracting and retaining responsible, proactive, and accountable professionals to work in the organization's infrastructure where customer service is delivered, which can encourage and stimulate interest in visitors so they have a positive and memorable experience. Most of the focus group participants exposed this as a problem since there is a gap in matching the profile that tourism staff should have with the required skills. Nevertheless, an LDMO should consider that, although these indicators can perceive the tourism destination's development, ultimately there are still a considerable number of other factors that are not within the LDMO's power to intervene.

Regarding LDMO's management skills, results from both studies demonstrated that, as a way of attaining sustainable competitive advantages within the tourism destination, an LDMO must strategically determine the best practices to obtain and employ the limited resources to establish well-funded organizational capabilities that obstruct imitation's possibilities, in concordance with Grewal and Slotegraaf [70]. Alongside these results, following a rigid program of recruitment and training generates a higher likelihood of retaining capable staff in the tourism destination organization [82]. Additionally, as already stated, innovation is a key factor in a creative tourism destination, thereby an LDMO should commit to overseeing the atmosphere and design of the offices according to the tendencies to provide enhanced customer service with a high level of presentation for when tourists need to ask questions, receive advice for places to visit, what experiences to have or even what other tourism destinations nearby they would be able to visit [83].

As a further consideration, the strong indirect link between the LDMO's management skills and the development of a creative tourism context destination as well as activities and experiences that provide unique involvement for tourists, demonstrates the relevance of assessing key success factors in tourism destinations due to the competitiveness and the necessity of offering services and activities that are inserted into the creative tourism

spectrum [84], where visitors feel a real involvement with the tourism destination and find memorable activities and experiences.

#### 4.3. Role of the LDMO: Destination's Development through Creative Tourism

The essence of a tourism experience can be intensified if it is portrayed as a complex memorable and actively undertake for tourists in a way that they receive the possibility of having an authentic first-hand experience, thereby increasing motivation for destination's revisit [5,28]. As verified by the results of both performed studies, creative tourism experiences that imply generating memories, satisfaction, feelings of uniqueness, and thrill for tourists are recognized as generating value towards the tourism destination [4,31]. Furthermore, tourism firms and destinations can benefit from high environmental awareness segments, recognizing them as agents of a better world [85].

In the spectrum of the qualitative study, it was demonstrated that to develop the tourism destination and competitiveness, considering the sustainable tourism development principles as recognized in the open innovation literature [86], an LDMO should fully comprehend the qualities and history of their tourism destination, encouraging differentiation and innovation within destinations to continuously intensify performance quality and overall tourist satisfaction. Complementarily, as indicated by Manhas et al. [83], the optimization of the tourism destination increases the chances of tourists having a unique and satisfying experience, in conjunction with upgrading the destination's brand image.

In concordance with this, an LDMO must accomplish this by dedicating to analyzing tourists' behaviors to obtain an increasing number of revisits that are motivated by the tourist's satisfaction in visiting the tourism destination and pursuing an on-site tourism experience again due to the destination's offers rather than visiting relatives and acquaintances [83].

Findings indicate that in the long-term development of the tourism destination, an LDMO is seen as a central player in the creative tourism context and that it has high accountability for organizational effectiveness with qualified and proactive human resources, while also having deep partnerships, actively managing these with the destination's stakeholders, and planning in a strategic line after analyzing current and future tourist needs, an important issue in the open innovation context [87]. As recognized in the open innovation literature, the stakeholders' commitment and firm support are important ingredients for a comprehensive collaboration strategy [88]. In this manner, the results of this research contribute towards extending the understanding and interpretation of the role of an LDMO as a crucial part of the development of a tourism destination. On top of this, exploring how a tourist destination can be inserted into a creative tourism context can provide an even greater positive development by providing tourists with the advantage of a set of creative activities and experiences that build memorable and unique feelings. Additionally, an LDMO has a leading role in creating a changing environment within the organization to enable it to encounter new challenges, competition within the market, and distinctive tendencies and advantages.

To accomplish this and work towards developing a competitive and unique destination, LDMOs ought to exploit the destination's potential, preserve its cultural identity, and adopt dynamic strategies by analyzing and foreseeing market trends and tourists' needs.

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1. Main Conclusions

This study aimed to comprehend the role of an LDMO in developing tourism destinations competitively and in a creative tourism context, using a mixed-methods approach composed of both qualitative and quantitative studies. Alongside the literature review, a conceptual model is proposed and verified through both studies.

Regarding the qualitative research, the main purpose was to explore the characteristics as well as responsibilities that an LDMO identifies as relevant. Additionally, we wanted to understand the types and outcomes of strategies employed to continuously achieve the



destination's sustainable development. In this focus group, the six participants agreed that the most relevant roles of an LDMO are the contribution towards the development of the community, the coordination with tourism stakeholders on top of creating an important network, and finally the promotion of a sustainable tourism destination.

Numerous studies [11,26] have investigated a DMO's role in promoting tourism destination development. However, these analyzed rather larger destinations, contrarily to what is shown in this study for the LDMOs, which are present in local destinations that do not possess the same number of resources that a denser destination does.

According to Liu [89], creative industries, such as creative tourism, "have experienced significant transformations in recent times, with features of flexibility, user engagement, technology advancement, open platforms and digitalization, and project-based short life cycles observed" (p. 14), highlighting the importance of a close relationship between stakeholders. This finding aligns with the open innovation dynamics that defend these strategic partnerships and shows a direct impact on firms' revenues [90], which were found to be especially important in the pandemic context [40].

Nevertheless, challenges were discussed regarding the inexistence of systematic information sharing, reduced brand awareness, and a lack of promotion regarding marketing strategies due to limited resources in certain less dense geographic regions in Portugal. This last difficulty can be overcome through an improved co-creation environment among stakeholders, organizations, and tourists. Additionally, to deal with this, a potential measure that an LDMO outlined was to design the tourist's profile within the next three years through a market study as well as by adopting a dynamic perspective to foresee future tendencies [91].

Furthermore, the inadequacy of technical knowledge among employees in the organizations was highlighted. Additionally, LDMOs stated that further attention should be given to the human resources department, since they recognize that innovation and learning are key features of a high-performance organization. Therefore, the set of organizational capabilities to ensure the great development of a tourism destination was assessed as organizational learning commitment capability, marketing communication, and LDMO's management skills.

Concerning the quantitative study, an internet-mediated questionnaire was administered to one hundred and sixteen (116) LDMOs in Portugal and further analyzed by partial least-squares path modeling. The findings proposed that an organization's learning commitment capability, i.e., the extent to which the tourism organization considers each employee in the process of decision making as well as the implementation of an innovative, knowledgeable, and agile working environment, also influences marketing communication capabilities based on the close relationship between tourism organizations and visitors. For instance, a well-rounded organization will have a higher chance of structuring and executing advertising programs and strategies to create an elevated brand image and brand awareness.

As a further consideration, LDMO's management skillset is suggested to relate to marketing communication capability through creative tourism since the effective recruiting and training of human resources provides a knowledgeable organization with technical tools to actively collaborate with stakeholders, to create distinctive marketing strategies such as advertising and promotion of the destination, and to proceed with market research. Moreover, the atmosphere and design of the organization's infrastructure, where visitors are provided with customer service, which is frequently the first contact the tourist has with the LDMO, also impact the tourists' evaluations of the quality of activities and services provided during their stay.

Providing a creative tourism local destination by boosting co-creation in the set of activities enables us to grant experiences that are closer to tourists' needs. In this way, revisit intentions increase since tourists feel that they have an impact on what the destination delivers and perceive real involvement with the destination. Therefore, the results demonstrated that an LDMO can affect the tourism destination's performance. In concordance

with this, Rusko et al. [92] ascertain that the LDMO is responsible for decision making and for creating strategies to continuously develop tourism destinations, hence playing a fundamental part in the process of establishing their tourism destination's competitiveness.

The results of this quantitative study also revealed that marketing communication capabilities and key success factors in tourism destinations were linked to creative tourism and the stimulation of a unique involvement feeling in the activities for tourists. Supporting this point of view, Stipanović and Rudan [15] state that the development of creative tourism activities will possibly lead to a longer period of stay, boosting contentment and consequently potentiating an increase in the amount of money spent on the tourism destination. Hence, supporting the notion that implementing a highly creative tourism destination is a positive way of forming competitive and sustainable advantages to develop a local tourism destination.

### 5.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study provides theoretical contributions to tourism destination development in the creative tourism context, based on the results of the studies that demonstrated accuracy with regard to the proposed model and measurement scales. The evidence obtained is relevant and contributes towards the development of creative tourism destinations since it correlates and delivers a conceptual model about organizational and market performance to achieve competitiveness within creative tourism from the DMO's standpoint.

The importance of the DMO in tourism is well represented by various authors, such as Upadhyaya and Vij [10] and Richards [7]. However, the implications of the role and capabilities of an LDMO regarding the competitive development of a creative tourism destination are still underexplored, hence the significant theoretical implications of this study by analyzing less populated destinations.

Both studies reveal new lines of research, such as realizing how to deliver new sources of differentiation to creative tourism and how an LDMO can transform these into strategies that create solutions to competitiveness in tourism destinations. Specifically, organizational learning and technical knowledge, to improve communication with the tourism market will potentially benefit the LDMO's managerial skills, hence attaining a greater value proposition in tourism destinations. Knowledge absorption is a key issue within the tourism context and plays an important role in the development of open innovation dynamics, especially in the adoption of strategic and operational forward supply chain collaboration [28].

Moreover, strong marketing communication skills will also distinguish tourism destinations with a higher value potential. Additionally, as explored and in concordance with Richards [5], given that this study concerns local tourism destinations, strategies ought to be adapted towards this reality. In other words, replicating approaches that are implemented by denser tourist destinations would not be a great method.

Lastly, the mediating correlations presented were still underexplored, thus providing a great contribution to tourism destination management and development in the context of creative tourism competitiveness. In this spectrum, these findings were that an organization's learning commitment capability impacts tourism destinations in a creative tourism environment, as well as destinations that focus on providing unique involvement for tourists through the DMO's marketing communication capabilities. Moreover, an LDMO's management skills affect destinations in a creative tourism environment, along with destinations that provide unique involvement for tourists by defining their key success factors in tourism destinations.

### 5.3. Managerial Implications

Overall, improvement points for an LDMO were detected based on the results of both studies with the purpose of the destination's competitive evolution in terms of creative tourism, since these LDMOs demonstrated a deficiency in their ability to differentiate and grow within the market.

Firstly, a high number of these tourism destinations are relatively small, thereby facing challenges regarding the resources' amount at their disposal. To meet this challenge, tourism destinations should aim to increase synergies and partnerships between other destinations and stakeholders, in this way benefitting from collaborative strategies and mutual help, and where the government can play a leveraging role [90]. Additionally, implementing systematic information sharing among these elements will be relevant.

As demonstrated through the structural equation modeling, LDMOs acknowledged creative tourism and provided visitors with innovative experiences where they could feel unique involvement during their visits as positive approaches to the tourism destination's development. In parallel, an absolute definition of the tourist's profile for each destination should be established, and if creativity and an innovation-based approach are seen as key factors, it is suggested that more actions should take place towards building these new experiences. In addition, this will also restrict the use of unnecessary resources, for instance, on activities that visitors do not search for in that particular tourist destination or do not appreciate nowadays.

On a final note, LDMOs should invest in expertise, local and technical knowledge, and training capabilities to better communicate with the public and market, thereby focusing on organization learning commitment capability and marketing communication capabilities to enhance value creation for their tourism destination.

#### 5.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study contemplates certain limitations, indicating, in this way, the requirement for further research. First, both studies were conducted on LDMOs in Portugal, so it is recommended that they be employed in other countries since different locations have distinctive features and structures. For instance, as exposed in the analysis of the focus group, it was highlighted by participants that there was an existing lack of resources, whereas in denser regions this would not be the case; thus, generalizing these results on LDMOs should be done with caution.

Secondly, the timeline of the quantitative study is also considered a reservation due to its being conducted only from April to June 2020. This probably means that more time would increase the number of LDMOs involved and reinforce confidence in the results, although the sample size agrees with the minimum criteria suggested for structured equation modeling [67].

Finally, additional research on the topic may generate extended perceptions in a more detailed manner and, for instance, build upon this conceptual model to reach conclusions to be generally implemented regarding creative tourism destinations, especially regarding the impacts of the pandemic on LDMO activities and performance. Furthermore, since Portugal is a very diverse country, it is expected to find different approaches to creative tourism. As such, it can be interesting to include the region as a moderating variable in the structural model to explore eventual differences.

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