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Article

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MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Congress tourism: Characteristics and application to sustainable tourism to facilitate collective action towards achieving the SDGs

Sandra Monroy-Rodríguez^{1*} and Raquel Caro-Carretero²

Abstract: The destination's tourism managers strategically invest in meeting infrastructure, aiming to host congresses and leverage the economic and social benefits of tourism to foster sustainable economic growth, inclusive employment and the realization of Sustainable Development Goal targets. Their efforts contribute to promoting a thriving economy, equitable job opportunities, and a sustainable future for all, as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). However, the mere fact of having basic facilities is not enough for the destination to be competitive in this segment. The aim of this paper is to identify those core factors that increase the competitiveness of the tourist destination in the congress segment. To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the congress tourism segment in the region of Extremadura, a study based on IPA (Importance-Performance Analysis) has been carried out on 21 determining factors selected from interviews with experts in the sector and after a thorough literature review. The diagram resulting from the IPA analysis has allowed us to obtain the strategic factors and theoretical and practical implications for both publics and private stakeholders. The result of this paper confirms the fundamental role of the public administration in improving the competitiveness of the congress tourism destination and key factors that directly affect the good development of congress tourism in a territory, such as the good relationship between public and private agents involved in the sector, tourism promotion and transport.

Subjects: Tourism Development/Impacts; Tourism Management; Events;

Keywords: competitiveness; congress tourism; destination management; IPA analysis; priority factors

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, a new normal has developed that has brought about many economic, technological, and social changes with important implications for the business world (Ahlstrom et al., 2020). This context is a challenge for many businesses that have to face new ways of doing things in the face of increased competition (Loon et al., 2020). The tourism sector, and specifically Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE, hereafter) industry, has had to adapt to these changes (Disimulacion, 2020), for which it has been essential to understand what factors determine that an event such as a congress is held in a particular country and in a particular area.

Many congresses and events are held in Spain and one area that has a lot of potential is Extremadura. For this reason, in this work we will focus on analysing the factors and carry out a pilot case study in a region of Spain.

Public tourism managers, being aware of the important role that meeting tourism has for the development of the destination (Smagina, 2017), invest in congress and complementary infrastructures to accommodate this market, such as, for example, conference centres to provide the destination with essential elements to make it competitive (Espejo & Ponce, 1999; Sylla et al., 2015). In this way, meeting tourism becomes an instrument of dynamization and local urban restructuring, as well as investment in equipment and promotion of the cities (Vera, 1997); which in turn causes the congress offer of the destinations to grow (Jin et al., 2010) and the infrastructures can be enjoyed by tourism in general and the leisure of the local population (Davidson, 2007).

These managers are also aware that without adequate infrastructures, the importance of this segment would be lower (Binimelis & Ordinas, 2003), and this would condition the optimal development of this type of tourism (Espejo & Ponce, 1999). It is this perception that public managers have of a destination and of the benefits generated by meeting tourism that has led to an increasing intensity of competition to attract more congresses (Lee & Back, 2007), and this behavior has been the subject of study by many authors (Weber & Ladking, 2004).

Spain has been a popular destination for congress tourism, hosting numerous significant congresses over the years, contributing significantly to congress tourism in Spain, attracting delegates, professionals and experts from various fields and industries, thus boosting local economies and promoting knowledge exchange. In this regard, Spain occupies the second position worldwide in the number of international conferences in 2022, according to the ranking of the International Congress and Convention Association [ICCA] (2022)

The case of Extremadura, a region situated in western Spain along the Portuguese border, boasts a population of one million residents. In recent years, the regional government has made significant investments to facilitate the hosting of congresses. They have accomplished this by constructing five conference centres in various cities: Cáceres, Mérida, Badajoz, and Plasencia (managed by a public entity), as well as Villanueva de la Serena (under the management of the local municipality). Despite these efforts, Extremadura has struggled to attract a greater number of congresses and establish itself as the premier destination for such events, thus enhancing its competitiveness in the tourism sector. This study aims to provide practical insights, moving beyond theoretical considerations, with a specific focus on the Extremadura region. Its objective is to serve as a valuable piece of scientific research and a useful resource for both public and private stakeholders involved in the tourism industry.

All this has led to the reception of meetings and congresses in a city becoming a fundamental strategic decision for the stakeholders of a destination, given that a large number of meetings and/or attendees creates a positive economic multiplier impact on the city or country where the meeting is held (Huo, 2014). This is due to the fact that meeting tourism generates a higher level of expenditure, which is much higher than that incurred by other types of tourists consuming tourism services in other segments (Binimelis & Ordinas, 2003). Furthermore, meeting tourism also has a positive influence on the destination by reducing the seasonality of demand (Shin, 2009), diversifying supply (Davidson, 2007), influencing the destination's image (Oppermann, 1996) and becoming a major economic multiplier (Del Valle, 2007).

Studying the analysis of a locale in Spain in the context of developing congress tourism as a valuable product provides a theoretical framework for understanding how destinations can strategically position themselves to attract and cater to the needs of congress events. It aligns with concepts from destination management, event planning, marketing, sustainability and economic development, contributing to the overall body of knowledge in tourism and hospitality studies.

The analysis of a locale in Spain on the development of Congress Tourism as a valuable product is limited by its specificity, short-term focus, and potential biases toward the immediate context. To overcome these limitations, researchers can draw insights from a variety of destinations, consider long-term implications, engage diverse stakeholders, and adopt a more holistic and sustainable approach to congress tourism planning and development.

2. Meeting tourism: the congress segment

Although there is no homogeneity in the concept, nor in the classification of meeting tourism, together with the also called MICE tourism, they are the most commonly used terms that encompass the sub-segment of congress tourism (Getz, 2008). This heterogeneity in classifying the congress segment generates doubts about the statistics and economic results provided by each organization in terms of meeting tourism. This is why the data do not coincide, because the organizations and associations involved in the subject, the recording of information and the analysis and publication of their data apply different criteria to classify tourism as detailed in Table 1.

The lack of harmonized approaches in the classification of the different types of meeting tourism that are carried out, as well as in the criteria for defining congresses, generate controversy both in the definition and in the statistical studies carried out on the subject. An example of this is the controversy generated in 2013 by the statistical report published by the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) and the data provided by the Spain Convention Bureau (SCB) a period in which the ICCA, based on its criteria, indicated that the number of congresses had increased in Spain, while for the SCB the number had decreased, which does not make it possible to make comparative studies either nationally or internationally. Similarly, if we compare the data published by other official organizations such as the UIA and the ICCA, in 2016, in which Spain ranked sixth in the UIA ranking having hosted 423 international meetings, while in the list by country prepared annually by the ICCA Spain ranked fifth in the same year with 533 international meetings held (ICCA Report, 2016). These years have been taken into consideration because the difference in the statistical results can be clearly seen.

Likewise, Tables 2 and 3 show the disparity in the statistics collected by the official organizations when comparing the data published by the UIA and the ICCA in 2018. Taking Spain as a reference, it can be observed that, in 2018, the country occupied the eighth position in the UIA ranking, while in the ICCA ranking it was placed in the third position by the number of meetings held in that same year.

Table 1. Main differences in congress classification

Organization	Periodo of time	Attendees	International scope
SCB (Spain Convention Bureau)	> two days	>50	The 40% of participants are international and among them there are three different nationalities
ICCA (International Congress and Convention Association)	> three days	Average between 300 and 500	Rotation in different countries
UIA (Union of International Associations)	> three days	>50	The 40% of participants are international and among them there are five different nationalities

Source: own elaboration

Table 2. UIA country ranking

Position 2018 Ranking UIA	Country	Number of meetings
1	Singapore	1177
2	South Korea	854
3	Belgium	849
4	United States	592
5	Japan	579
6	Austria	472
7	France	455
8	Spain	441
9	United Kingdom	329
10	Germany	296

Source: own elaboration

Table 3. ICCA country ranking

Position 2018 Ranking ICCA	Country	Number of meetings
1	United States	1037
2	Germany	695
3	Spain	635
4	United Kingdom	610
5	France	603
6	Italy	564
7	Japan	505
8	China	502
9	Canada	388
10	Canada	335

Source: own elaboration

This paper has taken into account the classification and term of meeting tourism, that includes the sub-segment of congresses, to which the SCB refers, as it is the concept most commonly used by official national organizations.

According to the SCB (2020), meeting tourism includes congresses, conventions and conferences, symposiums and seminars. It defines a congress as a type of organized meeting held with a generally fixed frequency and of an extraordinary nature with a public vocation, professional associations, societies or associations, universities, federations and private entities. These meetings are attended by about 50 people from different places who meet at a given destination where the congress is held for at least two days and with at least one overnight stay, which is the minimum duration. Below are some points that complement the definition of congress given by the SCB, which were attached as explanatory notes in the report that the association publishes annually on the measurement of meeting tourism:

- (1) Participants at a congress attend a meeting previously organized and published on an established topic, changing their usual environment and activity.
- (2) The sponsor and/or organizer decides on the contributions to the presentation and discussions of the topic.
- (3) Congresses have different frequencies, which are established in advance; they can be annual, biennial, biannual or multiannual.
- (4) Conferences can be considered as congresses, except for public and governmental conferences.

A total of 63 articles indexed in the Scopus database related to meeting tourism and published in the last 25 years were analysed. This list of articles has been carried out after a thorough review of the publications to have a valid sample, a search that was performed by entering in the database the keywords meeting and MICE as the two terms most commonly used to refer to the meetings segment.

It is important to mention that from the date of the first publication on this segment that was indexed in Scopus, i.e., 1995, there was no significant increase in publications until 2008, when the production of articles on this segment increased significantly (Figure 1). By 2011, it becomes evident that the production of publications on the subject is periodically carried out every subsequent year, since up to that date there are gaps during long periods without publications. More recently, it is observed that 2019 is to date the year in which the largest number of publications on this segment has been produced, a total of eight, incorporating Portuguese and Spanish authors; it is worth mentioning that the three publications by these authors include the terms meeting tourism and business tourism (Carvalho et al., 2019; Pinho & Marqués, 2019).

Figure 1. Number of articles published in the last 25 years.

Source: own elaboration

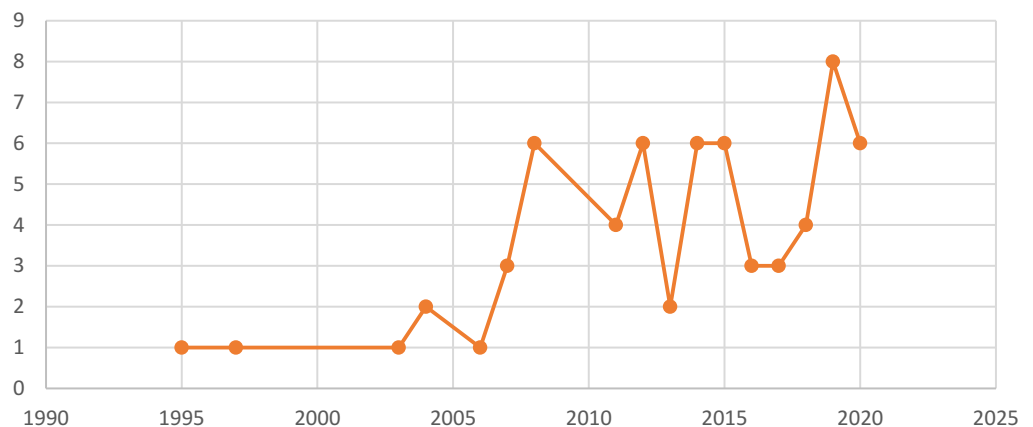


Figure 2. Percentage of articles by journal.

Source: own elaboration



Figure 2 illustrates the percentage distribution of articles by journal, portraying a clear picture of the scholarly emphasis on various facets within the tourism industry. Notably, the *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* emerges as the prominent contributor to literature on MICE tourism. Its consistent focus on this subject matter substantiates its position as a pivotal resource in the realm of scholarly discourse surrounding tourism management and strategies

In the articles analysed, the term meeting was used most frequently, with a percentage of 34%, followed by MICE and then by the two terms used simultaneously in the same study. The studies made it possible to verify that in recent years there has been an increase in the use of the term MICE, which encompasses meetings, incentives, congresses and exhibitions, by the main official bodies with competence in tourism and by researchers in their studies (Van Niekerk & Getz, 2019). Other terms also used to refer to the segment under study are congresses and conventions. The term business tourism is used interchangeably with meeting tourism and MICE.

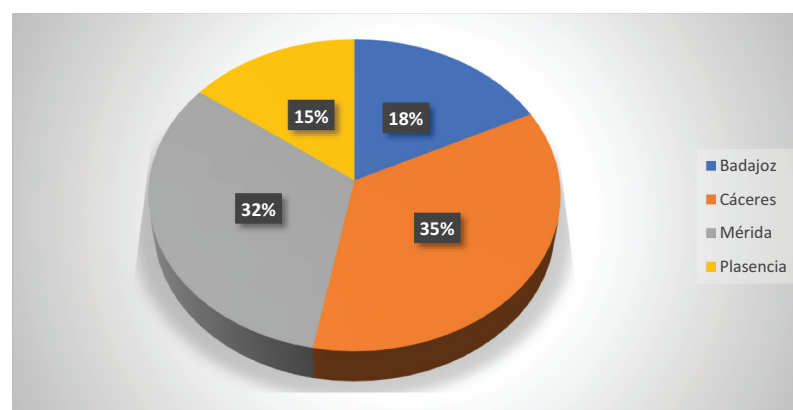
The most discussed topic in the literature on the meetings segment indexed in the Scopus database deals with its importance and the potential for its development and promotion. Some authors have studied it by geographical locations, such as Wootton and Stevens (1995) in Wales; Aksun et al. (2004) in Turkey; Zhang (2014) in Denmark; Hanly (2012) in Ireland; Mussina et al. (2019) in Kazakhstan; Silerova et al. (2013), who studied it in several locations such as Bulgaria and Czech Republic; Jones and Li (2015), who studied the topic by making a general approach by surveying people from different countries such as France, the United States, Germany and Ireland. These authors, among others, have used different techniques to carry out their respective analyses, such as quantitative (Dwyer & Forsyth, 1997) and qualitative methods (Silerova et al., 2013), Delphi technique (Weber & Ladkin, 2003) or studies through satellite accounts (Dwyer et al., 2007; Jones & Li, 2015).

In the first published article, the terms used by the researchers to refer to the segment studied was meeting (meeting tourism), which is associated with the notion of business tourism (Wootton & Stevens, 1995). Other subsequent studies also addressed as the object of study the importance, contribution or benefits generated by this segment for the destination using only the term meeting tourism (Hanly, 2012) to refer to the segment, only the term MICE (Jones & Li, 2015; Mussina et al., 2019), the two terms MICE and meetings (Bandhuseve et al., 2017; Dwyer & Forsyth, 1997; Zhang, 2014), or directly employing the designation of congress tourism (Silerova et al., 2013) among its keywords or the title of the publication. The articles do not use a common term to refer to the same segment (Figure 3).

The most numerous publications of the articles that addressed the study of the meetings segment and that were found in the database included in their topics of study the benefits generated by meetings tourism.

Figure 3. Percentage of responses according to congress destination of origin.

Source: own elaboration



Sustainability publications related to meetings tourism are scarce, despite being an important topic for the Meetings Industry (Draper et al., 2011; Mykletun et al., 2014). Of the 63 articles analysed only four studied sustainability related to this segment and developed the topic through quantitative analysis from the following approaches: the study of sustainable meetings from the organizers' point of view (Draper et al., 2011), from the participants' point of view (Aksu et al., 2015), or considering both perspectives (Mykletun et al., 2014). On the other hand, it is important to note that a more recent publication analyzed the carbon footprint of the expenses associated with the MICE meeting (Kitamura et al., 2020).

Demand has been more extensively studied from different points of view, such as: overall customer satisfaction (Monge & Brandimarte, 2011; Wei & Huang, 2013), related to the congress centre (Ryan et al., 2008), associated with the quality of the food provided at international congresses (Wei & Huang, 2013), linked to the motivation or decision to participate in a congress (Chiang et al., 2012; Pavlukovic & Cimbalevic, 2020).

In sum, the articles published on the MICE tourism value chain are limited, as we are facing a topic that requires the production of specific studies due to the peculiarity presented by the relationship that exists between B2C in leisure tourism and B2B in the MICE segment (Rojas et al., 2020). Only a few of the articles studied a part of the value chain specific to this segment, such as the distribution channels linking suppliers and conference participants (Smith & Garnham, 2008).

On the other hand, it is important to say that the production of the articles is geographically deconcentrated, since the studies were prepared and published in 33 different countries, with the United States being the largest producer of studies with eight articles published in the last 25 years. This country is followed by the United Kingdom, Australia, Macao and Thailand, which share the second position as the largest producers of studies on the subject with five articles.

Finally, it should be noted that the 63 articles studied and indexed in the Scopus database were written individually and collaboratively by a total of 148 authors, 11 of whom are the only authors to have published twice on meetings tourism, while the other researchers have produced only one publication. All the studied articles indexed in Scopus that addressed meeting tourism as an object of study are published in 39 journals. The scientific journal with the highest number of publications is *Journal of Convention & Event Tourism* (11 articles), which collects research on the Meetings and Events Industry; this journal is followed with three publications: *International Journal of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* and *Tourism Management*; and in third place are the following journals with two publications each: *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Travel Research*, *Sustainability* and *Tourism Analysis*. The other journals in which the articles studied were published only include, in the last 25 years, a single article about meeting tourism, representing more than half of the publications (Figure 3).

The interconnection of Congress tourism, sustainable tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) presents an opportunity for the comprehensive development of destinations. When these three elements are seamlessly integrated, they can collectively foster the holistic growth of a locale. Congress tourism involves the hosting of meetings, conferences, and events that draw delegates, professionals, and experts to a destination. These gatherings yield substantial economic benefits, encompassing expenditures on lodging, transportation, dining, and local attractions. By hosting international congresses, regions like Extremadura can invigorate economic expansion, generate employment opportunities, and bolster the revenues of local enterprises. Sustainable tourism places a premium on mitigating adverse environmental impacts and safeguarding a destination's cultural and natural heritage. The incorporation of sustainable principles into congress tourism can result in decreased carbon emissions, waste reduction, and conscientious resource management. For instance, the adoption of eco-friendly transportation options, energy-efficient venues, and waste management initiatives can all contribute to Extremadura's pursuit of sustainable tourism development.

The United Nations' SDGs provide a global framework for addressing urgent social, economic, and environmental challenges. Congress tourism aligns harmoniously with several SDGs, including Goal 8 (Promoting Decent Work and Economic Growth) through job creation, Goal 9 (Advancing Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) by encouraging investments in infrastructure, and Goal 11 (Fostering Sustainable Cities and Communities) by advocating responsible urban development. The fusion of congress tourism with sustainable practices and the SDGs can engender a positive ripple effect. Extremadura can demonstrate its dedication to conscientious destination management, attract ethically minded event organizers, and contribute to global sustainability endeavors, all while concurrently bolstering its local economy.

In conclusion, Extremadura has the potential to craft a mutually beneficial scenario where economic expansion, environmental accountability, and societal progress are harmoniously intertwined, leading to a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable future.

3. Methodology

To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the congress tourism segment, a study based on Important-Performance Analysis (IPA) has been carried out. The IPA is a widely used technique in marketing and management research to evaluate the importance and performance of various attributes or factors that influence customer satisfaction or organizational performance. IPA is known for its simplicity, ease of interpretation and its ability to provide valuable insights for tourism management (Simpson et al., 2020 and references herein). Numerous articles employing IPA analysis have been identified, as a valuable approach for evaluating tourism performance and making informed decisions, spanning from the 1980s, such as that carried out by Evans and Chon (1989). The authors explore the application of survey research methodology and the essential elements required to construct a strong research framework using IPA. The paper showcases the utilization of the IPA method to confront and address diverse tourism policy challenges in two significantly different tourism destinations. This approach is exemplified in the work of López-Bonilla and Monroy-Rodríguez (2023), where they employed IPA to inform their strategic decision-making and priority-setting for sustainable tourism planning and development. Their decisions were grounded in an analysis of importance and performance metrics derived from the IPA methodology.

In this sense, a study was conducted to identify the key factors influencing the congress tourism segment. The study utilized IPA to assess the disparity between the importance and performance of these factors. Experts were surveyed, seeking their input on 21 different factors (Griffin & Edwards, 2012).

It has been conducted IPA in Microsoft Excel by collecting and scoring data on attributes. It has been calculated mean Importance and Performance scores, created a scatterplot, identified quadrants, and made strategic recommendations based on the results. In particular, to perform an Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) in Excel, it has been followed these key steps:

- (1) Data Collection: Collect data on various attributes, factors, or variables that we wanted to analyze for importance and performance.
- (2) Data Entry: it has been organized into two columns: one for "Importance" scores and another for "Performance" scores. Each row represented a specific attribute or factor.
- (3) Data Scoring: it has been scored the Importance and Performance on a consistent scale, from 0 to 10, where 0 is low and 10 is high. It has been assigned an Importance score to indicate how important each attribute is to the study and a Performance score to evaluate how well it performs.
- (4) Data Analysis: it has been calculated the mean Importance score, calculated the mean Performance score, created a scatterplot with Importance on the X-axis and Performance on the Y-axis.

- (5) Quadrant Analysis: it has been identified the quadrants in the scatterplot enabling us to identify areas for improvement and strengths:
- (6) High Importance, High Performance: These attributes are strengths and are meeting customer expectations effectively. They contribute positively to customer satisfaction.
- (7) High Importance, Low Performance: These attributes are areas of concern, as they are important to customers but not being adequately delivered. These require attention and improvement to bridge the gap between expectations and reality.
- (8) Low Importance, High Performance: These attributes are strengths, but since they hold low importance, focusing on them might not yield significant improvements in overall customer satisfaction.
- (9) Low Importance, Low Performance: These attributes are of lesser concern, as they have low importance and low performance. While improving these might be beneficial, they might not greatly impact overall satisfaction.
- (10) Interpretation and Visualization: it has been focused on attributes in quadrants to visualize the results
- (11) Conclusion and Recommendations: it has been summarized the findings and made recommendations based on the IPA analysis.

Then, IPA involves two key dimensions: “Importance” and “Performance.” Importance evaluates the significance of different attributes or features to customers or stakeholders. Attributes with high importance are those that significantly impact customer satisfaction or perception. Performance assesses how well the attributes are currently being delivered. Attributes with high performance are those that are being effectively executed, resulting in positive customer experiences.

IPA’s strength lies in its simplicity and ability to prioritize actions. It guides organizations to concentrate resources and efforts on improving attributes that matter most to customers while highlighting those that might not require immediate attention.

In sum, IPA Analysis is a valuable framework that helps organizations identify where to allocate resources for improvement and innovation. By focusing efforts on areas that align with customer priorities, organizations can enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and overall business success. It not only identifies gaps and priorities but also guides strategic decisions, resource allocation, and sustainable practices alignment. Ultimately, it empowers the region’s tourism management to make informed choices that enhance the congress tourism experience and contribute to the overall growth and sustainability of the destination.

3.1. Questionnaire

To identify the study population, a review was carried out, which made it possible to design an approximate questionnaire model for carrying out surveys. In addition, for this purpose, programs of congresses held in the region of Extremadura were consulted to obtain information on suppliers, informal interviews were conducted with experts in the congress organization sector with the aim of confirming that the factors identified in the literature review were the ones that best suited the destination, company websites were visited and telephone calls were made to identify the population of tourism establishments in Extremadura that could host and provide services for congresses; this made it possible to carry out the empirical study approach.

When implementing research fieldwork, especially in the context of tourism and destination analysis, several ethical considerations have been taken into account to guarantee the well-being of participants: ensuring that they have been fully informed about the purpose of the research and how their data would be used and confirming that data was anonymized to prevent any unintended harm or breach of privacy.

From the research carried out up to this point, we obtained a very limited number of companies that are directly and professionally engaged in providing services in the organization of congresses. Likewise, from the inventory of tourism establishments and agents involved in congress tourism in the region, it was possible to identify the suppliers, both private and public, that make up the value chain of the congress tourism segment and who are experts in the knowledge derived from this sector; thus, this information on the segment has resulted in a database made up of 105 tourism experts to whom the questionnaire was addressed. To identify the experts in congress tourism within the Extremadura region, we chose individuals from the tourism industry and public sector employees who are actively involved in the specific sub-segment we were studying. To accomplish this, we conducted a comprehensive examination of congress programs held in Extremadura over the past five years. This allowed us to identify professionals from hospitality, event management, tourism boards, local government, transportation, academia and other relevant entities with the most extensive experience in the realm of congress events. Each of these sectors has unique insights and concerns related to congress tourism.

The anonymous questionnaire is divided into three distinct parts. The first part contains questions on the sociodemographic profile related to the activity or sector to which the respondent belongs: whether they belong to the private sector involved in the value chain of congress tourism, such as hotels, travel agencies, Professional Congress Organizers (PCOs), tour guides, restaurants, activity companies or catering companies; or whether they belong to the public sector linked to the congress centres, the university and the different levels of public bodies with tourism competences, such as the public administration of the autonomous community of Extremadura and the local public administration which includes both provincial councils and town councils.

In this first part of the questionnaire, questions were also asked about the location where most of the congress activity takes place, specifically the cities of Badajoz, Cáceres, Mérida and Plasencia, which are the four centres that host the largest number of congresses in the region, as they have adequate infrastructure for this purpose, such as sufficient hotel accommodation and congress centres. And, finally, these first questions included a question about the gender of the person surveyed. In the second part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked about the importance they consider a congress tourism destination should have with respect to a series of qualities or attributes (Table 4). The third part of the questionnaire sought to obtain the value given by the respondents to the attributes of the destination where they carry out their activity. In these last two blocks, the responses were organized by category scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being not at all important and 10 being very important, on the factors involved in the decision-making processes in the meetings market.

The selection of the 21 factors that were included in the survey stems from a prior literature review, Pansuwong (2017) conducted a study aimed at evaluating the perspectives of key stakeholders from an industry standpoint and assessing how a territory could capitalize on its recent advancements as a convention destination. Previously, the researcher conducted an analysis of the factors contributing to the competitiveness of convention destinations in the research conducted by Lee (2003); Sangpikul and Kim (2009); Kim et al. (2011); Kang et al. (2005); Qu et al. (2000); Go and Zhang (1997); McCartney (2008); Park et al. (2014). Taking into account the factors

Table 4. Percentage of used terms

Meeting	38%
MICE	31.25%
Meeting and MICE	14%
Others	6.25%

Source: own elaboration

Table 5. Analysed factors

1. Availability of hotel rooms
2. Security of the destination
3. Friendliness of the local population
4. Facilities for organizing congresses
5. Quality of hotel service
6. Accessibility/How to get to the destination
7. Cleanliness and attractiveness of the destination
8. Sightseeing opportunities
9. Good image of the destination
10. Adequate food and lodging costs
11. Quality and efficiency of congress services
12. Quality of service in restaurants
13. Affordable prices and rates at the destination
14. Good weather
15. Nightlife offer
16. Sustainability of the destination
17. Institutional support for congress tourism
18. Tourism promotion of the destination
19. Uncrowded environment in the destination
20. Professionalization of the congress tourism sector
21. Good relationship between public and private agents

Source: own elaboration

from those studies, the ones that best suited the studied destination and were most commonly found in the studies were identified with the aim of analysing them. In Table 5, the selected factors are displayed.

3.2. Sample

In total 105 questionnaires were applied and 34 surveys were completed by experts in congress tourism in the region of Extremadura. It must be taken into account in this study that the survey was carried out in April 2021 and that one of the sectors most affected by the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has been tourism; the reason for which the expected responses have not been obtained, since some tourism companies consulted were in definitive or temporary cessation, in such a way that it was not possible to contact those responsible. The principle of representative sampling aims to select a subset of participants that accurately reflects the larger population's characteristics. Since the research locale is relatively small, 34 respondents could potentially be a representative sample providing valuable insights. However, given that, the locale is diverse, the sample might not fully capture all nuances.

Regarding the profile of the people who responded to the survey, it was found that most of them are managers of 4-star hotels, as shown in Table 6 below.

The experts working in the congress destinations of Cáceres and Mérida received the highest number of surveys (Figure 3). This may be due to the fact that Cáceres is the city in Extremadura that hosts the largest number of congresses and that Mérida, being the capital of the autonomous community of Extremadura, is where public organization of the region is located, which increases the number of responses from the Public Administration of this population.

Table 6. Percentage of respondents with respect to the activity or sector to which they belong

Hotels	23%
<i>Tour guides</i>	12%
<i>Regional public administration</i>	11%
<i>Local public administration</i>	9%
<i>Conferences centres</i>	9%
<i>University</i>	6%
<i>Professional conference organizer</i>	6%
<i>Business Association</i>	3%
<i>Catering</i>	3%
<i>Travel Agencies</i>	3%

Source: own elaboration

Regarding the gender of the people who responded to the surveys, the percentage that was reflected is very similar, with a slightly higher percentage of responses from women, who represented 53% of the total number of respondents compared to 47% represented by the number of male participants.

4. Results and discussion

The data from the results obtained in the surveys are shown in Table 7.

From the data reflected in the surveys, it can be said that the importance given to the attributes by expert agents is greater than the value given to these factors at the destination (8.54 in importance compared to 8.14 in value), except for the factors of safety (F2), friendliness of the local population (F3), good climate (F14) and uncrowded environment at the destination (F19). These four attributes are more highly valued at the destination by the expert agents than the importance they give to the development of congress tourism in the region. According to this analysis and the data shown in Table 7, the attributes that exceed 9 out of 10 in the degree of importance given to them by experts in the region (Figure 4) were:

- Availability of rooms (F1).
- Facilities for organizing congresses (F4).
- Quality of hotel service (F5).
- Accessibility/How to get to the destination (F6).
- Good image of the destination (F9).
- Professionalization of the congress tourism sector (F20).

Opposite these were the least relevant factors, which the experts scored 7 and 8 out of 10. These were:

- Friendliness of the population (F3).
- Good climate (F14).
- Nightlife offer (F15).
- Sustainability of the destination (F16).
- Uncrowded environment at destination (F19).

The attributes that presented the greatest difference between the importance given by the experts and their evaluation of it in the destination were the following:

- Accesibilidad/Cómo llegar al destino (F6).

Table 7. Data obtained from the importance/valuation surveys

Factors	Importance	Valuation	Discrepancy
1. Availability of hotel rooms	9.08	8.55	0.53
2. Security of the destination	8.73	9.17	-0.44
3. Friendliness of the local population	7.94	8.88	-0.94
4. Facilities for organizing congresses	9.14	8.82	0.32
5. Quality of hotel service	9.17	8.47	0.7
6. Accessibility/how to get to the destination	9.08	7.5	1.58
7. Cleanliness and attractiveness of the destination	8.88	8.52	0.36
8. Sightseeing opportunities	8.91	8.67	0.24
9. Good image of the destination	9.02	8.55	0.47
10. Adequate food and lodging costs	8.47	8.41	0.06
11. Quality and efficiency of congress services	8.97	8.11	0.86
12. Quality of service in restaurants	8.91	8.29	0.62
13. Affordable prices and rates at the destination	8.47	8.17	0.3
14. Good weather	7.61	8.58	-0.97
15. Nightlife offer	7.02	6.17	1.03
16. Sustainability of the destination	7.58	7.79	0.21
17. Institutional support for congress tourism	8.55	7.17	1.38
18. Tourism promotion of the destination	8.5	7.76	0.74
19. Uncrowded environment in the destination	7.44	8.67	-1.23
20. Professionalization of the congress tourism sector	9.11	7.55	1.56
21. Good relationship between public and private agents	8,85	7,2	1,65
Average score	8,54	8,14	

Source: own elaboration

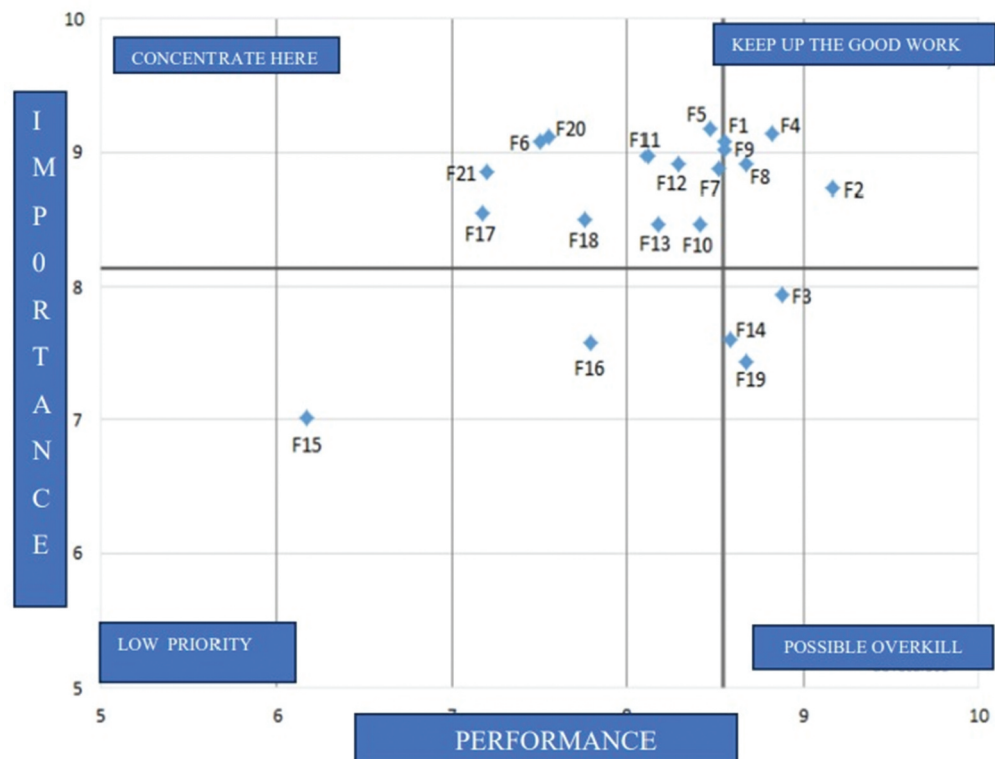
- Institutional support for congress tourism (F17).
- Professionalization of the congress tourism sector (F20).
- Good relationship between public and private agents (F21).

The graphic representation of the factors will serve as a support in the elaboration of the strategic plan as a tool for the development and promotion of congress tourism in the region (Figure 4). The factors can be distinguished under the following premises:

- Low priority.
- Possible waste of resources.
- Focus here.
- Keep up the good work.

Figure 4. IPA importance-value analysis with mean value scale.

Source: own elaboration



Based on the analysis made and the results of the survey, the strategies to be considered by public managers responsible for the planning, management and promotion of the autonomous community of Extremadura as a congress destination are presented below.

Low priority is given to elements such as the nightlife offer (F15) and the sustainability of the destination (F16), which are not priority factors in terms of tourism promotion of the congress destination. However, it is considered a possible waste of resources to focus promotion efforts on the following factors:

- Friendliness of the local population (F3).
- Good climate (F14).
- Uncrowded environment at destination (F19).

With respect to the premise of maintaining the good work, it is stated that actions should focus on the following factors:

- Hotel room availability (F1).
- Facilities for organizing congresses (F4).
- Good image of the destination (F9).
- Opportunities for sightseeing (F8).
- Security of the destination (F2).

The priority factors for a good development of the destination as a congress tourism destination were the most numerous (Figure 5), such as:

- Good relationship between public and private agents (F21).
- Institutional support for congress tourism (F17).

- Accessibility/How to get to the destination (F6).
- Professionalization of the congress tourism sector (F20).
- Tourism promotion of the destination (F18).
- Quality and efficiency of congress services (F11).
- Cleanliness and attractiveness of the destination (F7).
- Affordable prices and rates at the destination (F13).
- Adequate food and lodging costs (F10).

Within the area of priority factors, the most important were, according to the data analysis (Figure 5):

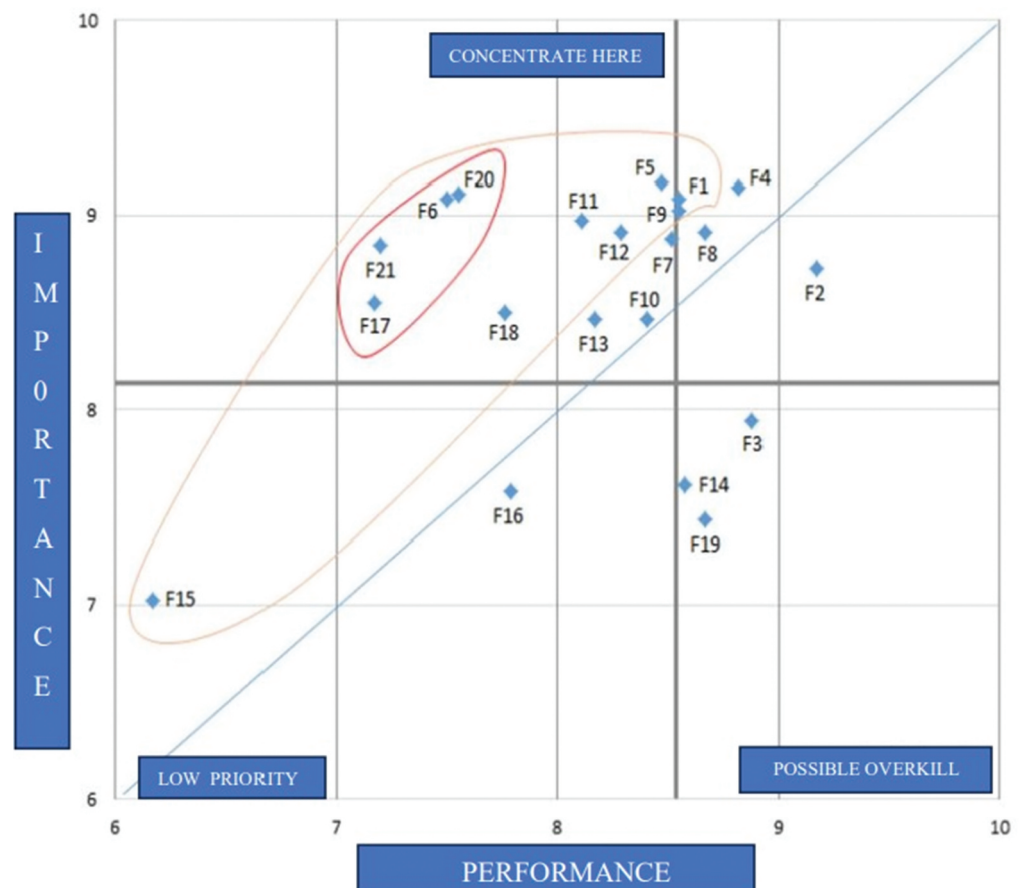
- Good relationship between public and private agents (F21).
- Institutional support for congress tourism (F17).
- Accessibility/How to get to the destination (F6).
- Professionalization of the congress tourism sector (F20).

Most of the priority factors (F21, F17, F18, F7) are the responsibility of the public administration of the autonomous community of Extremadura, therefore, it is stated that the role of those responsible for tourism management is key to the proper development of the congress segment in the region (Dioko & Whitfield, 2015).

At the I MICE Forum held in Mérida, where all members of the congress tourism value chain were present, the participants demanded back in 2014 that the figure of the Convention Bureau should

Figure 5. Figure6 Importance-value IPA analysis with priority areas.

Source: own elaboration



integrate the public and private offers, and that it should function as a coordinating and institutional support entity (F21, F17). These two elements form part of the four most important priority factors. An entity with these characteristics has recently been created; however, its efficiency has not been analysed due to its limited trajectory. The role of the stakeholders involved in the success of the sector (F21) has been highlighted in several studies on the use of information technologies (Buhalis, 2019) and other authors relate the coordination of efforts among them to the creation of a strong brand image, that can become a great competitive advantage (Hoque, 2016).

The factor of accessibility/how to get to the destination (F6) is of state competence and there are discrepancies among the autonomous regions. According to the experts' identification of this factor, it is a priority and a factor that should be given special attention, as it is one of the factors that shows the greatest discrepancy between the high importance given to it by the experts and their assessment of the factor at the destination, as indicated in the section on communications. This is due, for example, to the fact that Spain has more than 30 international airports, while Extremadura has only one, located in Talavera de la Reina, Badajoz, with two domestic flights to Madrid and Barcelona; and the same applies to the railway network, which is deficient in Extremadura compared to the rest of Spain, which has the most extensive network of high-speed trains in Europe, with 300 km built, and is the second largest in the world, being surpassed in extension only by China.

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, the following should also be a priority for Extremadura:

- Tourism promotion of the destination (F18).
- Quality and efficiency of congress services (F11).
- Quality of hotel services (F5).
- Good image of the destination (F9).
- Availability of hotel rooms (F1).
- Nightlife offer (F15).

Regarding tourism promotion of the destination (F18), the Internet is the most widely used medium for obtaining tourism information (Díaz & López, 2012; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008) and, therefore, websites are the main element of online promotion of destinations (Fraiz & Rodríguez, 2012). The information contained in the Extremadura tourism website in the MICE section is not useful, nor is it complete, nor does it show an adequate presentation compared to other official websites of different national destinations, therefore, it does not fulfil its role of being a promotional tool (Alencar et al., 2011).

On the other hand, the availability of rooms (F1) is a factor that expert's rate with a 9 out of 10 in importance and give it a valuation in the destination of almost 9, so it is inferred that it is necessary to direct and maintain a good work towards this factor. According to the analysis carried out in this chapter on the number of hotels with capacity to host congresses, Extremadura has facilities for organizing congresses (F4). However, even though congress tourism experts in the autonomous community of Extremadura give high importance to facilities for organizing congresses and place it in the quadrant of maintaining good work, none of the publicly or privately owned congress facilities inventoried in the community of Extremadura has the Q for quality. As for the private sector (F5), few have the Q for quality, according to Statista 22:

- 12 hotels and tourist apartments.
- 3 spas.
- 1 intermediary services company.

According to the Meture executive report published by SCB (2020), the venues that hosted the highest number of meetings were conference centres, with 33.2 %, followed by hotels, which hosted 25.7 % of the meetings. It is therefore advisable to continue to maintain this type of facility in good condition.

As for sustainability (F16) related to meeting tourism, it is a very little studied factor (Mykletun et al., 2014). Even so, some authors consider that concern for the environment is an important element in decision-making (Diamantopolus et al., 2003) and it is also a factor perceived positively by congress centre managers, meeting organizers and participants (Mykletun et al., 2014). However, in the study carried out in the region, sustainability associated with meetings is the element, among all those analysed, that presented the smallest discrepancy between importance and valuation in the destination, and the sustainability factor falls into the category of not very important and not highly valued by experts.

Congress tourism in Extremadura, despite having adequate infrastructure to host this type of tourism, is not in a good position in the ranking of the number of meetings hosted by cities, although it should be noted that the development of the destination goes beyond investment in resources, services and equipment; the key to this is the relationship that exists between the agents that make up the tourism offer, as indicated by Merinero and Pulido (2009), who verified that greater coordination between stakeholders is reflected in greater development. According to authors such as Bigné et al. (2005), the real and effective participation of all public and private entities is necessary, since there are still no planning and management plans drawn up jointly between the administrations at different levels within the community, nor between public and private agents; in this sense, only the case of the local Conventions Bureaux is evident, which are not operational at the time of the study and the regional one has little to analyze its efficiency.

Therefore, the role of the public administration is key since it has the authority to promote and manage the tourist destination and must coordinate both the other public agents at different levels within its sphere of action and the private agents. The development of tourism will depend on this good management (Jamal & Getz, 1995), so it is essential to know the agents involved and how they relate to each other (Merinero & Pulido, 2009).

5. Conclusions

IPA, from the destination's viewpoint, serves as a valuable methodology in tourism congress. It plays a crucial role in strategic planning by offering valuable insights for destination management and marketing strategies. It allows destinations to customize their marketing initiatives to showcase their strengths and address weaknesses, thereby attracting a larger share of the congress tourism market. This study highlights the importance of public administration in congress tourism and outlines critical factors for attention:

- (1) Collaboration: Public administration plays a key role in fostering collaboration between public and private stakeholders through platforms like public-private partnerships (PPPs) and information sharing.
- (2) Institutional Support: Governments can offer financial incentives and subsidies to attract major congress events, making hosting more appealing to organizers.
- (3) Promotion and Marketing: Government entities actively promote congress destinations through marketing campaigns, participation in industry events, and the creation of open data portals for strategic planning.
- (4) Infrastructure Investment: Governments invest in world-class congress facilities, including convention centres and exhibition halls, and improve accessibility, focusing on reducing transportation time for attendees.

- (5) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Public administration formulates policies and regulations to advance sustainable congress tourism, emphasizing event sustainability, accessibility, and environmental impact.
- (6) Financial Support: Public administration allocates funds for infrastructure improvements, marketing, and sustainability initiatives to attract and host congress events.
- (7) Monitoring and Assessment: Public administration tracks the impact of congress tourism on SDGs, evaluating economic benefits, environmental sustainability and social inclusivity.
- (8) Education and Awareness: Public administration promotes public education and awareness about sustainable congress tourism and its alignment with SDGs.
- (9) Capacity Development: Public administration invests in training programs for its workforce and stakeholders, focusing on sustainable practices and customer service.
- (10) Encouragement of Innovation: Public administration incentivizes innovation in congress tourism, supporting research and innovative solutions for sustainability and competitiveness.
- (11) Advocacy for Equality and Inclusion: Public administration advocates for gender equality, social inclusivity, and accessibility in congress tourism, ensuring equal access for all participants.
- (12) Setting a Precedent: Public administration leads by example by adopting sustainable practices in its congress tourism operations, including eco-friendly venue management and responsible tourism promotion.

In essence, public administration's pivotal role in congress tourism encompasses nurturing collaborations, providing institutional support, actively promoting destinations, and investing in essential infrastructure. These concerted efforts contribute significantly to the development and competitiveness of congress tourism destinations, ultimately benefiting the local and regional economies.

The research results have several theoretical implications that contribute to the broader academic understanding of congress tourism, sustainable tourism development and destination management. The research provides insights into the factors that influence its development as a valuable product. This knowledge can enrich the literature on destination management, event tourism and sustainable practices. The results could help refine existing theoretical frameworks related to congress tourism development. For example, the study may identify new dimensions or variables that should be considered when assessing destination readiness for hosting congresses. The findings can lead to the development of theoretical models that outline effective strategies for engaging diverse stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, and event organizers, in the congress tourism ecosystem.

As per our findings, it is evident that a good relationship between public and private agents (F21) is a top priority within the sector. Drawing upon the existing literature, stakeholders in the tourism sector should actively promote Servant leadership in managerial and CEO positions prior research has suggested that this serves as a distinguishing factor for the service (Ruiz-Palmino et al., 2021) Furthermore, to foster social capital with individuals beyond the boundaries of the hotel or restaurant (Ruiz-Palmino et al., 2023; Zoghbi-Manrique de Lara & Ruiz-Palmino, 2019).

Furthermore, the research results also hold practical implications for stakeholders in the congress tourism industry since destination managers and policymakers can use the findings to formulate strategic plans that align with their identified priorities and concerns. This can even guide resource allocation and infrastructure development. The research can inform marketing campaigns that highlight the strengths of the locale and its alignment with the needs of event organizers. It can guide branding efforts that resonate with the values of congress attendees important motivational factors for attending such congresses, accessibility and the recognition of

gender-based differences in motivation, significantly influence attendees' decisions (Lopez-Bonilla et al. 2023). Hospitality and event industry businesses can make informed decisions about investment opportunities based on the identified gaps and opportunities within the congress tourism ecosystem. Government authorities can use the results to develop policies that support responsible tourism development, promote economic growth, and ensure positive social impacts.

In addition, the international significance of the research lies in its potential to contribute to global best practices in congress tourism development and sustainable destination management. The insights gained from analysing a specific locale's congress tourism can be shared with other destinations facing similar challenges and opportunities, fostering international knowledge exchange. The research results can serve as benchmarks for other locales aspiring to develop congress tourism. Destinations can learn from successful strategies and avoid pitfalls identified in the study. As the research aligns with the SDGs, it can inspire other destinations to adopt similar approaches, contributing to worldwide efforts toward responsible tourism.

Congress tourism offers numerous benefits to local communities and economies. Congress tourists spend generously on accommodations, food, transportation, and other services, directly boosting the local economy. Hosting such events creates job opportunities, and organizers often prefer local suppliers, fostering local business growth. This can also lead to new businesses catering to congress tourists' needs, like boutique hotels and restaurants. Investments in transportation infrastructure can enhance mobility for both locals and tourists.

Furthermore, congresses encourage collaboration with local experts, academics, and professionals, facilitating knowledge transfer and skill enhancement. Academic conferences promote research advancements and cultural events, preserving and promoting local traditions. Attendees often extend their stay, benefiting the local tourism sector. Volunteers get involved, fostering community engagement and networking opportunities.

Sustainability initiatives in congress tourism influence businesses to adopt eco-friendly practices. Knowledge about sustainability spreads, leading to local education and awareness campaigns. Overall, congress tourism can contribute to economic, cultural, and social growth while promoting sustainability.

In summary, congress tourism has the potential to provide a wide range of economic, cultural, and social benefits to a community, fostering sustainable growth and local engagement. However, it is essential for destination planners and stakeholders to manage this type of tourism effectively to maximize its positive impact while minimizing any potential negative consequences.

One of the issues that could be considered as a limitation is the lack of any relevant factor that has not been studied, such as data management, the use made of them, the impact on their publication and access to them from the public and private point of view. On the other hand, it would be interesting to carry out the same study on congress attendees, to analyse experts in congresses from a perspective other than supply. Incorporating the perspective of congress attendees provides a holistic view of the congress tourism sector, guiding destination management toward more attendee-centric strategies. It fosters a deeper understanding of the industry's dynamics, leading to better-informed decisions, improved experiences, and a stronger reputation as a congress tourism destination. Examining attendees' demographics such as age, gender, nationality, and profession provides a clearer picture of the diverse audience that congress tourism attracts. Studying why attendees choose a particular congress provides insights into their motivations and objectives. Some might attend for networking, education, business opportunities, or personal interest. This knowledge informs how the destination can create tailored experiences that align with these motivations. Analysing attendees' expectations before the congress and their experiences afterward highlights areas where the destination excelled and areas that might

require improvement. This feedback loop is crucial for refining the congress tourism product to meet or exceed attendee expectations. Examining attendees' interests in exploring the local culture, history, and leisure activities provides insights into potential pre- or post-congress tourism opportunities. This helps extend attendees' stays and benefits the local economy. Analysing attendees' post-congress actions, such as whether they return to the destination for leisure or business purposes, measures the long-term impact of congress tourism. Repeat visits indicate the destination's lasting impression and potential for building loyalty. Understanding which topics, sessions, or speakers resonated most with attendees informs the design of future congress programs. This ensures that content remains relevant, up-to-date, and aligned with attendees' interests.

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