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Academic Research Paper

Destination Management organisations between governance and marketing orientation: the Italian DMO's case

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Abstract: *Purpose* Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) have progressively evolved from promotional bodies into strategic actors responsible for destination governance, stakeholder coordination, and sustainable tourism development. Although this transformation is widely recognised in the literature, evidence of its implementation in practice remains limited. *Design/methodology/approach* - This study investigates the extent to which the theoretical evolution of DMOs is reflected in their organisational structures and operational practices. Focusing on the relationship between governance, digitalisation, and organisational capacity, the research aims to assess how DMOs contribute to destination competitiveness. The Italian tourism system, characterised by fragmented governance and strong territorial diversity, provides the empirical context for the analysis. *Originality/value* - The research adopts a mixed-methods approach combining bibliometric analysis and empirical investigation. A bibliometric review of publications indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection (2015–2025) identifies the main research trends and thematic developments concerning DMOs. The empirical analysis examines 146 Italian DMOs through a web-based assessment of their governance models, organisational characteristics, and digital presence. Integrating these two approaches enables a comparison between the theoretical evolution of DMOs and their current operational practices, providing a multidimensional perspective on destination governance. The study combines bibliometric techniques with organisational analysis to offer a comprehensive framework linking governance, digital transformation, and organisational capacity. It highlights the

gap between the conceptual evolution of DMOs and their practical implementation while providing a basis for future comparative research on destination governance across different institutional contexts. *Practical implications* - The findings reveal significant differences among Italian DMOs in governance arrangements, organisational capacity, and digital maturity. Strengthening governance integration, improving digital capabilities, and enhancing institutional coordination emerge as key priorities for increasing DMO effectiveness. The results provide practical guidance for policymakers and destination managers seeking to improve destination governance and support more coordinated and sustainable tourism management.

Keywords: *Destination Management Organisations; destination governance; digitalization; smart destinations; Italy tourism policy;*

JEL Codes: H83; M41; Q01

1. Introduction/ Literature Review

Tourist destinations are increasingly understood as complex socio-economic systems shaped by the interactions among multiple stakeholders, institutions, and governance arrangements. Within this perspective, destination competitiveness no longer depends solely on tourism resources or destination attractiveness, but increasingly on the ability to coordinate actors, integrate strategic functions, and support long-term territorial development (Candela & Figini, 2012; UNWTO, 2019). As tourism systems become more complex due to globalisation, sustainability challenges, digital transformation, and post-pandemic recovery dynamics, governance and coordination have become central dimensions of destination management.

In this context, Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) have progressively evolved from purely promotional entities into more integrated governance-oriented organisations. Traditionally focused on branding, communication, and visitor attraction (Pike & Page, 2013), DMOs are increasingly expected to combine marketing activities with stakeholder coordination, strategic planning, sustainability management, and destination development functions (Sheehan et al., 2016; Reinhold et al., 2023). Contemporary tourism governance demonstrates that promotion and management cannot be treated as separate dimensions. While some destinations still prioritise attracting visitors, others, particularly mature or saturated destinations, increasingly focus on visitor management, sustainability, and territorial balance. Consequently, DMOs are expected to balance destination competitiveness with long-term territorial sustainability.

At the same time, digitalisation has accelerated this transformation. The diffusion of big data, artificial intelligence, smart destination technologies, and real-time monitoring systems has expanded DMOs' strategic responsibilities (Gretzel, 2021). Within this context, the concept of the "Smart DMO" has emerged, referring to organisations that use data and digital technologies to support evidence-based destination governance. Digital transformation is therefore no longer limited to promotion and communication but increasingly represents a strategic infrastructure for governance and management. Despite this theoretical evolution, the operational reality of DMOs remains highly heterogeneous. Several studies highlight that many DMOs continue to operate predominantly as marketing-oriented organisations, with limited governance capabilities, uneven digital maturity, and constrained organisational resources (Mandić &

Kennell, 2021). Financial dependence on public institutions, fragmented governance structures, and limited technological capacity often hinder the implementation of integrated destination management models.

The Italian tourism system represents a particularly relevant context for investigating these dynamics. The coexistence of regional, provincial, local, and thematic tourism organisations has created a highly heterogeneous landscape in which DMOs differ significantly in governance orientation, organisational structure, digital capacity, and strategic functions. While some destinations have adopted integrated governance approaches and advanced digital infrastructures, others continue to rely mainly on traditional promotional models. These asymmetries make the Italian context particularly suitable for analysing the extent to which contemporary theoretical models of destination management are reflected in operational practices. Although a substantial body of academic literature, institutional reports, and technical documents has examined the evolution of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), particularly from managerial and operational perspectives, fewer studies have combined a systematic bibliometric analysis of the international scientific literature with a nationwide empirical assessment of Italian DMOs. By integrating these two perspectives, the present study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical developments and operational practices within the Italian destination management system. This integrated perspective represents the main contribution of the present study.

2. Methodology and Analytical Framework

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design combining bibliometric and empirical analyses to investigate the evolution of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) from both theoretical and operational perspectives. The analytical framework integrates evidence from the academic literature with an empirical assessment of Italian DMOs, allowing a comparison between conceptual developments and their practical implementation.

Against this background, the present study combines a bibliometric review of DMO-related literature published between 2015 and 2025 with an empirical analysis of Italian DMOs to investigate the relationship among governance orientation, digitalisation, and organisational capacity.

By integrating bibliometric and empirical perspectives, the study contributes to the debate on destination governance and tourism management by providing both a systematic overview of DMO research trends and empirical evidence on the operational configuration of Italian DMOs.

The study is based on the following hypotheses:

H1: Contemporary academic literature increasingly conceptualises DMOs as integrated governance-oriented organisations characterised by stakeholder coordination, digital transformation, and strategic management functions rather than purely promotional activities.

H2: Despite this theoretical evolution, most Italian DMOs continue to operate predominantly on marketing-oriented models, with limited integration of governance and data-driven management functions.

H3: Significant territorial asymmetries and organisational heterogeneity exist among Italian DMOs in governance orientation, digital maturity, and organisational capacity.

3. DMO's Literature Analysis

Over the last decade, the literature has progressively recognised Destination Management

Organisations (DMOs) as key actors in destination governance rather than solely as promotional agencies. Alongside their traditional marketing functions, increasing attention has been devoted to stakeholder coordination, strategic planning, sustainability, and digital transformation as fundamental dimensions of destination management (Pike & Page, 2013; Sheehan et al., 2016; Reinhold et al., 2023; World Tourism Organisation, 2019). This evolution reflects the growing complexity of tourism destinations and provides the conceptual background for analysing the extent to which these theoretical developments are reflected in the operational practices of Italian DMOs.

The bibliometric analysis was conducted using the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS), one of the most widely recognised databases for academic research. The analysis covered the period from 2015 to 2025 to capture the most recent developments in DMO-related research.

The search was performed within the Topic field (TS), including titles, abstracts, author keywords, and Keywords Plus. To ensure inclusiveness and account for spelling variations, the search query included both "Destination Management Organisation" and "Destination Marketing Organisation" in their singular and plural forms.

The initial search returned 1,114 records. Subsequently, a subject-area refinement was applied, retaining only publications classified in the "Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism" category in Web of Science. After filtering, the final dataset consisted of 823 publications.

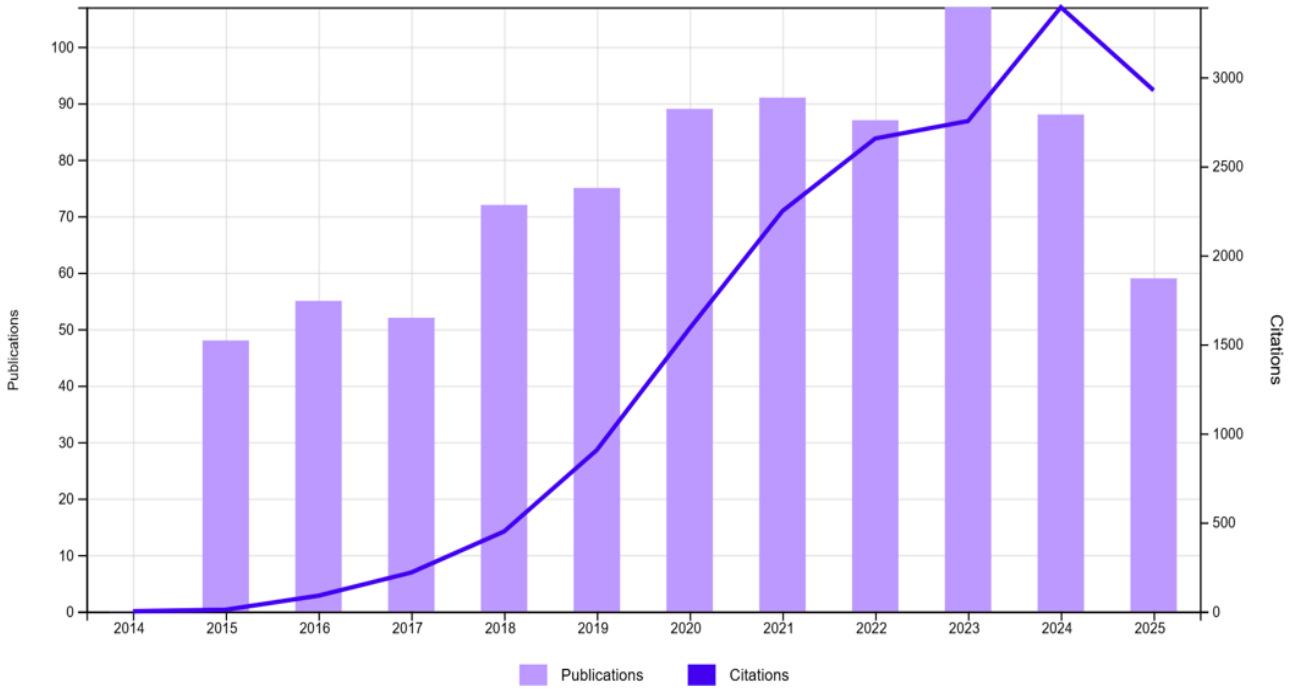
Research activity consolidated after 2017, with the number of studies increasing steadily from 48 in 2015 to a peak of 121 in 2024, then declining slightly to 101 in 2025.

This trend indicates a gradual expansion of scholarly attention to DMOs, reflecting the growing academic relevance of destination governance, marketing, and innovation. The sharp rise observed between 2022 and 2024 may be linked to the post-pandemic recovery phase, during which tourism management and destination resilience became prominent research priorities.

The data (Figure 1) also show that publication output remained relatively stable between 2018 and 2021, suggesting a period of consolidation during which foundational concepts and frameworks for DMOs were refined. The steady upward trajectory confirms the growing recognition of DMOs as key organisational actors in the sustainable, strategic management of tourism destinations.

During the initial stage (2015-2017), publication activity remained relatively modest, averaging fewer than 55 papers per year. Since 2018, the number of publications has risen steadily, surpassing 70 papers per year and reflecting growing scholarly interest in destination governance, marketing, and technological innovation.

Figure 1: Publications and citations trend (2015-2025)



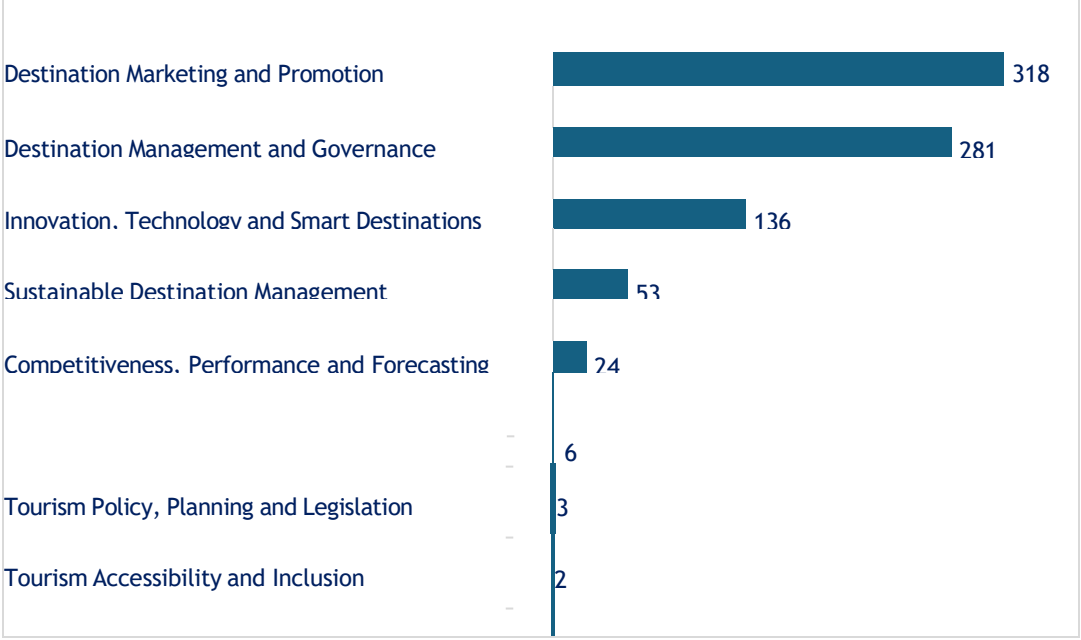
Source: data analysis on Web of Science

The most remarkable expansion occurred between 2021 and 2024, when annual publications nearly doubled (from 67 to 121 articles), coinciding with a significant escalation in citations. This pattern suggests that the post-pandemic period catalysed academic reflection on destination resilience, digital transformation, and strategic management. The sharp rise in citations during these years, peaking in 2024 at over 3.000 references, indicates that the literature produced in the previous phase had begun to gain strong visibility and impact across the academic community.

In 2025, both publications and citations declined slightly, a common trend in bibliometric analyses when more recent studies have not yet had sufficient time to accumulate citations. Nonetheless, the overall trajectory remains strongly positive, confirming that DMO-related research has evolved from a niche topic into a recognised and influential academic domain. The decade-long upward trend highlights a maturing discipline characterised by theoretical diversification, empirical depth, and expanding international collaboration.

The analysis shows that Destination Marketing & Promotion and Destination Management & Governance are the two most extensively investigated domains, accounting for 38,64% and 34,02% of all publications, respectively This prevalence reflects the central role that marketing and governance play in defining the mission and strategic scope of Destination Management Organizations, which are traditionally positioned at the intersection of destination branding, stakeholder coordination, and policy implementation (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Distribution of articles by macro-theme (2015-2025)



Source: data analysis on Web of Science

Recent studies highlight the crucial role of governance in understanding the evolution and effectiveness of DMOs. Reinhold et al. (2023) emphasise that destinations can no longer be understood solely as static territorial units but rather as "spaces of flows," in which governance is conceived as a process of coordinating heterogeneous actors and resources in constant transformation.

Within this framework, destination governance shifts from a structural logic to a processual, action-oriented approach, where the ability to facilitate collaboration, foster co-creation, and adapt to external conditions becomes crucial. This perspective highlights the need for governance grounded in stewardship, in which DMOs act as catalysts for synergies among public, private, and community actors to address increasingly complex challenges (Reinhold et al., 2023). At the same time, the literature emphasises stakeholders' involvement and converges on the centrality of participation. An effective strategy involves formulating a destination- specific plan that fully accounts for the priorities and concerns of all stakeholders (World Tourism Organisation, 2019). Similarly, Maccioni et al. (2024) highlight how stakeholder engagement can be fostered through a threefold strategy (listening, meeting, and collaborating) that aligns diverse actors toward a common goal. Therefore, collaboration between parties is seen as a condition for long-term sustainability.

A second cluster of articles focuses on Innovation, Technology & Smart Destinations (16,52%), indicating growing academic attention to the digital transformation of destinations and the integration of smart technologies into destination management practices. As they expand their functions, DMOs continue to shape the image and positioning of destinations. Since 2015, the literature has increasingly focused on digitalisation and smart destinations, big data, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, digital twins, and knowledge-sharing platforms.

Gretzel (2022) describes the emergence of the "Smart DMO": the implementation of smart

destination models is intended to enhance long-term competitiveness. DMOs are tasked with smart governance and the integration of advanced technologies, but they often lack the necessary capabilities.

The same work defines six functions (mobilising, matchmaking, managing, sensing, shapeshifting, and stewardship) to guide DMOs in the strategic use of digitalisation.

In the selected database, the most recent articles focus on business intelligence applications, social media sentiment analysis, virtual reality for immersive experiences, and real-time monitoring systems to manage tourist flow: a sign that digitalisation is no longer just marketing but a management tool for DMOs to make data-driven decisions, anticipate demand, and optimise resources.

In contrast, research on Competitiveness, Performance & Forecasting remains comparatively limited (2,92%), suggesting that although destination performance is often discussed, few studies explicitly address forecasting or benchmarking within the DMO context.

Other themes, such as Sustainable Destination Management (6,44%) and Tourism Policy, Planning & Legislation (0,49%), highlight complementary but less dominant research streams, indicating opportunities for further exploration.

4. DMO's in Italy: Empirical Analysis

4.1 Methodology and Analytical Framework

The empirical analysis focuses on Italian Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) identified through the official ENIT database of destination management entities operating at regional, sub-regional, and local levels. Based on the ENIT-provided institutional list (2025), 147 organisations were initially identified. One DMO was excluded due to the temporary inaccessibility of its official website, resulting in a final dataset of 146 DMOs.

The study adopts a systematic desk-based web analysis to examine how DMOs operationalise destination management functions through their official digital presence. The methodology is based on the analysis of website content and digital features associated with each organisation.

A set of 18 binary variables (presence = 1; absence = 0) was analysed to assess governance-related and visitor-oriented digital functions. Variables included the presence of tourist portals, observatories, stakeholder areas, project sections, event calendars, booking systems, mobility information, transparency sections, and digital tools. This approach enabled comparability across organisations with different territorial scales, governance models, and organisational structures.

Based on the combination of identified features, each DMO was classified according to its dominant functional orientation into one of three categories:

i. *marketing-oriented DMOs*, primarily focused on promotional and visitor-oriented functions.
ii. *governance-oriented DMOs*, characterised by management, coordination, and stakeholder-related functions.
iii. *Hybrid DMOs* integrate both promotional and governance dimensions within the same digital ecosystem.

The empirical analysis further examined the level of digital service completeness and the

territorial distribution of DMOs across Italian regions to identify patterns of fragmentation, digital maturity, and governance differentiation within the Italian destination management system. The study's analytical framework integrates theoretical and empirical perspectives to assess the extent to which contemporary conceptual models of Destination Management Organisations are reflected in operational practices. The framework combines insights from the bibliometric analysis of DMO-related literature with empirical examination of Italian DMOs, enabling a comparative analysis of destination governance, digitalisation, and organisational capacity. In particular, the study evaluates whether the transition described in the literature, from promotional entities to integrated governance-oriented organisations, is observable within the Italian destination management system. The analysis is structured around three interconnected dimensions:

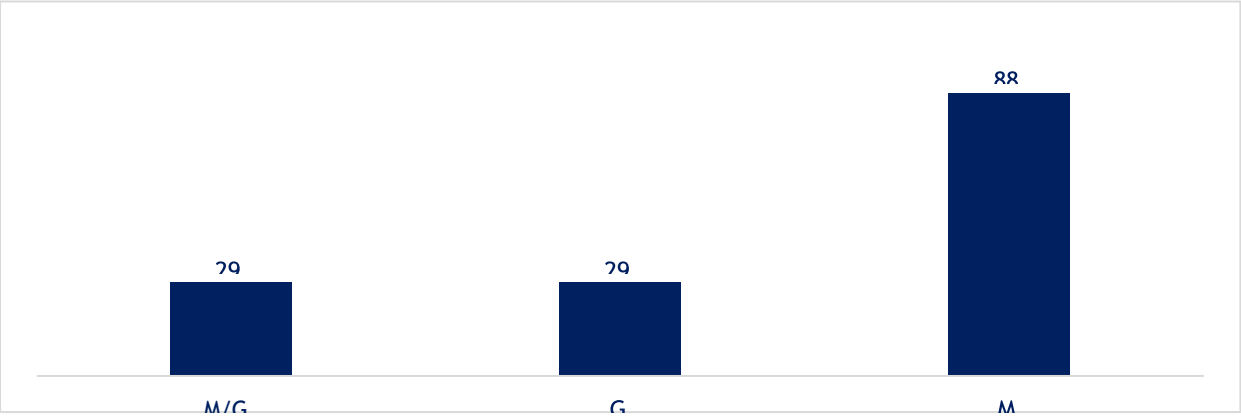
1. *functional orientation*, referring to the balance between marketing and governance functions.
2. *digital maturity,* measured through the presence of digital services and management-related tools on DMOs' websites.
3. *organisational and territorial differentiation,* examined through the regional distribution and structural heterogeneity of DMOs.

By integrating these dimensions, the framework allows for the identification of patterns of fragmentation, governance asymmetries, and uneven digital development within the Italian DMO landscape. The approach therefore provides a multidimensional interpretation of the evolution of destination management, bridging conceptual developments in the literature with empirical evidence.

4.2 Functional Orientation of Italian DMOs

The empirical analysis reveals a clear predominance of marketing-oriented Destination Management Organisations within the Italian tourism system. Of the 146 DMOs included in the dataset, 88 were classified as marketing-oriented, 29 as governance-oriented, and 29 as hybrid organisations integrating both promotional and governance-related functions.

Figure 3: Distribution of Italian Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) according to their dominant functional orientation (Governance-oriented, Marketing-oriented and Hybrid).



Note: G = Governance-oriented DMOs; M = Marketing-oriented DMOs; M/G = Hybrid DMOs integrating governance and marketing functions.

Source: Author's elaboration based on ENIT official DMO list and website content analysis

These findings suggest that destination promotion and visitor-oriented activities continue to represent the dominant operational logic among Italian DMOs. In most cases, the digital presence of DMOs is primarily structured around tourism promotion, destination branding, visitor information, itineraries, events, and experiential content. Governance-oriented functions, such as stakeholder coordination, data monitoring, strategic planning support, transparency tools, or collaborative platforms, appear less widespread and less systematically integrated into destination digital ecosystems.

Although contemporary literature increasingly conceptualises DMOs as strategic governance actors responsible for coordinating complex tourism systems, empirical evidence suggests this transition is only partially implemented in practice.

At the same time, the presence of hybrid organisations is analytically significant. The 29 hybrid DMOs demonstrate that some destinations are progressively integrating governance and management functions alongside traditional promotional activities. These organisations typically combine visitor-oriented services with stakeholder-related sections, project management tools, observatory functions, or governance-related information. Their existence suggests an ongoing process of functional evolution within parts of the Italian destination management system.

Governance-oriented DMOs, although representing a minority, provide further evidence of differentiated organisational models across the country. These organisations tend to emphasise coordination, institutional functions, stakeholder engagement, and management-related activities rather than pure destination promotion. However, their relatively limited number highlights the persistence of a fragmented and uneven governance landscape.

Overall, while theoretical models increasingly emphasise integrated destination management, data-driven governance, and stakeholder coordination, many Italian DMOs continue to operate primarily as promotional entities.

4.3 Regional distribution of DMOs

The territorial distribution of Destination Management Organisations across Italy reveals significant regional asymmetries in both the number of organisations and their functional configuration. The empirical analysis highlights a strong concentration of DMOs in Northern Italy, while Southern regions and island contexts are characterised by lower organisational density and greater heterogeneity in governance structures and operational orientation. The most structured regional systems are in Trentino-Alto Adige and Veneto, which have 24 and 23 DMOs, respectively.

These regions are characterised not only by a high concentration of destination organisations but also by a strong predominance of marketing-oriented entities. In Trentino-Alto Adige, 22 out of 24 DMOs are classified as marketing-oriented, reflecting a destination management model strongly focused on visitor services, promotion, and territorial branding. Veneto displays a similar configuration, albeit with a slightly higher prevalence of hybrid organisations that integrate governance-related functions.

Tab. 1: Distribution of Italian Destination Management Organisations by Region and Functional Orientation

Regione	N. DMO	G	M	M/G
TRENTINO ALTO ADIGE	24	2	22	
VENETO	23	1	18	4
CAMPANIA	12	2	9	1
TOSCANA	11	3	3	5
LOMBARDIA	10		7	3
LAZIO	8	3	3	2
PIEMONTE	8	1	5	2
SICILIA	8	1	5	2
EMILIA ROMAGNA	7	1	5	1
ABRUZZO	6	4	1	1
LIGURIA	5	2	3	
FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA	4	2	2	
PUGLIA	4	1	1	2
SARDEGNA	4	2	1	1
CALABRIA	3	1		2
UMBRIA	3	2	1	
BASILICATA	2		1	1
MOLISE	2	1		1
MARCHE	1			1
VALLE D'AOSTA	1			1

Source: Author's elaboration based on ENIT official DMO list and website content analysis

Central Italian regions present more balanced organisational patterns. Toscana, for example, shows a relatively even distribution among marketing-oriented, governance-oriented, and hybrid DMOs, suggesting greater integration of promotional activities with destination coordination functions. Similar mixed configurations emerge in regions such as Lazio and Piemonte, where destination governance appears more diversified and less exclusively oriented toward tourism promotion.

In contrast, Southern Italy and the Islands display a more fragmented and heterogeneous landscape. Sicilia, despite its strong tourism attractiveness and strategic importance within the national tourism system, includes only eight DMOs, most of which are marketing oriented. Other Southern regions, such as Calabria, Sardinia, and Abruzzo, exhibit a stronger governance component, with governance-oriented and hybrid organisations representing a larger share of the regional destination management structure.

The analysis also highlights the limited number of DMOs operating in smaller regions such as Basilicata, Molise, Marche, and Valle d'Aosta, where destination management functions are often concentrated within a few multifunctional organisations. In these contexts, DMOs tend to combine

promotional, administrative, and coordination roles within hybrid institutional structures.

The territorial distribution of DMOs reflects broader economic, administrative, and institutional disparities within the Italian tourism system. Northern regions generally display more consolidated destination management ecosystems, characterised by higher organisational density and stronger digital development. By contrast, Southern regions and island contexts appear more fragmented, with fewer organisations and more uneven governance capacities.

These findings suggest that destination management in Italy is shaped not only by tourism dynamics but also by regional development trajectories, institutional capacity, and governance traditions. The absence of a fully integrated national coordination framework reinforces territorial asymmetries, resulting in a destination management landscape characterised by uneven organisational development and differentiated governance models across regions.

4.4 Digital Maturity and Service Completeness

The empirical analysis highlights the widespread adoption of visitor-oriented digital platforms among Italian Destination Management Organizations. Of the 146 DMOs included in the dataset, 131 maintain dedicated tourist-oriented portals, either via an autonomous destination website or via redirection from institutional platforms. This finding suggests that digital communication and online visitor services have become standard components of destination management practices across the Italian tourism system.

Despite this broad diffusion of digital platforms, substantial differences emerge in the level of digital service provision and the overall complexity of destination digital ecosystems. The analysis reveals that most DMOs offer 7-12 digital services, representing the most frequent level of service completeness in the dataset.

Tab. 2: Distribution of Digital Service Completeness

Range of services offered on DMOs websites	DMOs
0-3	10
4-6	24
7-9	36
10-12	54
13-15	21
16-18	1

Source: Author's elaboration based on ENIT official DMO list and website content analysis

These services typically include event calendars, itineraries, attraction sections, mobility information, experience-based content, downloadable materials, and visitor information tools designed to support trip planning and destination promotion. However, the distribution of digital services is highly uneven across organisations. While some DMOs have developed articulated digital ecosystems integrating multiple functional layers, others offer only a limited set of basic information services. More advanced organisations combine visitor-oriented functions with governance-related

tools such as tourism observatories, stakeholder areas, transparency sections, project-related platforms, and interactive digital functionalities, including webcams and artificial intelligence-based systems. In contrast, less developed DMOs often operate with relatively simple portals focused almost exclusively on promotional communication.

These differences reveal that digital maturity extends beyond the mere existence of a website or visitor portal. Instead, digital maturity appears closely linked to DMOs' ability to integrate governance, management, coordination, and data-driven capabilities into their digital infrastructure. Consequently, organisations classified in the same functional category may still exhibit markedly different levels of digital sophistication and operational capacity.

4.5 Regional patterns further reinforce this fragmentation.

Tab. 3: Distribution of DMOs by level of digital service provision across Italian regions

Number of services per DMO							
Region	**0-3**	**4-6**	**7-9**	**10-12**	**13-15**	**16-18**	**Total**
ABRUZZO	2		3	1			6
BASILICATA			1	1			2
CALABRIA	1	1		1			3
CAMPANIA	3	4	3	2			12
EMILIA ROMAGNA			4	2	1		7
FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA			1	2	1		4
LAZIO	1	1	4	2			8
LIGURIA		2		3			5
LOMBARDIA	1		2	4	3		10
MARCHE		1					1
MOLISE		1		1			2
PIEMONTE				3	4	1	8
PUGLIA		3	1				4
SARDEGNA	1	1	1		1		4
SICILIA	1	1	2	4			8
TOSCANA		2	2	6	1		11
TRENTINO ALTO ADIGE		3	2	13	6		24
UMBRIA			1	1	1		3
VALLE D'AOSTA					1		1
VENETO		4	9	8	2		23
Total	10	24	36	54	21	1	**146**

Source: Author's elaboration based on ENIT official DMO list and website content analysis

Northern regions, particularly Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Lombardia, and Piemonte, tend to

concentrate a larger share of DMOs within the upper ranges of digital service provision. Many organisations operating in these regions provide highly articulated visitor ecosystems supported by extensive destination content and integrated digital services. By contrast, Southern regions and island destinations exhibit greater variability, with a higher presence of DMOs operating in lower service ranges and offering more limited digital functionalities.

Overall, the findings suggest that while digitalisation has become a central dimension of destination management in Italy, its implementation remains uneven and fragmented. The predominance of visitor-oriented portals demonstrates that DMOs increasingly recognise the importance of digital communication and online destination promotion. Nevertheless, the limited diffusion of advanced governance-oriented tools indicates that digital transformation remains largely focused on promotional functions rather than on fully integrated destination management practices. This evidence reinforces the broader gap identified throughout the study between the theoretical evolution toward smart, data-driven, and governance-oriented DMOs and the operational realities observed within the Italian tourism system.

1. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a significant divergence between the theoretical evolution of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) and their operational implementation within the Italian tourism system. The bibliometric analysis demonstrates that contemporary literature increasingly conceptualises DMOs as governance-oriented organisations responsible not only for destination promotion but also for stakeholder coordination, strategic planning, sustainability management, and data-driven decision-making. In recent years, academic attention has progressively shifted toward concepts such as smart destinations, integrated governance, digital transformation, and collaborative destination management, underscoring the growing complexity of tourism systems and the expanding strategic role of DMOs.

However, the empirical analysis reveals that most Italian DMOs continue to operate predominantly according to a marketing-oriented logic. The prevalence of visitor-focused portals, promotional content, itineraries, events, and branding activities suggests that destination promotion remains the dominant operational priority for many organisations. Governance-related functions, including stakeholder coordination tools, observatories, transparency mechanisms, project management platforms, and advanced monitoring systems, appear considerably less widespread. These findings confirm a persistent gap between theoretical models of integrated destination governance and the operational realities observed in the Italian context.

The study also demonstrates that digitalisation does not necessarily correspond to advanced destination management capabilities. Although the majority of Italian DMOs have adopted digital platforms and online communication tools, digital transformation often remains limited to promotional and informational functions. More sophisticated governance-oriented technologies, such as artificial intelligence systems, real-time monitoring tools, tourism observatories, and stakeholder interaction platforms, remain relatively uncommon. This suggests that many Italian DMOs are currently positioned within an intermediate stage of digital maturity, where digital technologies are primarily used to enhance destination visibility rather than to support integrated governance and strategic management. Consequently, the concept of the “Smart DMO” described in

recent literature appears only partially implemented in practice.

Another important finding concerns the strong territorial asymmetries characterising the Italian destination management system. Northern regions such as Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Lombardia, and Piemonte display more consolidated and digitally developed destination management ecosystems, characterised by a higher concentration of DMOs and greater service completeness. By contrast, Southern regions and island destinations appear more fragmented and heterogeneous, with fewer organisations and less advanced digital infrastructures. These differences suggest that the evolution of destination management systems is influenced not only by tourism development but also by broader institutional, administrative, and economic conditions. Regional governance capacity, public investment, organisational culture, and territorial coordination mechanisms appear to play a crucial role in shaping the operational maturity of DMOs.

At the same time, the presence of hybrid organisations that integrate both promotional and governance functions represents an important signal of ongoing transformation within the Italian tourism system. These organisations demonstrate that some destinations are increasingly adopting more integrated destination management models that combine visitor-oriented services with coordination, planning, and stakeholder engagement. Hybrid DMOs may therefore represent a transitional organisational model bridging the traditional marketing-oriented approach and more advanced governance-oriented configurations.

Findings suggest that the evolution of DMOs toward integrated governance organisations remains an ongoing and uneven process. While the literature increasingly emphasises strategic management, sustainability, stakeholder collaboration, and smart governance, many operational realities continue to prioritise destination promotion and communication. The Italian case, therefore, highlights the persistence of structural fragmentation, uneven digital maturity, and differentiated governance capacities within destination management systems, reinforcing the need for stronger coordination frameworks, organisational capacity building, and more integrated approaches to destination governance.

2. Strategic Implications

The findings highlight the need for a stronger, more coordinated governance framework to reduce fragmentation across the Italian destination management system. The coexistence of highly differentiated regional models, uneven organisational structures, and heterogeneous operational capacities suggests the absence of a fully integrated national coordination mechanism. The fragmentation observed across Italian DMOs is also associated with the absence of a comprehensive national legislative framework clearly defining their roles, functions, and governance responsibilities. Consequently, destination management models have evolved differently across regions, reflecting diverse institutional arrangements and policy approaches. Strengthening the national governance framework could contribute to greater consistency, coordination, and effectiveness within the Italian destination management system. This would also facilitate the progressive professionalisation of destination management across Italy.

A more structured multi-level governance framework could improve alignment between national, regional, and local destination management strategies while preserving territorial autonomy and

destination-specific characteristics. National institutions could play a stronger strategic role by defining shared governance guidelines, digital standards, monitoring frameworks, and long-term priorities for tourism development. At the same time, regional and local DMOs should remain responsible for implementing destination-specific actions and for coordinating with stakeholders.

Strengthening governance also requires improving vertical and horizontal coordination among tourism actors. More integrated governance systems could reduce functional duplication, enhance resource allocation, and support more coherent destination development strategies across territorial levels.

The analysis reveals that strategic planning is widely adopted among Italian DMOs, yet many plans lack measurable objectives, evaluation frameworks, and clear implementation mechanisms. Strategic documents often articulate broad visions and operational priorities without defining quantitative targets, timelines, or performance indicators that support systematic monitoring and evaluation.

Future destination planning processes should therefore adopt more evidence-based and adaptive approaches. Strategic plans should include measurable objectives linked to sustainability, competitiveness, governance performance, and digital transformation. Operational plans should clearly identify responsibilities, implementation timelines, and monitoring procedures to reduce the gap between strategic vision and practical execution.

More structured evaluation systems would also improve accountability and enable DMOs to adjust strategies based on empirical evidence, tourism dynamics, and stakeholder feedback.

One of the most significant limitations emerging from the study concerns the organisational capacity of Italian DMOs. Many organisations operate with limited staff, insufficient managerial specialisation, and weak analytical capabilities, restricting their ability to implement integrated destination management models.

Investments in human capital, therefore, represent a strategic priority. DMOs increasingly require specialised competencies in areas such as data analysis, digital governance, destination planning, project management, and stakeholder coordination. Continuous professional training programs could support the development of these skills and strengthen the managerial capabilities of destination organisations. From this perspective, the recent recognition of the Destination Manager as a professional figure under Article 31 of Italian Law No. 206/2023 may represent an important opportunity to strengthen the managerial capacity of Italian DMOs.

Particular attention should also be paid to smaller, less structured DMOs, which often face greater resource constraints. Shared services, interregional cooperation mechanisms, and collaborative governance arrangements could help mitigate structural limitations and improve operational effectiveness.

The strong dependence of Italian DMOs on public funding represents an additional structural vulnerability within the destination management system. Reliance on institutional resources may reduce financial flexibility and expose organisations to political cycles, administrative instability, and budgetary fluctuations.

Diversifying funding sources could therefore enhance the long-term resilience and strategic autonomy of DMOs. Potential strategies include developing partnerships with private stakeholders, participating in European projects, offering fee-based analytical services, and implementing collaborative investment models involving tourism operators and local actors.

At the same time, financial diversification should remain consistent with DMOs' public governance role. Accountability mechanisms and transparent governance structures remain essential to ensure that private-sector involvement supports collective destination development objectives rather than narrow commercial interests.

The findings indicate that digitalisation represents a crucial strategic opportunity for the future evolution of DMOs. While visitor-oriented digital platforms are already widespread, the governance and management potential of digital technologies remains underutilised.

DMOs should progressively adopt more integrated, data-driven digital ecosystems that support decision-making, stakeholder coordination, visitor management, and real-time monitoring. Tourism observatories, interoperable data systems, artificial intelligence tools, analytical dashboards, and collaborative digital platforms could significantly improve destination governance capacity.

Digitalisation should also support greater transparency and institutional coordination. Shared digital infrastructures and standardised monitoring systems could reduce territorial asymmetries and facilitate stronger alignment between governance levels. However, the effectiveness of digital transformation depends not only on technological adoption but also on organisational readiness, managerial competencies, and institutional integration.

The study confirms that destination competitiveness increasingly depends on collaboration among multiple stakeholders operating within tourism systems. DMOs are therefore expected to function not only as promotional entities but also as coordinators of collaborative governance networks involving public institutions, private operators, local communities, and tourism organisations.

Stronger stakeholder engagement mechanisms could improve strategic alignment, facilitate knowledge sharing, and support more integrated destination development processes. Multi-stakeholder forums, collaborative planning platforms, and cross-sector partnerships may help strengthen trust and coordination within destinations.

The analysis also highlights the importance of expanding participation in national and international networks. Greater involvement in collaborative projects and interregional partnerships could facilitate the diffusion of innovation, improve access to funding opportunities, and support organisational learning across destinations.

Ultimately, strengthening collaboration represents a fundamental condition for reducing fragmentation and advancing toward more integrated, adaptive, and governance-oriented destination management systems.

3. Conclusion

This study examined the evolution of Destination Management Organisations by integrating a bibliometric analysis of DMO-related literature with an empirical investigation of Italian DMOs. The findings confirm that contemporary tourism research increasingly conceptualises DMOs as complex governance actors responsible not only for destination promotion but also for stakeholder coordination, strategic planning, digital transformation, and integrated destination management.

At the same time, the empirical evidence demonstrates that the operational implementation of these theoretical models remains uneven and fragmented. The Italian case reveals a destination

management system characterised by significant territorial asymmetries, heterogeneous governance structures, and varying levels of digital and organisational maturity. While many DMOs have adopted visitor-oriented digital tools and promotional functions, governance-related capabilities, data-driven management practices, and integrated coordination mechanisms remain less developed.

Three major structural challenges emerge from the analysis. First, the Italian DMO landscape is highly fragmented, both territorially and functionally, resulting in uneven governance capacity across regions and destinations. Second, many organisations operate with limited resources, weak internal structures, and insufficient managerial specialisation, which restricts their ability to implement advanced destination management practices. Third, digital transformation remains only partially integrated into governance processes, with digital tools still predominantly used for communication and promotion rather than for strategic management and decision-making.

The study therefore highlights a persistent gap between the theoretical evolution of DMOs and their operational reality. However, this discrepancy should not be interpreted solely as an implementation failure. Rather, it reflects the adaptive and context-dependent nature of destination management systems, which are strongly influenced by institutional arrangements, territorial characteristics, and resource availability.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening destination management in Italy requires coordinated efforts across multiple dimensions. Enhancing multi-level governance, investing in human capital and digital competencies, developing more integrated planning frameworks, reducing dependence on public funding, and fostering stakeholder collaboration are strategic priorities for the future evolution of Italian DMOs. In this perspective, the recent introduction of the professional figure of the Destination Manager under Article 31 of Italian Law No. 206/2023 (Made in Italy Act) represents a significant opportunity to strengthen destination governance. This professional role may facilitate coordination among public institutions, private stakeholders, and local communities, supporting integrated destination planning, network development, and the implementation of sustainable tourism strategies. Its progressive adoption could contribute to reducing the organisational fragmentation highlighted in this study and reinforcing the managerial capacity of Italian DMOs.

More broadly, the study contributes to the ongoing debate on destination governance and tourism management by demonstrating the importance of integrating governance, digitalisation, and organisational capacity within contemporary destination management systems. Rather than proposing a new theoretical model of DMOs, the originality of this study lies in integrating bibliometric evidence with a nationwide empirical analysis of Italian DMOs, providing a comprehensive interpretation of the relationship between theoretical evolution and operational practice. The Italian case, therefore, provides useful insights for other fragmented tourism systems seeking to strengthen destination governance through more integrated and evidence-based DMO models. Future research could further explore comparative international models, longitudinal governance transformations, and the role of emerging technologies in shaping the next generation of smart and adaptive DMOs.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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