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Formation, Classification, Characteristics and Development Directions of Tourism Clusters

Mirzayeva Ayan Ibrahim¹ 

¹Lecturer;
Baku State University, Azerbaijan

Abstract. In a globalized environment, tourism has become one of the most dynamically developing sectors of the world economy. The development of tourism contributes to regional economic growth, job creation, investment inflow, as well as the preservation of cultural and natural heritage. At the same time, increasing competition among tourist destinations necessitates the application of new approaches to the organization and management of tourism activities. The article comprehensively examines tourism clusters, which play an important role in the development of the modern tourism industry. In particular, their classification, functional characteristics, and significance in the development of the tourism sector are widely analyzed. Different types of tourism clusters, the economic, social, and institutional factors influencing their formation, as well as their impact on the competitiveness of regions, are evaluated.

Keywords: tourism, tourism cluster, cluster approach, classification, globalization, regional development.

1. Introduction

In the modern era, the cluster approach is one of the most promising directions for the development of tourism. Tourism clusters represent a set of interrelated enterprises, organizations, and institutions operating in the tourism sector and united by a common goal of enhancing the competitiveness of a tourism destination. A tourism cluster typically includes hotels, travel agencies, catering establishments, transportation companies, cultural and entertainment venues, government bodies, as well as educational and scientific organizations.

The relevance of studying tourism clusters stems from the fact that their formation contributes to the efficient use of the region's tourism potential, the development of infrastructure, the improvement of service quality for tourists, and the growth of the region's investment

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attractiveness. In addition, clustering facilitates interaction among various tourism stakeholders, which is particularly important in a rapidly changing market environment.

At present, tourism clusters are widespread in many countries of the world. Their development is associated with globalization, regionalization, and the digital transformation of the economy. Practice shows that the use of the cluster approach facilitates the development of both individual tourism areas and the national tourism system as a whole.

The aim of the article is to examine the classification of tourism clusters, identify their characteristics, and analyze the prospects for their development in the current socio-economic environment.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Tourism Clusters

In the context of the development of the modern world economy, the cluster approach serves as an effective tool for enhancing the competitiveness of various sectors, including the tourism sector. The formation of tourism clusters arises from the necessity to unite diverse actors engaged in tourism activities around common economic, social, and infrastructural objectives.

The concept of the 'cluster' was first extensively explored in the scientific literature by the American economist Michael Porter. According to his approach, a cluster is an economic system in which interconnected enterprises, suppliers, specialized organizations, and institutions located in a particular geographical area collaborate with one another. The primary objective of clustering is to increase overall operational efficiency by strengthening cooperation among participants, promoting knowledge exchange, and ensuring the joint use of resources.

In the tourism sector, a cluster functions as a unified system of interrelated enterprises and organizations aimed at creating a complex service and product for tourists. Such clusters typically comprise hotels, travel agencies, transportation companies, public catering facilities, cultural and entertainment establishments, government administrative structures, as well as educational and research organizations.

The principal characteristic of tourism clusters is their complex nature. Since a tourism product is formed through the combination of various services, close coordination and

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linkages among actors operating in this sector are of particular importance. The effective operation of clusters depends on the level of cooperation among participants, the development of infrastructure, the investment climate, and government support.

Globalization processes also exert a significant influence on the formation of tourism clusters. Increasing international competition, the expansion of transportation opportunities, the application of digital technologies, and the growth of tourism flows contribute to the further development of this sector. Under these conditions, clusters play a crucial role in enhancing the competitive advantages of tourism regions and ensuring the more efficient use of their natural, cultural, and economic resources.

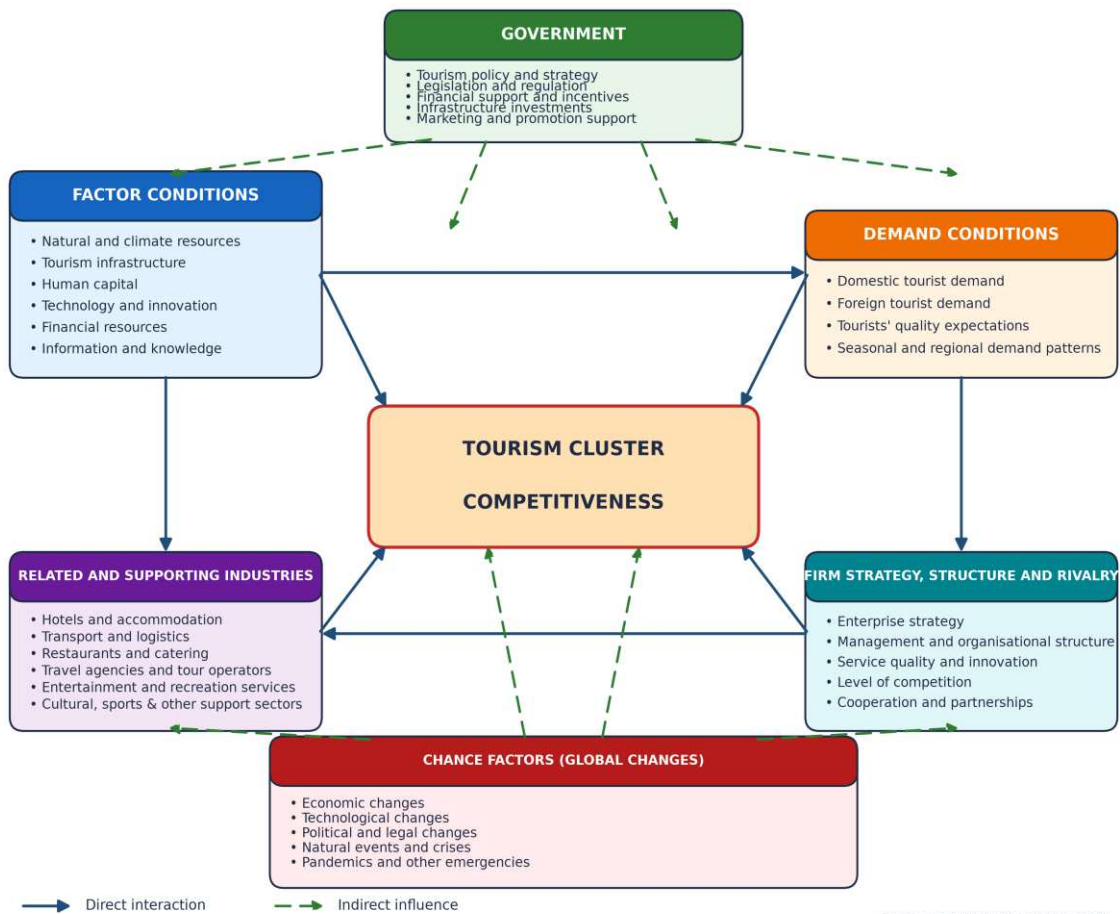


Figure 1
Porter's Diamond Model (adapted for tourism clusters)

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3. Classification of Tourism Clusters

3.1. Types and main characteristics of tourism clusters

The classification of tourism clusters allows us to identify the most effective models for their formation and development in different socio-economic conditions. Depending on the geographical scope, the thematic focus, and the level of integration among participants, the main types of tourism clusters are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Types of tourism clusters and their main characteristics

Type of Cluster	Main Characteristics	Example / Field of Activity	Development Prospects
Geographic (regional) cluster	Consolidation of tourism actors located in the same region	Mountain, sea, and urban tourism regions	Strengthening of the regional brand and infrastructure development
Thematic cluster	Specialization in a specific tourism theme	Ecotourism, cultural tourism, health tourism	Expansion of niche markets and specialized tourist flows
Integrated cluster	Combination of hotels, transport, tourism companies, and services	Complex tourism service packages	High competitiveness and improvement of service quality
Innovative cluster	Tourism activities based on digital technologies	Smart tourism, online booking platforms	Digitalization, AI- and data-driven management
Public-private partnership cluster	Joint activities of the public and private sectors	Tourism zones and government projects	Investment growth and sustainable development model

4. Operational Characteristics of Tourism Clusters

The operation of tourism clusters is distinguished by its complex and multifaceted nature. These clusters are formed and function based on the interaction of various enterprises and organizations in the process of creating and delivering a tourism product.

One of the main characteristics is the high level of interdependence among participants within the cluster. Hotels, travel agencies, transportation companies, public

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catering facilities, and cultural establishments cooperate closely to form a unified tourism service chain. This cooperation creates conditions for the provision of higher-quality and more integrated services for tourists.

Another important characteristic is the pooling and efficient use of resources within the cluster. The joint management of material, human, and information resources enables both the optimization of costs and the enhancement of service quality.

Innovation and the competitive factor also play a significant role in the operation of tourism clusters. While a competitive environment among participants is maintained within the cluster, cooperation and knowledge exchange are simultaneously encouraged. This creates conditions for the emergence of new services and products.

In addition, tourism clusters have a more flexible and adaptive structure in response to external environmental changes. Global economic processes, technological innovations, and shifts in tourist demand directly affect the operations of clusters and require their constant renewal.

In conclusion, the operation of tourism clusters can be characterized as a dynamic system built on cooperation, integration, the efficient use of resources, and innovation.

5. World Experience with Tourism Clustering

Clustering in tourism is a development model widely applied worldwide to enhance the competitiveness of regions and ensure the efficient management of tourism resources. This approach was initially formed within the framework of economic cluster theory and was subsequently successfully applied to the tourism sector [13].

In Europe, tourism clusters are among the most developed models. In countries such as Italy, Spain, and France, tourism clusters have been formed around cultural heritage, gastronomy, and urban tourism. For example, the Tuscany region of Italy is known as a cultural and rural tourism cluster. Here, hotels, local producers, restaurants, and travel agencies operate within a unified system and create high added value. The Barcelona cluster in Spain, on the other hand, has become a global tourism hub specializing in urban tourism and MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) [4].

In Asia, tourism clusters have developed particularly rapidly in China, Japan, and Thailand. The Chinese government has identified the creation of regional tourism zones as a strategic priority. For example, China's Hainan Island is

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being developed as an integrated tourism cluster where beach, health, and luxury tourism operate together. In Japan, the Kyoto cluster specializes in cultural tourism and is built upon ancient architecture, religious sites, and traditional crafts.

In the United States, tourism clusters have mainly been formed around natural and entertainment tourism. The Las Vegas cluster is based on the integration of casino, entertainment, and event tourism. Similarly, the Florida (Orlando) cluster has been formed around theme parks (Disney World and Universal Studios) and has become one of the most powerful integrated clusters in world tourism.

World experience shows that the following trends play a key role in the development of tourism clusters:

- Digitalization and 'smart tourism' systems;
- Strengthening of public-private sector cooperation;
- Prioritization of ecotourism and sustainable development;
- Regional specialization and branding;
- Integration and diversification of tourism services [14].

World experience demonstrates that tourism clusters are an effective model that accelerates the economic development of regions and enhances the competitiveness of the tourism sector. Examples from Europe, Asia, and America confirm the successful application of various forms of the cluster approach. These experiences also offer important development directions for Azerbaijan [13].

6. Development Prospects of Tourism Clusters (in the Azerbaijan Context)

In today's environment, the development of tourism clusters is recognized as a key factor in enhancing the competitiveness of the tourism industry, promoting sustainable regional development, and attracting investments. The dynamic development of the tourism sector in Azerbaijan in recent years has further increased the relevance of this approach. Tourism clusters will transition into more complex and innovative forms in the future as a result of digitalization, globalization, and changing consumer behaviors [1].

1. Strengthening of Regional Specialization

In the future, tourism clusters in Azerbaijan will be formed around unique natural, cultural, and historical resources. For example, Sheki is developing as a cultural and

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historical tourism cluster, while Gabala and Quba are developing as nature and mountain tourism clusters. This approach will enable regions to create their own tourism brands and enhance their recognition in the international market. Baku, meanwhile, serves as the main center for urban and business tourism [7].

2. Development of Digital and Smart Clusters

Digitalization is also one of the main development directions in Azerbaijan's tourism sector. Online reservation systems, mobile applications, artificial intelligence, and big data make tourism management more efficient. Baku is transforming into the center of digital tourism platforms as the fastest-developing city in this field [14].

3. Growth of Public-Private Partnerships

The development of tourism infrastructure in Azerbaijan is carried out through joint activities of the public and private sectors. The Gabala Tourism Center, the Shahdag Complex, and modern hotels in Baku are the results of this cooperation. This model ensures the sustainable development of clusters and improves the investment environment [1].

4. Environmental Sustainability and Green Tourism

The development of ecotourism in Azerbaijan is particularly evident in the Quba, Qusar, Shamakhi, and Gabala regions. The conservation of natural resources and the implementation of a sustainable tourism model are among the key priorities of future clusters. This approach both preserves ecological balance and increases tourism revenues [10].

5. Diversification of Tourism Services

Tourism clusters in Azerbaijan are increasingly covering a wider range of areas. Sheki specializes in cultural tourism, Naftalan in health tourism, and Baku in event and business tourism. This diversification increases the length of stay of tourists in the country and raises overall economic revenues [8].

6. Integration into International Tourism Networks

Azerbaijan's tourism clusters are developing in the direction of integration into the international tourism market. The country's tourism products are presented at international exhibitions, and cooperation with foreign tourism companies is expanding. This process strengthens Azerbaijan's position in the global tourism value chain [4].

7. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that tourism clusters are one of the most effective tools for the development of the modern tourism industry. Their development contributes to enhancing

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regional competitiveness, strengthening interactions among tourism market participants, and creating a sustainable economic environment.

Global experience shows that successful tourism clusters develop on the basis of territorial specialization, service integration, and the active use of innovative technologies. Examples from Italy (Tuscany), Spain (Barcelona), the United States (Orlando, Las Vegas), and Asian countries confirm the effectiveness of the cluster approach in various tourism models.

In the Azerbaijan context, the development of tourism clusters is particularly important. Regions such as Baku, Sheki, and Gabala are already developing their tourism specializations by utilizing their cultural, historical, natural, and infrastructural resources. The future development of clusters will be associated with the digitalization of the industry, the expansion of public-private partnerships, the diversification of tourism services, and the enhancement of environmental sustainability.

Thus, the cluster approach can be regarded as a strategic tool for the long-term development of tourism, guaranteeing an increase in industry revenues, an improvement in service quality, and the strengthening of Azerbaijan's position in the international tourism market.

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