The pragmatic paradigm in destination competitiveness studies: The case of the SCUBA diving tourism niche

11 The Pragmatic Paradigm in Destination Competitiveness Studies: The Case of the SCUBA Diving Tourism Niche

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Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss how the pragmatic paradigm shaped an investigation of destination competitiveness and customer value in a tourism niche market. We describe how this paradigm guided the implementation of a mixed-method approach consisting of two sequential stages: first semi-structured interviews and then an online survey. The interviews provided a view of SCUBA diving tourists' thoughts on what makes a successful SCUBA diving destination. The quantitative survey evaluated differences in the perceptions of different groups of SCUBA diving tourists about what makes a successful SCUBA diving destination.

Review of the Pragmatic Paradigm

A pragmatic paradigm seeks to enhance understanding of the complex social world (Pansiri, 2006), by fostering a dialogue between philosophical/theoretical and empirical incongruences, particularly in mixed methods research. As Morgan (2014: 7) notes, 'for most of the researchers operating within the field of mixed-method research, the appeal of pragmatism…[is] about its practicality'. The word pragmatism derives from *pragma* (Greek) and means *practice* and *practical*. Ontologically, the pragmatic paradigm is classified as 'what works' in the empirical world (Jennings, 2010). As summarised by Khoo-Lattimore *et al*. (2019: 1537), in the pragmatic paradigm, 'research designs and strategies should

privilege the most effective ways of answering research questions over philosophical assumptions'.

In his article 'Competitive advantage: logical and philosophical considerations', Powell (2001: 884) argues that

> [t]o a pragmatist, the mandate of science is not to find truth or reality, the existence of which are perpetually in dispute, but to facilitate human problem-solving. According to pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, science should overthrow the notion, which has ruled philosophy since the time of the Greeks, that the office of knowledge is to uncover the antecedently real, rather than, as is the case with our practical judgments, to gain the kind of understanding which is necessary to deal with problems as they arise.

From an epistemological perspective, pragmatism refutes the idea that 'truth' can be determined once and for all. 'Truth is what works', and knowledge cannot be entirely abstract from contingent beliefs, interests and projections (Howe, 1988). Hence, for the researcher adopting the paradigm of pragmatism, there is a quest to ontologically determine and understand what the 'truth' is or can be known as and equally, to realise that how we find the 'truth' or knowledge is through experiences and actions, including that of the researcher.

The methodological framework frequently adopted in pragmatic paradigm projects comprises the two extremes of positivism/post-positivism and interpretivism: quantitative methods are utilised by the former and qualitative methods by the latter. As a result of this combination, the pragmatists are considered the founders of the mixed-methods approach to data collection (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2003). Kaushik and Walsh (2019: 2) point out that pragmatism is able to close the gap between the scientific method approach (a quantitative one that fosters objectivity and deductive reasoning), with 'structuralist orientation of older approaches', and the naturalistic methods (a qualitative one that targets participatory action, and rhetoric of advocacy and change), characterised by 'freewheeling orientation of newer approaches'. As the first author, Ambrozio, became familiar with pragmatism, he came to realise this was the paradigm that would be more aligned with his research on destination competitiveness (DC). Examination of studies relating to the concept of DC, it further strengthened the need for this research to engage with pragmatism.

Pragmatism is common among the research paradigms used in tourism studies, particularly those that are supported by mixed or multiple methods (Khoo-Lattimore *et al*., 2019; Pansiri, 2006). Some of the examples of mixed methods approaches in tourism studies include:

- Mixed-methods of systematic reviews, bringing together both quantitative and qualitative meta-analysis. Meta-analysis, as the name suggests, involves the analysis of analyses. They have been extensively used in tourism due to the current stage of knowledge consolidation

that a still young and growing discipline continues to face. Either through narrative or systematic literature reviews, this method involves a combined quantitative and qualitative approach (Gretzel & Kennedy-Eden, 2012). Examples of mixed-methods systematic reviews include the work done by Spasojevic *et al*. (2018) analysing 157 journal articles on air transport and tourism, and Le *et al*. (2019) provided a theoretically based review of imagery processing research in tourism, reviewing and analysing 70 relevant papers published in the period from 1997 to 2017.

- Network analysis and evaluation methods aim to examine the relationships of actors that operate and collaborate in a network, in particular the impact that (1) actors have on each other, (2) the individual actors have on a network, (3) the network has on individual actors and (4) the interactions of the various actors have on the whole network (Ahmed, 2012). These network arrangements are very typical of the tourism literature, both in terms of the physical connections that facilitate travel to occur, as well as the communication and business channels used to transmit data/information.
- Supply and demand mixed methods: the multi-stakeholder nature of the tourism industry usually requires the understanding of a certain phenomenon through the lenses of several actors. Research on tourists' choices, behaviour and impacts is commonly based on statistical and quantitative analysis (Leung *et al*., 2017). There are also a substantial number of studies that undertake an interpretivism approach, usually describing a given market (Mazanec, 1984), management issues and the strategies used by tourism providers (Lohmann & Pearce, 2012).

This chapter builds on this past work in tourism and highlights how pragmatism can inform methodological choices in research design, especially in the implementation of a mixed-methods approach.

Pragmatism in the Context of a PhD Research on Destination Competitiveness

Ambrozio's study examined the concept of DC from an alternative perspective; one that considers DC not only in terms of the competitiveness indicators assessing the suppliers' side of a destination, but also one that adds value to the customer. More specifically, his PhD investigated customer value in DC in the context of SCUBA diving tourism, a niche tourism market. He used mixed-methods, deploying face-to-face interviews and online surveys.

The concept of DC was developed in the 1990s (Crouch & Ritchie, 1993, 1999; Kozak & Rimmington, 1999; Poon, 1993;) to satisfy the need for new management tools to deal with an economic crisis of the period (Poon, 1993). The diamond model for competitive advantage (Porter,

1990) and the resource-based view of the firm (Penrose, 1959; Wernerfelt, 1995) from management are the basis of the development of tourism DC models. The variation in models suggested that the paradigm relating to this research would need to be able to capture the different perspectives.

The abovementioned authors highlight that competitiveness leads to a sustained improvement in the well-being of residents, represented by economic prosperity, environmental stewardship and resident quality of life. D'Hauteserre (2000: 23) defines DC as 'the ability of a destination to maintain its market position and share and/or improve upon them through time'. Moreover, D'Hauteserre (2000) extends the concept of competitiveness to product life cycle, arguing that a company that seeks to be more competitive will extend, at the same time, their product lifetime, postponing a decline. Hassan (2000) argues that DC is the ability to create and integrate value-added products that sustain resources while maintaining market position relative to competitors.

These different perspectives on DC result in different models to frame DC (Table 11.1). Crouch and Ritchie (1993 ,1999) and Crouch (2011) are widely reported and used as a basis for other relevant studies in the field. Queiroz Neto *et al*. (2017) summarise Crouch and Ritchie's seminal work in three phases: (1) conception of ideas (Crouch & Ritchie, 1993), (2) the consolidation of a conceptual model (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999) and (3) ranking of determinant attributes used in their model (Crouch, 2011). Influenced by the Crouch and Ritchie (1999) model, Dwyer and Kim (2003) present a DC model recognising demand as an essential element (previously unobserved). Mostly, DC models are developed based on a suppliers' perspective.

Wilde (2010), Pabel and Coghlan (2011) and Andrades-Caldito *et al*. (2014) investigated the importance placed on DC attributes from the demand side. Initially, Wilde (2010) examined the importance given to 38 destination attributes by tourists that visited two destinations in Australia: the Coffs Harbour Coast and Great Lakes. Pabel and Coghlan (2011) measured the importance and performance of 16 dive trip attributes from the perspective of divers visiting the Great Barrier Reef in Cairns, Australia. In this case, attributes such as accommodation, restaurants and infrastructure were not considered in the study. Lastly, Andrades-Caldito *et al*. (2014) analysed the importance of 13 destination attributes from the view of tourists who visited the region of Andalucía, Spain.

Focusing on the suppliers' side, Hong (2009) and Crouch (2011) also investigated the importance of DC attributes. Both authors use their model of DC. Table 11.1 shows the comparison of the results obtained by above-mentioned studies. Due to different terminologies used in the reviewed studies, the comparison is limited to groups of attributes.

Abreu-Novais *et al*. (2016) highlighted that the complexity of investigating DC results in knowledge gaps, especially from the customer's perspective. Many models are fundamentally based on a suppliers' perspective

Table 11.1 Analysis of important destination competitiveness attributes

Author/ Reference	Based on	Perspective	Most important factors
Hong (2009)	Hong (2009)	Suppliers/ Experts 19 respondents	1. Exogenous comparative advantages 2. Endogenous comparative advantages 3. Competitive advantage 4. Tourism management 5. Domestic environment conditions 6. Global environment conditions
Wilde (2010)	Dwyer and Kim (2003)	Demand 344 respondents	1. Destination management (public and private) 2. Facilities and activities 3. Nature 4. Augmented benefits 5. History
Crouch (2011)	Crouch and Ritchie (1999)	Suppliers/ Experts 83 respondents	1. Core Resources and attractors 2. Destination Management 3. Qualifying and amplifying determinants 4. Destination policy planning and development 5. Supporting factors and resources
Pabel and Coghlan (2011)	Dwyer and Kim (2003)	Demand 296 respondents	1. Environmental attributes 2. Setting attributes 3. Service attributes
Andrades-Caldito *et al.* (2014)	Crouch and Ritchie (1999); Dwyer and Kim (2003)	Demand 4195 respondents	1. Created resources 2. Endowed resources 3. Tourists' perceptions about destination management

Source: Queiroz Neto *et al.* (2017).

(Figure 11.1). Woodruff (1997) emphasised that customer value is an important source of competitive advantage and, rather than being delivered by suppliers, value is co-created by the customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). An investigation of the destination attributes valued by tourists is a relevant gap (Queiroz Neto *et al.*, 2016) and was the main aim of Ambrozio's PhD research.

Reviewing previous works on DC (Figure 11.1), two different phases were identified: an investigation of destination attributes/developing models on DC and measurement of the importance of DC/ranking destination attributes. These two phases implement two sequential research methods: qualitative followed by a quantitative approach. Firstly, while Crouch and Ritchie (1993, 1999) used a series of interviews and workshops, Dwyer and Kim (2003) used a literature review to develop their DC model. In the second phase, different quantitative methods were implemented to assess the importance of DC attributes: Wilde (2010) and Pabel

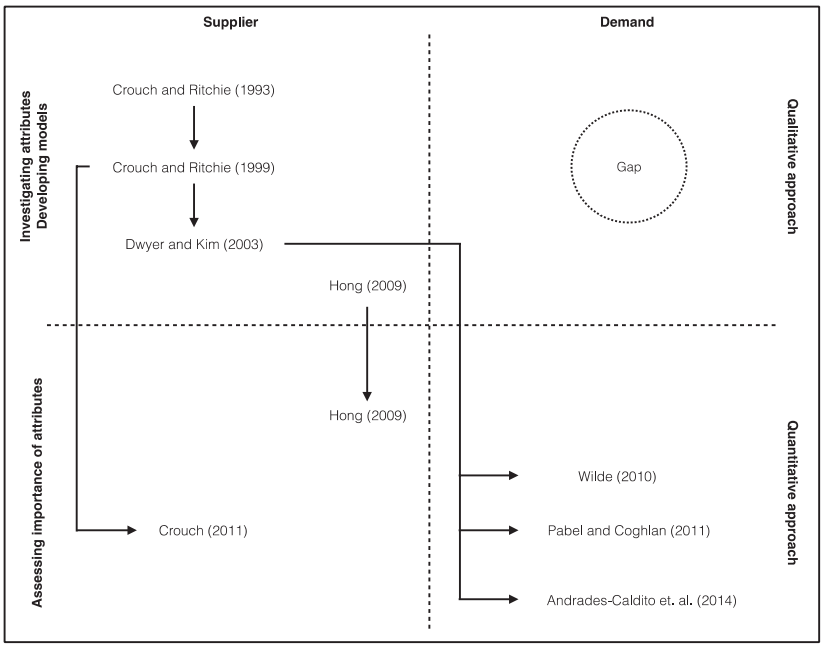

Figure 11.1 Identification on knowledge gap

and Coghlan (2011) used a survey; Crouch (2011) implemented an analytical hierarchy process; and Andrades-Caldito *et al*. (2014) used structural equation modelling. Hong (2009) consolidated two stages in the same study: a literature review to establish his model of DC (qualitative); and an analytical hierarchy process to measure the importance of the destination attributes of his model (quantitative).

The customer value determination process (Woodruff, 1997) is composed of five guiding questions: (1) what do customers value?; (2) of all the value dimensions that targeted customers want, which are the most important?; (3) how well or poorly is the supplier doing in delivering the value that targeted customers want? (4) why are suppliers doing poorly (well) on important value dimensions?; and (5) what are the targeted customers likely to value in the future? These five guiding questions can be implemented in three sequential stages: investigation of attributes (question 1), measurement of importance of attributes (questions 2 and 5) and measurement performance (questions 3 and 4).

Disregarding the measurement of a destination's performance, both DC studies and customer value determination processes follow similar approaches: a qualitative stage to investigate (destination) attributes; and a quantitative stage to measure the importance of (destination) attributes. Hence, the implementation of a research paradigm that could embrace these two sequential stages was critical to guide the investigation of DC

through customer value. Therefore, pragmatism was presented as the most suitable paradigm to guide and shape this study.

Research design

The research therefore aimed to investigate DC from a customer value perspective. Indeed, it considered that there are different customer value perspectives related to the levels of travel experience and experience in a leisure activity (in this case, diving experience). Therefore, this study examined, in particular, the customer perspective of value in a niche market: scuba diving tourism. To achieve this aim, Ambrozio's PhD research brought together two broad theories: DC and customer value. In support of this aim, four research questions were proposed:

RQ1: What are the destination attributes scuba diving tourists value in a successful scuba diving destination?
RQ2: From the perspective of scuba diving tourists, what is the relative importance of each DC attribute?
RQ3: How do scuba diving tourists with different travel experience levels differ in the importance given to DC attributes?
RQ4: How do scuba diving tourists with different diving experience levels differ in the importance given to DC attributes?

In line with the paradigm of pragmatism, this exploratory research implemented a mixed-method approach in two sequential stages: qualitative and quantitative. In the first stage, to answer research question one (RQ1), semi-structured interviews were applied. Afterward, in the second stage, an online survey was implemented to answer research questions 2, 3 and 4 (RQ2, RQ3 and RQ4). Figure 11.2 showcases the conceptual framework designed specifically for this research.

First stage: interviewing SCUBA divers

Influenced by Woodruff's (1997) customer value determination approach and Crouch and Ritchie (1999), the first stage aimed to answer RQ1. The idea of 'successful destination' was first applied by Crouch and Ritchie (1999) while developing their DC model.

Woodruff and Gardial (1996) indicate two different techniques to investigate customer value: focus groups or interviews. Initially, this research aimed to use focus group interviews. However, during the pilot study, two issues were perceived with the proposed approach. Firstly, as pointed out by Gabott and Hogg (1998), value is individual and varies according to very particular reasons of a person. Thus, a thorough investigation was not possible during focus groups due to the complexity of value. Secondly, SCUBA diving tourists, in general, want to spend most of their holidays relaxing and resting, when not diving. Therefore, gathering

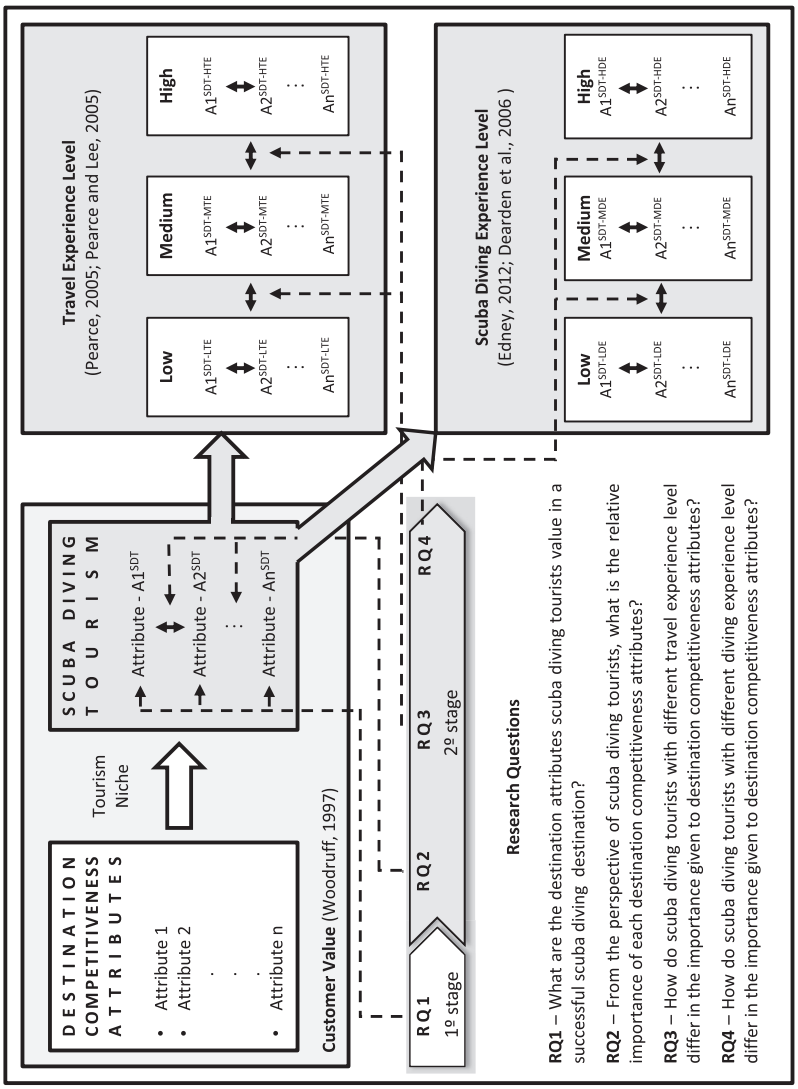

Figure 11.2 Research framework

a particular group of interviewees at the same time was challenging with tourists during their holidays. For these reasons, after analysing the results obtained during the pilot study, the researchers decided to swap the method from focus groups to semi-structured interviews. Further, semi-structured interviews were recommended when there is no chance to interview the respondent in a future moment (Bernard, 2000). Hence, it was the most suitable interviewing technique to apply to tourists during their holidays.

Regarding the sampling approach, a non-random convenience sample (Gideon, 2012) was applied. The reason for the choice was that a convenience sample was a useful method for exploratory studies (Neuman, 2011) and it involves seeking out individuals meeting specific criteria (Gideon, 2012). In the case of this study, certified SCUBA divers that travelled to tourism destination to undertake SCUBA diving activities were designated.

To answer RQ1 and to be in line with a pragmatic paradigm, two distinct approaches were implemented: deductive and inductive. First, SCUBA diving tourists were asked to 'think about two of the most successful SCUBA diving destinations' they have visited in the past. After addressing two destinations, respondents were asked to list the attributes that made those past experiences successful. Second, interviewees were asked to 'think about the most successful (hypothetic) SCUBA diving destination'. Afterwards, a handout with a list of destination attributes based on previous studies (Dearden *et al*., 2006; Hong, 2009; Pabel & Coghlan, 2011) was presented to the respondents. The respondents could either confirm, delete or add new attributes. In the end, divers were asked to describe the reasons, importance and unimportance of the listed destination attributes. Overall, the instrument of data collection was composed of six enquiries related to (1) diving experience; (2) travel experience to SCUBA diving destinations; (3) influence of diving activity in travel decision making; (4) destination attributes of successful SCUBA diving destinations visited in the past; (5) destination attributes for the most successful SCUBA diving destination (hypothetic); (6) reasons, importance and unimportance of listed destination attributes. The application of these two approaches undoubtedly provided a comprehensive picture of the attributes of a successful SCUBA diving destination.

Data collection for the first stage occurred from August to October of 2015 in four popular SCUBA diving destinations: Gold Coast and The Great Barrier Reef (Cairns) in Australia and Phuket and Koh Tao in Thailand. In total, 34 SCUBA diving tourists were interviewed during the period of data collection. The researchers targeted SCUBA divers with different levels of diving experience and a balanced number per gender to get a comprehensive list of destination attributes. The first author was encouraged to find that the profile of interviewees (Table 11.2) was similar to the profile of respondents of previous studies (Dearden *et al*., 2006; Garrod, 2008; Pabel & Coghlan, 2011).

Table 11.2 Profile of respondents in stage one

Level of diving experience	Gender		Total per diving experience	(%) per diving experience
	Male	Female		
Low diving experience	9	6	15	(44%)
Medium diving experience	5	3	8	(24%)
High diving experience	8	3	11	(32%)
Total per gender	22	12	34	–
(%) per gender	(65%)	(35%)	–	(100%)

To answer RQ1, thematic analysis was implemented. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006: 82) argue that thematic analysis is a 'form of recognition within the data where emerging themes become the categories for analysis'. With the assistance of NVivo 11, the six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were implemented: (1) familiarising with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing final report.

The results obtained in the first stage of the study fed into the design of the questionnaire that was applied in the second stage. The details of methodological steps and results of the first stage were published in Queiroz Neto *et al*. (2018).

Second stage: online survey

SCUBA divers are well educated (Dearden *et al*., 2006; Edney, 2012); a significant number of them live in Europe and the United States of America (Garrod, 2008). SCUBA divers form a large global community. Evidence of this can be seen on social networking sites such as Facebook. Facebook groups relating to SCUBA diving have hundreds of thousands of members. Because of the ability to reach members of this community through social media, the second stage of this study involved the administration of a questionnaire-based online survey to answer RQ2, RQ3 and RQ4. An online questionnaire survey containing closed and open-ended questions was provided to certified SCUBA divers. Data collection took place from January to June of 2016.

Online surveys are popular as a research method nowadays. However, there are several strengths and potential weaknesses in the implementation of online surveys (Evans & Mathur, 2005). While global reach, flexibility, convenience and the opportunity to reach controlled samples are considered strengths; sample selection, impersonal approach, lack of

online experience from the respondents and low response rate can be potential weaknesses for online surveys.

As in the first stage, certified SCUBA divers (SCUBA diving tourists) were the target population for data collection. In seeking a significant sample size to provide a high degree of accuracy, the rationale for the sampling size was based on the formula developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) and other quantitative approaches presented in similar studies. While the method of Krejcie and Morgan (1970) indicates 387 sample units are required (for an unknown population), similar studies use different sample units: Kim *et al*. (2008) when segmenting golf tourists used 370 respondents, and Sung (2004) examining the consumer and travel behaviour of adventure travellers used 892 sample units. In the end, the total number of respondents in this study was 712 sample units.

This research used variety of strategies to recruit SCUBA divers for the online survey: (1) a website (www.scubabestchoice.com) was developed to publicise the details of the research: research aims and objectives, profile of researchers, contact and link to the questionnaire; (2) a banner (in four languages) and a 40 seconds video were developed and posted on Facebook and Twitter; (3) two paid advertisement campaigns on Facebook framing individuals who liked 'SCUBA diving activities' in their profile. The implementation of these different and simultaneous strategies was fundamental to the achievement of the planned number of respondents.

The survey instrument was designed based on analysis of data from the previous stage of this study and on previous studies (Dearden *et al*., 2006; Edney, 2012; Pearce, 2005; Pearce & Lee, 2005). The questionnaire comprised five sections: socio-demographics, travel experience, SCUBA diving experience, SCUBA diving trip characteristics and assessment of DC attributes. For the section 'assessment of DC attributes', the 89 destination attributes obtained in the first stage were reduced to 52 attributes. A pilot test ($n = 20$) was performed in November of 2016 and as a result some questions were re-worded or reformulated. The final questionnaire included 19 questions.

In this stage, analytical procedures for quantitative data varied according to the research questions. Firstly, for research RQ2, descriptive analysis and principal components analysis were implemented. Secondly, for RQ3 computation of travel experience score, descriptive analysis, k-means cluster analysis, cross-tabulation and analysis of variance (ANOVA) with post-hoc pairwise comparisons were applied. Finally, descriptive analysis, cross tabulation and analysis of variance with post-hoc pairwise comparison were used to analyse RQ4.

To highlight the structure of the data analysis implemented on this research, an analytical framework was created. Figure 11.3 was designed to showcase step-by-step the methods applied in the study.

The results obtained in the second stage of this study were published in two journal articles. Results for RQ2 and RQ3 are published in

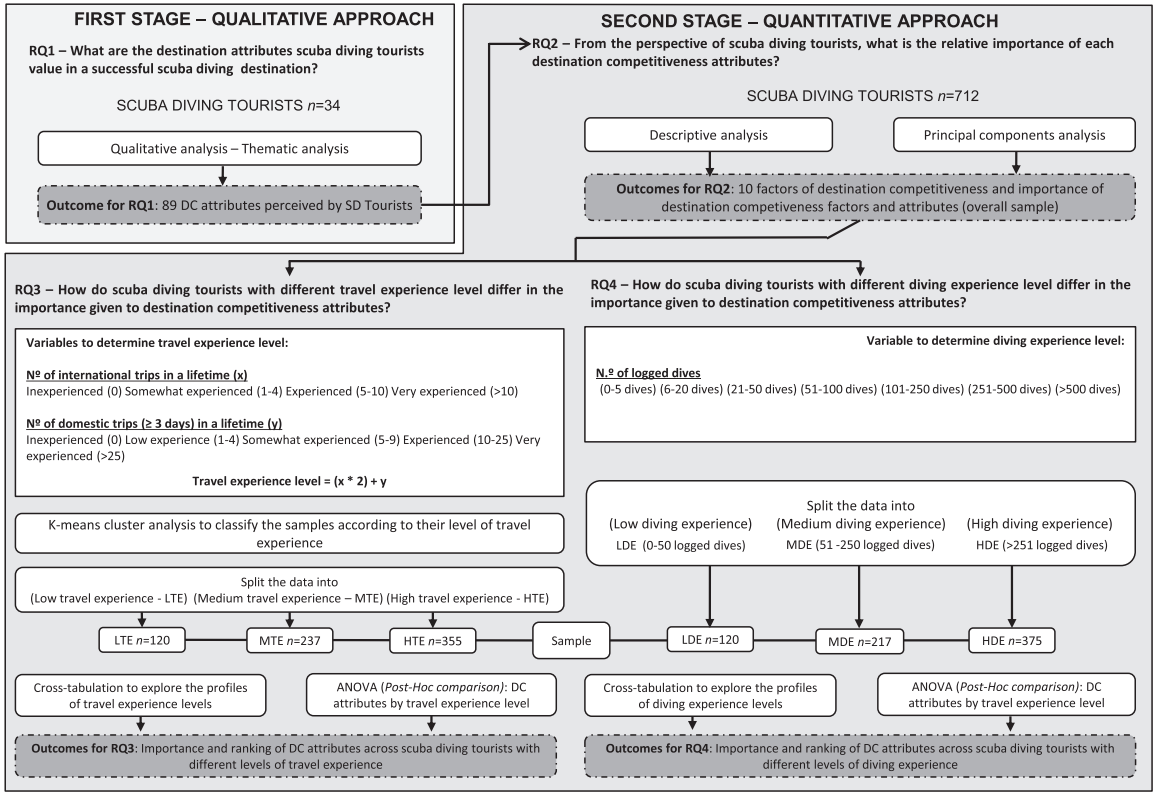

Figure 11.3 Methodological framework

Queiroz Neto *et al*. (2017) and results for RQ4 are presented in Queiroz Neto *et al*. (2018).

Reflection on the Use of the Paradigm

Choosing a paradigm is one of the most important tasks for the researcher while shaping a study. The decision should be based on the research questions proposed (Stockman, 2015). Following this premise, pragmatism was the most suitable paradigm because it covered both qualitative and quantitative approaches (led by the research questions). In the case of this investigation, the application of pragmatism provided (1) a better understanding of how knowledge on the topics (DC, customer value and SCUBA diving tourism) were forged; (2) as a consequence of the first, a clear evaluation on the level of maturity of the studied area; and (3) a guidance for the development of the research design and its procedures.

Every research has predictable and unpredictable issues regardless of the paradigm. The use of pragmatism requires good planning in order to fit within the research's timeframe. The researcher must be aware of the processes while applying a mixed method approach. Usually, one stage leads to the other. It means that the researcher needs discipline to guarantee the rigour in every research step. Otherwise, the research could lack rigour or might end up becoming a never-ending essay.

Through the application of a mixed-method approach with two sequential stages, the first author able to capture the complexity of perspectives when studying the demand's point-of-view. The qualitative method, applied in the first stage of the study, provided the perspectives of SCUBA diving tourists towards attributes of a successful SCUBA diving destination. The final stage investigated the different perceptions among SCUBA diving tourists towards DC attributes. Howe (1988) writes that knowledge cannot be abstracted from contingent beliefs, interests and projections. Therefore, contemplating the world through the idea that 'truth is what works' brought unique insights to scientific investigation. In this way, a pragmatic paradigm allows a better understanding of the complexity in tourism and hospitality studies. Thus, the authors will keep using pragmatism when the research design requires a more comprehensive approach to investigate what works in reality.

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