

FACTORS AFFECTING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS WHEN CHOOSING AN EVENT DESTINATION: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH BETWEEN VILAMOURA (PORTUGAL) AND MARBELLA (SPAIN)

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ABSTRACT

Business travel is nowadays a key component of tourism industry and an important instrument for reducing seasonality. Literature has identified several attributes that affect the decision-making process when choosing a destination to hold an event. The main objective of this research is to determine their importance and how they influence the decision-making process. Vilamoura in Portugal and Marbella in Spain are the destinations under analysis, as they are important seaside destinations where business travel has contributed to a successful meeting industry. In order to achieve the study's aim, a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews both to event organisers and suppliers has been conducted. The findings confirm the hypothesis that underpinned the study, demonstrating that destination image is the main determining site-selection factor. This investigation, proposed as an exploratory examination for further research, could constitute a useful resource for event professionals to improve their destination promotion and their positioning.

Keywords: Business Tourism, Decision-making Process, Destination Image, Meeting Industry, Site-selection Attributes.

JEL Classification: Z32, Z33

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, business travel represented 23.4% of the expenditure of the tourism sector in 2014 and it “is expected to grow by 4.0% in 2015 to USD1,222.3bn, and rise by 3.2% pa to USD1,679.0bn in 2025” (WTTC, 2015: 6). Representing 14% of international travel in the year 2014 (UNWTO, 2015), business tourism produces higher visitor spend than international tourism average. Business tourists “usually stay longer and spend more than other types of tourists” (Zhang, Leung & Qu, 2007: 1123). Other authors also note that business travellers’ expenditure has been measured as higher than expenditures of leisure tourists (Pechlaner, Zeni & Raich, 2007; Rogers, 2008).

Being an important part of the business tourism segment, the MICE industry stands for meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions and according to some authors, MICE is one of the fastest growing tourism segments (Zhang *et al.*, 2007; DiPietro, Breiter, Rompf & Godlewska, 2008; Hayat, Severt, Breiter, Nusair & Okumus, 2014).

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MICE tourism is vitally important to the destinations that have developed this type of tourism, as these business travellers bring multi-economic benefits to the host location through their expenditure on accommodation, food and beverages, local transportation and miscellaneous spending” (Zhang *et al.*, 2007: 1123). The acronym MICE is however not universally used and sometimes replaced by “events industry” (Hayat *et al.*, 2014). Because some other authors focus their research on meetings and conventions, they prefer other designations such as “convention and meetings businesses” (Oppermann & Chon, 1997), “meetings and conventions industry” (Crouch & Ritchie, 1998), “meeting and convention industry” (Choi & Bogger, 2002), “meetings and conventions sector” (Crouch & Louviere, 2004), or even narrower as “convention industry” (Chen, 2006) or “Convention tourism” (Zhang *et al.*, 2007). Crouch and Ritchie (1998: 50) point out “inconsistencies in the definition and measurement of the industry”. According to them, the term “meetings” is often used in a broad sense covering “all forms of meetings, conventions, conferences, symposia, workshops, seminars, congresses, trade shows, expositions, exhibitions, and associated special events”.

Business tourism has been mainly studied in terms of event attendance (Opperman & Chon, 1997; Chen, 2006; Lee, Petrick & Crompton, 2007; Zhang *et al.*, 2007; Severt, Wang, Chen & Breiter, 2007; Mair & Thomson, 2009; Yon & Zhao, 2010; Tanford, Montgomery & Nelson, 2012; Jung & Tanford, 2017). Although some studies address event site-selection (Crouch & Ritchie, 1998; Choi & Boger, 2002; Crouch & Louviere, 2004; Comas & Moscardo, 2005; Hayat, Severt, Breiter, Nusair & Okumus, 2014; Para & Kachnievska, 2014), further research needs to be done in order to understand the factors that influence the decision-making process of choosing a specific destination to hold an event. In fact, a critical issue on this subject “is how associations decide where to hold their conferences and meetings” (Comas & Moscardo, 2005: 117).

Against the plethora of terms used to refer to those decision-makers who have to decide where to hold an event, there is a need for a clear and unambiguous terminology. The proposal set forth in this paper is “internal business events planners/organisers (IBEPO)”, which refers either to the team or the individual responsible for event planning and event management in a company or association.

Europe dominates business tourism worldwide (ICCA, 2010) with a share of 54% in international meetings. Among the top ten international meeting countries in 2016, seven are European, with Spain ranking the fifth position and Portugal the tenth (ICCA, 2016). According to the ICCA 2016 ranking, seven out of the top 10 meeting cities are European, with Madrid and Lisbon ranking 7th and 8th (ICCA, 2016).

As stated by Crouch and Ritchie (1997: 51) “second-tier cities are finding they can also compete effectively, as associations seek new convention sites.” In fact, the opportunity exists: business travellers are looking forward to broadening their experiences at various destinations. Consequently, an increasing number of cities are investing on business travel, willing to become recognized business tourism destinations. Indeed, “the attractiveness of convention tourism has spurred destinations to proactively pursue the meetings and conventions market” (Weber & Chon, 2002: 57), and especially medium-size destinations are attempting to find their niche into this promising industry.

Marbella and Vilamoura are popular tourism destinations at Southern Europe. Due to their favourable climate, adequate infrastructures and high business tourism demand, both destinations are steadily positioning themselves as business tourism destinations, competing with major business tourism cities, such as Madrid or Lisbon. Besides, Marbella and Vilamoura, known for their marinas and luxury golf courses, belong to countries with solid tourism brand images. Both Spain and Portugal often convey an image of welcoming countries, known for their hospitality, gastronomy and outstanding landscapes. The

similarities between Marbella and Vilamoura are particularly relevant to this study as they both present good reasons and show strong attributes for IBEPO decisions when selecting an event-site.

This research aims at determining the decisive factors that lead internal business event planners/organisers (IBEPO) to choose a destination where to hold an event. The paper also aims to rank literature identified factors according to buyers and suppliers' perceptions of business events. In order to achieve these goals, a qualitative comparative approach has been undertaken within two European regional destinations: Marbella in Spain and Vilamoura in Portugal. Nonetheless, it is important to refer that the main purpose of this work was not making a comparative study between the two destinations. In fact, both destinations, even proposing a similar tourism leisure offer, occupy different stages in terms of business tourism: Vilamoura as an emerging destination, Marbella as a mature business tourism destination. Hence, the purpose of this study was not to measure the efficiency of those two destinations in terms of business travel, but only to determinate which factors lead IBEPO to choose one destination over the other to hold the events. Moreover, this research has been complemented with the event supplier's perspective, as advised by Crouch & Ritchie: "An understanding of the meeting site-selection process should therefore be of considerable interest to both buyers (...) and suppliers (...) of meeting sites" (1997: 52).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Site selection is primordial to ensure the success of an event (Crouch & Ritchie, 1997). In fact, companies try to associate their communication strategy to an adequate destination, which will convey a certain favourable image for the organisation (Bowdin, McDonnell, Allen & O'Toole, 2006). Some authors state that selecting the most convenient destination to an event is one of the most important decisions that event planners have to take (Vogt, Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1994; DiPietro *et al.*, 2008). In addition, successful meetings in a given destination will contribute not only for the success of the meeting industry, but also for the success of leisure tourism in that destination as it will encourage return visits (Crouch & Ritchie, 1997).

2.1 Destination Image

A strong destination image and a consolidated identity will help to achieve awareness of that destination and to increase its ranking as an event destination (Gonçalves, Perdigão, Torkington, Pereira & Martins, 2007). As soon as formed, destination image will have a large repercussion and impact on travel choice and behaviour (Mendes, Do Valle & Guerreiro, 2011). In fact, it has been shown throughout many researches (Pizam & Mansfeld, 2000; Lam & Hsu, 2006; Mazanec & Strasser, 2007; Murphy, Moscardo & Beckendorf, 2007; Mendes *et al.*, 2011) that tourism behaviour often depends on the image the potential tourist has of the destination, because destination image influences loyalty and behaviour before, during and after the visit (Agapito, Do Valle & Mendes, 2011). Consequently, destination image constitutes a key factor for the site selection and is imperative, especially to differentiate the destination from its competitors (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Guzman-Parra, Vila-Oblitas & Maqueda-Lafuente, 2016). Tourists tend to choose destinations with a strong, positive image (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Guzman-Parra *et al.*, 2016).

The notion of destination image is necessary to understand the decision-making process. Destination image has been defined by Crompton (1979: 18) as "the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination." The focus on the word 'impression' denotes subjectivity and an individual interpretation because destination image is a mental

construct which is formed by impressions and values that one has about a specific destination, including material knowledge about a specific place or region and a series of emotional perceptions (Di Marino, 2008). In fact, destination image seems to be a complex construct not only because it is subjective, but also because “destinations are an amalgam of specific tourism products and services (accommodation, catering, transportation, entertainment), from private and public initiative, presented as a global and composite product” (Agapito, Mendes & Do Valle, 2010: 92).

According to Gartner’s model, there are three dimensions of destination image: cognitive, affective, and conative (Gartner, 1993). According to this author, “the cognitive component may be viewed as the sum of beliefs and attitudes of an object leading to some internally accepted picture of its attributes” (Gartner, 1993: 193), whereas “the affective component of image is related to the motives one has for destination selection” (Gartner, 1993: 196) and “the conative image component is analogous to behaviour because it is the action component” (Gartner, 1993: 196). Decision is reached taking these components into account and processing all internal and external information concerning the destination (Gartner, 1993). More recently, the relationships between the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of destination image of Gartner’s model have been confirmed by Agapito, Do Valle & Mendes (2013), who have tested each dimension separately emphasizing the hierarchical nature of the three dimensions of destination image. Their work “highlights the importance of affect in destination image, supporting the claim that the willingness to react positively to the destination is higher when the visitor associates positive feelings to the destination, such as pleasure and arousal” (Agapito, Do Valle & Mendes, 2013: 478).

2.2 Decision-making Process and Site-selection Attributes

The decision-making process of choosing a destination involves internal psychological and external non-psychological aspects (Guo & Sun, 2016). Among the internal factors that influence decision-making are escapism, prestige, relaxation and health. To the external factors belong attractiveness of the destination, and one’s own perceptions and expectations (Hsu, Tsai & Wu, 2009).

The decision-making process involves a choice set of destinations. Decrop (2010) proposes a choice set model based on four dimensions: Awareness (1) of the destination, resulting from one’s own experience or from information gathered from external sources; Evaluation (2) of the destination, it is known that destinations which are evaluated positively will belong to the evoked or preferred set; others that are evaluated negatively will belong to the exclusion set; some destinations may fall into the surrogate or tolerated set. The third dimension refers to constraints (3): evoked destinations may fall into the dream set if they present some form of constraint; or into the unavailable set if they present situational inhibitors; or they are included in the available set if no constraints are associated. The final Choice, according to Decrop (2010: 108), “is made either from the available set, the surrogate set, or straight from the awareness set. Vacationers may choose a spare or surrogate destination when the available set decreases to no alternative at all (due to the intervention of situational inhibitors)”.

Considering the destination choice process, Dias & Cardoso highlight “the heuristic value of two kinds of destination brands categories: dream destinations and favourite destinations. The former is rooted in the tourist imaginary and conveys the idea of a future destination choice; the latter is deep-rooted in the respondents’ memory and is related to memorable tourist experiences” (Dias & Cardoso, 2016: 22). According to these authors, “dream destinations and favourite destinations have high (top of-mind) brand awareness, rich and positive brand associations (favourable brand image), high perceived quality and

strong brand loyalty” (Dias & Cardoso, 2016: 22). The results of their empirical study show that dream destinations are located far away from home, mostly in other continents, while favourite destination are predominantly located nearer, in the respondents’ own countries or countries with easy travel connections and not very far away from home (Dias & Cardoso, 2016).

Although IBEPO play a key role in the decision-making process, it cannot be disregarded that events are not only created for the benefit of the organising entities but also to attract participants and to achieve their satisfaction (Comas & Moscardo, 2005). Consequently, this perspective results worthy of note for meeting buyers. In fact, aware of what attendants evaluate as criteria to participate in an event, IBEPO will try to meet all participants’ expectations and take them into consideration in the decision-making process of choosing a specific destination to hold an event. According to Caber, Albayrak & Ismayilli (2017: 113), “exceeding participants’ expectations and rival destination performance are crucial for the long-term success of a congress destination”. The main attributes for participants’ decision-making identified by Opperman and Chon (1997) are related to location, mainly: destination image, transport cost, accessibility, accommodation rates, climate, activities, and previous experience. Besides the value of the venue, the location, the personal and business features and the interventional opportunity, the authors added that one of the main causes for preferring a venue lays on economic aspects. Actually, the meeting tourism market is composed by association meetings and corporate meetings (Weber & Chon, 2002) and a fact that has decisive financial implications is that corporate events are paid by its organising companies whereas association meetings are normally funded by participants. Subsequently, funding could raise different participation behaviour. In that case, it can be concluded that destination choice and the selection process convey a higher significance when a non-funded event is being organised and participants feel the budgeting pressure. The economic aspect should be one of the first concerns for IBEPO, as they shall have to propose a cost-effective event package to increase participation.

The meeting industry could be characterized by the interdependence of all players, both buyers and suppliers. Each actor plays a pivotal role, and this necessary relationship has been largely studied (Opperman & Chon, 1997; Crouch & Ritchie, 1997; Jago & Deery, 2005). Although it has been recognized that participants have an obvious influence on event site-selection, the literature has not yet tested, through an empirical study, the role of the IBEPO in the decision-making process for choosing the event site.

2.3 Determining Attributes for Event Site-selection

IBEPO’s decision-making process has been characterized by Opperman and Chon (1997) as quite complex and influenced by numerous variables. In fact, it depends on former conditions (Crouch & Ritchie, 1997), including the nature of the association, experience, member characteristics, environmental conditions, and on site-specific variables. Even if few studies have been undertaken on site-selection, it has been stated (Jago & Deery, 2005; Comas & Moscardo, 2005) that some factors predominantly influence this process, as:

- Budget;
- Location and access to the destination;
- Meeting venues facilities, with an increasing importance given to flexibility and capacity criteria and Internet services;
- Accommodation adjusted to event requirements.

Other attributes have been characterized on a lower-level as the quality of the service, destination image, safety and security, entertainment possibilities, and weather (Jago &

Deery, 2005; Comas & Moscardo, 2005). However, it is believed that these variables are significant and some of them are increasingly regarded as basic requirements, like destination image for instance.

Another important issue when analysing events is the type of event. According to some authors (Robinson & Callan, 2003; Comas & Moscardo, 2005), location, destination image, and leisure opportunities have been analysed as the lowest influencing factors because participants do not feel concerned about leisure possibilities. However, it must be said that the above mentioned authors only investigated one type of event, conferences. Results would have been different taking into account incentives, for instance. In this case, leisure time is part of the incentive trip and IBEPO will have to plan extra activities. Besides, other divergences exist when dealing with weak destination images. In fact, it is assumed that destination choice is directly linked with destination image. According to Baloglu and Love (2004), in terms of decision-making process, destination image exerts a significant influence in the decision to travel or not travel to a destination.

Taken as a whole, a conceptual model regarding event site-selection has been developed by Crouch and Ritchie (1997) and has served as a basis in some studies for site-selection (Baloglu & Love, 2005; Comas & Moscardo, 2005), as presented below:

Figure 1. Site-selection Attributes

Accessibility	Local support	Extra-event opportunities	Accommodation facilities
.Cost	.Local chapter	.Entertainment	.Capacity
.Time	.CVB/Convention center	.Shopping	.Cost
.Frequency	.Subsidies	.Sightseeing	.Service
.Convenience		.Recreation	.Security
		.Professional opportunities	.Availability
Meeting facilities	Information	Site environment	Other criteria
.Capacity	.Experience	.Climate	.Risks
.Layout	.Reputation	.Setting	.Profitability
.Cost	.Marketing	.Infrastructure	.Association promotion
.Ambience		.Hospitality	.Novelty
.Service			
.Security			

Source: Adapted from Crouch and Ritchie (1997)

The literature review enabled to acknowledge what has already been developed, allowing to establish the base of the study and to indicate where further research would be required. Along this project, the literature review has been particularly crucial as permitting to identify that the main focus has not been given yet to the IBEPO and that decisive attributes for event site-selection have not yet been classified. In this study, the determining factors involved into the event site-selection will be ranged according to their importance for the IBEPO decision-making process.

3. METHODOLOGY

Considering the aim of this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted, to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and to get the respondents' point of view. As Kvale (2011) states, qualitative methodology enables researchers to better understand the

individual perspective. Also Bryman (1988: 12) claims that an important objective for the qualitative researcher is “to be able to see through the eyes of those being studied”.

Unlike quantitative, qualitative research does not take into account numbers but its main interest is on the “interpretation of social realities” (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000: 7). As based on individuals, qualitative methodology conveys subjective findings, which limit the generalisation of obtained results (Kvale, 2011). In relation to this research, the main goal was precisely to find out differences and similarities between destination choice’s factors.

One of the main purposes of this study is to give voice to the people inquired. No other players would enrich the research with a better account of the experiences and behaviour of individuals (Comas & Moscardo, 2005). According to Bryman (1988: 61), “The most fundamental characteristic of qualitative research is its express commitment to viewing events, action, norms, values, etc. from the perspective of the people who are being studied”. As explained by Schostak (2006) the term “interview” is formed by two words: ‘inter-view’. It perfectly illustrates what this approach can achieve: “to get insights into the respondent’s perspective” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 361). This can be a valid and appropriate tool for getting a better understanding of the investigated problem.

Comparative analysis consists on the examination of two similar groups but differing at some extent (Routio, 2007). The current investigation, centered in defining event site-selection variables, focused on the meeting industry and considered both players at the same time: the buyers and the suppliers. Adopting a purposive sampling, the technique used in this study was the stratified purposive sampling, in the sense that into a same phenomenon, several groups of the field are investigated simultaneously (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003) and a comparison can be done, making it a comparative approach research.

3.1 Sampling

Table 1 presents in detail the sampling procedure applied:

- IBEPO, as main target, directly implicated in the decision-making process of destination choice.
- Event suppliers, as secondary target. It is considered that they have a more objective point of view about client’s destination choice. In fact, they are not directly involved in the decision-making process, yet they intermediate with clients when organising an event. Hence, they have been asked about their client’s perception.

Table 1. Interviewed Organizations

IBEPO	
Vilamoura	Marbella
13th Portuguese Congress of Cardiology	Incentive Whitbread
16th Portuguese Congress of Rheumatology	Third Congress of the Earth Planet
18th Portuguese and 3rd Iberian Congress of Internal Medicine	Fall 2012 Gamma-Ray Burst Symposium
Event suppliers	
Vilamoura	Marbella
Crowne Plaza	Meliá Banús
Dom Pedro Marina	NH Alanda Hotel Spa
Tivoli Marina	Azafrán Travel
	España Incoming
	Técnica Viajes
	Cititravel
	Eventworks
	Events Privilege
	La Difference P.R.
	Marbella Congress, Fairs y Exhibitions

Source: Authors

3.2 Interview Design

One of the primary purposes of this research has been to reveal what aspects mainly impact and influence IBEPO's decision-making process in terms of destination choice. Therefore, specific highlights for guiding the research design have been developed to approach target's perspective:

- General perceptions about the importance of event destinations;
- The specific decision-making process experienced by the IBEPO;
- Influencing factors identified at destination;
- Destination choice- reasons and motivators;
- Competitiveness' test of the host destination;
- Event outcomes' expectations connected with the destination;
- Destination image of both destinations;
- Ranking event site-selection factors.

Two versions of the interviews have been designed to address the two target groups' profiles as they play different roles in the event selection process. The IBEPO interview was composed of 21 questions and the event supplier's interview contained only six questions. In order to ease interactions, interview patterns have been translated into following languages: English, Spanish and Portuguese.

However, both sets of interviews have been clustered following three guide sections:

- 1: Destination choice,
- 2: Decision-making process,
- 3: Comparative questions about the other studied destination (Vilamoura or Marbella).

As already mentioned in section 2, it was considered relevant to inquire whether the IBEPO had an induced or experienced destination image when choosing a destination, as well as how it was formed (Govers, Go & Kumar, 2007). The goal was to know if destination choice was influenced by external contributions/opinions, or based on personal thoughts (Beerli & Martín, 2004).

Some authors (Comas & Moscardo, 2005) regret the lack of studies that measure destination choice according to the type of event. To overcome this setback IBEP0 were inquired if the venue was specifically suitable and adapted to the sector they were operating in and to the type of event they were organising. Also many authors valued previous experiences as a significant destination choice's determinant (Opperman, 1996; Baloglu & Love, 2005; Lam & Hsu, 2006). Some questions aimed at revealing if having a previous experience could influence destination choice. Furthermore, respondents have also been asked if they had ever organised an event at that destination. The investigation has been designed to confirm if, as demonstrated through secondary data, a previous satisfactory experience would impact on repeating an event at the same destination, or if IBEP0 were more willing to swap between destinations.

Responding to the central focus of the research work, essential questions were connected with the decision-making process in order to understand the different stages of purchase (Mohammadi & Mohamed, 2011), especially:

- Information search
- Evaluation of alternatives
- Destination Choice

In the literature review, eleven variables that influence the decision making process have been identified. As mentioned by Comas and Moscardo (2005), there has been a lack of variable's level categorization. Hence, it appeared relevant to ask the participants to rank the variables in order to understand their importance (Crouch & Ritchie, 1997). This categorization list forms the central core of this research, revealing which destination factors are mostly valued within the decision-making process. Moreover, inquiring the two counterparts, allowed researchers to know if suppliers were aware of the most important selection attributes when organising an event.

4. RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results obtained from the 19 interviews will be revealed and treated comparatively with secondary data in order to reach the study's objectives and to apprehend "the other as research subject" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 12).

4.1 Determining Factors in the Decision-making Process

A list of randomly displayed variables that may influence the decision making process, identified in the literature, was presented to each respondent. They were asked to rank from one to eleven (from the most important to the least important) the following items:

- a) Destination image and location (including landscape and weather)
- b) Transportation facilities
- c) Accommodation facilities
- d) Accessibility
- e) Value for money
- f) Quality perception
- g) Leisure tourism opportunity
- h) Meeting venues
- i) Previous experiences
- j) Word of mouth
- k) Others (please provide details)

The results obtained from the list of variables provide important insights to the research work. Table 2 shows the determining variables ranked by IBEPO:

Table 2. Determining Variables Ranked by IBEPO

	IBEPO					
Attributes	Marbella			Villamouira		
	Earth P.	Gamma-R	Incentive	Rheumatology	Cardiology	Internal Medicine
<u>Location-Destination image</u>	6	1	2	5	4	
Transportation facilities	7	7	4	7	7	
Accommodation facilities	4	6	6	6	3	
<u>Accessibility</u>	3	6	1	8	6	
<u>Value for money</u>	9	4	8	4	1	
Quality perception	8	2	9	3	8	
<u>Leisure tourism opportunity</u>	10	8	5	10	9	
Meeting venues	11	5	7	1	2	
Previous experiences	5	3	3	2	5	1
Word of mouth	2	10	10	11	10	
Others	1	9	11	9	11	1

Ranking

1	2	3	4	5
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Source: Authors

Results are very different between Marbella and Vilamouira: In Marbella destination image, accessibility, previous experiences, accommodation facilities and transportation facilities appear as the strongest variables ranked by IBEPO; In Vilamouira, meeting venues, value for money, accommodation facilities, location/destination image and accessibility are rated as the most determining factors in the decision-making process. Table 3 presents the determining variables ranked by the event suppliers interviewed in Vilamouira:

Table 3. Determining Variables Ranked by Event Suppliers - Vilamoura

Attributes	Event suppliers		
	Vilamoura		
	Tivoli Marina	Crowne Plaza	Dom Pedro Marina
<u>Location-Destination image</u>	2	1	1
Transportation facilities	3	4	3
Accommodation facilities	5	2	4
<u>Accessibility</u>	7	1	5
<u>Value for money</u>	1	1	2
Quality perception	9	5	8
<u>Leisure tourism opportunity</u>	8	6	10
Meeting venues	4	3	7
Previous experiences	6	8	9
Word of mouth	10	7	11
Others	11	9	10

Ranking

1	2	3	4	5
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Source: Authors

Concerning the event suppliers in Vilamoura, the determining variables are location/destination image, value for money, transportation facilities, accommodation facilities, and accessibility. Table 4 shows the same variables as ranked by event suppliers in Marbella:

Table 4. Determining Variables Ranked by Event Suppliers - Marbella

Attributes	Event suppliers										
	Marbella										
	Events privileges	NH Alanda	España Incoming	Congress Center	Azafra Travel	Citi-travel	Event-works	La Difference	Tecma Viajes	Mela Banos	
<u>Location-Destination image</u>	2	1	3	1	6	9	1	1	1	1	
Transportation facilities	5	4	11	3	8	1	5	10	2	8	
Accommodation facilities	3	3	7	4	3	3	4	5	3	5	
<u>Accessibility</u>	4	2	2	2	4	2	2	9	4	3	
<u>Value for money</u>	7	5	5	6	2	10	3	3	5	2	
Quality perception	9	8	4	7	5	7	8	6	6	4	
<u>Leisure tourism opportunity</u>	6	6	10	8	7	5	7	2	8	7	
Meeting venues	1	7	9	5	1	4	6	8	7	9	
Previous experiences	8	9	6	9	9	6	9	4	9	10	
Word of mouth	10	10	8	10	10	8	10	7	10	6	
Others	11	11	1	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	

Ranking

1	2	3	4	5
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Source: Authors

Event suppliers in Marbella ranked location/destination image, accessibility, accommodation facilities, transportation facilities, and meeting venues as the most important variables. Table 5 below shows the averages obtained after calculation of the previous presented rankings.

Table 5. Average Rankings

Attributes	IBEPO		Event suppliers		Total	
	Marbella	Vilamoura	Marbella	Vilamoura	Marbella	Vilamoura
<u>Location-Destination image</u>	3	5	2,6	1,33	2,8	3,166
Transportation facilities	6	6,33	5,7	3,33	5,85	4,83
Accommodation facilities	5,33	3,33	4	3,66	4,665	3,495
<u>Accessibility</u>	2,66	5,33	3,4	4,33	3,03	4,83
<u>Value for money</u>	6,33	3	4,8	1,33	5,565	2,165
Quality perception	8,33	6	6,4	7,33	7,365	6,665
<u>Leisure tourism opportunity</u>	6,66	9	6,6	8	6,63	8,5
Meeting venues	7	2	5,6	4,66	6,35	3,33
Previous experiences	6	5,66	7,9	7,66	6,95	6,66
Word of mouth	7	10	8,9	9,33	7,95	9,665
Others	7,66	10,33	10	10	8,83	10,165

While in Marbella, the highest value obtained has been the location-destination image (2.8), in Vilamoura, interviewees ranked first the value for money (2,16). This financial variable has been ranked fourth in Marbella. Hence, it can be assumed that IBEPO in Marbella may have available higher financial resources and thus be able to value more the destination image. The second highest value has been attributed to the accessibility in Marbella (3.03), while this latter has been ranked fifth in Vilamoura. In Vilamoura, the third ranked variable is meeting venues (3.33). It may be connected with the fact that the destination holds few meeting facilities, thus justifying a significant concern to IBEPO. As one planner in Vilamoura recognized:

“Marbella has more infrastructures than we have”.

The average calculated for both destinations revealed the following lowest factors: others (11th), word of mouth (10th) and leisure possibility (9th) were considered not relevant for the site-selection.

When a detailed analysis was applied to both parties, a very interesting finding was obtained from suppliers. The most important factor in both destinations has been the location (in Vilamoura this value equals the value for money; 1.33). IBEPO first consider the destination when organising an event. Both places have been characterised having a strong brand image resulting from a differentiated positioning in terms of tourism. Hence, the significant importance given to the destination image variable.

Unlike suppliers, huge contrasts have been found throughout the IBEPPO's variables. In the case of Vilamoura, the main factor has been the meeting venues, underlying once again a concern about business tourism facilities, as illustrated by one client:

"In the case of our event, destination choice has been influenced by facilities with enough capacity."

A lowest available budget and the different profile of the IBEPPO labelled the second variable of importance into the analysis of Vilamoura: the value for money (3).

Regarding Marbella, the main attribute pointed out is the accessibility, followed by destination. These findings indicate that IBEPPO consider an effective transport service and an attractive environment as decisive factors.

Furthermore, divergences have also been pointed out through the lowest ranked attributes. In Vilamoura, others, word of mouth and leisure have been indicated, whereas in Marbella, it is the quality that came in last position. This latter has been understood as connected with the destination image. In fact, Marbella is often defined as a high-standard destination. Consequently, IBEPPO feel that quality does not need to be considered as a main requirement as it is inherent to the destination.

Thanks to result comparisons, it has been possible to reveal the different perceptions in terms of site-selection factors. Even if there are a few similarities, the attributes have been valued differently comparing IBEPPO and event suppliers' average. The most forthcoming findings might be the overall significance given to the destination image and to the value for money. This latter variable received more importance in Vilamoura, which can be related to the fact that Portugal has been considered one of the least expensive destinations in terms of MICE (Festas e Eventos, 2010) and that finance appeared as a higher concern in that destination.

4.2 Destination Choice

In terms of destination choice, this phase has been mainly highlighted as a prevailing one. Most IBEPPO declared that within the decision-making process a large attention is paid to the site-selection, which is regarded as "one of the most important factors when organising an event". Event suppliers largely confirmed that statement: "At 100%! The first decision has to do with the destination. What drives the client is the destination". In general, respondents emphasised the importance of choosing an attractive place to ensure participants' satisfaction as defended by Shaw, Lewis & Korey, (1991), and to promote their company in a favourable environment.

Another interesting aspect has been the confirmation of the impact of destination choice on the number of attendees and event outcomes. Destination choice has been characterized as impacting on success by all interviewees, confirming what had already been identified by Crouch & Ritchie, (1997). As one client (IBEPPO) stated: "Destination choice is almost vital. It can be said that the same event, I mean with identical characteristics, in different locations can get very different results." Corroborating this, also a planner opinion illustrates the importance of destination choice: "Some events depend on destination choice. Sometimes, it occurred that clients did not agree with the destination choice, thus events have not been celebrated."

Concerning destination loyalty, i.e. repeating an event at the same destination, results differ: In accordance with Rogers (2008), some respondents (IBEPPO) highlighted the importance to swap between destinations in order to attract participants. Other respondents defended that participants themselves, satisfied by a previous destination were willing to come to the same destination.

However, the convenience of repeating an event at the same destination depends on the type of event. In fact, some event suppliers declared that in case of congresses, repeating the event at the same place is more plausible than in case of incentives with the same participants, because incentive clients demand attractive and different destinations for each event.

In connection with destination choice, interviewees have been asked about their level of awareness about the other destination in analysis. This question revealed a slight difference between destinations' acquaintance, as all respondents in Vilamoura knew Marbella but three out of ten Marbella's suppliers recognized that they did not know Vilamoura. Subsequently, these findings raised a concern about the awareness of Vilamoura as event destination.

At both locations, meeting venues have been highly valued. Besides being competitive in terms of prices, destinations have to propose effective facilities. However, some IBEPO, especially the ones interviewed in Vilamoura, stressed a lack of venues and facilities with large capacity. They regretted that they had few alternatives to organise their event:

"In Portugal, there are not many possibilities of destinations especially in case of 'big events': Lisbon or Algarve. Alternatives have been strongly reduced because of venue capacity. We have 1200 participants, so we had not many choices in terms of meeting venues."

Taking into account similarities, both destinations have been pointed out as enjoying from a range of facilities and activities. Overall, the question of attractiveness has been frequently applied to these destinations, positively 'pulling' the event and largely the corporate image and communication. However, findings raised divergences between both destinations Regarding the segment of the meeting industry. These differences enabled the researchers to characterize the destinations as follows:

- Marbella: a mature business tourism destination;
- Vilamoura: an emergent business tourism destination.

4.3 Economic Factor

Characterized by Comas and Moscardo (2005: 117) as "a major component", the economic factor has been hypothesized as impacting heavily on destination choice. IBEPO recognized that value for money was one of the first determining factors, as one declared: "The value for money led to our destination choice." Interviews stressed how destination competitiveness can rely on that feature and influence destination choice. In fact, following the global recession, the meeting industry has faced a significant diminution of IBEPO' budget, as foreseen by Rogers (2008).

4.4 Accessibility and Complimentary Attractions and Activities

Identified as a primary factor, accessibility could be related to time constraint's issue as time is a scarce resource that can impact on destination choice. Both IBEPO and event suppliers underlined the requirement for a destination to be accessible, offering effective connections, either by plane, train or highways.

Connected with accessibility, respondents highly valued the location of the venue, especially at walking distance of the main amenities. As highlighted by DiPietro *et al.* (2008) most of the business events offer attendants some leisure time. Consequently, it is worth to select a destination in which entertainment facilities, such as restaurants and bars, are situated nearby. Comas and Moscardo (2005: 128) confirmed that most IBEPO expect "to have a venue (...) close to other activities and that would showcase the area as a tourist destination." As underlined by an event supplier: "There is a favourable environment for the sector we are operating. The incentive is not only contained within the hotel and the venue but also on what 'extra' the destination has to offer around." Even if not ranked as a primary

attribute, the possibility to complement business travels with leisure has been highlighted as an attractive component at both destinations.

All interviewed IBEPO agreed on the advantage of holding the event within a place where extra attractions are available. However, results confirmed the hypothesis that, depending on the event type, leisure tourism complements can constitute either a decisive attribute or a plus to add to the event, as one client (IBEPO) declared: "At the beginning, it was not considered as an incentive to our conference. But, after the decision to hold the event in Marbella, I realised that leisure could be a bonus to benefit the event."

4.5 Destination Image

A final hypothesis has been the influence played by the destination image in the site-selection. In fact, it has been largely demonstrated by the secondary data, how impacting this variable could result. From the perspective of event suppliers, destination choice has been frequently connected with attractiveness, as one supplier said: "To hold an event, a destination needs to be exclusive" and that "Destinations must have attractions that differ from others". Destination image has been recognized as a major attribute among the list of variables, as IBEPO ranked it as the second factor while event suppliers classified this factor as the first one.

5. CONCLUSION

Primary data research has been conducted on two different actors of the industry, the buyer and the supplier, questioning about client's travel decisions' behaviour. Both were involved in the decision-making process but to a different extent, IBEPO provided a more subjective point of view as obviously representing the decision-maker. While suppliers, less involved in the destination choice yet with expert knowledge, offered more detailed points of view.

As business tourism is a promising sector, conveying significant benefits and an important growth, it is a fact that more and more cities compete to become the selected place to hold an event. Because of an intensified competition, destinations would have to acknowledge, which attributes are primarily evaluated by IBEPO in their destination-choice to hold an event. The main goal of this study has been to rank factors identified in the literature for influencing the decision-making process of choosing an event destination.

Results show that economic factor, accessibility and destination image are the main influencing attributes that IBEPO value when selecting a location to hold an event.

The economic attribute is one of the major determining factors for destination choice. Primary data research confirmed that nowadays value for money is an increasing determinant when organising an event. In Vilamoura, it has been classified as the first, while in Marbella it obtained the fourth position. Respondents highlighted interesting viewpoints. IBEPO mainly supported that budget was decisive because of its decrease; suppliers stated that the bid was primordial connected with the competition from other destinations.

Destination image is crucial in the decision-making procedure. Interviews qualified that this variable was predominant as this attribute labelled the event. In the case of Marbella, it has been highlighted as the first factor, while in Vilamoura it has been defined as the second. Respondents added that the place communicates about the event, giving it a specific picture.

Findings confirmed that success depends on a good combination of location, image, cost and attractiveness of amenities. Consequently, understanding IBEPO's site-selection criteria will allow suppliers to know better how to attract events and future business travellers.

These results revealed that to increase their performance as event host destinations, Vilamoura and Marbella will have to promote themselves as exclusive event destinations in order to positively influence destination choice.

Nevertheless, this investigation only constitutes an exploratory investigation. It is hoped that further research could be concluded from this study, emphasising on the figure of the IBEPO. An enhanced understanding of event site-selection appears crucial to apprehend efficiently the meeting industry and to respond with improvement to the first client of a segment foreseen to increasingly contribute to the tourism sector.

Limitations

This study comports some limitations that are important to recognize. In terms of respondent's sample, the number of interviews conducted does not allow generalisation, even if taken as valid. The sample that was studied provides only insights, representing a specific theme. Conclusions from the empirical analysis cannot be comprehensively applied to all IBEPO, as decision-making is a complex random procedure. As a result, in case of future research, it will be recommended to enlarge the number of interviews, providing an enhanced framework.

It is also important to mention difficulties in accessing both inquired groups, mainly IBEPO. On one hand, most event suppliers do not reveal publicly their agendas, making it hard to be informed about business events. On the other hand, both players are protected by confidentiality agreements which makes access to data very difficult.

This research work reveals one of the many possible perspectives when researching a specific topic. As stated by Denzin and Lincoln (1994: 15) "there is no single interpretative truth (...) there are multiple." Consequently, findings are only representative of the studied sample.

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