The future of tourist information centers? Decentralized information ecosystems in a Danish tourism landscape

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper explores how Danish destination management organizations (DMOs) define and plan the present and future role of tourist information centers (TICs) within increasingly digital tourism information landscapes, and how they balance political expectations, resource constraints and visitor information needs in this process.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The study draws on 15 semi-structured interviews with senior DMO representatives across Denmark analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic development focused on how tourist information center formats, governance structures and information channels are interpreted and reconfigured within DMOs' wider service portfolios.*

Findings – *DMOs regard the traditional, stand-alone TIC as symbolically important yet operationally inefficient, increasingly misaligned with tourists' information needs and constrained by municipal politics. They instead envision decentralized information ecosystems in which TIC functions are redistributed across partner businesses, ambassadors and mobile concepts, supported by a curated mix of digital tools and physical materials. Across cases, human interaction, local storytelling and decision support (curation) are framed as core value propositions that must be retained beyond the TIC building, while information search is understood as a hybrid "both/and" process rather than a choice between physical or digital channels.*

Originality/value – *The paper advances debates on the future of TICs beyond technology-led narratives by identifying provider-side decision logics, governance arrangements and service configuration. It envisages a "TIC of the future" as a distributed portfolio of touchpoints rather than a single venue, and identifies curation, capability-building among frontline tourism staff and destination-wide coordination as critical but under-developed for reconfiguring tourism information services.*

Keywords *Tourist information, Destination management organizations, Thematic analysis, Decentralized information ecosystems, Tourist information centers*

Paper type *Research article*

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Introduction

The tourist information center (TIC) – also called "tourist information office" or "visitor information center" – defined as a "clearly labeled, publicly accessible, physical place with personnel providing predominantly free of charge information to facilitate travelers' experiences" (Pearce, 2004, p. 8), has become a hotly contested issue in the tourist information landscape in recent years. Noteworthy examples are Paris, one of the world's most visited cities, which closed its last TIC at the beginning of 2025 (France24, 2025) and VisitScotland, who will close all TICs by 2026 (BBC, 2024). With tourist officials claiming widespread access to social media and the availability of smartphones, as well as fewer number of visitors at TICs, their usefulness and relevance has seemingly been on a steady decline, with destination management organizations (DMOs) opting instead for online strategies for tourism information services. Oppositely, destinations such as

South Korea and Japan are heavily expanding their number of TICs, claiming they are thriving due to "different mindsets of the travelers in the region" (Marcus, 2025, p. 1).

This dichotomy is striking, as TICs are one of the founding pillars and visible manifestations of the modern tourism industry – long considered a key source of information for travelers (Wong and McKercher, 2011). Given their historical significance and current woes, recent research concerning TICs is limited. This is surprising, as information search is one of the most prevalent influences on tourism behavior (see: Buhalis and Law, 2008; Ho *et al.*, 2012), with TICs traditionally "believed to be an indispensable component" of tourism promotion and information (Lyu and Lee, 2015, p. 1034). Yet as Hassan and Saleh note, "current research has increasingly moved to study and apply digital tourism and digitalization initiatives" (2024, p. 1) due to the burgeoning use and popularity of online information sources (Varotsis and Mylonas, 2024).

Does this mean that TICs are resigned to a slow and inevitable extinction? Such questions are also being asked in Denmark, where TICs are being closed across the nation (e.g. Nordström, 2023; Skouboe, 2024), yet also being reopened (e.g. Sørvin, 2024) due to backlash from citizens, municipal politicians and tourism practitioners. With 36% of tourists using TICs when vacationing in Denmark (VisitDenmark, 2025), the answer is not obvious as to whether to open or close them based on tourists' needs alone. With research highlighting that TIC closures can result in missed benefits to business suppliers, local communities and tourists (Chui and Walters, 2022), and that "there really is a change in the behaviour of tourists, who increasingly plan trips less and seek more tourist information once at the destination" (Huertas and Miguel, 2022, pp. 14–15), then TIC's format and position merits further study to better map a potential role for the future.

Despite these developments, there remains a gap in how tourism information services are managed and reconfigured from the provider perspective, particularly within DMOs. Recent studies have focused predominantly on tourists' information-seeking behavior or the performance of specific technologies, revealing a gap in knowledge regarding how DMOs interpret these changes and translate them into strategic decisions about TICs and wider information services. As highlighted by Varotsis and Mylonas (2024, p. 14), there is a "scarcity of literature on information service management in tourism", especially a "paucity of research on the quality, security and reliability of research from the tourism provider side" Varotsis and Mylonas (2024, p. 13). This gap is especially evident in relation to how DMOs balance technological change, governance and evolving visitor needs when planning the future of TICs.

Based on this gap, the study addresses the following research question*: How do Danish DMOs define and plan the present and future role of tourist information centers within contemporary tourism information service landscapes?*

DMOs are an apt organization for this study as they.

1. Have traditionally run and operated TICs,
2. Serve as a local "nervous systems" for tourism development (Dragin-Jensen *et al.*, 2025) and
3. Have needed to change consistently in response to technological developments, to adopt knowledge network management, to create new partnerships for knowledge creation and sharing as well as subscribing to master developer thinking in a tourism context (Gretzel, 2021).

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides an in-depth, provider-side perspective on how DMOs interpret and respond to changes in tourism information behavior, addressing the limited focus on (physical) information service management in tourism. Second, it advances debates on the future of TICs by moving beyond technology-centric narratives and examines how governance arrangements, resource constraints and political considerations shape decision-making. Third, it conceptualizes the "TIC of the future" by drawing on ecosystem perspectives in tourism research, which conceptualize destinations as networks of interdependent actors jointly creating value (e.g. Gretzel, 2021; Jäckli and Meier, 2025).

Within this perspective, information provision is not confined to a single organization, but distributed across multiple actors, technologies and contexts. Building on this, we conceptualize "decentralized information ecosystems" as configurations in which tourism information services are embedded across practitioner businesses, digital platforms and local actors, rather than centralized within dedicated institutions such as TICs.

The next section reviews existing literature on TICs, followed by our methodological approach and data collection. The subsequent section presents the findings from the thematic analysis. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of these findings for theory and practice and concludes with limitations and directions for future research.

Literature review

A review of existing literature on TICs revealed that the research in this area is relatively fragmented and, in many cases, outdated. Rather than forming a cohesive and cumulative body of knowledge, studies on TICs are often dispersed across different themes, time periods and research contexts. At the same time, much of the literature implicitly or explicitly engages with the question of the future of TICs, often framing them either as declining institutions or in need of transformation, yet without offering a solution of how this transformation should unfold in practice. This made it necessary to structure the literature review into distinct subsections that capture key dimensions of TIC research – namely their role as information sources, their relationship with technological developments, their (need of) evolving functions, the human dimension of service encounters and how it relates to a tourism ecosystem perspective. This structure guided both our data collection and analysis, helping us address the research question by building a clear overview of how TICs have been understood in the literature and how their future roles are being discussed.

TICs as sources of information and influences tourist behavior

TICs are important sources of information for tourists (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2009) and can significantly impact travel behavior (Fesenmaier, 1994). Visitors who stopped in TICs were more likely to modify their trip, including adding attractions and changing planned activities (Lee *et al.*, 2007). Lyu and Lee (2015) found that tourists, particularly domestic, still visit TICs despite mobile use, indicating a role in verifying information gathered elsewhere. Traditional information sources at a Sydney TIC (staff and material) were perceived as higher quality compared to visitors' prior Internet use (Mistilis and D'ambra, 2008). Tlabela and Douglas (2022) link TIC information quality, staff knowledge and service to memorable tourism experience dimensions including hedonism, novelty and meaningfulness. Ballantyne *et al.* (2009) argue TICs should prioritize information with a "local" flavor, especially for first-time and spontaneous visitors.

TICs must update to keep pace with technological demands

A recurring theme is the need for continuous technological updates. Already in the late 1990s, researchers argued that technological developments were fundamentally changing tourism and that TICs had to adapt (Connell and Reynolds, 1999). Given tourism's information-intensive and technology-sensitive nature (Buhalis *et al.*, 2019; Moutinho, 1987), changing infrastructures and information-seeking behaviors require new TIC responses (D'Ambra and Mistilis, 2010; Iannaccone *et al.*, 2024; Ivanova, 2019; Lyu and Hwang, 2015; Lyu and Lee, 2015; Servidio *et al.*, 2009).

Much of this literature is sobering for TICs: TIC websites not meeting usability criteria (Servidio *et al.*, 2009); AI and automation services replacing core tasks (Ivanova, 2019); TICs struggling to meet virtual users' needs (D'Ambra and Mistilis, 2010; Mkiranweni, 2025); and Internet usage being negatively related to TIC visitation (Lyu and Lee, 2015). Lyu and Hwang (2015) concluded

that the conventional TIC is an inferior good in an advanced information environment and must identify new services that digital tools cannot reproduce.

Some research points to opportunities for TICs. Heavy social media users show higher TIC visitation, indicating potential in leveraging social platforms for real-time, tailored distribution (Lyu and Hwang, 2015). Interactive digital environments such as AR and robotics may enhance visitor experiences (Ivanova, 2019) while community-based TICs remain important for on-the-spot visitor decisions (Lee *et al.*, 2007).

(Changing) roles of TICs

Research has noted the multifunctionality of TICs. Ballantyne *et al.* (2009) argued that TICs can be viewed hierarchically: promotion as the baseline, with additional roles like orientation, control/filtering and substitution depending on their location and facilities. In a US context, state border TICs fulfil both practical and informational purposes, with travelers stopping for amenities as well as travel information (Fesenmaier, 1994). Newer research supports additional services beyond information. Pociūtė-Sereikienė *et al.* (2024) noted that the COVID-19 lockdown spurred reconsideration of TIC functions suggesting evolution into multifunctional visitor centers involved in marketing, data collection, strategic projects and organizing cultural events.

Other research stresses the need for TIC roles beyond information services. Connell and Reynolds (1999) urged a shift toward more commercially focused, service-led operations, while Grinfelde and Lotina (2015) argued that TICs can also act as intermediaries, balancing commercial activities with custodianship of sacred sites.

Studies call for proactive TICs that source and curate information rather than passively receiving it from tourism enterprises, including establishing networks with local cultural stakeholders (Grinfelde and Lotina, 2015). Lyu and Hwang (2015) further propose online-to-offline models to provide relevant destination information that complements visitors' prior online searches. Tlabela *et al.* (2022) note that TICs and local tourism businesses exchange information, generating economic opportunities, extending TICs as knowledge brokers whose unique insights benefit visitors and industry (Wong and McKercher, 2011).

Summarizing, Iannaccone *et al.* state that TICs "*. . . are currently undergoing a significant transformation from traditional information hubs into multifaceted institutions that play an active role in managing visitor dynamics, bolstering the local economy, and contributing to the preservation of natural and cultural heritage*" (2024, p. 1).

TICs – service and the "human" factor

Research has highlighted the importance of the human factor in tourism information services. Despite technological advancements, personal interaction remains vital, especially for those who do not rely on digital tools (Connell and Reynolds, 1999). Draper (2018) emphasizes knowledgeable, friendly staff and training of familiarity about local attractions, as TIC staff can shape visitor interest (Grinfelde and Lotina, 2015), as they can uniquely mediate between online and offline information sources (Mistilis and D'ambra, 2008).

Jinh Chang *et al.* (2019) found staff service encounters (reliability, assurance, responsiveness and empathy) affect the overall experience more than material dissemination. Wong and McKercher (2011) similarly stress interpersonal skills and service ethic – not just product knowledge. Araña *et al.* (2016) corroborate this: TIC visitors place higher values on information services received through personal interaction than through (new) technologically automated processes. Smith and Holmes (2012) highlight benefits to visitors and communities: volunteers serve as knowledgeable local ambassadors and strengthen destination promotion and links tourism with the local community.

Ecosystem perspectives in tourism information services

Tourism research is increasingly conceptualizing destinations as ecosystems composed of interconnected and interdependent actors that collectively create service value rather than operating through isolated organizations or services (see: Hillebrand, 2022). Ecosystem perspectives emphasize collaboration, coordination and resource integration between (public and private) stakeholders, technologies and local actors (Gretzel, 2021; Jäckli and Meier, 2025). Within destinations, "the focal organization that identifies and engages the disparate ecosystem . . . is the DMO" (Giannopoulos *et al.*, 2020, p. 462).

This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of tourism information services, where information increasingly flows across digital platforms, tourism businesses, local communities and other touchpoints throughout the destination, rather than only through a centralized TIC. Gretzel (2021) highlights how contemporary destination management increasingly depend on networked governance, stakeholder and collaboration within broader tourism ecosystems. Similarly, tourism ecosystem research suggests that destinations can secure co-created value through coordination between multiple stakeholders rather than through single organizations acting independently (Giannopoulos *et al.*, 2020).

On the future of TICs

TIC literature presents both challenges and opportunities. The search for commonalities, best practices and "lessons learned" is hampered by outdated studies and the (d)evolution of TICs. For example, early 2000s studies on staff service variables and optimal printed materials can now appear dated in a context where the very foundations of TICs are questioned by rapid technological change. Many papers stress the need for TICs to adapt to shifting technological demands, yet few offers concrete tools for doing so. Recent ecosystem perspectives in tourism research further suggest that destinations and tourism services are increasingly shaped through interconnected networks of actors, technologies and interactions rather than isolated organizations or locations. However, limited research has explored how such ecosystem perspectives relate specifically to TICs and the organization of tourism information services.

At the same time, literature points to opportunities, particularly around roles for TICs beyond information brokers – as more multifaceted institutions with diverse spaces, experiences and functions. It also raises the question of whether TICs can be moved out of their traditional physical location.

To summarize: (1) the current TIC format is increasingly undesirable and outdated in a technologically advanced tourism sphere; (2) TICs must reinvent their physical/digital configurations, purposes and functions and (3) emerging ecosystem perspectives suggest a need to better understand tourism information services as embedded within wider networks of actors, technologies and destination-level interactions.

Method and materials

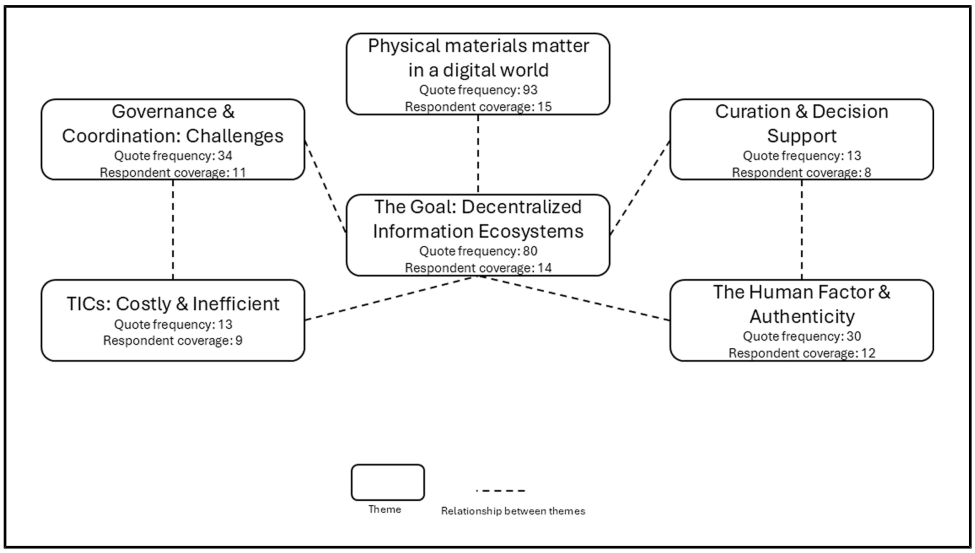
Semi-structured interviews were conducted to acquire in-depth understanding and insights. This approach was chosen as the study seeks to capture both current practices and future-oriented reflections among DMOs. The interview guide was informed by the key themes identified in the literature review – namely TIC roles, technological developments, evolving functions, the human dimension of service encounters and an ecosystems perspective – while remaining open to new themes emerging from the data. The open nature of semi-structured interviews permitted new ideas to be raised by respondents, allowing flexibility within the framework (Galletta, 2013; cited in Carlisle *et al.*, 2021). A purposive sampling method was used to select interviewees on specific criteria (Sirakaya-Turk *et al.*, 2017): (1) working with and knowledge of tourist information services at a tactical/strategic level and (2) level of seniority – e.g. DMO Director, Head of Marketing, Head of Tourist/Guest services and Operations Manager. Importantly, all 18 DMOs in Denmark were

invited to participate in the study to ensure national coverage. Of these, 15 agreed to participate, resulting in a response rate of 83% ($N = 15$). All participating DMOs were included in the analysis – hereafter named R1–R15. Authors conducted online interviews between May–August 2025, until a point of saturation was reached (shortest interview: 31 min, longest: 58 min).

Once the interviews were completed, a thematic analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was conducted. All 15 interview transcripts were included in the analysis. Following a six-phased approach (Byrne, 2022), the following actions below were conducted.

1. *Familiarization with data:* Each interview recording was first "active-listened" to "develop an understanding of the primary areas addressed in each interview" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1398), then transcribed at the second listen. Transcripts were read multiple times to understand the breadth and depth of the dataset. The six-phase approach was revisited (as at every phase) to ensure that each phase complemented the next.
2. *Generating codes:* Initial codes were generated by systematically working throughout the dataset, highlighting aspects that stand out and could be useful for developing themes. Coding was conducted iteratively, with codes continuously refined as familiarity with data increased. All transcripts were coded, and segments of text could be assigned multiple codes where relevant. No predefined coding frame was imposed, allowing codes to emerge inductively from the data while the literature review helped guide attention to relevant topics.
3. *Generating themes:* Codes were clustered into potential themes, to produce a "coherent and lucid picture of the dataset" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1403). While theme frequencies were covered (Figure 1), they were not treated as an indicator of their importance or salience, but rather as a support for identifying consistent patterns across the dataset. The aim was to develop themes that captured shared ways in which DMOs understand and configure current and future TICs, in line with the study's research question.
4. *Reviewing themes:* Themes were examined according to three criteria, (1) internal coherence – do the quotes within a theme fit together? (2) external distinction – are themes meaningfully different? and (3) coverage – are themes present across the dataset? Here, one potential theme was removed due to a lack of coverage across respondents, and while interesting, was increasingly out of scope from this study.
5. *Defining and naming themes:* Each theme was to be expressed in relation to both the dataset and the aim of the study, ensuring a "coherent and internally consistent account of the data

Figure 1 Thematic Map. Source: Authors



that cannot be told by the other themes" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1407). A finalized thematic map was generated (Figure 1).

6. *Producing the report:* Themes and data extracts are presented analytically in the results section.

Results

The goal: decentralized information ecosystems

Across destinations, respondents described a clear desired move from the traditional TIC toward more decentralized information ecosystems embedded in practitioners' businesses – e.g. hotels, attractions, rental agencies, supermarkets, restaurants, museums–and local communities. Rather than expecting tourists to seek out TICs, respondents envisioned information services as something that should be present wherever tourists already are, as R7 noted: *"we see ourselves as the tip of the spear [regarding number of tourists they are in direct contact with], so it makes sense for the goal to have local tourist information out in the destination, at businesses and with locals".* This indicates that decentralization is not an abstract ambition, but an ongoing strategic shift already being implemented through initiatives such as:

1. satellite TICs (set up at practitioners' businesses, staffed locally),
2. mobile TICs (DMO personnel present at popular sites with cargo bikes/vans and information material) and
3. paid/volunteer ambassadors throughout the destination to interact with tourists on the spot.

The underlying rationale for such initiatives was that traditional TICs are outdated and underutilized, and that *"it's not the guest's problem to find us, we need to be where they are"* (R7). This reflects a broader shift in how (Danish) DMOs conceptualize information services, both now and in the future: not as a centralized function, but as something distributed across the destinations' ecosystems. According to respondents, practitioners saw the advantage of becoming a crucial link in tourist information services:

> . . . they see the potential in the satellite TIC, and want to be a part of this – because it is about giving the best experience for the guests, and not necessarily who we [the tourist industry] think should have the responsibility (R3)

> We invited practitioners to become information spots, but now we also have practitioners who are asking to become one (R13)

These (desired) changes also signified that *"it has become more complex – because the burden rests with the practitioners to provide these information services"* (R15), who do not necessarily have the knowledge or competences. This shows that decentralization introduces new coordination challenges, requiring DMOs to shift from direct information service provisions to building capabilities across a wide network of practitioners. DMOs launched a series of initiatives to give the frontline staff of practitioners the necessary knowledge and competences, which came in the form of information service courses (focusing on guest services, destination knowledge and digital/physical informational materials), tours of major sites and other practitioners' businesses, seasonal kick-off meetings, quiz-style board games and free access for frontline staff to major attractions. While considered fruitful, these initiatives also encountered significant challenges:

> But do our partners join these courses? No – not nearly enough engagement. Those who do get a lot out of it, but there is a lack of engagement! (R5)

> The small enterprises are lagging–not because they don't understand, but because of lack of resources. How can they onboard all their seasonal workers, to take the same levels of ownership for these services as the owners? (R15)

Overall, this theme shows that decentralization is not about "simply" relocating information services, but about reorganizing how they are delivered and by whom. Therefore, the future (success) of information services will be shaped by the ability of the DMOs to coordinate, support, training and capability building and aligning a distributed network of actors – all who have varying degrees of competences, motivation, staff and infrastructure available. This also presents a new discussion point on the (short/long term) costs of developing and executing such a strategy.

However, while R10 notes, *"the future of tourist information services is out where the practitioners are"*, TICs are still operational throughout most parts of Denmark (for now), since this is not always for DMOs to decide, as the next theme reveals.

Governance and coordination: challenges

With all respondents bar one still having TICs present in their destination, the organization of TICs emerged as deeply entangled with local governance structures and political priorities, and not purely driven by visitor demand. Key decisions about TICs – whether to maintain, transform or close them – were frequently driven by municipal politics and path dependencies, indicating that TICs function as politically embedded institutions. Several DMOs underlined that municipalities formally control the existence and format of TICs, even where the DMO is responsible for daily operations:

> The municipalities who keep their physical tourist information centers are financed by the municipalities. We run them, but the municipalities decide how they are run. (R1)

These governance arrangements resulted in fragmented strategies within the same destination (DMOs in Denmark cover multiple municipalities), with individual municipalities pursuing distinct approaches to TICs and information materials. One respondent argued for greater coherence:

> We [DMO] don't have a strategy for what to do with TICs . . . the municipalities can't keep having different strategies on information services and TICs, where they each sit in their own closed room, not sharing information about other areas. Because the guests don't care where they are [municipality-wise], they want the best experience! (R4)

The ideal, for some, would be a coordinated, destination-wide approach and *"that all the municipalities agree to do it in the same manner – both in a physical and digital space so guests can get a holistic experience to information"* (R4). However, political priorities and local identities often complicate such coordination. One DMO working across three municipalities described divergent stances toward TICs:

> We have three municipalities in our destination – all of them with different political standpoints on TICs. One is closing their TIC at the end of the year whereas another refuses to close. (R5)

Attempts to close TICs have also provoked strong reactions from local citizens and media, even when tourists are supposedly increasingly digital. One respondent recounted a controversial closure (which has since been reopened):

> We closed one TIC on the main street, then there was a huge uproar from the local press, citizens and businesses . . . this wasn't necessarily anything to do with what the tourists wanted, but rather that these stakeholders wanted the tourists to feel welcome in their city. (R2)

Taken together, this theme highlights that the future of TICs is not only decided by technology- or demand-driven changes but also by political priorities, local identities and governance arrangements. For DMOs wishing to evolve into a decentralized information ecosystem, this presents significant hurdles as this requires significant inter-municipal coordination and agreements, as well as having to consider the symbolic value of TICs to politicians and locals alike. This could spur a new discussion if the traditional TIC should remain a possible touchpoint within a decentralized tourism information ecosystem – and if yes, should it have the same or different functions? This is of relevance to the next theme – as TICs were persistently seen as costly and inefficient.

TICs: costly and inefficient

Respondents viewed the classic TIC as an increasingly expensive and inefficient way to deliver information compared to digital channels and decentralized options:

> The classic TIC is not viable anymore, it's too expensive per tourist compared to what we can do online. But the human interaction is still very important, and that is why we work with the front-line staff in the destination – they need to be informed and receptive . . . this is the tourist information experience we want to give. (R8)

This perception is reinforced by a consistent pattern of declining TIC visitation despite increasing overall tourist numbers, suggesting a structural mismatch between traditional TIC formats and contemporary visitor behavior, as R3 noted: *"We had a counter monitoring how many tourists came into our TICs, where we can confirm that we are getting more people visiting the destination, but fewer visiting the TICs."* This became increasingly apparent in terms of seasonality and underutilization in low season, further highlighting a dichotomy: *"TICs are in some ways becoming superfluous, but at the same time not. In high season, thousands visit our TIC, but in low season, it can be as low as 40 tourists a month" (R6).* In a damning verdict, R7 concludes: *"If we want to give guests in our destination the best service, information and inspiration possible, then a TIC is not the place to do it"*.

Importantly, respondents do not interpret this decline as a reduced need for information, but rather as a misalignment between how information is delivered and how tourists access it:

> Everything is accessible nowadays via the phone, and we can see this with the closing of our TICs, tourists are not running around clueless. (R11)

> A change we have noticed is that when we are contacted by email or telephone, this is by tourists who are already at the destination (about two-thirds of guest contact) and not ones calling in advance (R10)

In tandem with the previous two themes, this suggests that the issue is not the relevance of TIC functions and services, but the inefficiency and costliness of their traditional format. While the decentralized model showed a variety of where TIC functions could be allocated, the question of the quality of the services given remains. Yes – TICs are costly and inefficient, yet are manned by trained and qualified staff operating at the behest of a larger geographical area – can satellite TICs at practitioner sites and local volunteers provide the same quality? Moreover, the blend of physical and digital information services was highlighted as a key juncture for the future of information services – particularly with the decentralized scenario as highlighted in the next theme.

Physical materials matter in a digital world

All respondents collectively agreed that tourist information was becoming increasingly digital – especially prior to arrival, but also during tourists' stay. Yet, the physical material (e.g. guidebooks, maps, brochures) still played a significant role, as R9 notes: *"we react to what the demand is – currently the demand is a mix of both physical and digital. If that changes in the future, then so will we."* Rather than viewing digital and physical formats as substitutes, respondents consistently frame them as complementary components within a broader information ecosystem. As R11 observed: *"It would be hopeless to go back to fully physical tourist information, and semi-hopeless to go fully digital, and it will be like this for many years"*.

Several DMOs reported that printed guides and maps continue to perform strongly, even alongside expanding digital offerings:

> We see a huge demand for city maps – I would love to be able to make one for each city in our destination! In one city, we printed 50.000 this year (R6).

> What we hear still delivers value is our [free] printed guide of all the experiences available here, which is sent out annually to all partners, and also placed in all the holiday homes in our destination – 150,000 copies. (R3)

An interesting finding was that physical material was not only of importance to tourists but also to tourism enterprises, serving as a visual cue that their place of business was being highlighted: *"physical material has a demand not only from our tourists . . . but also for the practitioners who want to be represented in something physical" (R14)*.

The performance of specific digital tools was often mixed. Some DMOs reported withdrawing digital info touch screens at (satellite) TICs due to low use, and destination-based apps were seen as an expensive endeavor with limited downloads in a saturated app market. AI guides, however, were seen as an exciting prospect:

> I see an opportunity in engaging our chatbot even more at the physical tourist information spots (R13)

> In terms of scalability for the quality of tourist information in the future, we are very much leaning towards the prospects of AI. Not only for creating a chatbot, but that we can use it to cut down on resource-heavy tasks, i.e. translation work. (R9)

Generational and nationality differences in channel preferences were highlighted repeatedly. R5 described a cautious approach to digitalization, shaped by these differences: *"our satellite spots at the practitioners' place of business have both physical and digital elements and guests can choose what they prefer – usually younger guests will scan the QR codes, the older generation, especially Germans, will take the physical material."*

With the desire for decentralized information services, respondents acknowledged the continued importance of physical materials, whilst also calling for better knowledge of what type of physical material will aid such services best:

> It is increasingly important that we give the practitioners all the necessary information they need to service the tourists–and here printed materials are a strength, so we need to reassess what kind of printed material works best in this context (R10)

> Our role in the future might be to revert back to more traditional content in terms of physical material. Because we must get this material out to the partners' places of businesses to provide the information services (R15)

Overall, this theme shows that physical materials persist not despite digitalization, but because they fulfill distinct functions within hybrid information services. This certainly challenges the "digital replacement" narrative and instead positions tourism information as inherently multi-channel and context dependent. Whether digital or physical materials, DMOs were adamant regarding the importance of the human factor in information services, as the next theme shows.

The human factor and authenticity

Across all discussions of digitalization, decentralization and efficiency, respondents repeatedly returned to the enduring importance of human contact and authenticity. Even highly digitalized destinations emphasized that many guests actively seek personal interaction and local storytelling as part of their information search.

Some respondents explicitly identified a segment of tourists who could find information online but choose not to: *"There is a segment of tourists who know they can find the information online, but they want the physical meet with a real person, they want a physical guide in their hands" (R1)*.

Frontline staff, both in TICs and in partner businesses, often understood themselves as providing a "human touch" that digital tools cannot fully replace. One DMO reported resistance from TIC staff to the introduction of digital tablets:

> Some of our TICs have shown resistance to using digital tablets. The main reason why is that they – the front office staff – claim the people who come in are seeking a human touch – an experience/service with a real person (R2).

The authenticity of the encounter was seen as particularly strong when it involves local people outside of corporate-destination settings. As one respondent reflected,

> We know how important authenticity is, so we are under no illusion that guests would rather get information from the "real" people who are out in the destination rather than my colleagues and I, who are wearing corporate uniforms with logos of the destination (R7).

Another respondent framed the added value of physical tourist information explicitly in terms of presence and authenticity: *"There are advantages and disadvantages – but the clear advantages of the physical tourist information is the human interaction, the presence and authenticity made available" (R9)*.

Given this, several DMOs argued that the core human function of tourist information must increasingly be carried out by partners' staff and other local hosts, rather than by TIC employees alone:

> Human interaction is incredibly important with tourist information, all the more reason why it is the front office staff at partner places who need to be informed and ready to service the guests. (R12)

> I believe in the local storytelling, the more authentic recommendations locals can give . . . in the human-relation experience. (R14)

This theme underscores that, even as information becomes more digital and decentralized, the human element remains "alpha and omega" for perceived service quality and guest experience. The future of tourist information, in respondents' accounts, is therefore not a simple technological substitution, but one of reconfiguring where and how authentic human encounters occur within destination information systems. This is aptly summarized by R11: *"Personal interaction is the equalizer – "high-tech" and "high-touch" fit well together, meaning that we can do everything ourselves [find information online], right up until we can't, and then we would like to talk to a person [high-touch]"*.

Curation and decision support

Beyond the question of access and distribution, respondents emphasize the growing importance of how information is structured and delivered. They reported that many guests do not simply seek "raw" information but rather help with making decisions and prioritizing experiences – a curatorial function that may become increasingly central in (future) information services. At TICs and other contact points, tourists frequently arrive with open-ended requests for help in structuring their stay: *"The most asked question at our TICs is: 'I'm here today. What should I do here?' They want the decision curated for them – that we make the decision for them" (R1)*.

Respondents also recognized risks of information overload when everything is made visible. One respondent spoke of filtering prioritized content rather than providing exhaustive lists:

> The ideal scenario for me is that we figure out how to filter our content for the guest. Whether it's online or physical, we in the tourism information industry tend to put on display all the 747 thousand things we have to offer and let the guest choose – this is overwhelming . . . I'm more of a fan to curate and highlight experiences and services for them (R8).

Curation was not only about products but also about enabling small, authentic "micro-experiences" (e.g. having an informal chat with a local). As one respondent noted*, "many seek 'micro-experiences' – especially in smaller locations, so you need a physical place for tourists to have that opportunity" (R11)*.

Ambassadors – volunteer or salaried–were seen as a valuable resource in this regard: *". . . many want to ask for help from our ambassadors, because they feel that they have knowledge that they cannot read about online" (R13)*.

In conjunction with other themes, respondents' call for curation could also manifest in different types of TICs and information services, as envisioned by R11: *"the future of TICs – if they are not to disappear entirely due to budget cuts – need to be thought differently. They need to be mobile, like*

a container moved around to different parts of the city, where you can invite tourists in for a cup of coffee in a lounge setting and take time to hear what the tourists want to experience".

Discussion

This study shows that TICs are increasingly being reconfigured into decentralized information ecosystems distributed across multiple actors and touchpoints. Rather than functioning as centralized service locations, TIC functions are redistributed to partner businesses, ambassadors and mobile formats. Our results reinforce earlier claims that conventional TIC formats are under pressure in tourism information landscapes (Lyu and Hwang, 2015), while adding nuance as to how DMOs are responding. Because while our results align with recent calls for an evolution of TICs (Iannaccone *et al.*, 2024), the manner in which Danish DMOs are responding is novel as compared to existing literature (e.g. Pociūtė-Sereikienė *et al.*, 2024; Mkiranweni, 2025). While these studies emphasize the diversification of TIC roles, our findings show that DMOs are actively restructuring responsibility for information provision across a network of actors – fundamentally changing how tourist information services are delivered. This suggests a shift from viewing TICs as places to understanding them as systems. In this system, DMOs no longer operate as primary service providers, but as coordinators of distributed information practices and services. This challenges assumptions in prior literature that TICs' (needed) evolution primarily concerns service and task diversification, but rather showing that it involves redistribution of authority, competence and responsibility. An area of future research here could be how service quality and consistency can be maintained across decentralized networks, particularly when information provision is delivered by actors with varying levels of training, motivation and resources.

Our findings are also novel in that they demonstrate that TIC transformation is not solely driven by technological change or visitor behavior (e.g. Draper, 2018; Ivanova, 2019). While prior TIC research has largely focused on technological disruption and changing tourist behavior (e.g. Lyu and Hwang, 2015), our findings highlight a dimension that is underdeveloped in the literature: the role of municipal governance and political decision-making. While research on tourism governance structures (and their changes) is well documented (e.g. Dragin-Jensen *et al.*, 2024; Ivars-Baidal *et al.*, 2024), far less attention has been paid to governance structures and political-decision making regarding TICs. Our study also contradicts the predominantly technology-centric narratives that frame TIC changes as a linear response to digitalization. Instead, we highlight that such changes are a negotiated process shaped by multiple stakeholders with competing objectives and are influenced by local identities and political priorities. TICs should be understood as both institutional and political objects, rather than "simple" infrastructure in the tourism information landscape. Future research could focus on governance mechanisms and inter-organizational (mis)alignments in tourism information systems.

While our findings on tourist information services being increasingly digital is corroborated by existing research (e.g. Lyu and Lee, 2015; Varotsis and Mylonas, 2024), there are also contradictions – that there is a continued importance of traditional physical information materials. The findings also indicate that with this desired evolution of TICs, future information services are unlikely to be fully digital or physical. DMOs consistently describe tourists' information searches as "both/and", not "either/or", aligning with research on online–offline information search (Lyu and Hwang, 2015). The continued presence of physical promotion material – and its potential resurgence, as one respondent noted – is an indication that the TIC of the future may be better conceived as a portfolio of touchpoints – some temporary, some permanent; some digital, some physical; some staffed by DMO personnel, others by local hosts – rather than a single bricks-and-mortar facility. While research is increasingly focusing on smart tourism initiatives and mature data platforms for information ecosystems (e.g. Xu *et al.*, 2025), it is of note to mention that in decentralized information ecosystems – physical materials might still

play a role and merits further study on how DMOs can optimize the mix of physical and digital channels.

Lastly, our findings confirm the continued importance of human interaction in tourism information services, even in highly digitalized contexts. This supports existing literature emphasizing the role of personal encounters, staff knowledge and service quality (e.g. Araña *et al.*, 2016; Draper, 2018). However, our findings extend this by showing that the human element is not disappearing with the closure of TICs but being relocated and increasingly embedded across partner businesses and local actors. This challenges the assumption that technological advancements reduce the need for human involvement. This is also in line with our last finding, which indicates a shift from information provision to curation and decision support as core values of tourism information services. While prior research has identified TICs as knowledge brokers (Wong and McKercher, 2011), our findings extend this by showing that the key challenge is managing information abundance, rather than access to information. This is in line with the growing importance of curation in tourism and hospitality, where staff can have an impact by providing a "meaningful and persistent selection and organization of content and experiences to increase value by aesthetically relating production and consumption, thereby facilitating better choices" for the tourist (Richards, 2024, p. 19). This also raises a significant challenge and an area for future research – how can the staff at practitioner sites and volunteers deliver the same quality, curated and timely information as a trained TIC staff member? While DMOs had put forth several initiatives, issues such as lack of engagement, knowledge bottlenecks and constraints from small enterprises persist.

Conclusions

Contributions to tourism information and TIC research

We contribute with three interrelated insights.

1. *Decentralized information ecosystems:* DMOs increasingly plan TIC functions as distributed across partner businesses, ambassadors and mobile concepts, rather than concentrated in a single office. This extends existing discussions on community-based and multifunctional visitor centers (Iannaccone *et al.*, 2024; Lee *et al.*, 2007) by specifying how decentralization is operationalized at destination scale and how tourism ecosystems perspectives can be applied to tourism information systems and landscapes (Giannopoulos *et al.*, 2020; Hillebrand, 2022; Jäckli and Meier, 2025).
2. *Curation and decision support as core value propositions:* Beyond providing information, DMOs see the advantage in filtering abundance and helping guests prioritize. This curatorial role – making the decision for the guest – expands prior work on TICs as knowledge brokers (Wong and McKercher, 2011) and suggests that future research should pay closer attention to how recommendations are curated, not just through which channels (physical and digital) they are delivered.
3. *Governance and future TICs:* TIC transformations are shaped as much by municipal politics, local identities and governance arrangements as by visitor demand or technology. This extends prior work that focuses mainly on technological change (Lyu and Hwang, 2015), identifying TICs as politically mischievous, whose future roles depend on negotiations between DMOs, municipalities, citizens and businesses, rather than on efficiency considerations alone.

Managerial and practical implications

For practitioners, several implications follow. First, for destinations aiming at decentralized information ecosystems, investing in capability-building for frontline staff at partner businesses appears essential. Respondents' experiences with training courses, destination familiarization

trips, games and ambassador schemes are seen as promising, but are currently under-utilized. To increase effectiveness and impact, DMOs may need to rethink how such initiatives are designed and delivered – for example, by lowering participation barriers, integrating training into existing workflows or creating stronger incentives for engagement among small and seasonal businesses. This also points to a shift in DMO roles toward ongoing facilitation, rather than one-off training. Second, DMOs may need to reassess the usefulness of physical materials. Guides, and especially maps placed in satellite TICs and other relevant locations can function as both guest resources and visible signals of inclusion for tourism enterprises, as well as preferable material to use for curating purposes. Rather than viewing physical materials as legacy/memorabilia tools, DMOs could strategically deploy them as part of a coordinated information strategy, where physical formats complement digital platforms and support on-site decision making. This may involve fewer, more curated materials (or material with the possibility to curate such as maps) that are easier for both guests and frontline staff to use. Finally, governance arrangements warrant explicit attention. Fragmented municipal strategies undermine destination-wide coherence and holistic approaches to tourism information. DMOs seeking to move toward decentralized information ecosystems will likely need to facilitate new forms of inter-municipal collaboration, shared standards for information services and clearer roles between political actors and operational experts. This may require DMOs to take on a more proactive coordinating role and to develop shared visions for tourism information services across municipalities. Without such coordination, efforts toward decentralization risk remaining partial and inconsistent across destinations.

Limitations and future research

The analysis is based on a qualitative sample of senior DMO representatives in a single national context. While Denmark offers an interesting case of ongoing TIC restructuring, patterns may differ in destinations with other governance models, tourism structures or visitor profiles. Future studies could conduct comparative research across countries to explore how different settings shape TIC futures.

Moreover, the thematic analysis is interpretive, and other researchers might cluster the material differently or emphasize alternative aspects. Nonetheless, we are confident the themes presented here offer a coherent account of how Danish DMOs currently define and plan the future of TICs within tourism information ecosystems.

Lastly, our data captures practitioner (DMO) perspectives. Tourists, residents, volunteers and frontline employees in partner businesses will also be affected by such TIC changes. Subsequent research could integrate these groups, i.e. a mixed-methods study combining interviews and visitor survey data to assess how decentralized information ecosystems are experienced in practice.

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