Place Branding and Public Diplomacy
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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity of touristic local territorial systems (LTSs) in south Italy: a strategic positioning

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Abstract
This investigation focuses on applying an innovative strategic planning model for place marketing to implement a sustainable development process for touristic territories. The purpose of this study is to propose a strategic place marketing approach for the sustainable development of four Local Territorial Systems (LTSs) located in the Province of Lecce, Southern Italy, by examining their main determinants. Two intermediate objectives are established: 1) to evaluate the determinants of sustainable development of LTSs—specifically, the attractiveness of the competitive environment and the competitive capacity of the various LTSs—by analyzing the competitive positioning of each LTS; and 2) to define the prospective positioning by forecasting future dimensions of sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity. The outcomes of a prospective analysis are valuable to inform and develop distinctive place marketing investment strategies—Penetration investments, Rebuilding investments, Selection investments, and Reduction investments. This approach provides a groundbreaking tool to guide the choices of policymakers and institutions, and to inform their strategies. The specificity of LTSs can be leveraged to prepare suitable territorial offers and achieve sustainable development by shifting the focus of state government planning decisions from individual cities to cohesive territorial systems.

Keywords Sustainable development · Attractiveness · Competitive capacity · Touristic Local Territorial Systems · Strategic Positioning

Introduction

The UN 2030 Agenda, signed in September 2015 by 193 countries, aimed to adopt the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for sustainable development (United Nations 2015). These objectives are meant to signify a commitment to a better and more sustainable future for all by eliminating poverty, encouraging prosperity and well-being, and respecting the environment. In one of the earliest and most cited definitions, sustainable development is described as "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987, p. 43). Initially perceived as a purely environmental theme, the concept of sustainable development has broadened to encompass economic and social dimensions. Indeed, the sustainable development of places reflects the capacity of socio-territorial systems to evolve and maintain their identity and unique characteristics through changes. This concept emerges from a growing recognition of the finitude of resources and the necessity to preserve our natural heritage. It also suggests that sustainable development does not obstruct economic growth but rather encourages the conservation of resources for use by future generations of residents, businesses, and tourists.

Despite the prevailing economic and social climate characterized by globalization, recent strategic directions emphasize the critical importance of local area valorization. Consequently, even smaller Local Territorial Systems (hereafter, LTSs)—i.e., sub-regional areas consisting of one or more municipalities with shared characteristics and orientations—play an active role in the sustainable development of places. Magnaghi (2005) notes, "local development relies

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on enhancing territorial resources and local identities as the foundation for alternative development models" (p. 55).

Pursuing a long-term sustainable strategy, all locations, regardless of their territorial or economic conditions, need to be marketed effectively. Place marketing is defined as the strategic planning process aimed at fulfilling the needs of target markets (Kotler et al. 1999, p. 125). This definition highlights the importance of being responsive to changes in the marketing environment and addressing customer needs. Thus, it underscores the significance of *strategic needs* — i.e., the priority goals of places—in facilitating successful place branding strategies and, consequently, structural changes required for sustainable development. A *strategic place* marketing approach must transcend the basic and naive implementation of promotional actions, advocating instead for a holistic and strategic approach to the sustainable development of places. To this end, place branding strategies aim to establish a positive and distinct positioning or repositioning of a place's image in the minds of consumers and within the global marketplace (Muñiz-Martinez 2012; Oliveira 2016a, b). Analyzing a place's positioning involves evaluating its *attractiveness*—i.e., its capacity to attract investments—and its *competitive capacity*—i.e., its efficiency in utilizing resources—to support its strategic needs. These strategic needs then guide the design of place marketing strategies to leverage place's strengths and mitigate its weaknesses.

This investigation utilizes a strategic planning model for place marketing to foster sustainable development in a touristic territory, examining four LTSs (Guido 2000) as the unit of analysis. An LTS is a sub-regional area comprising one or more municipalities, distinguished by shared social, economic, and territorial attributes and a predominant (industrial versus tourist) "vocation" (or orientation). The territorial vocation is defined as "an objective, self-evident characteristic, the expression and synthesis of a territory's resource potential, skills, and capabilities, shaped by its history and directing its future towards a unique strategy of differentiation in territorial competition" (Calabrese, Mastroberardino, and Cortese 2014, p. 308). Thus, an LTS constitutes a "relative space" shaped and organized by economic activities, transcending mere physical proximity. Therefore, LTSs are characterized by their economic, social, and spatial dimensions, which collectively contribute to the unique offerings of a territory (Guido and Pino 2016; 2018; Guido et al. 2016; Pino et al. 2014, 2015).

The goal of this study is to propose a *strategic place marketing approach* for the sustainable development of LTSs, with a specific application to the LTSs in the Province of Lecce, Southern Italy, by exploring its principal determinants. It sets two intermediate objectives: 1) to assess the *sustainable development determinants of LTSs*—specifically, their competitive environment attractiveness and the competitive capacities of LTSs—through an analysis of each LTS's competitive positioning; and 2) to define their *perspective positioning* by projecting the forthcoming dimensions of sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity.

The structure of this article is as follows: The Theoretical Background explores the strategic place marketing approach and identifies key factors influencing place attractiveness and competitive capacity. The Methodology details the research setting, data collection, and the analytical methods used to assess the sustainable development of LTSs in the Province of Lecce. The Analysis and Results section presents the competitive positioning of the LTSs based on sustainable development indicators. The Discussion interprets these findings, focusing on strategic needs and recommendations for enhancing the competitive capacity and attractiveness of the LTSs. Finally, the Conclusions summarize the study's main contributions and implications for policy and future research.

Theoretical background

Strategic Place Marketing Approach

Strategic place marketing planning begins with analyzing the distinct characteristics of territories, leading to the development of suitable strategies. The relationship between place marketing and sustainable development, first highlighted in the seminal work of Ashworth and Voogd (1988) and then by Walker (2000), has been thoroughly examined by Maheshwari et al. (2011). Sustainable development, defined by Campbell (1996) as the balance among economic development, social harmony, and ecological protection of territories, can be achieved through a reorganization of local economic and political policies for renewal and planning activities (Maheshwari et al. 2011). It pertains to the capacity of socio-territorial systems to evolve in such a manner that they retain and recreate their identity and unique attributes amidst change (Dematteis, Governa, and Vinci 2003; Magnaghi 2001). Importantly, sustainable development is not about curtailing economic growth. Instead, it emphasizes resource conservation to ensure their availability for future generations of residents, businesses, and visitors.

A strategic approach to place marketing is deeply interconnected with sustainable development in numerous ways. First, it encompasses more than merely a territory; it involves an LTS, a "meso-structure" that intersects with national economies and individual companies, while remaining tied to and evolving with the territory (Caroli et al. 1999). In this approach, a place is viewed as a dynamic entity (Warnaby and Medway 2013), and the LTS

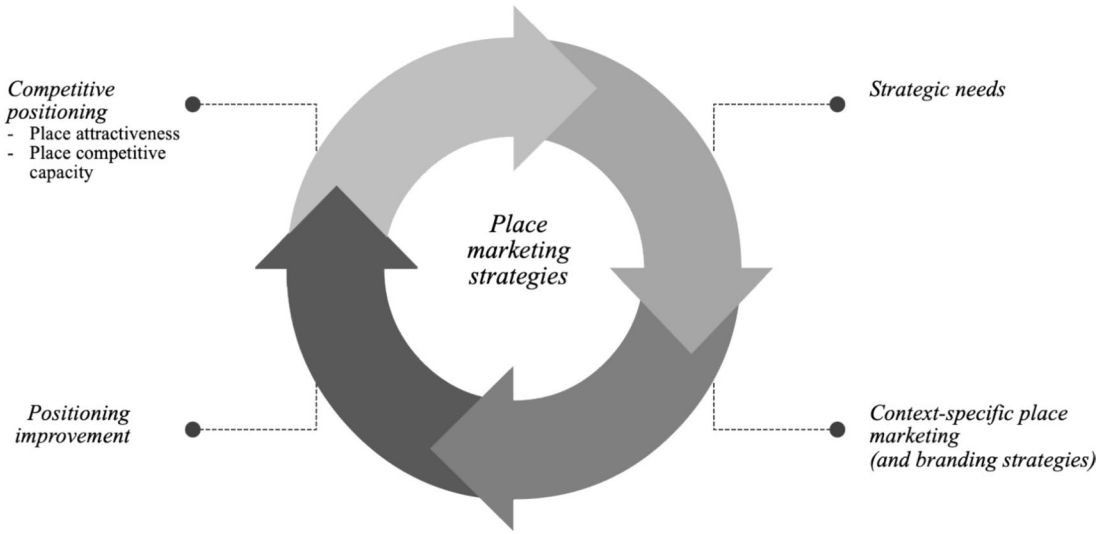

Fig. 1 Place marketing strategies. Source: Own elaboration.

is considered more an organization than a mere structure, given its economic, spatial, and social dimensions. This perspective moves beyond the idea of place marketing as a top-down, managerial, and uncritical application of generic promotional activities to territories, ignoring their unique identities, authenticity, and essence (Clegg and Kornberger 2010; Eisenschitz 2010). Territories differ in their historical, cultural, and political backgrounds, leadership approaches, and in how they manage public–private sector relations (Kotler et al. 1993). Secondly, an LTS serves diverse user groups (e.g., businesses, visitors, residents) for various purposes, making it a multi-scale product rather than a single-scale one (Kotler et al. 1993). This concept supports the "sense of place" notion (Hospers 2008), describing the place from an internal, social-spatial perspective. Thirdly, the goal of place marketing is not merely quantitative (focused on economic growth metrics like profit or efficiency) but qualitative, emphasizing sustainable development. This goal involves achieving specific objectives such as high employment levels, attracting foreign investment, and tourism.

At the LTS level, identifying sustainable development strategies requires an analysis of the territorial system's spatial, economic, and social structure, as well as an examination of the intrinsic attractiveness and competitive capacity of various areas (Salone 2006). To prevent decline, territories must pursue continual evolution through strategic marketing planning processes.

Factors of Competitive Positioning: Place Attractiveness and Competitive Capacity

The sustainable development study of an LTS is a multi-tiered process that includes 1) identifying *local development determinants* through evaluating *place attractiveness* and *competitive capacity* and determining *strategic needs*; 2) defining *strategic thrusts* based on strategic vision and *competitive positioning*; and 3) formulating *development strategies* to enhance place attractiveness and competitive capacity through strategic leverage (Kotler, Jatusripitak, and Maesincee 2002a, b).

Specifically, as outlined by Kotler et al. (1999; 2002a, b), *competitive positioning* comprises *place attractiveness*—the capacity to attract and retain local resources (Capello et al. 2011)—and *place competitive capacity*—the ability to utilize and manage resources to continually improve the well-being of inhabitants (OECD 1996) (Fig. 1).

Place Attractiveness

According to the scientific literature, place attractiveness denotes the potential that an area offers to enhance its resource base (such as labor, capital, etc.). This concept can be evaluated through several key factors (Kotler, Jatusripitak, and Maesincee 2002a, b), specifically: economic factors, company interconnections, sector competition, productive specialization, export potential, and market-related factors.

Economic factors concern conditions that may either boost or diminish the wealth and productivity of places—for instance, the added value or entry barriers, respectively (Tardivo and Viassone 2009). *Company interconnections* refer to businesses whose outputs serve as inputs for

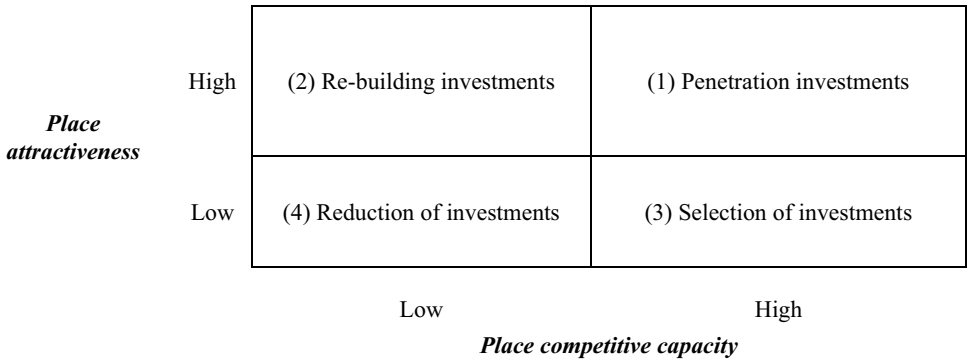

Fig. 2 Investment strategies on the basis of the dimensions of development, Source: Adapted from Kotler, Jatusripitak, and Maesincee (1997, p. 222)

other companies (Camacho-Ballesta et al. 2014). *Sector competition*, also regarded as future competitive capacity, is considered crucial as it guides governmental authorities in selecting and investing in economic activities that promise long-term competitiveness (OECD 2017). *Productive specialization* is deemed an important indicator as higher job specialization tends to increase attractiveness (Diniz and Upadhay 2010). *Export potential* is another attractiveness factor, having a positive impact on the local economy by selling locally produced goods/services internationally and attracting industries and investments (Lee et al. 2016). Finally, *market-related factors*, or domestic demand perspectives, are key as they facilitate the absorption of increased internal productivity, thereby fostering economic growth (Bel and Miralles 2003; Falvey et al. 2013).

Places may exhibit varying degrees of *industrial* or *tourist attractiveness* based on their production orientation (Cassel 2008). *Industrial attractiveness* pertains to a place's ability to attract local and foreign businesses, manufacturing and industrial companies, and investments. Conversely, *tourist attractiveness* measures a place's appeal to local and foreign tourist companies and investments.

Place Competitive Capacity

The concept of *place competitive capacity* encompasses a territory's ability to effectively utilize its tangible and intangible resources—amid competition—to meet global market demands, generate wealth, and ultimately support sustainable development (Dwyer and Kim 2003; Huggins et al. 2014; Kitson et al. 2004). Thus, enhancing a territory's competitive capacity is a primary objective of place marketing and branding strategies (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009; Kavaratzis 2004).

The assessment of each LTS's competitive capacity is based on the methodology proposed by Kotler, Jatusripitak, and Maesincee (2002a, b), which identifies two major components. The first component, the *capabilities* of each LTS, comprises competitive capacity factors—encompassing physical, human, and technological resources—and the *competitive capacity* of companies, which includes financial resources. The second component involves the *development of capabilities*, relating to infrastructure advancement, foreign investment attraction policies by public entities, and the enhancement of entrepreneurial activity, technological capabilities, and capital accumulation by private entities.

Strategic needs

After analyzing the determinants of local development through the evaluation of competitive positioning factors—namely, place attractiveness and place competitive capacity—it is possible to identify *strategic needs*. These needs can be delineated with respect to the various categories of place users, specifically residents, local firms, and export markets (Zenker 2011; Zenker and Martin 2011). Their requirements should be considered to inform and develop place marketing strategies (Hospers 2011). Indeed, assessing competitive positioning underscores the importance of developing effective place marketing and branding strategies. As a result, such strategies can improve a place's positioning, thereby facilitating a valuable improvement process. Furthermore, strategic needs can bridge strategic marketing planning with place branding.

The competitive positioning of a place can be assessed using an adapted version of the GE/McKinsey matrix (McKinsey & Co. 2008). It is a four-quadrant matrix that evaluates places based on two dimensions: industrial/tourist place attractiveness (on the vertical axis) and place competitive capacity (on the horizontal axis; Fig. 2). Each quadrant in Fig. 2 indicates the need to implement a distinct set of investment strategies (Kotler et al. 2002a, b):

1. *Penetration Investments*, aimed at enhancing a place's competitive capacity by leveraging available resources. This could include measures such as improving the efficiency of the production system, increasing output, or attracting new customers while retaining existing ones (Sternad 2011).

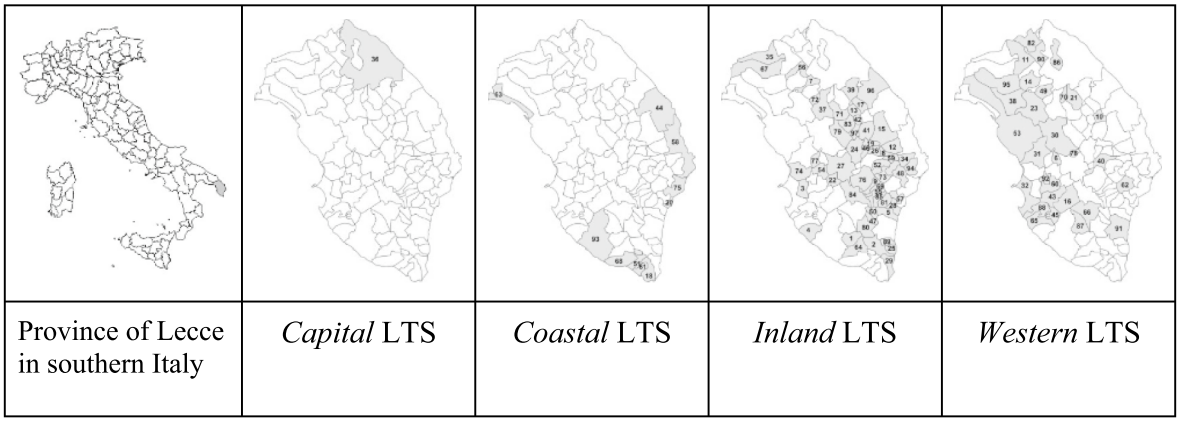

Fig. 3 The four LTSs identified in the province of Lecce in Southern Italy. 3bis Co-relations and trends in sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity for the four LTSs over three key periods: 2012, 2022, and 2030

2. *Re-building Investments*, intended to rejuvenate the competitive capacity of places with high attractiveness. This might involve significant resource investment to initiate innovations or reorganize production activities (Budd and Hirmis 2004).
3. *Selection of Investments*, aimed at reinforcing specific niches where the benefits of targeted redevelopment surpass the costs. It also involves reducing or eliminating investments in areas that are less attractive and competitive (Carvalho et al. 2002).
4. *Reduction of Investments*, focused on decreasing investments and providing short-term support to declining industries, while also exploring areas with development potential.

Methodology

Research setting

This study investigates the LTSs of the 97 municipalities in the province of Lecce, in the Apulia region of southern Italy—an ideal focus for this study due to its distinct economic and cultural profile. With a population of approximately 767,356 as of 2024, Lecce faces significant economic challenges, including a GDP less than half that of northern Italian regions and an average per capita income over 30% lower (ISTAT 2017). These factors, coupled with its demographic characteristics and resource management issues, make Lecce a compelling case for studying sustainable development and competitive capacity in LTSs. The LTSs were identified as units of analysis based on previous research (Guido 2000; Guido and Pino 2018), which employed a hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA) on 968 spatial, economic, and social variables related to the municipalities under consideration. The decade from 2013 to 2023 was selected as the reference period. Data were sourced from various entities: the Apulian tourist agency (*Pugliapromozione*), the Apulian Water Agency, the Lecce Chamber of Commerce, the Ministry of the Interior, and regional research centers (*Istituto Pugliese per le Ricerche Economiche e Sociali*—IPRES). The analysis facilitated the grouping of the 97 municipalities into clusters that were internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous, based on the Euclidean distance between them and Ward's method, which calculates the mean of each variable within each group (Hair et al. 1987; Ward 1963). This process identified four LTSs (Fig. 3)

1. The *Capital LTS*, corresponding to Lecce, the province's capital city.
2. The *Coastal LTS*, encompassing ten municipalities in the coastal area.
3. The *Inland LTS*, including 56 municipalities located in the province's interior.
4. The *Western LTS*, comprising 30 municipalities near the province's western coast.

Subsequently, the territorial vocation of each LTS has been identified, which it could be an *industrial vocation* (the production of manufacturing industries, value-added creation in the industrial sector, etc.) or a *tourist vocation* (the presence of tourist accommodation facilities, visitor numbers, attendance, and arrivals) (Golfetto 1996). A Principal Component Analysis (PCA; Dillon and Goldstein 1984) was conducted on the mentioned variables. The extraction of two factors and a Varimax rotation to minimize the number of variables with high loadings on each component was implemented (Kaiser 1974). The results indicated that the two factors primarily reflected variables associated with *industrial* and *tourist vocations*. The predominant vocation of each cluster was identified:

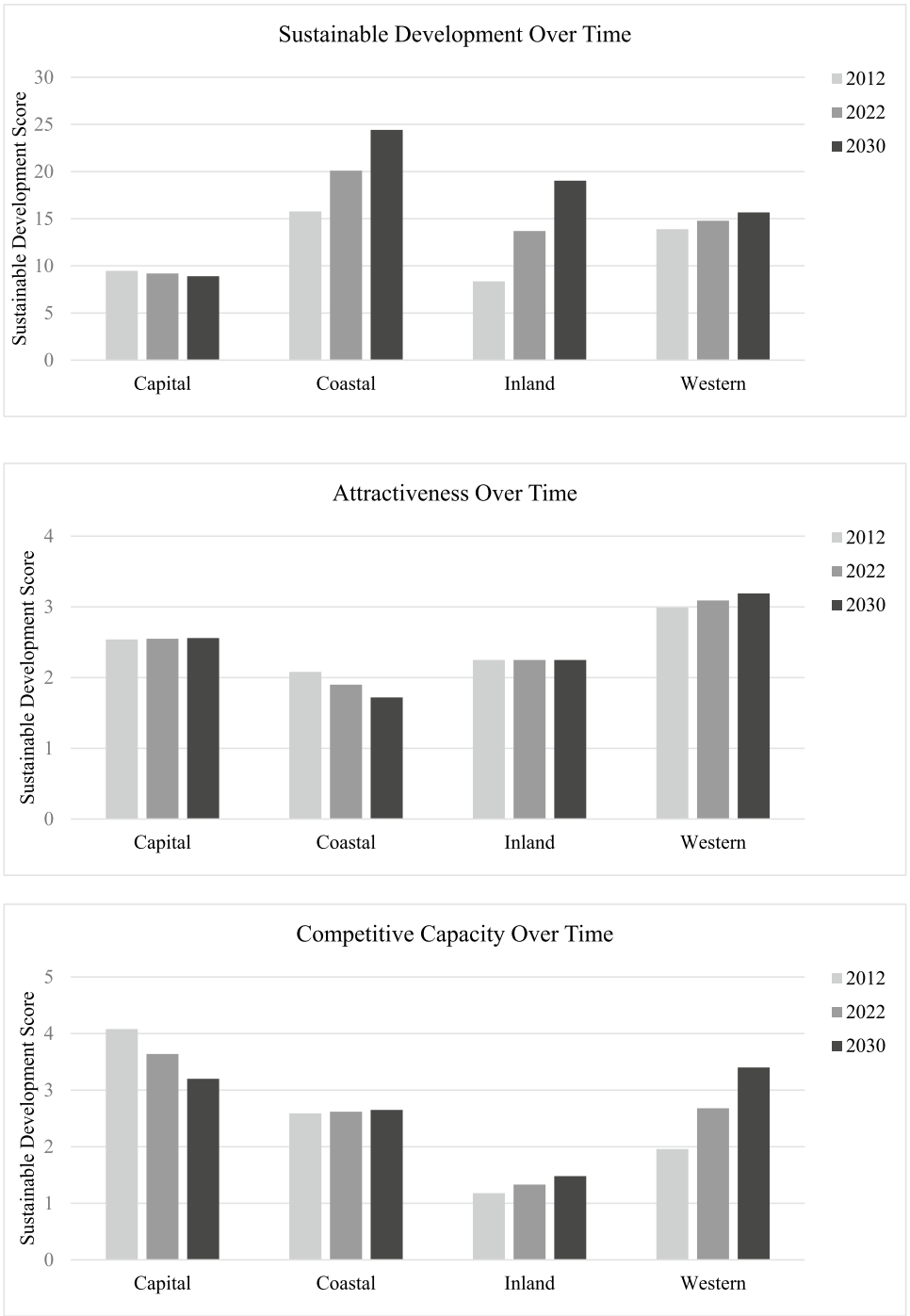

Fig. 3 (continued)

the Capital and Western LTSs primarily exhibit an *industrial vocation*, the Coastal LTS is mainly characterized by a *tourist vocation*, and the Inland LTS does not have a dominant vocation.

To achieve the study's objectives regarding the LTSs under consideration, several indicators assessing the sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity of the LTSs were collected. Data for each indicator from the first analysis period (2012) and the second period (2022) were utilized to track changes in the competitive positioning of the LTSs over the specified timeframe.

Table 1 Models and factors of sustainable development of LTSs proposed in the literature

Model	Factors	Description
Monet	Economic	Economic system; efficiency and competitiveness; flexibility and stability; employment; production, and consumption of goods and services; international trade
	Social	Objective living condition; subjective living condition; fairness of distribution, equality of opportunity; strengthening of social cohesion; international solidarity; human capital
	Environmental	Consumption of resources; materials and wastes; risks; rate of change; natural and agricultural landscape
ISSI	Economic and social	Life expectancy; per capita income; unemployment rate, unemployment rate in the South; equity in income distribution (Gini Index); female social unease; level of education; access to wellness, health, safety and culture, development aid; and expenditure on scientific research
	Environmental	Greenhouse emissions; air quality in the eight main Italian cities; dioxin and furan emissions; coastal marine water quality; quality and environmental certification; forest fires; consumption of pesticides; illegal building; hydrogeological risk; and terrestrial and marine protected areas
	Use of resources	Energy intensity of GDP; energy production from renewable sources; direct input of materials, water consumption per capita; removal of marine biological resources; new built surface; urban waste per capita, recycling; road transport and rail transport
US-IWG-SDI	Economic	Expenditure on personal consumption compared to state per capita consumption; level of home ownership; families with housing problems; use of owned transport vehicles; and economic management index
	Social	Life expectancy and health; crime rate; education degree; access to medical treatment; homeless; and child poverty
	Environmental	Supply of renewable water resources; fishing activities; threatened and damaged species; soil erosion percentage; forest growth; greenhouse gas emissions; waste production; and population living in areas with an air quality that does not meet the quality targets

Measures of sustainable development of LTSs

For the four LTSs—Capital, Coastal, Inland, and Western—secondary data were collected to obtain indicators of sustainable development. These indicators were selected from those most used in statistical research and national and regional censuses, such as IPRES, the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), or the Chamber of Commerce. They were chosen based on three models: the MONET project (Altwegg, Roth, and Scheller 2004), the ISSI (*Indicatori per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile in Italia*, or Indicators for Sustainable Development in Italy) model (Federico and Barbabella 2008), and the United States Intergovernmental Working Group (US-IWG-SDI) (Tenuta 2009).

The MONET project provides a systematic set of 135 indicators to measure the economic, ecological, and social aspects of sustainable development (Altwegg, Roth, and Scheller 2004). Specifically, the set of indicators addresses three qualitative objectives: economic efficiency, ecological responsibility, and social solidarity. The indicator grid is divided into 16 different themes described in Table 1.

The ISSI model is structured in three levels. The first-level indicator offers an overall measure of sustainability. The second level is divided into three domains: economy and society, the environment, and the use of resources. The third level breaks down each of the three domains into ten associated key indexes linked to specific goals and timelines. The key indexes can be composite, meaning they are calculated through the aggregation of multiple indicators using an appropriate combination algorithm. In the ISSI project, the index system is hierarchical and provides a unique indicator capable of integrating the three components of sustainable development: economy, society, and environment (ISSI 2005). *Social and economic indicators* include life expectancy, per capita income, unemployment rate, unemployment rate in the South, equity in income distribution (Gini Index), female social unease, level of education, access to wellness, health, safety and culture, development aid, and expenditure on scientific research. *Environmental indicators* cover greenhouse emissions, air quality in the eight main Italian cities, dioxin and Furani emissions, coastal marine water quality, environmental quality and certification, forest fires, pesticide consumption, illegal building, hydrogeological risk, and terrestrial and marine protected areas. Indicators of resource use include GDP energy intensity, energy production from renewable sources, direct material inputs, per capita water consumption, removal of marine biological resources, new built-up area, per capita urban waste, recycling, road transport, and rail transport (ISSI 2005).

The US Intergovernmental Working Group is a model for measuring sustainable development in the United States by identifying a series of indicators. These are categorized by an *eco-meter*, a *socio-meter*, and an *environment-meter* (Maiolo et al. 2006). The *eco-meter* is based on sub-indicators, such as expenditure on personal consumption versus state per capita consumption, home ownership levels, families with housing issues, use of

Table 2 Factors and indicators of sustainable development of LTSs used in the study

Factors and indicators	Description	Model
Economic factor		
Patent applications	N. of patent applications	MONET—Research, development, and technology/ ISSI—Competitiveness
Failed companies	N. of failed companies	MONET – Efficiency and competitiveness
Activity rate (Potential job index)	Active population (15–64 years old) / total residents * 100	MONET – Employment
Replacement index	Population about to retire (60–64 y.o.) / population about to enter the world of work (15–19 y.o.) * 100	MONET – Employment
Social load index	Inactive population (0–14 y.o. and 65 +) / active population (15–64 y.o.) * 100	MONET – Employment
Social factor		
Aging index	65 + y.o. population / total population * 100	ISSI – Life expectancy
Natural balance	Births—deaths	ISSI – Life expectancy
Birth rate	N. of births * 1000	ISSI—Life expectancy
Mortality rate	N. of deaths / population * 1000	ISSI – Life expectancy
General fertility rate	N. of births / N. of women aged 15 through 44 * 1000	MONET – Subjective living conditions
Migration balance	N. of immigrants—N. of emigrants	MONET – Subjective living conditions
Pharmacies	N. of pharmacies	US-IWG-SDI – Access to medical care
Contributions to culture	Contributions assigned to the schools / required	ISSI – Culture and leisure
Environmental factor		
Water consumption per capita	Volume of water/inhabitant	ISSI – Water consumption per capita
Protected areas	N. of protected areas	ISSI – Terrestrial and marine protected areas/ MONET – Biodiversity
Population density	N. of inhabitants per square kilometer	US-IWG-SDI – Percentage of soil erosion

personally owned transport vehicles, and the economic management index. The *socio-meter* uses indicators like life expectancy and health, crime rate, level of education, access to medical care, homelessness, and child poverty. The *environment-meter* includes indicators like the availability of renewable water resources, fishing activities, threatened and endangered species, soil erosion percentage, forest growth, greenhouse gas emissions, waste generation, and the proportion of the population living in areas failing to meet air quality standards (Table 1).

Considering the convergence of themes among the three models, this study has contemplated a range of indicators, namely, *economic indicators*, *social indicators*, and *environmental indicators*, as outlined in Table 2.

Profiles of Local Territorial Systems (LTSs

A detailed and systematic overview of each LTS is provided, highlighting their unique characteristics and potential for sustainable development.

Capital LTS

Profile: The Capital LTS corresponds to Lecce, the provincial capital city, which serves as the administrative and cultural hub of the province. Lecce is known for its rich historical heritage and baroque architecture, which attract numerous tourists.

SWOT Analysis:

- **Strengths:** Central administrative functions, historical and cultural attractions, robust infrastructure.
- **Weaknesses:** High competition for resources, potential for overcrowding.
- **Opportunities:** Development of cultural tourism, potential for educational and research institutions.
- **Threats:** Economic fluctuations impacting tourism, competition from other cultural destinations.

Place-Brand Value Trend: The place-brand value of the Capital LTS has remained strong due to its cultural significance and administrative importance. Continuous investments in cultural and educational infrastructure can enhance its brand value further.

Coastal LTS

Profile: The Coastal LTS includes ten municipalities located along the coastline, characterized by beautiful beaches and tourist resorts. This LTS primarily has a tourist vocation, attracting both domestic and international visitors.

SWOT Analysis:

- **Strengths:** Scenic beaches, well-developed tourist facilities, high tourist influx.
- **Weaknesses:** Seasonal dependency, environmental concerns due to tourism.
- **Opportunities:** Expansion of eco-tourism, development of year-round tourist attractions.
- **Threats:** Environmental degradation, dependency on tourist season for economic activity.

Place-Brand Value Trend: The place-brand value of the Coastal LTS has seen fluctuations due to its seasonal nature. By diversifying tourist attractions and promoting eco-friendly practices, the Coastal LTS can stabilize and enhance its brand value.

Inland LTS

Profile: The Inland LTS comprises 56 municipalities located in the interior of the province. This LTS lacks a dominant vocation, with a mix of agricultural and small-scale industrial activities.

SWOT Analysis:

- **Strengths:** Rich agricultural heritage, potential for rural tourism, traditional crafts.
- **Weaknesses:** Limited industrial development, outmigration of young population.
- **Opportunities:** Development of agro-tourism, revitalization of traditional crafts.
- **Threats:** Decline in agricultural viability, lack of investment in infrastructure.

Place-Brand Value Trend: The place-brand value of the Inland LTS is currently low due to its economic challenges. Strategic investments in agro-tourism and infrastructure can help improve its attractiveness and competitive capacity.

Western LTS

Profile: The Western LTS consists of 30 municipalities located near the province's western coast. This LTS primarily exhibits an industrial vocation, with a focus on manufacturing and production activities.

SWOT Analysis:

- **Strengths:** Established industrial base, strategic location near the coast.
- **Weaknesses:** Environmental impact of industrial activities, aging infrastructure.
- **Opportunities:** Modernization of industrial facilities, development of port-related activities.
- **Threats:** Economic downturns affecting industrial output, environmental regulations.

Place-Brand Value Trend: The place-brand value of the Western LTS has potential for growth through the modernization of industrial facilities and diversification of economic activities. Enhancing infrastructure and environmental sustainability practices can further strengthen its brand.

Measures of industrial and tourist place attractiveness

The assessment of the industrial and tourist attractiveness of the studied Local Territorial Systems (LTSs) was conducted using the methodology proposed by Kotler, Jatusripitak, and Maesincee (2002a, b). This approach considers a series of macro-factors and their corresponding indicators (see Table 3). *Economic factors* were evaluated based on the value-added produced by the industrial and tourist sectors within the LTSs, reflecting the wealth and productivity generated by their economic structures (Snieska et al. 2019; Tardivo and Viassone 2009). For identifying *company interconnections*, i.e., firms whose outputs serve as inputs for other companies, indicators such as the number of service companies operating in the area (Camacho-Ballesta et al. 2014) and the number of Local Employment Systems (Sistemi locali del lavoro, SLL) were selected. Local Employment Systems, as defined by the Italian Statistical Office (ISTAT), comprise municipalities that are geographically adjacent and characterized by mutual commuting patterns, enabling an analysis of the socio-economic structure of local labor markets at a detailed territorial level (Destefanis 2012).

Sector competition, or future competitive capacity, is considered critical, as it guides government authorities to select and invest in economic activities promising long-term competitiveness. This was assessed by examining both the number of active companies and the number of companies that have closed (OECD 2017). *Productive specialization* is recognized as a significant indicator, where a higher degree of job specialization enhances attractiveness (Diniz and Upadhay 2010). This was measured through thirteen indexes of productive specialization across various sectors, categorized by the Chamber of Commerce: agriculture, hunting, forestry, and fishing; mineral extraction; manufacturing; electricity,

Table 3 Factors and indicators of industrial and tourist place attractiveness used in the study

Factors of Attractiveness	Indicators	Source
Economic factors	Value added of the industrial sector	Kotler, Jatusripitak, and Maesincee (2002a, b); Snieska et al. (2019); Tardivo and Viassone (2009)
Company interconnections	- N. of service companies - N. of Local Employment Systems	Camacho-Ballesta et al. (2014); Destefanis (2012); Léo and Philippe (2005)
Sector competition (future competitive capacity)	- N. of companies - N. of closed companies	OECD (2017)
Productive specialization	13 Indexes of productive specialization per sector	Diniz and Upadhay (2010)
Export potential	N. of Certificates of origin issued by the Chamber of Commerce	Lee et al. 2016
Market-related factors (Perspectives of internal demand)	Resident population	Bel and Miralles (2003); Falvey et al. (2013)

gas, and water supply; construction; wholesale and retail trade, including the repair of household goods; hotels and restaurants; transport, storage, and communications; monetary and financial intermediation; real estate, rental, IT, and research services; education; health and social services; and public, social, and personal services. These indexes were calculated using the formula: [Number of employees in sector X in Municipality Y / Total employees in Municipality Y].

Export potential is also a key factor of attractiveness, positively impacting the local economy by facilitating the sale of locally produced goods/services and attracting industries and investments through appeal to international consumers and investors (Lee et al. 2016). This aspect was gauged by the number of certificates of origin issued by the Chamber of Commerce, which verify the origin of goods for customs clearance. Lastly, *market-related factors*, or domestic demand perspectives, were included because they help absorb increased internal productivity, thus promoting economic growth. The chosen indicator for this factor was the resident population size, which represents potential consumers of the goods/services produced within the LTS, indicating the internal demand outlook (Bel and Miralles 2003; Falvey et al. 2013).

Measures of place competitive capacity

To measure the competitive capacity of each LTS, the methodology proposed by Kotler, Jatusripitak, and Maesincee (2002a, b) was followed, which outlines it through two macro-factors. Specific indicators were selected for each macro-factor. For the *Capabilities* macro-factor, particularly regarding *physical resources*, indicators such as the total number of companies and the number of hotel businesses were considered to provide insights into the physical resources available to an LTS (Porter 1990). For *human resources*, the numbers of primary school pupils, secondary school pupils (I and II degree), and graduates were analyzed, offering valuable information on the human resource potential of the LTS (Archibugi and Coco 2005; Crescenzi 2005; Snieska et al. 2019). *Technological resources* were assessed by the number of trademark registrations, reflecting the innovation level within a territory (Saiz and Fernandez 2012; da Silva Lopez and Duguit 2010). Concerning *companies' competitive capacity* and their *financial resources*, the indicator related to the bank loan-to-deposit ratios was chosen for its representation of banks' refinancing capabilities, thereby informing on the competitive capacity and growth prospects of firms (Usai and Vannini 2005). Regarding the *Development of Capabilities* macro-factor, the indicator for the *rate of business development* was selected due to its relevance in gauging the LTS's capacity to foster and generate new enterprises in the area (Anderson 2005; Huggins and Williams 2011; Malecki 2004). A comprehensive list of the indicators used in this study is presented in Table 4.

Analyses and results

Analysis of sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity dimensions of the considered LTSs

The analyses were carried out using the average values of each indicator for the years 2012 and 2022. The unidimensionality of the indicators was then assessed using two independent Principal Component Analyses (PCAs), conducted according to established procedures (Jolliffe 2002; OECD 2008; Wang et al. 2004) — the first for industrial attractiveness metrics and the second for tourist appeal traits. The findings revealed that each factor consisted of a single dimension when the indicators were combined into a single component. Subsequently, the data for each LTS's locations

Table 4 Indicators of place competitive capacity used in the study

Factors of Competitive capacity	Indicators	Source
Capabilities		
Physical Resources	- N. of total companies - N. of hotel businesses	Porter (1990)
Human Resources	- N. of primary school pupils - N. of secondary school pupils (I and II degree) - N. of graduates	Archibugi and Coco (2005); Crescenzi (2005); Snieska et al. (2019)
Technological Resources	- N. of trademark registrations	da Silva Lopez and Duguit (2010); Saiz and Fernandez (2012)
Companies' competitive capacity Financial resources	- Incidence of bank loan-to-deposit ratios	Usai and Vannini (2005)
Development of capabilities	- Rate of business development	Anderson (2005); Huggins and Williams (2011); Malecki (2004)

were aggregated to determine the raw value of each key attractiveness indicator for each date. These values were then used to calculate the global indicators for the LTSs. Each key indicator was normalized by dividing it by the geographic area of the LTS, also considering the spatial dimension of the territory, to create measurements comparable to previous studies (Golden and Picci 2005; Mazziotta and Vidoli 2009; Pino et al. 2018). The metrics were scaled from 1 to 5 using a "min–max" standardization method (OECD 2008; Yigitcanlar and Lönnqvist 2013).

To estimate the short-term values (i.e., for the year 2030) of the sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity dimensions for each LTS, a linear extrapolation method was employed (Hammond and Thompson 2004). This method is particularly useful for evaluating the potential value of specific variables beyond the current data range and complements retrospective analyses of the indicators used. The standardized indicators for each LTS, for each period under consideration (2012, 2022, and 2030), are presented in Table 5.

Figure 3b provides a visual representation of the convergence and divergence in sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity among the LTSs, offering valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to enhance regional competitiveness and sustainability.

Each bar chart represents one of the considered dimensions, showing the quantitative changes and highlighting stability or fluctuations in these indicators. In particular,

1) Sustainable Development over time:
2) The Coastal LTS exhibits the most significant growth in sustainable development from 2012 to 2030.
3) The Inland LTS shows a substantial improvement, especially between 2022 and 2030.

Table 5 Synthetic indicators of sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity

Determinants	LTS	Year		
		2012	2022	2030
Indicators of sustainable development	Capital	9.48	9.19	8.90
	Coastal	15.77	20.10	24.43
	Inland	8.36	13.70	19.04
	Western	13.89	14.78	15.67
Indicators of attractiveness	Capital	2.54	2.55	2.56
	Coastal	2.08	1.90	1.72
	Inland	2.25	2.25	2.25
	Western	2.99	3.09	3.19
Indicators of competitive capacity	Capital	4.08	3.64	3.20
	Coastal	2.59	2.62	2.65
	Inland	1.18	1.33	1.48
	Western	1.96	2.68	3.40

4) The Capital and Western LTSs display more stable yet positive trends, with slight declines projected for the Capital LTS by 2030.
5) Attractiveness over time:
6) The Western LTS consistently improves its attractiveness, marking the highest scores in all periods.
7) The Capital LTS maintains stable attractiveness scores over time.
8) The Coastal LTS shows a slight decline in attractiveness, while the Inland LTS remains constant.
9) Competitive Capacity over time:
10) The Western LTS significantly enhances its competitive capacity, especially noticeable between 2022 and 2030.
11) The Capital LTS shows a gradual decline in competitive capacity.
12) The Coastal and Inland LTSs exhibit slight improvements in competitive capacity over time.

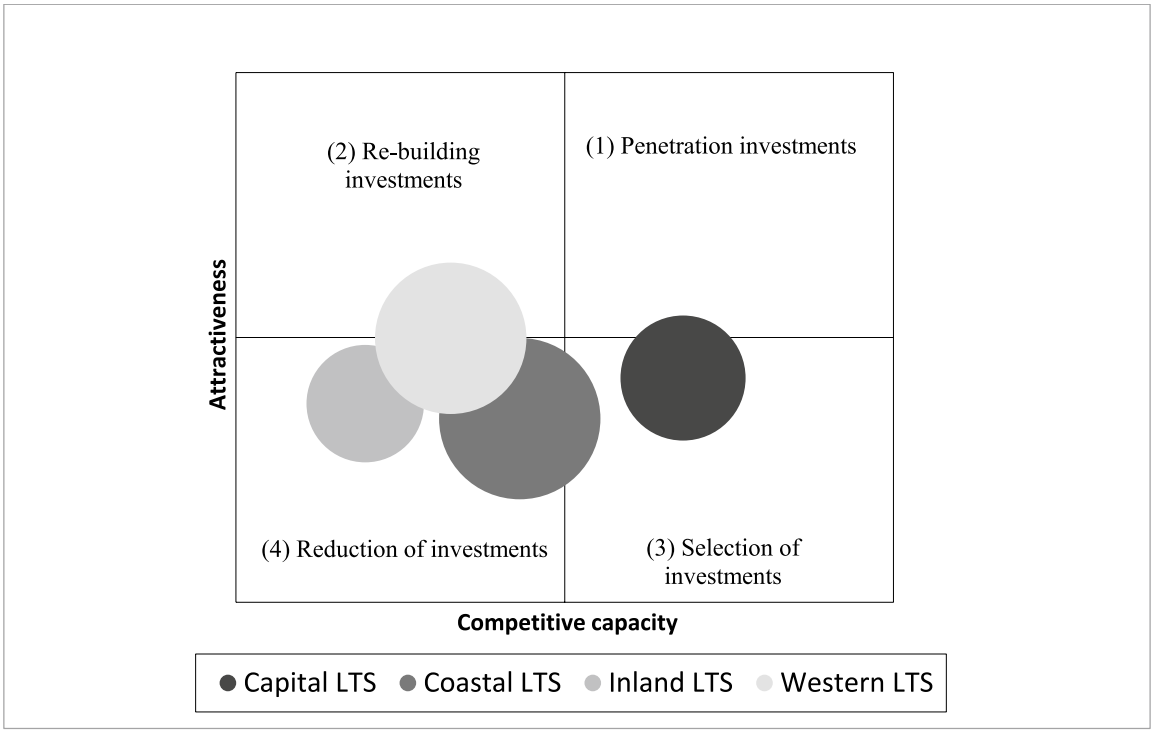

Fig. 4 Positioning of the LTSs in 2012

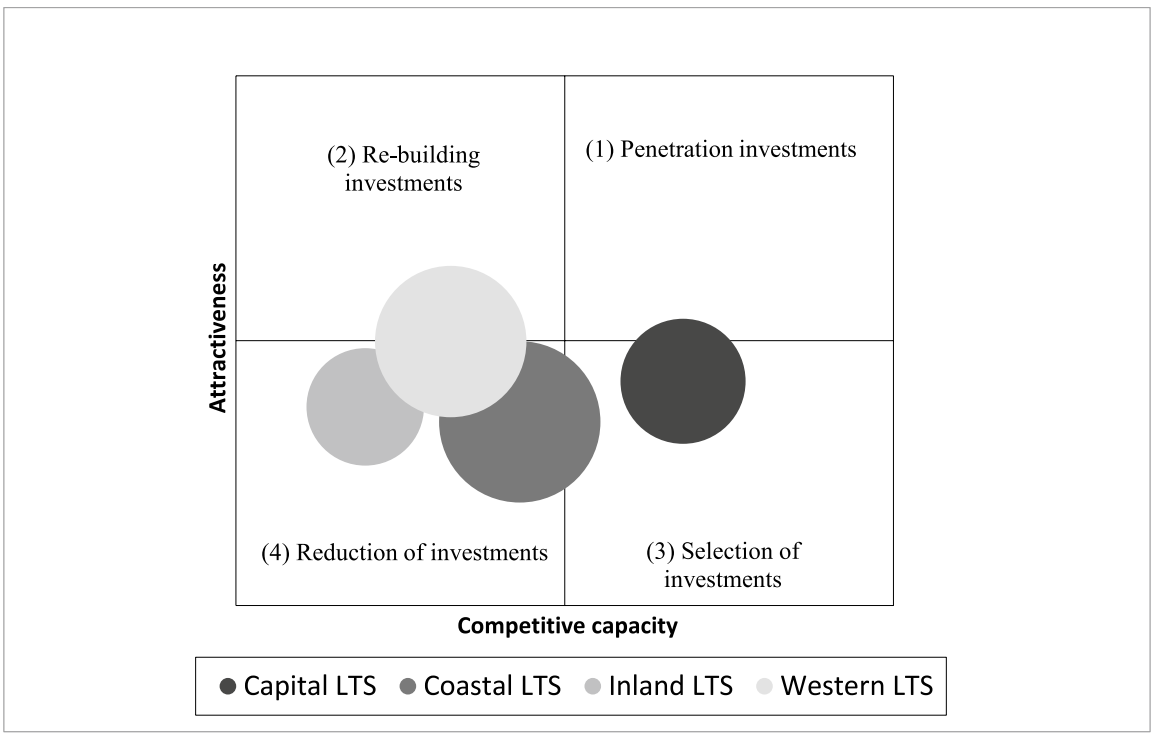

Fig. 5 Positioning of the LTSs in 2022

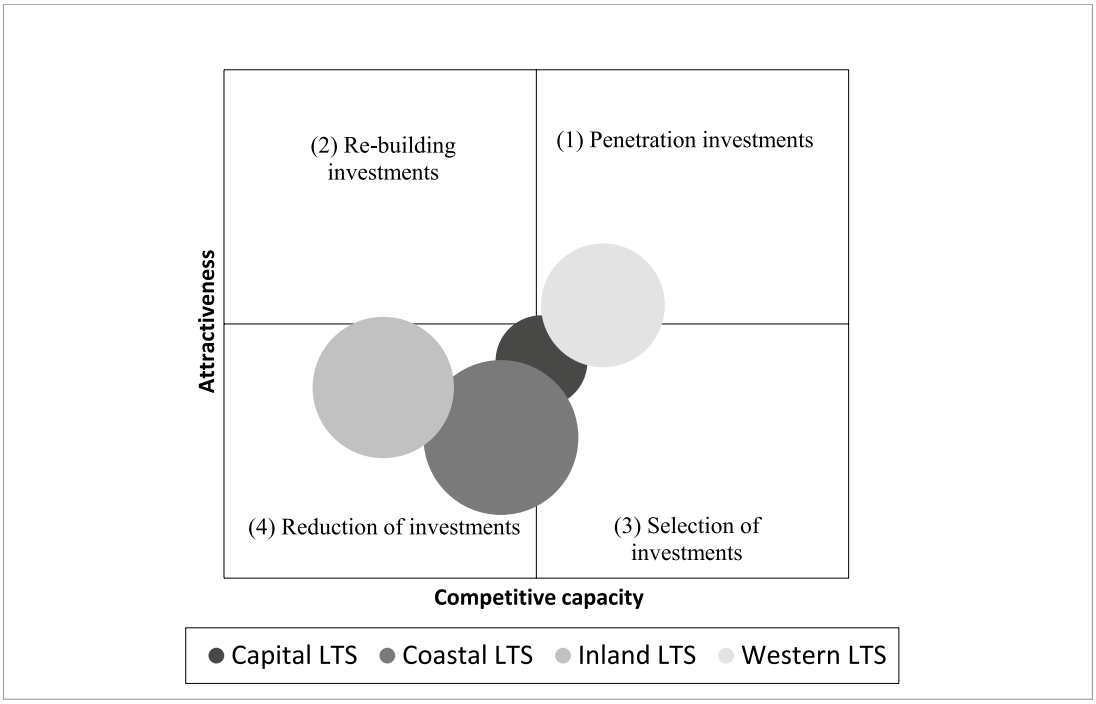

Fig. 6 Estimation of positioning of the LTSs in 2030

Analysis of competitive positioning of the considered LTSs

The competitive positioning of each LTS was then determined using the McKinsey Matrix, which is based on the synthetic indicators of sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity. These indicators were analyzed for three distinct periods: the initial analysis period (Fig. 4), the second analysis period (Fig. 5), and the prospective period (Fig. 6).

The analysis for the year 2012 revealed that, in comparison to other territorial systems, the Capital LTS holds a more advantageous strategic position. It is uniquely situated in the third quadrant of the matrix, which is associated with the *selection of investments*. This LTS boasts the highest level of competitive capacity and an average level of attractiveness, positioning it third in terms of sustainable development, following the Coastal LTS and the Western LTS. The other three LTSs are primarily located in the fourth quadrant, indicative of a *reduction of investments*. Specifically, the Coastal LTS exhibited the highest level of sustainable development, and a level of competitive capacity surpassed only by the Capital LTS, yet it had the lowest attractiveness level. The Inland LTS displays the least favorable positioning among the LTSs, characterized by low levels of sustainable development and competitive capacity, and an attractiveness level that only surpasses that of the Coastal LTS. Lastly, the Western LTS finds itself between the second quadrant (*re-building investments*) and the fourth quadrant (*reduction of investments*), competing closely with the Capital LTS. Remarkably, this LTS has achieved the highest level of attractiveness, albeit with a low competitive capacity and a level of sustainable development that ranks second to the Capital LTS.

Analysis of Strategic Needs of the Considered LTSs

Once we obtained the prospective values (for the year 2030) of the synthetic indicators for sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity of the four LTSs, we assessed the variation in competitive positioning across the three observation periods using the McKinsey Matrix (Fig. 3, above). For the prospective period of 2030, it was noted that the Capital LTS is positioned at the edge of the third quadrant, which concerns the *selection of investments*, with a portion extending into the fourth quadrant related to the *reduction of investments*. The Coastal LTS finds itself straddling the border between the third and fourth quadrants; the Inland LTS is positioned within the quadrant associated with the *reduction of investments*; and the Western LTS predominantly occupies the first quadrant (*penetration investments*), with a segment also in the third quadrant (*selection of investments*), indicating the most favorable positioning among the four. Subsequently, we analyzed the variations of each normalized indicator within the aforementioned dimensions.

This comparative analysis between the three strategic situations was crucial for examining the strategic needs

of the LTS in the Province of Lecce. It enabled the identification of the key factors—sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity—that significantly influence the positioning of the LTS and facilitate effective competition with other territorial systems. The strategic requirements were quantified by comparing the values of the normalized indicators for each dimension from the first period to those in the second period and again from the second to the prospective period. In essence, the calculation of strategic needs was performed twice: once comparing the initial period with the second, and then comparing the second period with the prospective period of 2030.

Discussion and Implications

This study aimed to propose a competitive place marketing strategy for the sustainable development of locations, focusing on the LTSs in the Province of Lecce, by applying a strategic planning model for place marketing. This model assessed the indicators of sustainable development, attractiveness, and competitive capacity for different LTSs during the periods of 2012–2022 and 2030. Based on the analysis of these indicators, several strategic recommendations can be made to enhance the competitive positioning of each region. These recommendations are aimed at leveraging the unique characteristics and strengths of each LTS while addressing their specific challenges and strategic needs. By focusing on targeted investments and strategic planning, each LTS can improve its overall sustainability and competitiveness.

From 2012 to 2022, the Capital LTS maintained a relatively stable position between penetration investments and selection of investments, highlighting its potential to achieve a leadership position and enhance its competitive capacity by leveraging available resources. This aligns with findings by Kotler et al. (1993), who emphasize the importance of understanding unique territorial characteristics for strategic place marketing. It is recommended that the Capital LTS focuses on activating investments in growing sectors while reducing investments in declining ones. This strategic approach ensures that the Capital LTS remains competitive and continues to attract investments.

The Western LTS shifted from a re-building investment phase to a more advantageous penetration investment phase, indicating it should focus on growth sectors to secure a dominant stance, as suggested by Warnaby and Medway (2013). It is recommended that the Western LTS bolsters its competitive capacity through investments that improve efficiency, production processes, and customer relationships.

The Coastal LTS remained largely unchanged, and it is advised to target sectors with development potential while reducing investments in declining areas. For the Coastal LTS, focusing on sectors with high development potential can enhance its attractiveness and sustainable growth.

The Inland LTS, also remaining largely unchanged, is encouraged to pursue strategies aimed at revitalizing sectors with residual attractiveness. This LTS must reassess and curtail investments in waning sectors, aligning with the reduction of investments quadrant.

The findings for the prospective period of 2030 suggest that both the Capital LTS and the Coastal LTS, positioned between the selection and reduction of investment quadrants, need to discern and eliminate declining areas. This is consistent with Maheshwari et al. (2011), who discuss the necessity of balancing economic, social, and ecological dimensions for sustainable development. Similarly, the Inland LTS, situated in the reduction of investments quadrant, must reassess and curtail investments in waning sectors. Remarkably, the Western LTS, primarily in the penetration investments quadrant, demonstrated the most advantageous positioning, underscoring the need to bolster its competitive capacity through investments that improve efficiency, production processes, and customer relationships. This is supported by Dwyer and Kim (2003), who identify competitive capacity as crucial for destination competitiveness.

The methodology used in this study aligns with the MONET project (Altwegg, Roth, and Scheller 2004) and the ISSI model (Federico and Barbabella, 2008), which provide comprehensive frameworks for measuring sustainable development. These frameworks' alignment with our findings confirms the relevance of multi-dimensional indicators in assessing sustainable development and competitive capacity. Furthermore, Salone (2006) and Huggins and Williams (2011) support the strategic planning approach by demonstrating how local development strategies enhance regional competitiveness.

This methodology serves as a strategic tool, guiding decision-making based on competitive positioning within the LTS matrix concerning development dimensions through gap analysis. Essentially, strategic needs illuminate the discrepancy between two developmental states, identifying attractiveness and competitive capacity factors that most impact each LTS's positioning to strategically focus efforts. By integrating the insights from these studies, our findings reinforce the validity of the proposed strategic place marketing model for promoting sustainable development in LTSs.

This strategic tool can be the first step to create awareness among citizens, public and private institutions to move toward the achievement of the objectives of the SDGs for sustainable development. Sustainability serves as a competitive advantage for microeconomic zones like LTSs by fostering resilience, attracting investments, and enhancing

overall quality of life. Sustainable practices improve resource efficiency, reduce costs, and create a favorable image that attracts both tourists and investors, thus bolstering the local economy (Farrell 2007; Sweeney 2007). Local development authorities and administrations should implement policies that encourage green infrastructure, support renewable energy projects, and promote eco-friendly tourism (Garrett et al. 2007; Lash and Wellington 2007). These measures can enhance the place-brand value by highlighting the region's commitment to sustainability. Key stakeholders, including local entrepreneurs, can leverage sustainable practices in their business strategies by adopting green technologies, improving energy efficiency, and participating in local sustainability initiatives (Lee et al. 2008). By aligning their business models with the sustainable development goals, they can attract a conscious consumer base, improve operational efficiencies, and gain a competitive edge in the market (Lenaghan and Eisner 2007).

Based on the findings of this study, several key factors emerge as influential in the sustainable development of Local Territorial Systems (LTSs) in the Province of Lecce. The study identifies crucial economic, social, and environmental indicators that impact sustainable development and provides a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in different LTSs.

Economic indicators such as the number of patent applications, the number of failed companies, the activity rate (potential job index), the replacement index, and the social load index are pivotal in determining the economic vitality and resilience of LTSs. For instance, a higher number of patent applications indicate a robust innovation environment, which is essential for long-term economic sustainability. Conversely, a high number of failed companies may signal economic distress, necessitating targeted interventions to support struggling sectors.

Social indicators, including the aging index, natural balance (births minus deaths), birth rate, mortality rate, general fertility rate, migration balance, number of pharmacies, and contributions to culture, play a significant role in shaping the social sustainability of LTSs. A favorable natural balance and high birth rate contribute to a growing and dynamic population, which is crucial for sustainable development. The migration balance, reflecting the net movement of people, indicates the attractiveness and livability of an area. Access to healthcare and cultural contributions are also critical components of social sustainability, enhancing the quality of life for residents.

Environmental indicators such as water consumption per capita, the number of protected areas, and population density are essential for assessing the environmental sustainability of LTSs. Efficient water use and the presence of protected areas are indicative of responsible environmental stewardship, which is fundamental for preserving natural resources and biodiversity. Population density, while often a sign of urbanization, must be managed to ensure that it does not lead to overexploitation of resources.

Overall, the interplay of these economic, social, and environmental factors determines the sustainable development trajectory of LTSs. Policymakers and stakeholders should focus on enhancing innovation, supporting economic resilience, fostering social well-being, and ensuring environmental sustainability to achieve comprehensive and long-lasting development outcomes. This analysis underscores the importance of a balanced approach that integrates economic vitality, social well-being, and environmental stewardship to foster sustainable development across different regions in the Province of Lecce.

Conclusions

This study introduces a comprehensive strategic place marketing model tailored for the sustainable development of LTSs in the Province of Lecce, Southern Italy. The insights gained from this research offer a nuanced understanding of how targeted investments and strategic planning can significantly enhance the competitive positioning of different regions. This strategic tool can be useful to foster the transition to a sustainable society model through the achievement of SDGs, on the one hand, encouraging citizens' responsibility and, on the other, informing the management needs of policymakers (Palmi et al. 2020).

One of the most important findings is the identification of the unique characteristics and strengths of each LTS. For instance, the Capital LTS has shown potential for leadership through a balanced investment approach, while the Western LTS has demonstrated an advantageous position by focusing on growth sectors. These findings underscore the necessity for region-specific strategies that leverage local strengths and address specific challenges.

Future research should delve deeper into the dynamic interplay between place attractiveness and competitive capacity. Investigating how these factors evolve over time with changing economic and social conditions will be crucial. Additionally, exploring the impact of external factors such as global economic shifts, technological advancements, and climate change on the sustainable development of LTSs can provide further insights.

Policy implications of this study are significant. Policymakers should consider adopting the strategic place marketing model proposed here to guide investment decisions and resource allocation. This model not only aids in identifying priority areas for development but also helps in crafting policies that foster sustainable growth by balancing economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

In conclusion, the strategic place marketing approach presented in this study offers a valuable framework for enhancing the sustainability and competitiveness of LTSs. By continuing to refine this model and expanding its application, we can better support the sustainable development goals and create resilient and thriving local economies.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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