RESEARCH PAPER

Does Distributed Leadership Have a Place in Destination Management Organisations? A Policy-Makers Perspective

Dean Hristov [a][1] **and Anita Zehrer** [b]
[a] *Bournemouth University, United Kingdom*
[b] *MCI Management Center Innsbruck, Austria*

Author 1: Dean Hristov, Doctoral Researcher
        Bournemouth University
        Talbot Campus
        Fern Barrow
        Poole, UK
        BH12 5BB
        E-mail: dhristov@bournemouth.ac.uk

Postal address: Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, BH12 5BB
Tel: +44 7526 326021; Alternative e-mail: dean.hristov@aol.com

Author 2: Anita Zehrer, Professor, Head Family Business Center, Deputy Head Academic Council
        MCI Management Center Innsbruck
        Universitätsstrasse 15
        6020 Innsbruck
        Austria
        E-mail: anita.zehrer@mci.edu

Postal address: MCI Management Center Innsbruck, Universitätsstrasse 15, Innsbruck, Austria, Tel: +43 512 2070 7110; E-mail: Anita.Zehrer@mci.edu

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[1] Corresponding Author. Email: dhristov@bournemouth.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

Within an increasingly networked environment and recent transitions in the landscape of funding for DMOs and destinations, pooling knowledge and resources may well be seen as a prerequisite to ensuring the long-term sustainability of reshaped, yet financially-constrained DMOs facing severe challenges to deliver value to destinations, visitors and member organisations. Distributed leadership is a recent paradigm gaining momentum in destination research as a promising response to these challenges. Building on the scarce literature on DL in a DMO context, this paper provides a policy makers' perspective into the place of distributed leadership in reshaped DMOs and DMOs undergoing transformation and explores current challenges and opportunities to the enactment and practice of DL. The underpinned investigation used in-depth, semi-structured interviews with policy makers from VisitEngland following an interview agenda based on the DMO Leadership Cycle. Policy makers within VisitEngland saw a multitude of opportunities with regards to DL, but equally, they emphasised challenges acting as barriers to realising the potential benefits of introducing a DL model to DMOs as a response to uncertainty in the funding landscape.

INTRODUCTION

The continuous turbulence in the political and economic environment (Coles, Dinan, & Hutchison, 2014; OECD, 2014; Preston, 2012) contributed to shifts in the functions, responsibilities and structures of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) across the world (Beritelli & Laesser, 2013; Laesser & Beritelli, 2013; Scott & Marzano, 2015). This, combined with the impact of global–local forces (Hristov & Naumov, 2015; Milne & Ateljevic, 2001) and the raising importance of destination competitiveness (Zehrer & Hallmann, 2015), has brought into the spotlight the contribution of DMOs and their strategic purpose in destinations. In the case of England, the decline of state funding for tourism management and development (Coles et al., 2014; Kennell & Chaperon, 2013; Morgan, 2012), along with the introduction of private-led DMOs (Hristov & Petrova, 2015; Penrose, 2011) have brought a significant degree of uncertainty for DMOs and destinations.

Within this context, efforts to pool diverse destination knowledge and developmental resources may well be seen as an opportunity for DMOs to address the shifting landscape for destinations and destination organisations in England (Hristov & Petrova, 2015). This shifting landscape questions the long-term sustainability of reshaped, yet financially-constrained DMOs facing severe challenges to deliver value to destinations, visitors and member organisations (Reinhold *et al.,* 2015). Distributed leadership is a recent paradigm gaining momentum in destination research and a promising response to these challenges (Hristov & Zehrer, 2015; Pechlaner *et al.,* 2014).

Both academia and practice beyond the case of England are also signalling this major shift into the modus operandi of DMOs and evidence of this has been captured in two important recent events. The first one is the first ever special issue on leadership in destination and DMO research in *Tourism Review* (see Pechlaner *et al.,* 2014). The second one is the *2nd Biennial Forum Advances in Destination Management* St Gallen (see Reinhold *et al.,* 2015). On both occasions, the common thread has been the emergent importance of networks, distribution of resources within DMOs and destinations in times of uncertainty and complexity in the operational environment of these destination organisations.

The extant literature on DMO and destinations provides a multitude of discussions into the concept of leadership and its shared or distributed dimension in the context of DMOs (see Benson & Blackman, 2011; Hristov & Zehrer, 2015; Kennedy & Augustyn, 2014; Kozak *et al.,* 2014; Valente *et al.,* 2014). Nevertheless, the DL discourse in the context of DMOs and destinations is a relatively new phenomenon (Pechlaner *et al.,* 2014) and as such, there is clearly a scope for further enquiry in a number of directions. Providing a policy-makers perspective on DL and the opportunities and challenges linked with the enactment and practice of DL in the domain of DMOs and destinations is something that the current literature on DMOs and destinations has not discussed to date.

The overarching aim of this paper thus is to provide a policy makers' perspective into the place of distributed leadership in reshaped DMOs or DMOs undergoing transformation, including current challenges and opportunities to the enactment and practice of DL. Within this context, the paper attempts to address three objectives, which aim to:

> *(i)* Explore the opportunities for DMOs to assume leadership functions and adopt and adapt DL as the basis for their organisational model through the perspective of policy makers;

(ii) Further examine the opportunities for building DL capacity among policy makers on a DMO level – an investigation, which is grounded in an existing theoretical contribution (the DMO Leadership Cycle) and its three dimensions derived from three paradigms from the mainstream organisational literature, namely management, governance and leadership applied in a DMO context; and

(iii) Provide a policy makers' perspective into key challenges related to the enactment and practice of DL on a DMO level.

The paper continues with a literature review on changing tourism policy, distributed leadership and DL in the context of DMOs and destinations, followed by a discussion into the emerging role and relevance of leadership and its distributed dimension to the DMO and destination domain, particularly to the case of England. Then, the methodology, which includes in-depth, semi-structured interviews with policy makers from VisitEngland is presented, following the underpinning framework (The DMO Leadership Cycle), which serves to guide the interview agenda. This is then followed by a discussion of findings. Finally, the paper concludes and discusses the limitations and avenues for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism policy and tourism policy change

Contemporary interpretations depict tourism policy as a complex construct located at the nexus of government, businesses and not-for-profit organisations and communities (Wang & Ap, 2013), where the role of the state is gradually decreasing (Dredge & Jamal, 2015; OECD, 2014; Pastras & Bramwell, 2013). Nevertheless, processes related to the development and implementation of tourism policy have traditionally been influenced by the state (Hall, 1994; Hall, 2008), as are processes related to change in tourism policy (Hristov & Naumov, 2015). The trigger for change in tourism policy in the geography on focus, namely England, has been to a large extent, the new political regime - the formation of the coalition government that came into power after the 2010 elections (Cameron, 2010; Coles et al., 2012).

In the case of England, this change in tourism policy has been facilitated by Destination Management Plans (DMPs), which emphasised the collective nature of policy development and strategic destination decision-making (Hristov & Petrova, 2015). Tourism policy and change in tourism policy has become a pertinent issue particularly in times when the public purse is less-available to destinations and DMOs (Coles et al., 2014) as it has been the case of England. This shifting tourism policy has arguably led to the rise of the importance of leadership and its distributed dimension in DMOs and destinations in England. This has been captured in the *2011 Tourism Policy*, which advocated that DMOs should assume a strategic leadership role and adopt a more collaborative approach to their vision and mission in the destination (Penrose, 2011). With the aim to bringing collaborative forms of leadership in focus, the most prominent of which is DL, academics have started to study the role of destination leadership and it relevance to DMOs and the destination. Within a systematic process of policy formulation, destination leadership by setting up guidelines might help involving a number of destination stakeholders to keep the destination competitive (Ritchie & Crouch, 2000).

Leadership, its distributed dimension and DL's relevance to the DMO & destination literature

The last two decades have seen a major shift in the leadership paradigm and this has been widely discussed across the mainstream leadership literature (see Cullen and Yammarino 2014; Fitzsimons *et al.,* 2011; Harris, 2008 Martin *et al.,* 2015; Spillane, 2006). Cullen and Yammarino (2014, p.1) have seen the above transition from an orthodox and 'heroic' leadership towards collective forms of leadership as "a paradigm shift" within the field of leadership. Such paradigm shift in the field of leadership is one that recognises that "teams, organizations, coalitions, communities, networks, systems, and other collectives carry out leadership functions through a collective social process" (Cullen and Yammarino, 2014, p. 1).

Within the domain of DMO and destination research, the leadership paradigm and its distributed dimension has been captured in a two-part special issue of Tourism Review (see Kozak *et al.,* 2014; Pechlaner *et al.,* 2014). The special issue of *Tourism Review* may well be seen as marking the beginning of a new paradigm shift in the research domain of destinations and DMOs, where leadership and its distributed dimension has gradually started gaining recognition as a promising concept on the destination paradigm continuum. In light of the few sporadic attempts of academia to discuss leadership in the context of DMOs and destinations (Benson and Blackman, 2011; Wray, 2009), the above special issue was arguably the first consolidated effort to both recognise and theorise on the underpinned concept in DMO and destination research.

Within the mainstream leadership literature, the term 'distributed leadership' was first introduced by Gibb (1954) in his investigation of dynamics in influence processes taking place in both formal and informal groups and organisations. Sufficient progress on DL was not, however, made after Gibb (1954) up until its rediscovery by Brown & Hosking (1986). DL builds on prominent organisational paradigms and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) is arguably one of them. Stakeholder theory is grounded in the understanding of the relationships between individuals and groups seen as stakeholders within and across organisations (Freeman, 2010). At the heart of stakeholder theory is therefore the effective management of stakeholder relationships (Post *et al.,* 2002; Zehrer & Hallman, 2015). Whilst stakeholder theory favours a more corporatist (top-down approach) and organisational management point of view (Freeman et al., 2004), DL adopts a largely bottom up, collaborative and more inclusive stance to management and leadership in organisations (Oborn *et al.,* 2013). In the case of DL, leadership is distributed amongst the majority of stakeholders (Bennet *et al.,* 2003) and this is particularly the case when DL is examined in the context of reshaped DMOs. Further, stakeholder theory advocates a predominantly corporate and hierarchical organisational model (Jones, 1995), DL builds on that by using a network perspective or flat organisations as a dominant organisational model (Cullen & Yammarino, 2014). The latter perspective is closely aligned with the current landscape for DMOs in England, where DMOs are gradually turning into networks of public, private and not-for-profit organisations.

DL is therefore better placed to frame and study DMOs. Distributed leadership, as contended by Harris (2008), cannot be prescribed in advance as it is the case of 'heroic' leadership covered earlier in this chapter. Instead, distributed leadership emerges within organisations as a consequence of major shifts and subsequent complexities in an attempt to take actions. It is enacted by multiple individuals within the organisation (Fitzsimons *et al.,* 2011) and therefore occurs in a variety of group and organisation settings (Thorpe *et al.,* 2011). A

distributed leadership perspective then "recognises the inclusive and collaborative nature of the leadership process" (Oborn *et al.,* 2013, p.254). In line with this, Valente *et al.* (2015) contended that effective leadership in DMOs should be empowering and thus giving equal voice to the various actors having an interest in destination decision-making and this may well be achieved through embedding distributed leadership practice across reshaped DMOs.

Processes related to the enactment of DL practice, as argued by Hairon & Goh (2014), can be attributed to recent reforms in the public sector calling upon the need to adopt a more 'joined up' and 'networked' approach to governance. So is the case with reshaped DMOs in England that have undergone a public-to-private transition in their existing leadership model (Hristov & Naumov, 2015). Indeed, as formerly public-led bodies, DMOs in England were responsible for providing the bulk of funding for destinations (Coles *et al.,* 2014). Such processes implied management and leadership functions exercised by individuals being in the shadow of predominantly local government organisations and other public sector bodies. However, recent developments in the organisational environment, such as imposing new political ideologies (Cameron, 2010; Hristov and Naumov, 2015) and introducing new models involving a public-to-private shift in funding for destinations and destination organisations (Coles *et al.,* 2014; Penrose, 2011), call upon the recognition that resources are now located in the diversity of DMO member organisations involving businesses from a number of sectors of the economy, along with governmental agencies and not-for-profit organisations. This collective and distributed provision of resources in meeting strategic organisational and destination objectives implies greater appreciation of the interdependence of individual DMO members and calls for, and ultimately supports the enactment of distributed leadership beyond traditional public sector leadership. Distributed leadership is founded on interactions, rather than actions (Harris, 2005; Harris and Spillane, 2008), and as such, resources are central to the enactment of distributed leadership practice at an organisational level (Chreim, 2015; Tian *et al.,* 2015).

This is how distributed leadership emerges in reshaped DMOs across England as a response to changes in the operational environment i.e. a new political and economic context. Indeed, Currie & Lockett (2011) contended that organisational context influences the enactment of DL. Distributed leadership therefore supports organisations in their efforts to "benefit from diversity of thought in decision-making" (Evaggelia and Vitta, 2012, p.3). Equally, distributed leadership recognises the fact that diverse resources and the "varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few" (Bennet *et al.,* 2003, p. 7) as again is the case of reshaped business-led DMOs in England. There is nevertheless little research into the leadership paradigm and its distributed dimension in the context of DMOs and destinations (Hristov and Ramkissoon, 2016a).

DL in DMO and destination context

Having explored the leadership paradigm, its distributed dimension and DL's relevance to the DMO and destination literature, this section goes on to provide a discussion into current contributions in the field to explore the extent to which the DL paradigm in DMOs has been explored through the perspective of policy makers.

Valente *et al.* (2014) examined leadership practice in two Brazilian Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) by approaching RTO executives and other RTO and destination stakeholders. Beritelli & Bieger (2014) developed leadership research framework with the

help of influential actors from four destinations in Switzerland, Austria, and Italy. Blichfeldt *et al.* (2014) investigate the relationship between leadership and power in DMOs and other destination actors by employing a non-conventional vignettes approach. Benson & Blackman (2011) adopted a longitudinal qualitative case study including participant observation, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis in an attempt to explore different forms of distributed leadership in tourism firms in a UK destination. Hristov and Scott (2017) studied processes and practices related to the enactment of DL by DMOs by adapting a framework developed by Hoppe and Reinelt (2010) for evaluating leadership networks to uncover six types of DMO leaders demonstrating contrasting, yet complementary DL behaviours. Zmys`lony (2014) proposed a method of identifying and evaluating leadership potential of stakeholders in emerging destinations through employing an in-depth analysis of stakeholders representing the public, private and non-profit sectors. Pröbstl-Haider et al. (2014) investigated leadership in rural destinations undertaking an analysis of European case studies and case study-based literature. Hristov and Ramkissoon (2016b) explored DL and its application to DMOs by providing evidence of the transition from power relations in destination decision-making and heroic leadership towards a more-collective, DL practiced on a DMO level by a multitude of DMO member organisations.

This overview of key academic contributions suggests that the extant literature on DMO and destinations has attempted to provide a number of discussions into the concept of leadership and its distributed dimension in the context of DMOs and destinations. The existing body of literature has not however discussed to date the DL paradigm in a DMO context through the perspective of policy makers, which is in line with the objectives of this paper, namely the provision of a policy-makers perspective on DL and the opportunities for and challenges to the enactment and practice of DL in the domain of DMOs and destinations. This approach will help to advance our understanding of DL in DMOs and destinations in a policy context.

METHODS

Sample

In-depth, semi-structured interviews with three policy makers from Visit England – the national tourism body in England were carried out in January 2015. Policy makers arguably have an important role in providing insights into advancing a previous theoretical contribution, namely the DMO Leadership Cycle (see Hristov & Zehrer, 2015), which also informs the adopted methodological approach. Purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012) was adopted as a sampling technique as the aim was to involve a narrow sample of policy makers linked to a specific geography, namely England. As such, the sample is well-placed to provide in-depth account of key opportunities for and challenges to the enactment and practice of DL within a shifting landscape for DMOs and destinations. The interviews were carried out either through a virtual meeting platform or over the phone. The approached policy makers mirror diversity of expertise with regards to the shifting landscape for DMOs and destinations in England and included:
- Head of Destination Management, VisitEngland
- Head of Partnerships, VisitEngland
- Head of Policy & Analysis, VisitEngland

Policy makers were given the opportunity to provide their perspective on the extent, to which reshaped DMOs can be seen as leadership networks serving in destinations and to build upon

and explore the relevance of an earlier conceptual contribution related to reshaped DMOs through identifying the key challenges to and opportunities for building distributed leadership capacity on a DMO level.

Conceptual framework informing the methodological approach

Hristov & Zehrer (2015) positioned the DMO Leadership Cycle as a concept, which aims to serve as an input into and ultimately - shape policy development. The interview agenda was informed by each of the three building blocks of the DMO Leadership Cycle derived from three paradigms from the mainstream organisational literature, namely management, governance and leadership in a DMO context.
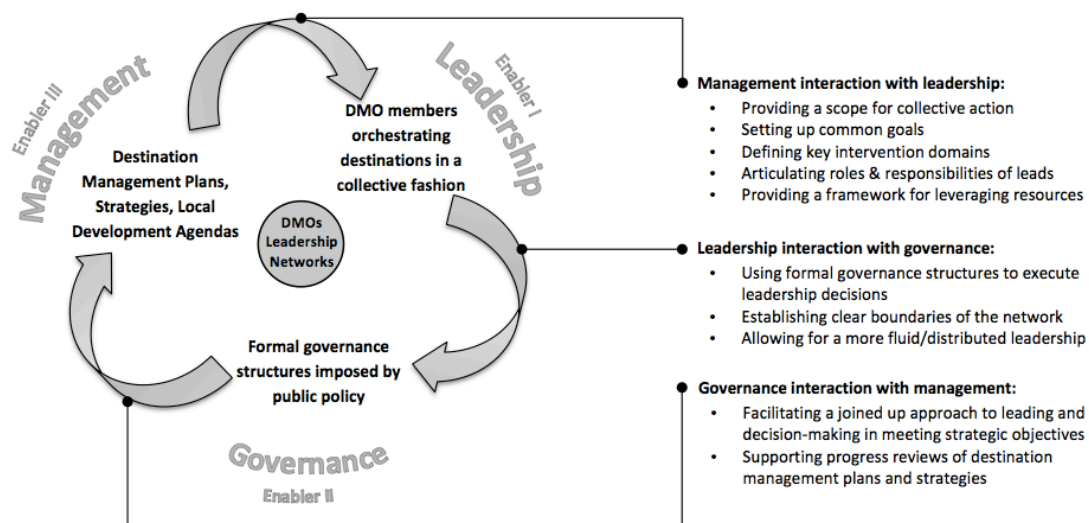
Figure 1: DMO Leadership Cycle (Source: Hristov & Zehrer, 2015)

The three dimensions and indeed enablers (Figure 1), which provide the conditions and structures to allow for DMOs to serve as DL networks are:
- DMO member organisations seen as a lead network of stakeholders (DMO Leadership Cycle's Leadership dimension);
- DMOs as formal governance structures defining boundaries of the lead network (DMO Leadership Cycle's Governance dimension); and
- DMPs providing strategic vision and direction for DL (DMO Leadership Cycle's Management dimension).

The three building blocks are seen as enablers of DL on a DMO level and provide a framework to explain how DMOs can serve as leadership networks in destinations (Hristov & Zehrer, 2015). The Cycle integrates the perspectives of destination management, governance and leadership and argues that such cyclical interaction through three sequential enablers (see Figure 1) is vital to DMOs operating as leadership networks in destinations. Management, governance and leadership provide input into, interact with and influence one another in the context of DMOs (Hristov & Zehrer, 2017).

Not only does this cyclical pattern of interaction place an emphasis on the integrative nature of the DMO Leadership Cycle's building blocks, but also provides direction for leadership

executed on a DMO level and a projected sequence of the processes located on the right-hand side of Figure 1. This starts with Enabler 1, namely DMO members exercising leadership, facilitated by formal governance structures under Enabler 2, and guided by a Destination Management Plan (DMP) or a strategy under Enabler 3. When the latter is revised in light of recent progress and the wider vision and mission of the DMO, DMPs provide direction to Enabler 1 for another cycle of DMO leadership.

Each of these three dimensions on Figure 1 informed the interview agenda with policy makers through the development and adoption of a set of questions aimed at the management's interaction with leadership, leadership's interaction with governance and governance's interaction with management (refer to the respective section of Figure 1). The policy makers were required to provide their views through answering questions related to each of the three points of interaction in the DMO Leadership Cycle.

The adopted interview agenda was different for each of the three policy makers involved in this study depending on their expertise and responsibilities in VisitEngland to enable a deeper exploration. This is also evident in the findings section which unfold according to each of the three pillars.

Methodological tools

The transcripts of the interviews were analysed systematically to identify themes. Thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012), which is a form of qualitative coding analysis, was adopted as part of this research. The thematic analysis assisted in developing deeper-level themes, than simply surface codes (Bryman, 2012) and as such, it allows one to spend considerable time with the data with the aim to explore what themes actually emerge, rather than reflecting one's own beliefs (Matthew and Sutton, 2011). If new themes emerged the coding frame was changed and the transcripts were reread according to the new structure by both authors. Emerging themes were developed by studying the transcripts repeatedly and considering possible meanings and how these fitted with developing themes.

The thematic analysis was assisted by NVivo10 (QSR International, 2013), which supports the organisation and analysis of thick data and subsequently - the development of consistent coding schemes (Jennings, 2010) as it was the case of this study. The thematic coding analysis enabled the creation of prominent themes and sub-themes to better inform the discussion of findings, which are visualised through a number of 'word-cloud' figures. It enables the narrowing down the wider pool of themes emerging through the insights provided by the three policy makers – this approach subsequently assists the presentation and discussion of findings. The interviews were transcribed verbatim (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011) and the resulting 'thick', yet largely raw data were used as an input into NVivo10, where a coding scheme was created (Figure 2).

Name	S	References	Created On
▼ ◯ 1. DMOs Assume L-ship Functions	3	13	27 Jul 2015 13:42
◯ 1. DMOs as L-ship Nets	3	6	27 Jul 2015 13:43
◯ 1. DMOs as L-ship Nets Considerations	1	3	27 Jul 2015 15:53
◯ 1. Role of DL in DMOs	1	2	27 Jul 2015 13:44
◯ 1. Role of Nets in DMOs	2	2	27 Jul 2015 15:55
▼ ◯ 2. Mgmt's Interaction with L-ship	3	14	27 Jul 2015 13:46
◯ 2. DMPs Articulate Roles & Responsib	2	4	27 Jul 2015 13:56
◯ 2. DMPs as Framework for Leverage Resources	2	4	27 Jul 2015 16:03
◯ 2. DMPs Facilitate Collective L-ship Action	3	6	27 Jul 2015 13:53
▼ ◯ 3. L-ship's Interaction with Gov	3	7	27 Jul 2015 13:47
◯ 3. Gov Structures Facilitate L-ship Decisions	3	7	27 Jul 2015 13:58
▼ ◯ 4. Gov's Interaction with Mgmt	3	8	27 Jul 2015 13:47
◯ 4. Gov Structures Empower & Voice	3	4	27 Jul 2015 15:18
◯ 4. Gov Structures Key to Dev of DMPs	2	4	27 Jul 2015 14:02
▼ ◯ 5. LEPs and the L-ship Net beyond DMOs	2	12	27 Jul 2015 14:11
▶ ◯ 5.1 Role of DMOs in Capitalise on VEcon	1	11	27 Jul 2015 14:13
◯ 5.2 LEPs and DMOs as L-ship Nets	0	0	27 Jul 2015 15:25
◯ 5.3 LEPs and DMOs as Funding Partners	1	1	27 Jul 2015 17:10
▶ ◯ 6. DMK Specific	1	3	27 Jul 2015 17:25
▶ ◯ 7. Misc	2	4	27 Jul 2015 15:20

Figure 2. NViVo10 Coding Scheme for the Project

The coding scheme of collected qualitative data on Figure 2 reflects a consensus on key emergent themes, where the two researchers involved in this study controlled for inter-rater reliability (Armstrong *et al.,* 1997) to reduce bias during the process of carrying out 'thick' data analysis (Pope *et al.,* 2000). The established inter-rater reliability procedures, although not common in qualitative enquiry (Armstrong *et al.,* 1997), contributed to the production of a refined NViVo10 coding scheme and as such, they have given further credibility to the findings, which are discussed below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Key opportunities for building DL capacity in DMOs

The first objective of this study was to explore the opportunities for DMOs to assume leadership functions and adopt and adapt DL as the basis for their organisational model through the perspective of policy makers at VisitEngland.

DMOs assuming leadership functions and the place of DL

A number of sub-themes and discussion points emerged within the broader *DMOs assuming leadership functions and the place of DL* theme. These are depicted on Figure 3 where the bigger a word (theme), the more frequently used is that theme in interview narratives with policy makers. The themes are subsequently explored in detail through the perspective of policy makers at VisitEngland.
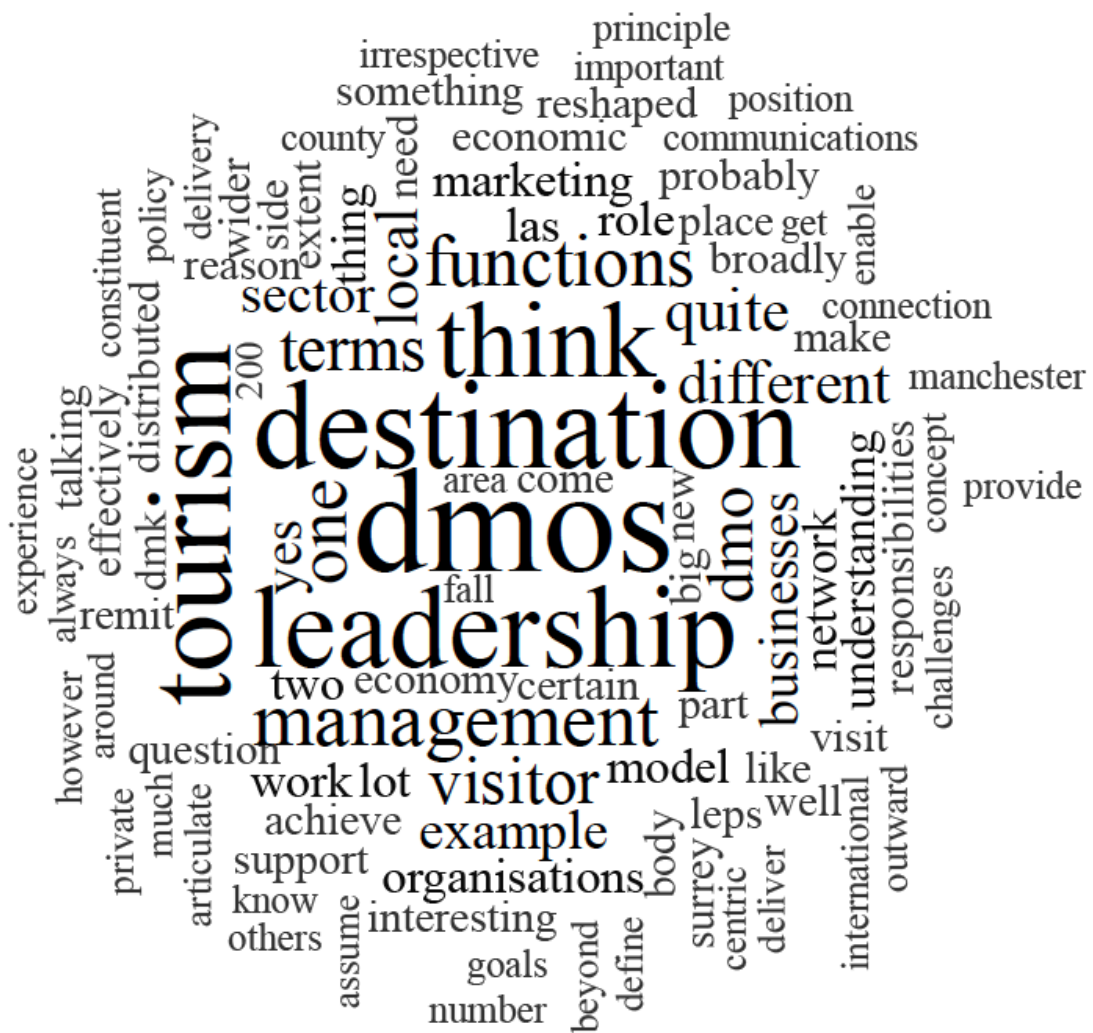
Figure 3. DMOs Assuming Leadership Functions and the Place of DL Sub-themes

When asked whether reshaped DMOs can and should go beyond traditional destination management and marketing and assume leadership functions as a response to recent political and economic shifts (e.g. decreasing state support, increased competition in a highly saturated market, a wider set of responsibilities under the remit of reshaped DMOs, lack of public sector leadership), policy-makers felt that embracing the concept of leadership may well be seen as an opportunity to address current developments in the industry:

> *"I think yes, they [DMOs] do and yes, they [DMOs] can and probably yes, they should! They should because the visitor economy is such a broad term, it touches a variety of industries, it touches a variety of stakeholder groups and it is done well, then DMOs do need to have that relationship [i.e. exercising leadership functions] more broadly than the traditional tourism sector."*

> *(Head of Destination Management, VisitEngland)*

Emergent dominant themes, such as 'role', 'leadership', and 'functions' depicted on Figure 3 further amplify the policy makers' stance on the opportunities for DMOs to assume a more leadership-driven model.

The identification of current opportunities for DMOs to go beyond destination management and assume leadership functions was also supported by both the Head of Strategic Partnerships and Engagement at VisitEngland and the Head of Policy and Analysis at VisitEngland, who believed that the concept of leadership can and should be more comprehensively-embraced in two directions, in this case in principle:

> *"As a principle [leadership], I think it is fine as tourism is all-encompassing, it covers a number of areas – especially economic activity. So, in principle yes- I think it is [leadership] is important."*
> *(Head of Policy and Analysis, VisitEngland)*

As well as in practice:

> *"I think there are examples of some DMOs – some of the stronger ones, where they are taking bigger, wider and kind of more strategic leadership roles. Example is Cheshire where they redesign themselves and are about what is more than tourism in a destination. Liverpool where the local LEP there have a local tourism delivery body and that connects to the wider agenda of inward investment."*
>
> *(Head of Strategic Partnerships and Engagement, VisitEngland)*

The above statement by the Head of Strategic Partnerships and Engagement, VisitEngland, provides evidence that the leadership concept has already been adopted by the sector to an extent as specific examples were provided, namely Cheshire and Liverpool.

Further, in addition to the more generic leadership concept, policy makers were also offered the opportunity to provide their accounts of what they believed to be the place of DL in light of today's largely resource-constrained DMOs and the resultant interdependency of DMO member organisations in the context of England:

> *"So the whole concept of shared or distributed leadership is something that has not been articulated in those terms [understanding what a destination and its constituents are and understanding of how a destination grows in economic terms] before, but is something that has been thought about and is encouraged for a while. So, there are examples where we get destinations to think more broadly..."*
> *(Head of Destination Management, VisitEngland)*

Yet, the Head of Destination Management at VisitEngland did not elaborate in detail on the place of DL in reshaped DMOs in England, nor they provided any specific examples of adoption across the sector. Providing policy maker accounts into DL in the context of DMOs through the DMO Leadership Cycle and its building blocks provided further in-depth insights. These are discussed below.

DMO Leadership Cycle-specific industry insights

The second objective of this study was to examine the opportunities for building DL capacity on a DMO level by involving an investigation, which is grounded in an existing theoretical contribution, DMO Leadership Cycle (see Hristov & Zehrer, 2015), and its three dimensions derived from three paradigms from the mainstream organisational literature, namely management, governance and leadership applied in a DMO context.

The DMO Leadership Cycle served to explain the integrative nature of the concepts of management, governance and leadership within the context of DMOs (Hristov and Zehrer, 2015). This integration of core organisational concepts provide the basis of DMOs serving as leadership networks (Hristov & Zehrer, 2015). As such, the DMO Leadership Cycle provides a simple and straightforward framework for enacting DL across the network of member organisations on board DMOs.

DL through the perspective of the Management dimension of the Cycle

The DMO Leadership Cycle provided evidence that plans, strategies and agendas such as Destination Management Plans (DMPs, see Hristov and Petrova, 2015) largely define the concept of management in a DMO context (Figure 1). The role of DMPs in promoting DL on a DMO level and also realising the opportunities for building DL capacity on a DMO level were further explored through the perspective of policy makers. A number of themes and discussion points emerged within the management dimension of the Cycle, such as 'responsibilities', 'resources' and roles. These are depicted on Figure 4 and subsequently explored in detail through the perspective of policy makers at VisitEngland. The word cloud gives greater prominence to themes that appeared more frequently in the interviews, i.e. the bigger a word (theme), the more frequently used is that theme in interview narratives.

Legend: Cloud themes in bigger font at the centre have been given greater importance by interviewees.

Figure 4. Dominant Themes within the Management Dimension of the Cycle

Policy makers felt that DMPs may well be seen as an important tool for articulating the roles and responsibilities of destination leads. DMPs, according to policy makers, provided opportunities for framing and practicing DL:

> *"Absolutely! A DMP can articulate roles and responsibilities of destination leads. This is at the core of our guide to developing DMPs ... So yes, I do think that articulating the roles and responsibilities of destination leads is key to DMPs."*
>
> *(Head of Destination Management, VisitEngland)*

Further, both the Head of Destination Management and the Head of Policy and Analysis felt that DMPs could provide a framework for leveraging strategic destination resources in resource-constrained DMOs, which facilitates the enactment of DL and provides opportunities for building DL capacity:

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"Now, in principle that is a good idea – all DMPs should be grounded in solid evidence, they should not just be based on the back up of DMO CEOs or the board ... So if DMPs are done properly, absolutely they can be used [for leveraging strategic destination resources] and they should be used and is useful for DMOs to understand how they can be used."

(Head of Destination Management, VisitEngland)

DMPs, in addition, were seen as being key to the provision of a scope for collective action and indeed enabling the setting up of common goals, which may well be aligned with the demands of diverse stakeholder groups on board DMOs according to the Head of Destination Management at VisitEngland.

"I think, absolutely is the answer to that [DMPs are able to provide a scope for collective action and facilitate the setting up of common goals]. I think DMPs is one of the biggest successes – it [a DMP] is not necessarily the end document, but is actually the process, which the stakeholders and the DMO go through to reach that document."

(Head of Destination Management, VisitEngland)

This statement provides evidence that DMPs can facilitate collective visioning and define strategic destination leadership actions, which are of interest to the majority (if not all) DMO member organisations. The wider organisational literature suggests that collective visioning is at the heart of DL (Benson & Blackman, 2011). DMPs, as policy makers felt, "allow DMOs to be able to provide leadership" (Head of Destination Management, VisitEngland). Policy makers also felt that DMPs allow for having an understanding what the challenges and opportunities are for all those different groups, which in turn provides DMO member organisations with the opportunity to capitalise on developing shared goals and objectives, which are among the key defining features of DL (Gronn, 2002).

DL through the perspective of the governance dimension of the Cycle

Further, the Cycle provided evidence that formal destination governance structures, such as DMOs (often imposed by public policy), largely define the concept of governance in a DMO context (Figure 1). The role of formal governance structures in promoting DL on a DMO level and their role in realising the opportunities for building DL capacity on a DMO level were further explored through the perspective of policy makers. A number of themes and discussion points emerged within the management dimension of the Cycle. Key themes included 'organisations', 'businesses' and members, where the larger the word corresponding to a theme, the more prominent and frequently used was that theme by policy makers These are depicted on Figure 5 and subsequently explored in detail through the perspective of policy makers at VisitEngland.

Figure 5. Dominant Themes within the Governance Dimension of the Cycle

Both the Head of Strategic Partnerships and Engagement and the Head of Destination Management at VisitEngland felt that formal governance structures in the face of DMOs are able to facilitate leadership decisions, which may well be of interest to DMO member organisations with diverging priorities and areas of operation, including the often under-represented smaller destination businesses, such as largely family-run Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs):

> *Yes, DMOs [formal governance structures] can facilitate leadership decisions being of interest to diverse DMO member organisations. There are a number of examples where small businesses both within the tourism sector and beyond have been engaged because the DMO is doing a good job of explaining the role that SMEs play within the wider visitor economy.*
>
> *(Head of Destination Management, VisitEngland)*

Similarly, the Head of Strategic Partnerships and Engagement at VisitEngland considered formal governance structures in the face of DMOs to be crucial in the provision of opportunities for wider representation of DMO member organisations, in the case of both smaller businesses and not-for-profit organisations:

> *Yes, absolutely, and that [DMOs allowing for a wider representation of stakeholder interests and providing a voice in shaping leadership decisions] is exactly the role that a DMO should play... Of course, DMOs will never be in a position to control all of it [empower and provide a voice], but DMPs are the place where priorities are being identified and DMOs have the facilitation, leadership and coordination role. So, I thing this is definitely beneficial and that is a role they [DMOs] can play locally.*
> *(Head of Strategic Partnerships and Engagement, VisitEngland)*

The importance of governance structures in destinations, such as DMOs is then emphasised by policy makers as governance structures serve as enablers of DL by bringing together diverse sectoral voices. Empowering, providing a voice and recognising diverse organisations and their capabilities or collective role are also among the key defining features of DL (Harris, 2004).

DL through the perspective of the leadership dimension of the Cycle

At last, the Cycle provided evidence that organisations on board DMOs orchestrating a destination in a collective fashion largely define the concept of leadership in a DMO context (Figure 1). The role of DMO member organisations and individuals behind these organisations in promoting DL on a DMO level and also realising the opportunities for building DL capacity on a DMO level were further explored through the perspective of policy makers. A number of themes and discussion points emerged within the management dimension of the Cycle, such as 'individuals', 'provision', 'needs' and 'interests'. These are depicted on Figure 6 and subsequently explored in detail through the perspective of policy makers at VisitEngland.

Figure 6. Dominant Themes within the Leadership Dimension of the Cycle

Policy makers felt that in line with DMOs (defining the concept of governance in a DMO context) and DMPs (defining the concept of management in a DMO context), "you need someone to provide leadership" (Head of Destination Management, VisitEngland). Within this context, the collective dimension of 'someone' or 'individuals' (see Figure 6), who is willing to assume leadership functions and provide leadership decisions on a DMO level was also seen as a pertinent theme deserving further attention.

In this case, despite providing evidence that DMOs tend to be more biased towards bigger members due to the fact that bigger members have more resources, the Head of Policy and Analysis at VisitEngland has seen an opportunity in embracing the collective nature of leadership on board DMOs:

> *"I think it very much depends on a DMO having an inclusive policy – a one that attempts to ensure that it represents all the interests of DMO members but it needs a few champions as well, or individuals who are willing to push that agenda."*

This is in line with the DMO Leadership Cycle's definition of leadership in the context of DMOs, which calls for recognition of the collective dimension of strategic destination decision-making.

Key challenges to building DL capacity in DMOs

The third objective of this study was to provide a policy makers' perspective on some key challenges related to the enactment and practice of DL on a DMO level. Within the context of perceived challenges to capitalising on the DL agenda and building DL capacity, policy makers touched upon a number of key important considerations and the associated challenges, which can be taken on board when DL is enacted on a DMO level:

(i) Organisational structure of DMOs;
(ii) Destination aspirations and organisational priorities of DMOs;
(iii) Inclusion of SMEs and Not-for-Profits in strategic destination decision making;
(iv) Monitoring leadership roles and responsibilities; measuring leadership activity.
(v) The role of funding in boosting DMO capacity to provide tangible outputs

Organisational structure of DMOs

Policy makers felt that the organisational structure of DMOs across England differs significantly and this may well have consequences for both embracing the opportunities presented by the leadership concept and building DL capacity on a DMO level by involving a range of public, private and not-for-profit DMO members:

> *"So, reshaped DMOs can demonstrate leadership if they have good structure [representing the public, private and not-for-profit sectors in a destination]. However, I do not think that this is something that can be recommended in all cases."*
> *(Head of Policy and Analysis, VisitEngland)*

The Head of Strategic Partnerships and Engagement, VisitEngland emphasised that particular attention should be given to the composition of DMO networks or the sectoral diversity of organisations on board DMOs as a prerequisite to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the leadership concept:

> *"So yes, I think that they [DMOs] can assume leadership functions, but obviously we know that there are some DMOs that are quite fragile. In terms of the stronger ones and the ones that are managing to survive, they perhaps have strong PPPs [Public-Private Partnerships] as the basis for their model."*
> *(Head of Strategic Partnerships and Engagement, VisitEngland)*

Destination development aspirations and organisational priorities of DMOs

Further, policy makers felt that destination development aspirations and organisational priorities of DMOs might also pose challenges to DMOs should they adopt leadership

functions. In support of this statement, a comparative perspective was provided through the inclusion of outward-facing (i.e. marketing and management-focused DMOs) and inward-facing (i.e. leadership-focused DMOs) organisations:

> *"…the majority of them [DMOs] are focused on the promotional side of things i.e. they are outward-facing and that brings challenges in it self in terms of being able to deliver leadership functions."*
>
> *(Head of Destination Management, VisitEngland)*

The Head of Destination Management at VisitEngland also felt that defining a DMO in itself is a challenging task as DMOs have different functions under their remit. Within this context, some DMOs were seen as being more marketing-centric (see Harrill, 2009), whereas others as more management-centric (see Laesser & Beritelli, 2013) or even leadership-centric (see Hristov and Zehrer, 2015).

Inclusion of SMEs and NFPs in strategic destination decision-making

The perceived barriers to the inclusion of SMEs and Not-for-Profits on board DMOs in strategic destination decision making were seen as another challenge that can limit DMOs in the enactment and practice of DL across public, private and not-for-profit organisations on board DMOs:

> *"I think that the biggest weakness [of DMOs] is the fact that DMOs can be dominated by better organised members and these better organised DMO members tend to be larger because they have the resource to be able to employ full time staff for people to assume such responsibilities [DMO tasks and agendas] under their remit."*
>
> *(Head of Policy and Analysis, VisitEngland)*

Building on this stance, the Head of Policy and Analysis also felt that for micro businesses and SMEs it is much harder to find the time to be involved in the above activities:

> *"…you could argue that a lot of the DMOs are influenced by organisations that do not necessarily include the smaller stakeholders. And that is a problem – I do not know how we can overcome that unless you can provide a specific resource for such businesses..."*
>
> *(Head of Policy and Analysis, VisitEngland)*

Monitoring leadership roles and responsibilities; measuring leadership activity

The perceived complexities in monitoring leadership roles and responsibilities and measuring leadership activity on board DMOs were seen by policy makers as yet another obstacle to the distribution of leadership and building of DL capacity across DMO member organisations championing leadership:

> *"There is something that we found – it is quite difficult to measure who does what. On a DMO level you have responsibilities assigned to different parties. Under the old system of local authorities this process was very straightforward because of the various departments who had to fine manage and had various performance*

monitoring. As soon as you start developing hybrid organisations, it becomes much more difficult to do that."

(Head of Policy and Analysis, VisitEngland)

This statement by the Head of Policy and Analysis at VisitEngland further amplified the complexities surrounding the enactment and practice of DL on a DMO level.

CONCLUSION

Building on the scarce literature on DL in a DMO context, this paper provided a policy makers' perspective into the place of distributed leadership in reshaped DMOs and DMOs undergoing organisational change. The perspectives provided by policy makers from VisitEngland, attempted to build upon and explore the relevance of an earlier conceptual contribution, namely the DMO Leadership Cycle and its building blocks to contemporary DMOs in England in light of the landscape they operate in. This cohort of policy-makers were also asked to reflect upon the key challenges to and opportunities for enacting and practicing DL on a DMO level - in general terms and also by building upon the foundations of the DMO Leadership Cycle (Figure 1).

Policy makers felt that the concept of leadership should be embraced and seen through a more integrated and comprehensive approach – both in principle and also in practice, particularly after the expectations of reshaped DMOs to lead on a wider agenda by fulfilling a wider set of economic and community objectives (Hristov & Petrova, 2015) and the transition from purely tourism activity in favour of the wider visitor economy (see Hristov, 2015b). Policy makers however emphasised that whilst leadership and its distributed dimension have been considered in the context of DMOs before, a more-holistic and comprehensive and integrated definition and approach would benefit the industry, particularly in light of recent disruptions, such those in the governance and funding landscape for DMOs and destinations. Within the context of the DMO Leadership Cycle, policy makers agreed that the building blocks of the Cycle have an important role in the facilitation and promotion of collaborative destination decision-making in reshaped DMOs. As such, the tree building blocks of the Cycle provide further scope for serving as enablers to the enactment and practice of DL on a DMO level.

Although policy makers highlighted a multitude of opportunities to recognise DL and put it into practice in DMOs, they also pointed to a number of challenges to building DL capacity. Policy makers discussed a number of dominant themes and considerations contributing to the current complexities in the enactment and practice of DL in DMOs. Amongst these were obstacles to empowering individual DMO member organisations, considerations related to the structure of DMOs, the provision of vision and substantial funding for DMOs and their destinations.

The current discourse on DL as an alternative paradigm to traditional DMO constructs, along with perspectives by policy makers, who discussed opportunities and challenges to embrace DL on a DMO level, confirm recent recommendations by the 2nd Biennial Destination Management Forum held in St Gallen, Switzerland, which concluded that:

"… it is questionable whether and to what extent a sole individual is able to pave the

way to a consensus in decision-making when resources, expertise, leadership influence, and skills reside in diverse destination actors who contribute in different ways to various parts of the experience system."

(Reinhold et al., 2015, p. 4)

Further, Reinhold *et al.* (2015, p.4) went on to argue that contemporary DMOs "will require less of alone leader that personifies and tries to direct the entire destination like a corporate CEO". The above policy makers discussion into the opportunities presented by DL as an alternative to traditional DMO and destination paradigms provides evidence into the the increased importance of DL in times of policy complexity and funding uncertainty for DMOs. The operational environment of DMOs and its funding dimension in particular has been characterised with a considerable degree of uncertainty:

"...public budgets are increasingly squeezed and austerity measures dominate the agendas of government bodies at different levels ... as is already the case in countries, such as Italy and the United Kingdom."

(Reinhold et al., 2015, p. 3)

Within this context, the transition from traditionally prominent organisation paradigms, such as management and governance towards leadership and distributed leadership in particular in the context of destination and DMO research may well be seen as a way to navigate through organisational change (Hristov and Zehrer, 2015) whilst sustaining competitiveness within a highly-saturated market of tourism services and products (Zehrer & Hallmann, 2015).

There has also been a response from the mainstream organisational and leadership literature, where Cullen & Yammarino (2014) in *The Leadership Quarterly* called upon introducing novel contributions to the extant DL literature and advancing DL theory and practice. This serves as yet another evidence into the scarce literature on operationalising DL and its practice across organisations.

The provision of a policy makers perspective into this provides important contributions to the literature on DL in a DMO context by unveiling key emergent themes related to the opportunities and challenges facing DMOs in the adoption and practice of leadership and its distributed dimension. Findings also provide policy and practice considerations, which can be applied to other contexts with DMOs operating within similar funding and governance landscape, such as the one presented in this research.

LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The paper has certain acknowledged limitations that should be taken into account, when considering the findings of the underpinned research and its contributions. This study is exploratory in nature and covered only a limited sample of policy makers within the context of England and English DMOs. Despite the fact that we not intend to offer final and conclusive solutions with regard to DL on DMO level, the underpinning study provided important insights into DL adoption on a DMO level. However, the findings cannot be generalised to all destinations and DMOs due to varied governance structures and influence of political decision-makers beyond the case of England.

Another shortcoming of the study at hand is that authors adopted a narrow approach to

sampling and thus dealt with a limited number of issues concerning DL in destinations and DMOs. Thus, the conducted research is far from comprehensive, which leaves a number of questions related to DMO and destination leadership, which still need to be answered.

Further research into the opportunities and challenges for DMOs to adopt and adapt DL as the basis of their organisational model should be pointed towards carrying out a more comprehensive study among policy makers in DMOs by means of a quantitative survey. This would allow to empirically testing the findings of this qualitative research. Future studies across borders and investigations beyond the content of England are likely to further contribute to our understanding of DL in DMO and destination research.

In addition to studies adopting a quantitative stance and crossing a multitude of contexts, further research would also benefit from a cross-perspective study. One that involves the construction of DL perspectives provided by both policy makers and DMO practitioners. Perspectives provided by policy makers are arguably an important contribution to the scarce literature on DL practice in destinations and DMOs. Within this context, adopting a cross-perspective approach that also involves industry practitioners may potentially result in constructing a set of practical outputs having implications for strategic leadership practice in DMOs and close the gap between DL theory and practice in the domain of DMOs and destinations.

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