

A Critical Realist Explanation of the Shifting Role of Destination Marketing Organisations: Evidence from Zambia's Tourism Destination System

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ABSTRACT

The role of Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) has been the subject of persistent questioning in both academic literature and professional practice since the early 2000s. While scholars acknowledge that the expected role of DMOs is shifting among various tourism industry stakeholders, the underlying causal mechanisms producing these shifts remain inadequately explained. This study employs Critical Realism (CR) as a theoretical framework to investigate the shifting expected role of the DMO in Zambia's tourism destination system. Using a qualitative case study design with thirty informants from the southern tourism circuit, the study applied Bhaskar's stratified ontology and Archer's morphogenetic model to explain the observed phenomena. The findings reveal that the shifting role of the DMO emerges from the interplay between structural conditioning forces (path-dependence mechanisms including government policy directions, regional structures, market forces, cultural history, and international organisation influences) and social interactions among destination stakeholders. The study identifies morphogenetic processes characterised by structural elaboration rather than morphostasis, explaining why policy propositions fail to produce intended outcomes despite stakeholder expectations shifting. This research contributes to DMO theory by demonstrating how CR provides explanatory adequacy for understanding destination system dynamics, offering practical implications for tourism policy formulation in emerging destinations.

Keywords: Critical Realism; Destination Marketing Organisation; Morphogenetic Model; Stratified Ontology; Tourism Policy; Zambia

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as a significant economic sector globally, representing approximately seven percent of the world's exports in goods and services (World Tourism Organisation, 2019). To enhance destination competitiveness, growth, and profitability, governments and places establish and fund Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs). Since the first DMO was established in New Zealand in 1901, these organisations have become prominent features in destination systems worldwide (Pike & Page, 2014; Pike, 2016). However, from the early 2000s, the purpose and legitimacy of the traditional monolithic DMO archetype focused on marketing has come under persistent questioning in both academic discourse and professional practice.

Contemporary literature documents significant shifts in how various tourism industry stakeholders perceive and expect the DMO to function. The World Tourism Organisation (2019) now defines DMOs as 'the leading organizational entity which facilitates partnerships with various authorities, stakeholders, and professionals to achieve a unified mission towards a destination's vision', marking a departure from earlier conceptualisations fixated on marketing and management functions. Scholars, including Hristov and Zehrer (2019) and Hristov et al. (2020) note that the contemporary DMO role is expanding beyond traditional destination marketing towards assuming greater management and leadership roles. Pike (2016) has argued that DMOs 'will soon no longer exist in their current form', making it an opportune time for academics to engage in innovative thinking about these entities' futures.

Despite these documented shifts in expected roles, a paradox persists: the general structure and core activities of DMOs have remained uniformly constant around the world for several decades (Pike, 2016). This presents a twofold problem inadequately explained in theory, practice, and policy propositions. First, while literature acknowledges the shifting role of DMOs, the causal mechanisms and structures producing these shifts remain unknown. Second, the mechanisms causing core DMO activities and structures to remain unchanged despite shifting expectations are equally unexplained.

In Zambia, this phenomenon manifests acutely. Despite numerous policy and legislation reforms from 1996, open questions persist among various tourism industry stakeholders regarding the purpose, leadership, and legitimacy of the contemporary DMO. The Zambia Tourism Master Plan 2018-2038 acknowledges that 'the private tourism industry has limited faith in Zambia's destination marketing' and its organisation (Ministry of Tourism and Arts, 2018). This situation threatens the growth, competitiveness, profitability, and sustainability of Zambia as a tourism destination.

This study addresses these gaps by employing Critical Realism (CR) as a theoretical framework to develop a technical account explaining the shifting expected role of the DMO among various tourism industry stakeholders in Zambia.

Aim Of the Study

The study aims to answer the following research questions: What has shifted the expected role of the DMO in Zambia's tourism destination system? Why is the expected role shifting among various stakeholders? And why do the general structure and core activities of the DMO remain unchanged despite these shifting expectations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolution of DMOs and Shifting Paradigms

The evolution of DMOs from their promotion-oriented origins to contemporary contested entities can be traced through distinct epochs. During the post-Second World War era and the booming mass tourism period of the 1960s and 1970s, DMOs consolidated as marketing entities funded by governments (Gyr, 2010). The post-2000 era, however, has witnessed the emergence of four paradigmatic views in destination discourse: destination marketing, destination management, destination governance, and destination leadership (Wang & Pizam, 2011; Morrison, 2012; Pike & Page, 2014; Hristov & Zehrer, 2015).

Two divergent positions characterise contemporary academic debate. The first, advocated by scholars such as Ritchie and Crouch (2003), Morrison (2012), and Reinhold et al. (2015), argues that DMO roles have evolved and emphasis should shift towards destination management, advocating nomenclature changes from 'Destination Marketing Organisation' to 'Destination Management Organisation'. The second position, represented by Pike and Page (2014) and Pike (2016), maintains that DMOs should retain their marketing focus while acknowledging environmental changes, arguing that using 'Destination Management Organisation' as a generic descriptor confuses perceived management needs with DMOs' largely marketing functions.

More recently, scholars have introduced destination governance and destination leadership paradigms into this discourse. Hristov and Zehrer (2015) and Hristov et al. (2020) argue that DMOs are positioned to extend their roles to encompass these functions. Dredge (2016) suggests that DMO discussions must move beyond mid-level social theorisations towards meta-level theoretical debate, recognising the post-structural, late modernity challenges facing tourism organisation.

Explanatory Gaps in Existing Literature

While literature has documented changes occurring in DMO roles and expectations, explanatory accounts of the causal mechanisms remain inadequate. Existing explanations typically attribute shifts to changing environments, including economic restructuring, technological advances, changing tourist tastes, increased stakeholder heterogeneity, and perceived governance failures (Pike & Page, 2014; Reinhold et al., 2015; Dredge, 2016).

However, these accounts tend to remain at the empirical level of observation without penetrating to the deeper causal mechanisms generating observed patterns.

Furthermore, Reinhold et al. (2017) note that 'the extant literature in the tourism domain appears to provide little insight on how to deal with tourism-specific contingencies when developing new or managing existing business models'. This suggests a need for theoretical frameworks capable of explaining not only what is changing but why these changes occur and why policy interventions fail to produce intended outcomes.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Realism

Foundations of Critical Realism

Critical Realism (CR), developed primarily through the work of Roy Bhaskar from the 1970s, offers a philosophical approach that transcends traditional positivism and interpretivism (Bhaskar, 1978, 1979, 1998). CR's basic assumption posits the existence of a real world independent of our knowledge of it, while acknowledging that this reality is multi-layered and requires deeper investigation beyond phenomenal appearances (Banifatemeh et al., 2018). CR combines a realist ontology with an interpretivist epistemology, making it particularly suited for investigating complex social phenomena where causation operates through multiple, often unobservable mechanisms (Archer, 1995; Sayer, 2004).

This study employs CR because of its capacity to explain social phenomena by uncovering generative mechanisms operating beneath observable events. Unlike empiricist approaches that focus solely on observable regularities, CR seeks to identify the structures and mechanisms that generate these regularities, making it appropriate for investigating why DMO roles are shifting while policy structures remain resistant to change.

Bhaskar's Stratified Ontology

Bhaskar's stratified ontology posits three domains of reality. The domain of the real includes structures and their inherent causal powers existing independently, comprising underlying generative mechanisms that co-produce the flux of phenomena. The domain of the actual, a subset of the real, encompasses events or occurrences arising from the enactment of causal powers, whether observed by humans or not. The empirical domain, a subset of the actual, consists of events experienced through perception or measurement (Bhaskar, 1995; Wynn & William, 2012; Hedlund-de Witt, 2013).

This stratified ontology provides the foundation for causal explanation in this study. The shifting role of the DMO represents observable events at the empirical level. However, these events are generated by causal mechanisms operating at the level of the real, which cannot be directly observed but must be theoretically postulated and empirically verified through their effects. The iceberg metaphor, popular among complexity theorists, illustrates this: what makes a ship sink is hidden beneath the visible surface, analogous to how causal mechanisms operate beneath empirically observable phenomena (Jakulin, 2016).

Archer's Morphogenetic Model

Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach complements Bhaskar's stratified ontology by providing analytical tools for understanding social change (Archer, 1995, 2000). In this framework, social structure exists independently of current human activity, and structuring of social systems proceeds through morphogenesis, defined as 'the complex interchanges that produce change in a system's form, structure or state' (Archer, 1989). The reverse process, morphostasis, denotes stability and continuation of society.

Morphogenesis analysis proceeds through three phases. First, structural conditioning involves pre-existing structures that condition but do not determine change. Second, social interaction produces change through actions of current agents towards the realisation of their interests and needs. Third, structural elaboration (or reproduction) involves a change in relations between system components (Archer, 2000; Carter & New, 2005). Crucially, structure and agency operate at different time periods because structure predates actions that transform it, and transformed structure post-dates these actions, making historical analysis essential for determining causality.

Applied to this study, the morphogenetic model suggests that exogenous factors lead to structural conditioning of the destination system, setting agents (various stakeholders) to act towards realisation of their interests. The interplay of structural changes and agent actions produces the observed occurrences of shifting DMO expectations. Whether this results in morphogenesis (transformation) or morphostasis (reproduction) depends on the dynamics of structural conditioning and social interaction.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative single case study design consistent with CR's emphasis on intensive investigation of causal mechanisms within specific contexts. The case study focused on Zambia as a tourism destination, with data collected cross-sectionally from three sites in the southern tourism circuit: the Kafue ecological area, Livingstone tourism area, and Lusaka/Lower Zambezi/Siavonga tourism circuit. These sites were selected for their developed tourism products, diverse stakeholder compositions, and representation of key destination challenges.

Sample and Data Collection

The study employed theoretical sampling to select thirty (30) informants from among licensed private sector operators with at least ten years of experience in Zambia's tourism industry, and representatives from the government and its main tourism sector agencies. This sampling approach aligned with CR's requirement for informants capable of providing rich accounts of both observable events and their interpretations of underlying mechanisms.

Data collection utilised multiple methods: face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews, archival unobstructed data, and document review. Interview protocols were designed to elicit accounts at multiple ontological levels: empirical observations of DMO role changes, interpretations of why these changes were occurring, and perceptions of structural factors conditioning stakeholder actions. Documentary sources included policy documents, legislation, tourism master plans, and industry reports spanning the period from 1996 to 2020.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a grounded theory approach combined with thematic content analysis, structured around CR's logics of abduction and retroduction. Abductive reasoning was employed for Research Question One, re-describing observable phenomena in more general, abstracted terms to describe causal sequences giving rise to observed regularities. Retroductive reasoning was applied to Research Questions Two and Three, fitting together theory and data by identifying patterns to provide the most plausible explanations and eliminating competing alternatives.

Under CR theoretical assumptions, the analytical framework employed Archer's morphogenetic model to examine: (1) structural conditioning forces operating on the destination system; (2) social interactions among stakeholders producing change; and (3) structural elaboration or reproduction outcomes. The affordances model was used as the analytical tool under social realist theoretical assumptions, examining action possibilities formed by relationships between agents and their environment.

FINDINGS

Structural Conditioning: Path-Dependence Forces

Analysis through CR's stratified ontology revealed five clusters of path-dependence forces operating as structural conditioning mechanisms at the level of the real, generating the observable shifting expectations of the DMO role.

Government and Public Policy Directions

Government policy directions emerged as a primary structural conditioning force. Budget and funding model changes have significantly altered stakeholder expectations. Documentary evidence revealed that DMO funding declined from approximately ZMK 26 million in 2013 to less than ZMK 15 million by 2017. This reduction, combined with the introduction of the Tourism Development Fund through the Tourism and Hospitality Act Number 13 of 2015, created structural conditions whereby private sector operators began viewing their role and that of the DMO as requiring redefinition.

The absence of a shared destination strategy and vision further conditioned stakeholder actions. Private sector respondents reported that current DMO strategies were 'at variance with private sector and market directions, especially on which growth markets to pursue'. This structural gap created conditions for private sector actors to pursue alternative pathways, including organising and funding international destination marketing activities independently of the DMO.

Regional Structures and Shared Products

Zambia's position within the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA) and its shared tourism assets, particularly Victoria Falls with Zimbabwe, created structural conditioning forces that transcended geopolitical boundaries. The study found that while policy and government-level operations followed rules unique to each country, private sector operators on both sides of the Victoria Falls had created informal structures of collaboration, including joint destination promotion activities in long-haul markets. This structural reality positioned private sector actors to expect and pursue DMO roles that policy frameworks had not anticipated.

Market and Travel Trade Forces

Market forces operated as mechanisms conditioning stakeholder expectations through multiple pathways. The realignment of international markets, declining regional tourism market for the KAZA area, and changing product preferences (particularly for eco-friendly products) created structural conditions requiring DMO responses that existing structures could not accommodate. Respondents consistently reported that the DMO was 'sluggish in responding to changes in pull-factors in the marketplace', conditioning private sector actors to assume roles traditionally expected of the DMO.

Cultural and Historical Forces

The destination exhibited structural conditioning through diverse historical backgrounds and ties among individual investments, tourism circuits, and markets. Competition and rivalry within the industry, arising from ownership history, country of origin for international brands, regional origins within Zambia, and business category differences, created varied expectations of DMO roles. The southern circuit versus northern circuit rivalry, particularly following government decisions to prioritise northern circuit infrastructure development contrary to the Tourism Master Plan 2018-2038, exemplified how historical and cultural structures conditioned contemporary stakeholder actions.

International Organisation Influences

Zambia's membership in international organisations, including the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), UNESCO, and Regional Tourism Organisation of Southern Africa (RETOSA), created structural conditioning through policy recommendations, normative prescriptions, and resource flows. These external structures influenced expectations of DMO roles in ways that sometimes conflicted with domestic policy frameworks.

Social Interaction: Agency and Path Creation

The morphogenetic model's second phase, social interaction, revealed how stakeholder agency interacted with structural conditioning to produce path creation, breaking away from established institutional structures and practices. Two new polycentric structures emerged as alternative pathways: the Destination Livingstone

Initiative (DLI) formed in 2019 as a private sector-led initiative for coordinating development and marketing activities, and informal regional alliances among operators within the KAZA TFCA.

The formation of DLI illustrates the morphogenetic process. Structural conditioning, including government policy shifts away from the Tourism Master Plan's southern circuit priorities and declining DMO funding, set conditions for agent action. Private sector operators, motivated by 'fear of the government neglecting Livingstone and creating an intra-destination competitor', mobilised to create alternative structures for destination development and marketing. This represents structural elaboration rather than reproduction, with agents actively transforming rather than reproducing existing structures.

Cultural networks based on business size, adjacent regional destinations, historical and origin ties, and shared tourism resources provided the social structures through which agents coordinated their path-creating actions. These networks enabled what Garud and Karnøe (2001) describe as the ability 'to dissemble from existing structures defining relevance and also the ability to mobilize a collective despite resistance and inertia'.

Structural Elaboration: The Persistence of Policy Structures

The morphogenetic model's third phase reveals why DMO policy structures persist despite shifting expectations. The study identified three categories of lock-in forces operating to produce morphostasis at the policy level while morphogenesis occurred at the stakeholder expectation level.

Structural lock-ins include the legal framework (Tourism and Hospitality Act Number 13 of 2015) that defines DMO functions, organisational structures within government ministries, and funding mechanisms that resist modification. Cognitive lock-ins manifest in policy-makers' persistent conceptualisation of DMOs as marketing entities despite changing stakeholder expectations. Political lock-ins arise from competing interests among government agencies, private sector groupings, and regional stakeholders that prevent consensus on structural change.

This finding illuminates the paradox identified in the literature: DMO structures remain constant while expected roles shift because morphogenetic processes operate at different levels of the destination system. At the stakeholder interaction level, structural elaboration occurs as actors create new pathways and redefine roles. At the policy level, lock-in mechanisms produce morphostasis, reproducing existing structures despite changed expectations. This temporal and level differentiation, central to Archer's morphogenetic approach, explains why policy resistance persists.

Summary of Critical Realist Analysis

Table 1: Critical Realist Analysis of DMO Role Shifting

CR Domain	Morphogenetic Phase	Key Findings
Domain of the Real	Structural Conditioning	Five path-dependence force clusters: government policy, regional structures, market forces, cultural history, and international organisations
Domain of the Actual	Social Interaction	Path creation through cultural networks, informal alliances, and new polycentric structures (DLI, KAZA collaborations)
Domain of the Empirical	Structural Elaboration/Reproduction	Observable shifting expectations, policy resistance; morphogenesis at stakeholder level, morphostasis at policy level

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several contributions to DMO theory. First, it demonstrates the utility of Critical Realism for explaining phenomena that existing approaches have inadequately addressed. While previous literature has documented DMO role shifts, explanations have remained at the empirical level, identifying correlations between environmental changes and role shifts without penetrating to generative mechanisms. CR's stratified ontology enables identification of mechanisms operating at the level of the real that generate observable patterns, providing explanatory adequacy rather than mere description.

Second, the application of Archer's morphogenetic model provides analytical tools for understanding the paradox of shifting expectations amid persistent policy structures. By distinguishing structural conditioning, social interaction, and structural elaboration as temporally sequenced phases operating at different levels, the model explains why morphogenesis can occur at the stakeholder level while morphostasis persists at the policy level. This addresses the gap identified by Pike (2016) regarding DMO structures remaining constant despite acknowledged changes.

Third, the study contributes to debates on DMO paradigms by demonstrating that the destination marketing versus destination management dichotomy oversimplifies complex morphogenetic processes. The emergence of polycentric structures like DLI suggests that stakeholders are not choosing between marketing and management paradigms but creating new structures that transcend these categories. This aligns with Dredge's (2016) call for moving beyond mid-level theorisations towards meta-level debates about tourism organisation.

Practical Implications

The findings carry significant implications for tourism policy formulation. First, policy-makers should recognise that DMO role definitions operate within structural conditioning contexts that may resist change. The identification of structural, cognitive, and political lock-ins suggests that policy reform requires addressing these mechanisms rather than simply revising legislation. Second, the emergence of polycentric structures indicates that stakeholders will create alternative pathways when official structures fail to meet their needs, suggesting policy should accommodate rather than resist such innovations.

Third, for emerging destinations like Zambia, the study suggests that DMO business model development should account for path-dependence forces and morphogenetic dynamics rather than adopting prescriptions from mature destinations without contextual adaptation. The five clusters of structural conditioning forces identified provide a framework for analysing destination-specific contexts that should inform policy development.

Fourth, this research underscores a critical insight often overlooked in policy circles: that addressing DMO role shifts requires more than legislative or administrative changes. The study reveals that structural, cognitive, and political lock-ins operate as persistent barriers to institutional transformation. Policy-makers must systematically diagnose these lock-in mechanisms within their specific contexts before formulating reform strategies. This CR-informed diagnostic approach involves examining not only formal policies but also the embedded cognitive schemas that policy actors hold about DMO functions, and the political economy dynamics that incentivize resistance to change. For destinations implementing DMO reform, this suggests establishing stakeholder consultation processes that explicitly surface these deeper structural conditioning forces.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the single case study design, while appropriate for CR's intensive investigation approach, limits generalisability. Comparative studies across multiple destinations could test whether identified mechanisms operate similarly in different contexts. Second, the cross-sectional data collection captures morphogenetic processes at a particular time; longitudinal studies could trace these processes over extended periods. Third, the study focused on structural emergent properties;

future research could examine cultural emergent properties or emergent properties of people as alternative CR approaches.

CONCLUSION

This study employed Critical Realism to develop a technical account explaining the shifting expected role of DMOs in Zambia's tourism destination system. Using Bhaskar's stratified ontology and Archer's morphogenetic model, the study identified five clusters of path-dependence forces operating as structural conditioning mechanisms: government and public policy directions, regional structures and shared products, market and travel trade forces, cultural and historical forces, and international organisation influences. These mechanisms, operating at the level of the real, generate observable patterns of shifting DMO role expectations.

The morphogenetic analysis revealed that structural elaboration occurs at the stakeholder interaction level, with agents creating new pathways and polycentric structures in response to structural conditioning. However, at the policy level, structural, cognitive, and political lock-ins produce morphostasis, explaining why DMO policy structures persist despite shifting expectations. This differentiation between levels and temporal sequences provides explanatory adequacy for the paradox documented in the literature.

The study demonstrates CR's value for tourism research, particularly for investigating complex phenomena where causation operates through multiple, often unobservable mechanisms. For emerging destinations facing similar challenges, the findings suggest that DMO policy development should account for morphogenetic dynamics and path-dependent forces rather than assuming that policy reform alone can transform destination governance. As Pike (2016) noted, this is an opportune time for innovative thinking about DMO futures; Critical Realism offers one framework for such innovation.

Methodologically, this study contributes a rigorous CR approach applicable beyond DMO research to other complex tourism phenomena. The analytical framework employed—combining Bhaskar's stratified ontology with Archer's morphogenetic model—offers researchers a systematic pathway for investigating multi-level institutional dynamics, temporal sequences of structural change, and the interplay between structure and agency. Tourism scholars examining destination governance challenges, stakeholder collaboration mechanisms, tourism policy implementation gaps, or institutional resilience can adapt this methodological approach, moving beyond descriptive accounts of what is changing toward explanatory accounts of why changes occur and what mechanisms enable or constrain institutional transformation.

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