

Business tourism in Porto from the perspective of local hotels and travel agencies

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ABSTRACT: In recent decades, business travel has become common, helping to organize events and congresses in tourism destinations and sparking the interest of researchers from different scientific areas. Nevertheless, a prevailing challenge in academic research and business tourism is the conceptual development related to the perspective of local hotels and travel agencies on business tourism.

This research aims to analyze the profiles and behavioral patterns of business travelers, as perceived by local hotels and travel agencies. It also explores the evolution of business tourism in Portugal, with a particular focus on Porto. The primary goal is to examine the significance of business tourism in Porto for local hotels and travel agencies.

To achieve this objective, a qualitative approach methodology is employed, using semi-structured interviews. The main conclusions point to the ideas that were previously researched, while also offering new perspectives.

KEYWORDS: business tourism; Porto; hotels; travel agencies; bleisure.

1. Introduction

Although business tourism seems like a new concept of this era, it is considered as one of two main motivations for travel (Davidson & Cope, 2003). Tourism plays a key role in economic development, being one of the largest sectors worldwide in terms of turnover and revenue. Consequently, business tourism is considered a strategic product to be used independently or as a complement to leisure tourism.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, a new era in business tourism was born, specifically in the US where the concept of conference and convention began to appear. Industrial, commercial and scientific associations, beside politics, started to organize meetings

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on a large scale. The growth of such events attracted the attention of potential destinations able to host such meetings for the economic and social benefits they represented. As a result, cities began to improve their resources and attractiveness to host the largest possible number of events. They also talked about the Olympic Games held every two years, Summer Olympics and Winter Olympics, which involve direct participation of thousands of athletes from hundreds of countries, who are accommodated in Olympic villages. Although Olympic villages have a very intensive use in time, the planning and development of these areas should consider its future uses in the post event. Because of the large number of participants that an event can bring to the city, cities begin to try to define together the top positions in a global hierarchy of leadership and image that precisely lead to the creation of professional structures capable of continuous monitoring in foreign affairs, image promotion and attractiveness, thus attracting investment.

These days Business Tourism has an important economic role in local and regional economies and relates to a tourism sector with great potential for development. The low seasonality, the controlled environmental impact, the higher income for accommodation and meeting venues, the high demand for food and beverages (lunches, gala dinners, coffee breaks, among others), the growth in leisure activities, are some of the principal elements that make business Tourism so attractive to destinations (Swarbrooke & Horner 2001). This reflects the potential of Business Tourism for local and regional development and the importance of providing an excellent service to visitors to ensure high levels of satisfaction during the stay at their destination, which goes beyond their expectations (Marques & Santos, 2016). Corporate trips have become more frequent over the years, because of the increasingly globalized business landscape. Millions of businesses trips are made each year (Finances Online, 2024). Communication and interaction between people who work and live in widely different places is a need for work organizations. As a result, business travel has been increasing considerably over the last few decades (Gustafson, 2012).

Business tourism is a type of tourism activity in which visitors travel for a specific professional and/or business purpose to a place outside their workplace and residence with the aim of attending a meeting, an activity or an event. The key components of business tourism are meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions. The term “meetings industry” within the context of business tourism recognizes the industrial nature of such activities. Business tourism can be combined with any other tourism type during the same trip” (UNWTO, 2025).

The general objective of this study is to explore the importance of business tourism in Porto city from the perspective of local hotels and travel agencies. This research aims to make a significant contribution to the development of future studies in this sector, which are currently limited. The rationale behind selecting this theme is twofold. On the one hand, it is a sensitive area that is

undergoing rapid development. On the other hand, there is a dearth of studies from the perspective of hotels and travel agencies as tourism businesses.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: the literature review on the topic of business tourism, considering different approaches in its framework, the methodology used, the results obtained and their discussion.

2. Literature Review

Business tourism has emerged as a strategic segment within the broader tourism industry, attracting increasing attention from both practitioners and academics. Its capacity to generate substantial economic benefits, counteract seasonality, and enhance destination image has positioned it as a priority for many urban destinations. This literature review examines the conceptual foundations of business tourism, its strategic value, the factors determining destination competitiveness, the key stakeholders involved, the evolving profile of the business traveler, and finally, the specific context of business tourism in Portugal with a particular focus on the city of Porto.

2.1. Defining Business Tourism: From Individual Travel to the Meetings Industry

Understanding business tourism requires an initial distinction between individual business travel and business tourism proper. Davidson and Cope (2003) provide a foundational differentiation: individual business travel encompasses regular and necessary trips that enable individuals to perform profession-based tasks, such as computer engineers travelling to resolve issues at a company branch. These journeys are typically undertaken alone, and the destination is generally non-negotiable. In contrast, business tourism includes meetings, exhibitions, incentive trips, and corporate hospitality, where venue choices are often flexible and associated with group travel, such as university teachers attending a conference together. Jones (2013) further refines this distinction at the company level, categorizing corporate movements as either internal (employee travel within a firm's operational network) or external (mobility between companies, typically involving clients, suppliers, or subsidiaries).

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2025) offers an authoritative contemporary definition, characterizing business tourism as "a type of tourism activity in which visitors travel for a specific professional and/or business purpose to a place outside their workplace and residence with the aim of attending a meeting, an activity or an event." The UNWTO explicitly identifies meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions (MICE) as the key components of business tourism, noting that the term "meetings industry" within this context recognizes the industrial nature of such activities. Furthermore, business tourism can be combined with any other tourism type

during the same trip, acknowledging the increasingly blurred boundaries between professional and leisure travel.

Nicula and Elena (2014, p.1) offer a complementary perspective, describing business tourism as "a form of tourism for commercial, governmental or educational purposes, with the recreational (leisure) part as a secondary motivation." They enumerate various manifestations, including individual trips, group journeys, and displacements at events encompassing meetings, incentives, conventions, exhibitions, team building, and training trips. This multiplicity of formats underscores the heterogeneity of business tourism and the need for nuanced understanding by destinations seeking to attract this segment.

2.2. The Strategic Value of Business Tourism for Destinations

Destinations compete intensely for business tourism due to its multifaceted economic and social benefits. Swarbrooke and Horner (2001) identify several characteristics that render business tourism particularly attractive: low seasonality, controlled environmental impact, higher revenue generation for accommodation and meeting venues, substantial demand for food and beverages (including lunches, gala dinners, and coffee breaks), and the stimulation of leisure activities. Pinho and Marques (2020) elaborate on these advantages, emphasizing that business tourism reduces the typical seasonality of leisure tourism by extending the tourism season and improving accommodation occupancy rates. Additionally, business tourists frequently extend their stays beyond professional obligations to explore destinations and their attractions, potentially returning subsequently for leisure purposes or recommending the destination to their personal and professional networks. Thus, business tourism functions not merely as an alternative to leisure tourism but as a complement, shaping destination image and generating multiplicative effects on economic and social components.

The economic significance of business tourism extends to employment, income generation, and broader macroeconomic impacts. Sugiyarto et al. (2003) argue that tourist arrivals generate various economic effects that require macroeconomic policies at global level, positioning tourism as a global issue. Hajinejad and Ahmadi (2011) contend that business tourism can serve as a catalyst for economic progress in communities facing unfavorable economic conditions, limited income, employment challenges, and insufficient resources for development. Many countries consequently regard this dynamic industry as a major source of income, employment, private sector growth, and infrastructure development. Farajirad et al. (2017) position business tourism as potentially more sustainable than other tourism forms due to its non-seasonal nature and year-round employment creation, while also serving as a driver for destination revitalization through capital attraction that improves infrastructure and overall development. They emphasize that proper and principled planning, adhering to principles

of balance, coordination, promotion, efficiency, correlation, universality, causality, hierarchy, and order, can contribute to social, economic, and physical urban progress.

2.3. Determinants of a Competitive Business Tourism Destination

The competitiveness of a business tourism destination depends upon a complex interplay of factors, which Carvalho et al. (2018) classify as either controllable or uncontrollable. Uncontrollable factors encompass climate and natural disasters, natural environment, physical, cultural and linguistic distance, built environment (architecture, buildings, historical monuments), destination size, and cultural elements. Controllable factors include monetary vacation costs, accessibility, accommodation and meeting equipment, country information, dynamism of leisure tourism, urban commercial and economic regeneration, security, opportunities for cultural and recreational activities, degree of financial and trade openness, dynamism of industry trade and services, hospitality facilities, and local infrastructures.

Hankinson (2005) complements this framework by identifying eight categories of brand images relevant from a business tourist perspective: physical environment, economic activity, business tourism facilities, accessibility, social facilities, reputation, people's characteristics, and destination size. These categories collectively shape the perceived attractiveness of a destination for business purposes.

Accessibility and Transport emerge as critical determinants. Nicula and Elena (2014) note that business travelers prefer flag airlines and prioritize time efficiency, adhering to the "time is money" principle. Airport congestion and frequent delays can deter business tourists, reinforcing accessibility as a key brand image attribute (Nicula & Elena, 2014; Hankinson, 2005). Falk and Hagsten (2018) found that airport proximity is significant for the probability of hosting conferences, though not necessarily for the volume of meetings held.

Infrastructure and Venues constitute another fundamental pillar. Falk and Hagsten (2018) identify the availability of suitable conference venues as a potential unmeasured factor explaining why certain cities attract more meetings than their destination attributes would predict. Marques and Pinho (2021) emphasize the strategic advantage conferred by reference venues such as Alfândega do Porto Congress Centre, which offers 10,000m² for exhibitions, capacity for congresses up to 3000 people, dinners for 1700, and concerts for 12,000, alongside the Crystal Palace venue hosting up to 8000 people for business events. Conference venues represent a strategic mechanism for enhancing city competitiveness as business tourism destinations.

Knowledge Intensity and Business Environment significantly influence destination attractiveness. Falk and Hagsten (2018) demonstrate that cities with characteristics attracting general

visitors are also attractive for international meetings, particularly when knowledge-intensive with leading universities and foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows. They found that cultural offerings (top museums, world heritage sites), knowledge intensity (highly ranked universities), FDI presence in accommodation, and city size constitute the most important factors for both becoming a conference host and determining the number of meetings held. Notably, cities hosting international organizations achieve the highest conference numbers, although global networks alone prove insufficiently attractive.

Leisure and Cultural Offerings function as complementary assets enhancing destination competitiveness. Falk and Hagsten (2018) identify cultural offerings as significant determinants of conference hosting potential. Marques and Santos (2017) emphasize that business tourism encompasses activities ranging from specific equipment and structures (conference centers, meeting rooms, accommodation, catering, transport) to complementary activities related to cultural and sporting events, and small and large commerce. Pinho and Marques (2020) confirm that complementary leisure and recreation activities are highly valued by business travelers alongside conference venues, business hotels, and transportation systems.

2.4. Stakeholders in the Business Tourism Ecosystem

The development and management of business tourism destinations involve multiple stakeholders whose coordinated action determines success. Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and specifically Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs) play pivotal roles in the supply structure related to territory and in the management, planning, and development of tourism destinations, particularly those aspiring to become successful business tourism destinations (Marques & Santos, 2016).

Marques and Ribeiro (2017) elucidate the specific functions of CVBs, describing them as dominant factors requiring appreciation not only for their specialization and qualification in managing business tourism offers and attracting business events, but also for luring events to destinations, increasing visitor numbers, and optimizing tourist experience and satisfaction. They distinguish between Convention Bureaus (CBs), which focus more narrowly on attracting and managing business events, and Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs), which may encompass broader activities including managing and developing overall tourist experiences. Marques and Santos (2017) further emphasize that CVB presence represents an organizational structure specialized in managing territory-associated resources and developing and promoting destination image within this specific segment, striving to attract not only more meetings, conferences, and events but also the maximum possible

number of visitors. Interaction and cooperation among diverse stakeholders, local communities, and environmental influences contribute to regional sustainability and economic and social development.

Hotels and Travel Agencies constitute fundamental private sector stakeholders. Martins et al. (2024) provide concrete evidence from Portugal, revealing that 54% of Portuguese hotels possess at least one meeting room and can thus be classified as business hotels. Among these, 65.9% belong to superior categories (49% four-star and 16.9% five-star hotels), indicating business traveler preference for higher service quality. Their research documents increasing numbers of four- and five-star hotels, suggesting investment trends toward higher-level business hotels. Furthermore, 67% of business hotels feature at least one leisure facility, with 18.6% offering multiple facilities, while 75% of non-business hotels lack any leisure facilities. Half of Portuguese business hotels provide gyms or outdoor swimming pools. Geographically, most business hotels are concentrated in Lisbon (106 hotels) and Porto (49 hotels) municipalities.

Investment and Policy frameworks shape the enabling environment for business tourism development. Carvalho et al. (2018) argue that business tourism revenues can grow through private investment in fixed tourist capital and foreign direct investment. They identify two actor groups with investment interest: economic agents (tourism industry companies) who should focus investments on value-creating equipment across the tourism chain—transport (buses, taxis, car rental), accommodation, meetings and catering (hotels, restaurants), entertainment and culture (bars, nightclubs, shops, sports facilities, amusement and theme parks, theatres, museums); and policymakers (governments and local authorities) who should develop policies encouraging private investment in fixed tourism capital, including investment support programs, licensing facilitation, tax and labor incentives for businesses, and foreign investment support programs. Beyond fixed assets, Carvalho et al. (2018) emphasize that service quality constitutes a strategic success factor, as loyalty and positive references derive from service quality and business tourist satisfaction. Policymakers can support professional training in hospitality and tourism and establish marketing research mechanisms (surveys in hotels or congress centers) to better understand tourist needs and evaluate destination satisfaction.

2.5. The Business and Bleisure Traveler Profile

Understanding the business traveler has become increasingly complex as boundaries between professional and leisure motivations blur. Traditional business traveler preferences emphasize service quality, efficiency, and reliability. Martins et al. (2024) confirm that business travelers prefer higher service quality levels during destination stays, explaining the concentration of business tourism accommodation in four- and five-star hotels.

The concept of bleisure (business combined with leisure) has gained prominence, reflecting travelers who initiate travel with business motivations but incorporate non-business activities. Lichy and McLeay (2018) conducted four-phase multi-method qualitative research identifying five traveler types based on interests and motivations:

- Experiential learners: often young managers or early career researchers seeking learning experiences
- Escapers: individuals seeking autonomy and respite from routine
- Working vacationers: holiday makers who combine work and pleasure while respecting professional obligations
- Altruistic knowledge sharers: senior academics eager to share knowledge while traveling
- Research-active trailblazers: career builders seeking professional development through research publication in ranked journals

Lichy and McLeay (2018) observe that while many hotels and service suppliers recognize business tourism importance and motivate business travelers to extend trips for leisure purposes, many business-tourism-focused travel agencies do not suggest leisure activities to bleisure travelers. Given that bleisure travelers typically have busier schedules than leisure travelers, they recommend targeting Escapers and Working vacationers through service suppliers, while Experiential Learners, Altruistic Knowledge Sharers, and Research-active Trailblazers require customized travel services. They conclude that better understanding of bleisure traveler needs and desires facilitates easier customization of specialist travel services.

Çulfaci et al. (2024) provide quantitative insights into bleisure motivations, identifying "Cultural discovery motivation" (40.54%) as the most frequent motivation for bleisure travel outside family contexts. "Personal Planning" (16.22%) and "Participation in Activities" (13.51%) constitute notable motivational factors. Regarding preferred activities, "Regional culinary exploration" (24.24%) ranks highest, followed by "Using hotel facility" (18.18%) and "architectural and cultural visits" (15.16%).

Tsaur and Tsai (2023) identify four main experience types during bleisure travel:

- Job-related learning experience: motivation for leisure participation enabling knowledge and skill improvement
- Sociocultural experience: assistance from local work partners in understanding local culture and work values, enabling cultural immersion
- Prestige experience: feelings of respect and focused attention during travel
- Smart technology experience: use of online travel agency (OTA) platforms for travel information search and travel applications for purchasing travel products and tickets

Park et al. (2025) identify four restrictions in bleisure travel: time, cost, place, and personal limitations, suggesting that despite growing interest in bleisure, practical constraints continue to shape participation patterns.

Colombo and Marques (2020) emphasize that understanding target group motivations enables event managers to serve attendees more effectively according to their needs. Observing motivation and satisfaction levels provides sufficient information to guarantee need satisfaction and expectation fulfillment. As event numbers increase, event managers, stakeholders, and local tourism organizations must continuously innovate to maintain event success amid competition, requiring creativity and sustained investment in innovation to maintain attendee interest.

2.6. Business Tourism in Portugal: The Case of Porto

2.6.1 National Context

Tourism constitutes a significant factor in Portuguese economic growth, principally through its influence on trade balance (Pinho & Marques, 2021). Portugal's tourism potential—encompassing beaches, museums, history, nature, wines, regional products, culture—generates consequent vast offerings (Fernandes et al., 2023). Marques and Pinho (2021) position Portugal favorably regarding originality and mid-range capacity for hosting conferences and events.

Portugal's Tourism Authority (integrated within the Ministry of Economy) has launched the "Meeting in Portugal Platform," a digital initiative aiming to develop the country as a destination of choice for events and conferences, with particular focus on international and corporate markets (Pinho & Marques, 2020). The northern region offers diverse tourist products ranging from beaches to mountains, thermal resorts, and rural tourism, which has experienced important recent growth (Fernandes et al., 2023).

Marques and Santos (2016) conducted a Delphi study on business tourism in Portugal's central region, finding unanimous agreement among interviewees regarding business tourism's importance for territorial economic development. Respondents highlighted strategic advantages and potential, enumerating advantages including decreasing seasonality through higher hotel occupancy rates, investment and job creation, longer visitor spending duration, lower environmental impact through group trip public transportation, increasing leisure tourism through complementary leisure activities, and meetings industry development. Specific characteristics potentially improving business tourism development included existence of important industrial areas, existence of important universities, geographical location and network access, tourism richness and variety, and existence of proper facilities and venues. Means to improve business tourism encompassed re-qualification and creation of new conference venues, upgrading and developing the hotel industry, wider distribution and

promotion of destination products nationally and internationally, creation of public-private partnerships and synergies, and emphasis on specialized human resources training for high-quality professional tourism service.

2.6.2 Porto's Business Tourism Profile

Marques and Pinho (2021) identify multiple Porto strengths: dynamic business environment, proximity to Spanish Galicia, international airport, scientific and technological development units, diverse tourist attractions and activities enhancing business tourism packages, strong leisure tourist destination reputation, price competitiveness, and friendly population. Porto possesses substantial four-star (24 hotels, 2591 rooms) and five-star (7 hotels, 1305 rooms) accommodation capacity.

The city benefits from reference conference venues: the Alfândega do Porto Congress Centre, recognized nationally and internationally through multiple awards including Europe's Best Meetings & Conference Centre (2014, 2015, Business Destinations), Best Congress Space (2013, 2014, Publituris Portugal Travel Awards), Best Congress Centre (2006, 2011–2013, 2015, Gala de Eventos/ExpoEventos), and Best National Supplier (International Association of Professional Congress Organizers). The Crystal Palace venue accommodates business events up to 8000 people, while the recently requalified Super Bock Arena – Rosa Mota Pavilion enhances Porto's event capacity (Marques & Pinho, 2021).

The Porto and North Tourism Association – Porto Convention & Visitors Bureau (PCVB), founded in 1995 as a non-profit organization, aims to improve Porto and Northern Portugal as tourist destinations and promote prestigious images in international markets (PortoCVB, 2025). Associated entities span diverse categories: food and beverages, accommodation, congress centers and other event venues, wine cellars, Professional Conference Organizers (PCO), destination management companies (DMC), golf, transport, public administration, associations (industrial, commercial), non-profit organizations, and other services encompassing leisure spaces, commercial spaces, and tourist attractions (Marques & Ribeiro, 2017).

Marques and Ribeiro (2017) present Porto's business tourism development potential, emphasizing competitive factors deserving appreciation, particularly Porto's strategic advantages in joining complementary areas for structured tourism product offerings and support services. Marques and Santos (2017) argue that business tourism holds strategic interest for territories with differentiating tourist attractions, which combined with existing venues and CVB work structuring and managing meetings industry offerings, prove important for territorial promotion and strategic positioning in this segment.

2.6.3 Challenges and Development Needs

Pinho and Marques (2021) identify barriers affecting Porto's business tourism development: functional conditioning (business tourism facilities) and management conditioning (individualized rather than cooperative management among tourist agents, insufficient external promotion). Marques and Pinho (2021) found respondents emphasizing three reasons for attributing greater importance to business tourism in Porto: combating seasonality, complementarity with leisure tourism, entrepreneurship and business network. Respondents stressed increasing venue supply and accessibility through more direct and regular flights to Porto and providing more facilities to gain national and international competitiveness.

A second intervention area concerns improving Porto's promotion and sales as a business tourism destination. Despite PCVB existence specifically for improving marketing campaigns with local stakeholders, respondents highlighted needs for multidisciplinary sales teams and professional organizations exclusively dedicated to marketing and international conference attraction, suggesting PCVB performance improvement requirements for stakeholder recognition of efficiency (Marques & Pinho, 2021).

A third intervention area concerns local tourist animation companies, recognizing that venues, accommodation, food and beverage, and transport systems, while important, require complementation by leisure and tourism animation activities for enhanced destination attractiveness. Marques and Pinho (2021) found tendencies toward reduced participant numbers in associative meetings despite increasing meeting numbers, suggesting that investment in new venues requires careful consideration given financial resources and maintenance costs. They advocate requalifying existing venues (exemplified by Super Bock Arena) rather than building new congress centers, prioritizing overall services including venue management, airport logistics, and hospitality management over destination capacity for larger events.

Falk and Hagsten (2018) provide a comparative perspective, noting that among large cities, Copenhagen, Edinburgh, Lisbon, Porto, and Munich receive more meetings than their destination attributes indicate, potentially reflecting unmeasured factors such as conference support infrastructures, suitable venue availability, or historical factors. They emphasize that while some destination elements cannot be changed (heritage sites), others vary slowly over time, requiring long-term strategies affecting city conference profiles, likely requiring close collaboration between conference organizers and policymakers over several years.

Marques and Pinho (2021) conclude that organizations responsible for Porto's business tourism development and tourism businesses must collaborate effectively, though evidence of such collaboration remains limited. They advocate CVB effective action developing stakeholder

cooperation and pressuring local, regional, and national authorities for concerted policies and branding strategies. While some business tourism promotion exists through regional public tourism organizations (Regional Entity of Porto and North), regional tourism associations (Tourism Association of Porto and North), and municipalities, structuring this product more seriously and collaboratively by including diverse services and joint public-private action remains necessary. The city of Porto, serving as anchor for the Northern Region, has strengthened its brand and image through recent years, evidenced by European Consumers Choice Best European Destination selections in 2012, 2014, and 2017 (Marques & Ribeiro, 2017). Francisco Sá Carneiro international airport's internationally recognized quality (Airports Council International distinction for best European airport for 5–15 million passenger structures, 2016), coupled with Porto's Best European Destination 2017 distinction and superior quality venues, positions the city competitively, with joint public-private entity action and articulated ERT and PCVB action potentially achieving development goals.

3. Methodological framework

3.1. Methodology

Once the theoretical framework of the theme is completed, the methodology section will describe and develop the entire research model in more detail. Next, the objectives of the research and the semi-structured interview are presented and analyzed. Then, the results and answers of the interviews will be discussed and analyzed. This section finishes with an analysis of the data collected: the results of the interviews.

Below, there is a model, showing the map of the path of this research.

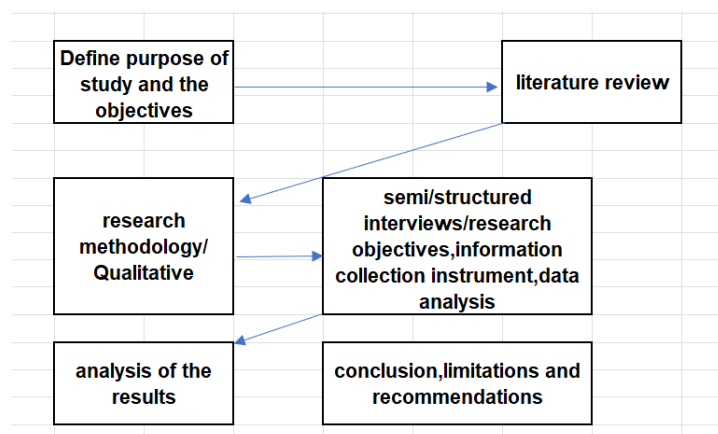


Figure 1. Study Model
Source: own elaboration

3.2. Research problems and objectives:

The general purpose of this study, through collecting data, has the main objective of understanding and exploring the importance of business tourism in Porto from the perspective of local hotels and travel agencies. To achieve the main objective, it is important to define specific objectives that are essential for building a research plan.

General objective	To explore the importance of business tourism in Porto
Specific objective	To understand the percentage of business travelers in hotels / travel agencies in Porto city
	To explore if the hotels / travel agencies in Porto host business travelers for small or big events.
	To understand the main barriers that affect business tourism development in Porto
	To explore the main characteristics of business travelers in Porto city

Table 1. General and specific objectives
Source: own elaboration

3.3. Research Method

The methodology adopted relies on qualitative research, given that, according to Creswell (2013), qualitative research starts with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the pointed individuals or groups attributed to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use a leading qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting of the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. According to Shkedi (2019), there are three principal criteria of qualitative research: the language of words and the natural environment, intuitive inquiry skills and analytical research skills. According to Creswell (2013) the motivations for choosing qualitative research lie in the existence of a problem or issue of the research that needs to be explored. This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silent voices. These are all good reasons to explore a problem rather than to use predetermined

information from literature or rely on results from other research studies. We also choose qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories independent of what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature. Qualitative research also empowers individuals to share their stories, to hear their voices, and minimize the relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study. Furthermore, we may collaborate directly with participants by having them review our research questions, or by having them collaborate with us during the data analysis and interpretation phases of research. We conduct qualitative research because we want to understand the context or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue. We cannot always separate what people say from the place where they say it—whether this context is their home, family, or work. We use qualitative research to follow quantitative research and help explain the mechanisms or linkages in causal theories or models. These theories provide a general picture of trends, associations, and relationships, but they do not tell us about the processes that people experience, why they respond as they did, the context in which they responded, and their deeper thoughts and behaviors that governed their responses. We use qualitative research to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples, or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining. We also use qualitative research because quantitative measures and the statistical analyses simply do not fit the problem.

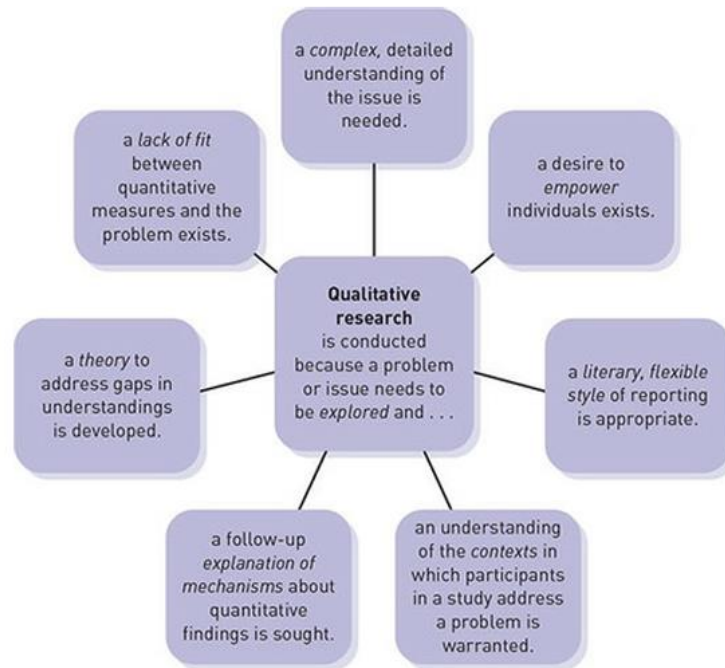


Figure 2. When to use qualitative research
Source: Creswell & Poth (2017)

3.4. Information collection method

According to Torrentira (2020), qualitative research data collection needs a high level of participant-researcher relationship, as this makes the participant to open up himself to a free-flowing conversation. Common data collection techniques for qualitative research include direct observation and face-to-face interviews (individual or groups). Direct observation helps the qualitative researcher involving himself in the day-to-day activities of the participants. Face-to-face interviews on the other hand enable the researcher to instantly acquire data from the participants in the exchanges following the semi-structured questionnaire.

For this research a semi-structured interview was chosen, which will allow us to have, in addition to a script with previously defined questions, some freedom to modify the order or change the form of the questions. A set of 12 open-ended questions were presented to the interviewees in the questionnaire of the interview.

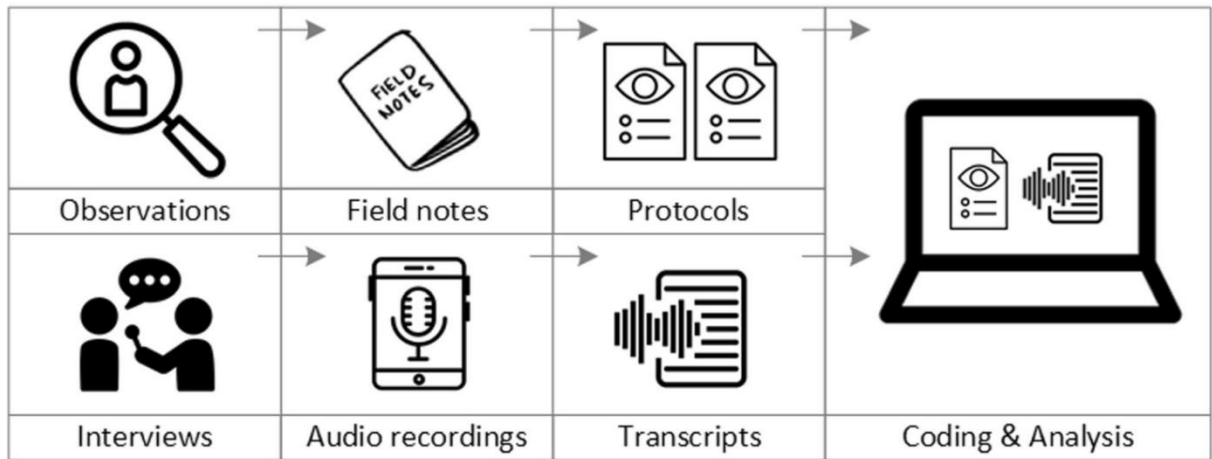


Figure 3. From data collection to data analysis
Source- Busetto et al. (2020)

In the first phase it was important to formulate questions that are related to the specific objectives, based on the literature review, that help to achieve the main objective of this study, as shown in the following table.

Interview question	Theoretical base
objective 1: understand the profile of business travelers	
1. Do business travelers represent an important percentage of your hotel / travel agency occupancy/ sales raIf? If not, would you like to improve that segment?	Marques & Santos (2017) Carvalho et al. (2018) Lichy and McLeay (2018) Marques & Santos (2016) Martins et al. (2024)
2. Do you prefer to have travelers for big events or small events? Why?	Marques & Santos (2017)
3. Do you prefer to have business travelers or leisure tourists? Why?	Pinho & Marques (2020)
	Marques & Santos (2016)
4. Do the business travelers extend their accommodation beyond the business event? Why?	Lichy & McLeay (2018)
	Marques & Santos (2017b)
	Pinho & Marques (2020)
objective 2: understand bleisure traveler´s needs	
1. Do you agree that” a better knowledge of the needs and desires of bleisure (business & leisure) travelers could help to customize travel services more easily? If yes, what do you do to know better this type of travelers?	Lichy & McLeay (2018)
	Marques & Santos (2017b)
	Colombo & Marques (2020)
objective 3: explore marketing strategies for business tourism development	
	Pinho & Marques (2021)

1. In your opinion, what are the main barriers that affect business tourism development in the Porto region?	Carvalho et al. (2018)
2. Do you have any plans to invest in marketing to have more business travelers? Which plan? Why?	Colombo & Marques (2020)
	Carvalho et al. (2018)
3. What are your strategies for continuously attracting business travelers?	Colombo & Marques (2020)
	Carvalho et al. (2018)
objective 4: explore regional DMO 's cooperation	
1. How can the regional DMO increase the bleisure segment in the region?	Falk & Hagsten (2018)
	Marques & Santos (2016)
	Marques & Santos (2017)
	Haven-Tang & Al. (2007)
	Marques & Ribeiro (2017)
2. How is the cooperation of public organization with your company?	Marques & Santos (2016)
	Sugiyarto et al. (2003)
	Haven-Tang et al.(2007)
	Pinho & Marques (2020)
	Marques & Ribeiro (2017)

Table 2. Theoretical basis of the interview questions
Source: own elaboration

The target population of this research was hotels and travel agencies located in Porto city. Although at first the target population was local hotels and travel agencies, due to the difficulty to find the managers of local travel agencies who have an interest in this research, there is only an opinion of one travel agency which mainly works on business tourism in different scales and in this research this travel agency works as an exploratory example, comparing with the answers of the hotels. Basically, it is necessary that qualitative research be reliable and rigorous. And sample size has a vital role in the validity of the research (Rego et al., 2019). Sample size in a qualitative study is generally influenced by the specificity of the sample, which means the number of participants. In other words, “more specific samples require more homogeneous characteristic”, leading to smaller participant sizes. The size of a sample also depends on the quality of the conversation with participants. In some studies, the researcher has good access to the field, which allows them to obtain good information from a smaller number of participants. When respondents are resistant and grudging, it may be necessary to increase the sample size and search for a larger number of participants (Rego et al., 2019).

The qualitative method is mostly about conducting research based on data, not hypotheses. Therefore, it is important to present and explain the entire process. Claiming to have conducted many interviews but not translating them into something visible (usually in the form of tables) has little

value. As a conclusion, presenting the analysis process is more important than the number of participants (Rego et al., 2019). In this way, the interviews are aimed at all the hotels and travel agencies located in Porto city that, directly or indirectly, have contact with business tourism in Porto city which constitute the sample of this study as well.

In the following table, we can see the age of the interviewees is between 27– 51, with an average of 13 years of professional experience. In relation to academic qualifications, all have higher education qualifications. It was also important in this analysis to understand what functions they currently perform, which are mostly directors.

N	Role of the interviewee	Profession al experience	Academic qualifications
1	Operations coordinator of a 4-star hotel	15	Bachelor degree
2	Marketing and sales manager of a 5-star hotel	15	Master degree
3	sales manager of a 4star hotel	15	Master degree
4	Technical manager of a travel agency	15	Bachelor degree
5	Account Manager of a 4-star hotel	15	NA
6	Account Manager of a 4-star hotel	15	NA
7	sales manager of a 4-star hotel	15	Master degree
8	sales manager of a 4- star hotel	15	Master degree
9	sales manager of a 5 –star hotel	15	Master degree
10	sales manager of a 5 –star hotel	15	Master degree

Table 3. Characterization of the participants
Source- Own elaboration

Through the analysis of the interviews, and particularly the four themes identified in table 5, it is possible to identify and understand the various points of view of the interviewees on certain themes that meet the objectives of the study.

Interview topics for analysis
1. Business traveler’s profile (Purpose of topic- Identify the profile of business travelers and the opinion of hotels and travels agencies about them)

2. Bleisure traveler's need (Purpose of topic- Identify the needs of bleisure traveler)
3. Business tourism development (Purpose of topic- Identify the ways the barriers for development and the strategies the hotels and travel agencies use to attract more business travelers)
4 Regional DMO cooperation (Purpose of topic- Identify the cooperations of regional DMO)

Table 4. Interview topics for analysis
Source- Own elaboration

4. Results

This section presents the findings derived from the semi-structured interviews conducted with hotels and travel agencies in Porto. The analysis is organized according to the four topics identified in Table 4, which correspond directly to the research objectives. Within each thematic subsection, the responses from all interviewees are synthesized to provide a coherent narrative of the findings, with illustrative quotes serving to exemplify key points rather than constituting the primary structure.

4.1. Business Traveler Profile

The first topic aimed to identify the profile of business travelers in Porto and understand how hotels and travel agencies perceive this segment. All interviewees acknowledged the importance of business tourism, though its significance varied considerably depending on the location and characteristics of their establishments.

Interviewees from hotels situated in Porto's business district reported that business travelers represent a substantial portion of their occupancy. One respondent indicated that business travel accounts for approximately 70% of total annual occupancy (Interviewee 9), confirming the growth trend identified by Nicula and Elena (2014) regarding the expanding business tourism market. However, hotels located in the historical city center reported a different reality, with leisure tourism dominating their occupancy patterns. This geographical variation aligns with Marques and Santos's (2016) observation that location constitutes a specific characteristic potentially improving or limiting business tourism development.

Regarding event size preferences, respondents' answers reflected the physical constraints of their facilities. Hotels with limited meeting space expressed preference for smaller events, which allow for greater flexibility and personalized service. Conversely, establishments with larger conference facilities welcomed both small and large events, recognizing the distinct advantages of each. Larger

events were valued for their substantial food and beverage revenues, confirming Swarbrooke and Horner's (2001) observation regarding the high demand for catering services in business tourism. As one respondent noted, considerable F&B revenue can substantially offset departmental costs during larger events (Interviewee 2).

The tendency identified by Marques and Pinho (2021) regarding reduced participant numbers in associative meetings alongside increased meeting frequency received limited confirmation, with only one respondent explicitly agreeing with this observation. This interviewee attributed the trend to post-pandemic behavioral changes, noting: "Yes, I agree. Especially since Covid, we've seen fewer large-scale events, but the number of smaller meetings has increased. I think people felt they owed it to themselves after spending so much time at home. There's now a stronger desire to reconnect in person, even if in smaller groups" (Interviewee 6).

All respondents confirmed that business travelers frequently extend their stays beyond professional obligations, corroborating Pinho and Marques's (2020) assertion regarding extended destination stays. The primary motivations cited for extensions included exploring the city, experiencing local gastronomy, and cultural discovery. These findings align with Çulfaci et al.'s (2024) identification of cultural discovery and regional culinary exploration as principal bleisure motivations. One interviewee articulated the transformative potential of these extensions:

"Business tourism is not a person who comes here, goes to a meeting and then goes home. Now, he comes here, he tries a restaurant, he tries a bar, he goes to some museum, and he/she goes home with an image and this image, we are trying this image be more significant for the people to come back as with family or alone or maybe with a friend" (Interviewee 1).

This perspective directly supports Marques and Santos's (2017) findings that business tourists extending their stays often return as individual tourists or recommend destinations to their personal and professional networks.

4.2. Bleisure Traveler Needs

The second topic explored how hotels and travel agencies understand and respond to the needs of bleisure travelers, those combining business with leisure activities. All respondents unanimously agreed that deeper knowledge of bleisure travelers' needs facilitates service customization, confirming Lichy and McLeay's (2018) assertion regarding the importance of understanding this segment.

The strategies employed to identify these needs varied considerably across establishments. Some respondents described systematic approaches, including post-stay surveys and feedback

collection mechanisms, while others relied on more informal methods such as attentive observation during guest interactions and casual conversations. The travel agency representative emphasized that attentiveness constitutes the fundamental requirement for understanding client needs: "you have to pay attention, to see what you can offer the clients, to satisfy the client" (Interviewee 4). This approach reflects Colombo and Marques's (2020) emphasis on observation as a critical tool for understanding target group motivations and ensuring need satisfaction.

Several interviewees noted that business travelers demonstrate distinctive characteristics distinguishing them from pure leisure tourists. Business travelers were described as having greater disposable income, heightened sensitivity to destination attributes, and deeper engagement with local culture. One respondent characterized them as follows:

"The business travelers normally, are more dedicated to the destination they travel. They have more money to spend. They are more sensitive to the territory, the destination, the culture, everything they're going to visit" (Interviewee 10).

This characterization aligns with Martins et al.'s (2024) findings that business travelers prefer higher service quality levels and with the higher spending patterns associated with business tourism in the literature.

4.3. Business Tourism Development: Barriers and Strategies

The third topic examined the barriers affecting business tourism development in Porto and the strategies employed by hotels and travel agencies to attract and retain business travelers.

4.3.1 Barriers to Development

Respondents identified several barriers constraining business tourism development in Porto. The most frequently mentioned concerned air connectivity, with multiple interviewees expressing dissatisfaction with flight connections operating from Porto Airport. Despite Marcucci and Gatta's (2012) emphasis on Porto Airport's privileged location and dynamism, respondents perceived significant limitations in connection frequency, particularly during winter months. One interviewee stated:

"The most important is the connections airline that operating the city, the amount of connection flights they do weekly. So, that's a big barrier" (Interviewee 2).

This finding supports Nicula and Elena's (2014) observation regarding business traveler preference for flag airlines and the importance of accessibility as a key determinant and brand image attribute for business tourism destinations.

Infrastructure limitations emerged as another significant barrier. Despite Marques and Pinho's (2021) identification of Alfândega do Porto Congress Centre and Crystal Palace as reference venues providing competitive advantage, interviewees perceived a need for additional congress facilities. One respondent explained:

"Because if you see the infrastructure that we have like Palacio de Bolsa, like Alfândega, they are places that have some limitation. It's a thing that must be changed because there are few places or few hotels with meeting rooms or places like Alfândega, there are not that many places" (Interviewee 1).

Urban construction works in the city center were mentioned as a temporary but significant barrier, creating traffic congestion and accessibility challenges that potentially deter business travelers (Interviewee 4). Additionally, one respondent suggested that Porto's business tourism offering requires greater creativity to provide distinctive experiences, echoing Colombo and Marques's (2020) call for continuous innovation to maintain attendee interest.

4.3.2 Strengths and Competitive Advantages

Despite these barriers, respondents acknowledged Porto's substantial strengths as a business tourism destination. Consistent with Marques and Pinho (2021) and Marques and Ribeiro (2017), interviewees highlighted price competitiveness, service quality, welcoming population, infrastructure quality, and airport internationalization as significant advantages. One respondent contrasted Porto favorably with larger European destinations:

"What is the difference that it makes from Porto for example to Madrid is prices. In Porto, business tourists feel that it is excellent service, like welcoming people, like infrastructure that we have, it is well connected to the city by transportation. We have the airport which become even more international" (Interviewee 1).

The higher revenue potential of business tourism, noted by Swarbrooke and Horner (2001), was confirmed by multiple respondents. One interviewee explained that corporate travelers typically

pay higher rates due to limited date flexibility and specific travel requirements (Interviewee 6), reinforcing the economic attractiveness of this segment.

4.3.3 Attraction Strategies

Regarding strategies for continuously attracting business travelers, respondents reported participating in MICE events, maintaining relationships with corporate travel agencies, offering specialized corporate rates, and implementing online advertising targeting corporate clients. These approaches reflect the marketing orientation emphasized by Colombo and Marques (2020) and the investment in fixed tourist capital discussed by Carvalho et al. (2018).

4.4. Regional DMO Cooperation

The fourth topic explored how hotels and travel agencies perceive their cooperation with regional Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), particularly regarding business tourism development.

All respondents expressed positive views regarding the work of Porto's regional DMO (Regional Entity of Porto and North), acknowledging efforts to strengthen the city's brand and image. One interviewee stated: "I think it's a good work that has been done so far from our tourism in Porto, here in Porto and in Portugal" (Interviewee 2). This positive assessment aligns with PortoCVB's (2025) stated mission and with Marques and Ribeiro's (2017) documentation of Porto's strengthened brand image, evidenced by multiple Best European Destination awards.

However, respondents also identified areas requiring improvement. Consistent with Marques and Pinho's (2021) findings regarding the need for enhanced promotion and sales of Porto as a business tourism destination, several interviewees suggested that current promotional efforts require additional resources and diversification. One respondent noted: *"But they need more money to afford, another kind of promotion and diversified strategies"* (Interviewee 3).

The need for more structured collaboration between public and private stakeholders emerged implicitly from several responses. While acknowledging existing promotional activities by regional public tourism organizations, tourism associations, and municipalities, the findings suggest that more systematic and collaborative product structuring, involving venues, accommodation, catering, transport, tourist attractions, and complementary activities, remains necessary. This observation supports Pinho and Marques's (2021) identification of management conditioning—specifically individualized rather than cooperative management among tourist agents and insufficient external promotion—as a barrier to business tourism development in Porto.

The results demonstrate that business tourism occupies a significant but uneven position across Porto's hospitality sector, with location fundamentally shaping establishments' exposure to this segment. Business travelers consistently exhibit higher spending patterns and frequently extend stays for leisure purposes, confirming the strategic value of this segment for destinations. However, Porto's business tourism development faces constraints related to air connectivity, venue infrastructure, and promotional resources. While regional DMOs receive positive assessments for their branding efforts, respondents identify needs for enhanced cooperation and diversified promotional strategies to fully realize Porto's potential as a competitive business tourism destination.

5. Conclusions

This work explores the concept of business tourism that is increasingly known and developed in today's tourism industry, reinforcing its importance in Porto city from the perspective of hotels and local travel agencies. To achieve the main objective, a set of specific aims were outlined, such as exploring the business traveler's profile, exploring the bleisure traveler's needs, understanding the challenges and strategies of the development of business tourism, and exploring the cooperations of regional DMOs. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative approach was selected that focused on the application of 10 semi-structured interviews to different 4-and-5-stars hotels and a travel agency manager as the exploratory sample, via zoom, or face-to-face, to know their perspective on the evolution and development of business tourism in Porto. The results show that they also grasp the importance of business tourism for the tourism sector in Porto city, they have some opinions in accordance with previous studies and some new points of view. It is also important to highlight that the main advantage of this research study is the diversity of perspectives of the various stakeholders: from 4- and 5-star hotels located in the business area of the city, to luxury 5 stars located in the historical center of Porto, to travel agency director as an exploratory sample, made the study even richer, taking into account the differences between these areas.

Considering the first research objective, to understand the profile of business travelers, all interviewees are asked a few related questions, such as, the percentage of the business travelers they have in their companies and if they want to improve this percentage, the main part of business travelers is for small or big events and if there is any preference between these two types. Although all the respondents agree on the importance of business tourism for their business, this segment is not the most important segment for all of them. The reason that business tourism is not the most important for all of them, as they mention, is the location of the company, in this case, the location of hotels, that does not allow to attract business travelers. As the interviewees (2) and (3) stated, despite having congress rooms in their hotels, there is more of a tendency to have leisure travelers as they are historical

city center located, which is justified by the authors (Marques & Santos, 2016), who consider geographical location as one of the specific characteristics that may improve the development of business tourism. Then as Pyka (2021) talks about the importance of events and that the meetings and event sector are a driver to transform an industrial agglomeration into a modern metropolitan area, the respondents are asked if they have the business traveler for big or small events and if they have any preference for it. Depending on the size of their buildings and the facilities the interviewees have in their company, the size of the events they have, or the preference differs, for example respondents (2) and (5) prefer to hold small events.

The interviewees are also asked if business travelers extend their stay beyond the event and the reason. All the respondents have had some cases of the extensions, and the reason mentioned is getting to know the city and the gastronomy, like Çulfaci et al. (2024), mention “Cultural discovery motivation” and “Regional culinary exploration” as two of the main motivations for the extension of the business travel.

Considering objective 2, understanding business traveler’s needs, according to all the interviewees, a better knowledge of the business travelers’ needs help to provide better service as the authors Lichy and McLeay (2018) believe that knowing the needs and desires of business travelers help service suppliers to customize specialist travel services more easily. The differences are in the strategies they use to find out these needs as some have more specific strategies while others only find out the needs by paying attention or asking random questions.

In the analysis of objective 3, we explored marketing strategies for business tourism development, and the interviewees were first asked about the barriers to business tourism in Porto. Some of the respondents do not see any special barrier to such development and they are satisfied with the tourism business demand, while other respondents mention the construction work that is taking place in the city center, causing a lot of traffic jams, which is a barrier to development. Also, flight connections that during winter season become less and there are not enough operations of flag airlines in Porto airport point to what authors Nicula and Elena (2014) state as the preference of business travelers for flag airlines connection. Regarding the strategies for business tourism development, and according to Masoumi et al. (2020) who refer to the importance of marketing and using new marketing methods, the interviewees are asked about the strategies they use to continuously attract business travelers to their companies. They mention participating in MICE events, corporate events, cooperating with corporate travel agencies, offering corporate rates to business travelers and having online advertisement for corporate travelers.

In the objective 4, exploring regional DMO cooperation, all the interviewees agree on the good work done by the local DMO (Regional Entity for Porto and North). There are some suggestions made

by some interviewees that the regional DMO may need an increasing budget to invest in other forms of developing Porto as a business destination, as Marques and Pinho (2021) state in their article that there should be a diversified and specialized promotion of Porto as a business tourism destination.

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