

## The Role of Proximity in the Cooperation of the Actors of Tourism: Qualitative Study of the City of Tangier

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### Abstract:

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This paper is an attempt to study the nature of the relationship between proximity in its different dimensions with the cooperation of tourism stakeholders, heterogeneous actors with divergent interests, through, first, review of literature which deals with different facets of this issue, and secondly, a qualitative exploratory study of tourism stakeholders in the city of Tangier, in order to assess the role of proximity in the cooperation of actors from different positions in the chain of tourist values of the city.

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**Key words:** proximity, cooperation, tourism, actors, territory.

### 1. Introduction

Tourism industry is characterized by the heterogeneity of the actors compared to the homogeneity of the offer with actors-operators (*composite*). An industry that can be considered fragmented with many different organizations offering accommodation, attractions, restaurants, shops, travel agencies, a variety of products and services provided by actors from different sectors of activity in a limited geographic area. The organization of tourism requires that private and public actors agree to modify their own mode of operation to create the framework of a transversal logic of actions and set up common procedures for action between institutions and specialized professional actors. The proximity approach should allow us to understand how coordination arrangements are implemented and what the obstacles that prevent concerted actions are.

According to Talbot (2009b), individuals located in a geographical area share "common sense because of identical location". These individuals, forming a group located, they appropriate and share the geographical space they are endowed with representations, customs, etc. According to Pecqueur (1997), "coordination processes are based on the construction of a common frame of reference". The appropriate space, place, creates a feeling of belonging, and therefore "to claim a place is to claim a social group, by association" (Talbot, 2009b). Individuals endow the geographic space with a cognitive dimension that influences the "process of construction - or destruction - of identities in the sense that it is a component of the relationship to others" (Pecqueur (1997) cited by Talbot (2009b)).

In this paper, we are interested in the role that the proximity with its different facets can play in the cooperation of tourism actors of the city of Tangier. To reach our goal, we have mobilized an exploratory qualitative case study.

### 2. Literature review

The proximity approach seeks to understand who is close to who or what, and what to share to act together (Talbot, 2009b). This approach consists of apprehending the organization of tourism taking into account its environment. According to Bouba-Olga and Grossetti (2008), three phases punctuated the evolution of proximity types from the beginning of the 1990s until the end of the 2000s. In the first phase, which they call "the proliferation", the concept of proximity has declined in many forms.

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However, this phase has seen the emergence of a distinction which is still present in many works, between spatial proximity and non-spatial proximity. Over the course of research, the notion of spatial proximity has evolved because the two terms form a tautology (a proximity is spatial). The latter has been declined in physical proximity (Veltz, 1995). Proximity refers to the distance between the actors. It is therefore "relative to the scale of analysis and is socially constructed" (Carrincazeaux and Lung, 1998). The authors consider that there are different scales of geographic proximity: national, regional, agglomeration level, city or building level. Bouba-Olga and Grossetti (2008) indicate that this proximity "can be evaluated by physical distances, transport times, transport costs, communication costs". The authors explain that the researcher can define the threshold studied a priori according to the membership to a territory or deduced according to the distance below which actors can meet.

In our study, we start from the threshold defined a priori at the regional level to determine the size of the tourist territory a posteriori. Non-spatial proximity has grown more in the Dynamics of the proximities group<sup>3</sup>. Gilly and Torre (2000) discuss organizational proximity. Pecqueur and Zimmermann (2004), then Torre and Rallet (2005), prefer to speak of organized proximity, which implies a distinction between the organization and the organizer. They define organized proximity as "the ability of an organization to interact with its members". They specify that the organization represents any form of structure such as a company, a social network, etc. This multiplication of forms or their titles has made the reading and application of the approach by the proximities more complex.

In the second phase, "that of tightening," the proximity has been reduced to three and then to two forms. Thus, the group retains the spatial, organizational and institutional proximities and then makes a distinction between physical proximity. That is to say, "separation in space and links in terms of distances", and organizational proximity structure which concerns "economic separation in space and links in terms of the organization of production" (Gilly and Torre, 2000).

Since this distinction is restrictive, certain forms of proximity have been reintroduced « no longer in a horizontal typology as in the first stage, but in a vertical step of successive differentiation (segmentation if we prefer) by adding hierarchical criteria ». (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008). For example, some authors (Gilly and Torre, 2000, Torre and Rallet, 2005) add to the organizational proximity, an offshoot in which they distinguish a logic of belonging and similarity. The authors note that the two logics are complementary and substitutable. The first "results in the existence of interactions between its members, inscribed in the genes (routines) of the organization" (Torre and Rallet, 2005). Cooperation is facilitated if individuals belong to the same company, group or network. The second, the logic of similarity, brings together actors "deemed to share the same system of representation, or set of beliefs, and the same knowledge" (Torre and Rallet, 2005). As a result, "the institutional dimension is important" (Gilly and Torre, 2000).

Pecqueur and Zimmermann (2004) consider that the coordination of actors "supposes the existence of coordination mechanisms, on which agents rely, which define and carry the conditions of their interdependencies. These devices may or may not be, for all or part, spatialized in the sense of geographical proximity of the agents concerned". Spatial and non-spatial proximity is described as "the ability of agents who share it to coordinate" (Pecqueur and Zimmermann, 2004). The two authors define the spatial dimension of proximity, geographical proximity, as the "respective positioning of localized agents". For the non-spatial dimension, they refer to organized proximity as the "respective positioning of agents in terms of coordination potential" (Pecqueur and Zimmermann, 2004). They distinguish within the latter organizational proximity (coordination is based on direct interactions) and institutional (coordination is based on institutions). Institutional proximity is in turn divided between norms and standards. Pecqueur and Zimmermann (2004) differentiate the institutions that impose themselves on all the actors and others that owe their existence to the acknowledged recognition of the actors concerned such as the ISO<sup>4</sup> standards, the language, the culture, the industrial sector. Indeed, for Pecqueur and Zimmermann (2004), "such modes of coordination are based on institutions (in the sense of North (1990)), as a set of codes, formal rules and informal constraints).

<sup>3</sup>The group "Dynamics of proximity", is interested in the spatial dimensions of the phenomena of economic organization and whose objective is to endogenize the spatial variable in the economic analysis. Various collective works have been carried out within this framework (Bellet, Colletis, Lung, 1993, Rallet and Torre, 1995, Bellet, Kirat, LARGERON, 1998, Gilly and Torre, 1998, Gilly and Torre, 2000b).

<sup>4</sup>ISO, the International Organization for Standardization, establishes documents that define requirements, specifications, guidelines, or features that are routinely used to ensure the suitability of materials, products, processes, and services.

The individual membership of the agents generates a "common space of representations, rules of action and patterns of thought and action". In contrast, "organizations constitute a space for defining the practices and strategies of agents within a set of rules carried by institutions" (Kirat and Lung, 1995).

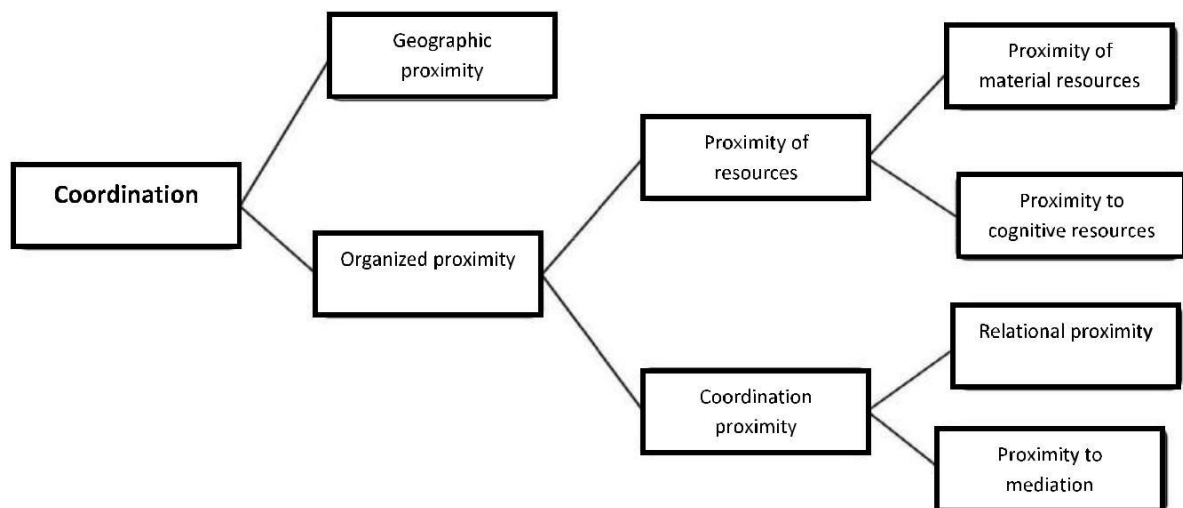
We summarize the different types of proximity developed by the researchers belonging to the "Dynamics of Proximity" group on the table below:

**Table 1: The declination of proximities in the publications of the group Dynamiques de proximité, according to Dynamics of the proximities group**

| Proximities                  | Geographical | Organizational | Organized | Institutional | Other       |
|------------------------------|--------------|----------------|-----------|---------------|-------------|
| Rallet, Colletis, Lung, 1993 | X            | X              |           |               | Territorial |
| Kirat, Lung, 1995            | X            | X              |           | X             | Technology  |
| Gilly, Torre, 2000           | X            | X              |           |               |             |
| Rallet, 2002                 | X            |                | X         |               |             |
| Burmeister, 2003             | √            |                | √         |               |             |
| Pecqueur, Zimmermann, 2004   | X            | X              | X         |               | Relational  |

We inscribe our work in the typology of the proximalist approach developed by Bouba-Olga and Grossetti. The interest of the typology developed by Bouba-Olga and Grossetti (2008) resides on the one hand in the unified vision of the proximalist approach and on the other hand, taking into account actors at different levels (individuals and organizations). From the previous analyses and developments formulated by the group of proximity dynamics, the dimensions of the concept of proximity are refined. The set of typologies proposed by the proximalist approach is based on the "founding distinction" between spatial proximity and non-spatial proximity. However, the authors do not develop geographic proximity. Their work focuses on breaking down organized proximity (which he also calls socio-economic proximity) to derive indicators. This typology highlights the non-geographical dimensions of proximity in the relations between actors sometimes inserted into institutional frameworks.

**Figure 1: typology of proximity according to Bouba-Olga and Grossetti (2008)**



This typology introduces organized proximity that also has a potential that can be activated or mobilized. Organized proximity refers to different ways of being close to other actors, regardless of the degree of proximity between individuals, the "organized" qualifier referring to the organized nature of human activities (and not to the fact that may belong to a particular organization).

Organized proximity rests on two main logics, which do not necessarily contradict each other, and which we will call the "logic of belonging" and the "logic of similarity". Both can help build relationships of trust, as they help stakeholders build a set of common references, and interpersonal connections among participants in a common project, for example. Bouba-Olga and Grossetti (2008) propose in their typology (Figure 1) a segmentation of proximities from the simplest interaction level, namely between two individuals. They consider that two individuals may be close because they are similar or complementary. We first talked about proximity of resources.

In this case, the analysis focuses on the individual characteristics of their activities and resources. The analysis focuses on "networks or devices that structure the coordination" (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008). That is to say, the elements that slow down or promote their coordination outside of individual characteristics. In this case we speak of coordination proximity. According to Bouba-Olga and Grossetti (2008), the proximity of resources requires individuals to share similar characteristics or to be complementary (we are talking about similarity and complementarity). The proximity of resources is then decomposed into proximity of material resources and proximity of cognitive resources. To justify this new ramification, the authors specify what they mean by these resources.

Resources represent both a constraint (financial resources for example), because their characteristics limit the action of the actor, and an issue (economic or political for example) to the extent that they can be coveted by others. Thus, resources can be immaterial (information, knowledge, rules, norms, etc.) and material (tools, energies, infrastructures, etc.).

The proximity of material resources reflects the fact that individuals are "similar or complementary in terms of the resources they have (assets, income, diplomas, social status, etc.)" (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008). The authors speak of classical social proximity in the sense of Bourdieu and explain that two kings are "socially" closer than they are with their own valet. Bouba-Olga and Grossetti (2008) use the example of language to illustrate intangible resources. Language represents a resource both individual and collective since each individual must control it personally and then share it within a group through their exchanges.

Consequently, "certain resources have the particularity of being essentially present in the minds of individual actors" (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008) and constitute the cognitive dimension of the proximity of resources which represents "a similarity or complementarity of values, "self-evident", projects, routines, conventions, referents, etc. [...]" (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008). They attribute to cognitive resources a "shareable" character and indicate that individuals mobilize them in order to coordinate their actions. Cognitive proximity refers to "everything that happens in people's heads" (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008). Thus, this type of proximity concerns only the resources of the individual. The authors note that, in certain situations, spatial proximity reinforces cognitive proximity and facilitates the exchange of information. In the case where two companies are distant geographically, they can share a sectoral culture that facilitates the flow of knowledge. In order to identify the role of cognitive proximity, it is necessary to analyze the discourses and practices of the actors.

Within the proximity of coordination, (which concerns all the elements that slow down or favor the coordination of individuals apart from the individual characteristics) Bouba-Olga and Grossetti (2008) operate a new segmentation and distinguish the relational proximity proximity closeness. This distinction stems from the work of Granovetter (1973, 1983) on the "strength of weak links". Granovetter defines weak links as the relationship between an individual and distant acquaintance such as a friend of a friend. This weak link is a bridge between an individual and a group he can access. The weak links are more open and allow to build bridges between groups of actors. Thus, the individuals are transmitted all the more new information that their meetings are less frequent. On the other hand, in a network of strong relationships (friend, family), individuals meet frequently and information circulates redundantly among its members.

Relational proximity is defined by the "position of the different actors in the networks" (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008). The greater or lesser distance separating the actors in this chain of personal relationships represents the inter-organizational relational proximity. According to these two authors, this proximity is based on interindividual relational proximity. Two individuals from the same school can bring the two organizations they work with closer together to solve a problem. The relational inter-organizational proximity link would not be broken when one of the two individuals leaves his / her functions (decoupling process).

Bouba-Olga and Grossetti (2008) define a second type of coordination resource: proximity to mediation. In this case, the actors coordinate themselves without using their social networks, Granovetter as an example. In order to fill a position, a company will submit a job application to a recruitment firm or publish an advertisement. For its part, the individual responds to offers by sending unsolicited applications directly to companies or recruitment agencies. The means of communication (Internet, post office, telephone, etc.), communication media (newspapers, web page, etc.) and "human intermediaries of recruitment and placement organizations" (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008) constitute the mediation resources. This type of proximity is supported by cognitive resources (languages, social norms, etc.) at the collective level. For a job offer in a foreign country, the candidate will certainly have to share a common language with the staff of the company. For a congress to be held in a destination, the organizers (convention bureau) and the business or professional association must share a language.

### 3. Methodology

In order to better understand the role of proximity in the cooperation of tourism stakeholders in the city of Tangier, a qualitative study was conducted.

Of the five qualitative methods presented by Creswell (2006), (Narrative Ethnography, Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, Case Study), we have opted for the case study method that Yin (2003) defines as "an empirical investigation that studies a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly defined, "which offers a variety of participants' points of view, and uses multiple data collection techniques. In order to cover the heterogeneity and variability of concepts related to the issue of cooperation between tourism stakeholders, our choice was based on a case study: "exploratory" (Yin 1984), "synchronic" (Grenier and Josserand, 1999), and «multiple" (Yin 1984).

Individual semi-structured interviews, lasting from 20 to 40 minutes, were carried out using an interview guide (inspired by the literature review we consulted) with twelve established tourism stakeholders in the city of Tangiers, Morocco, (the theoretical saturation threshold was reached at the level of ten actors, two actors were added in order to confirm that the theoretical saturation was reached), a sampling according to the rich case method in information has been mobilized, Patton (2002) "Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a lot about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research." The interviews were supplemented by non-participant direct observation, which is considered relevant because the data it generates makes it possible to verify the validity of the data collected during the interviews and to update them (Yin, 2003).

The interview guide, formulated by open questions, which evolves from one interview to another, which is structured in three parts, and whose objectives are to detect the perception of the actors interviewed vis-à-vis the role of the proximity with its dimensions (according to the typology Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008). The interviewees freely expressed their opinions. The interviews, then, were recorded and transcribed. Individual responses were analyzed, compared and categorized with the results of the field note transcript, then triangulated and interpreted to draw conclusions. "Verbatim" was thus produced according to "unity of meaning" and to analyze one opting for the thematic analysis of the data that we carried out manually, considering the reduced number of interviews, their limited durations, and the manageable number of " verbatim "that we have retained.

### 4. Results

The synthesis of the results of the role of different types of proximity in the cooperation of tourism stakeholders at the city level is presented in tabular form for each sphere of private and public actors.

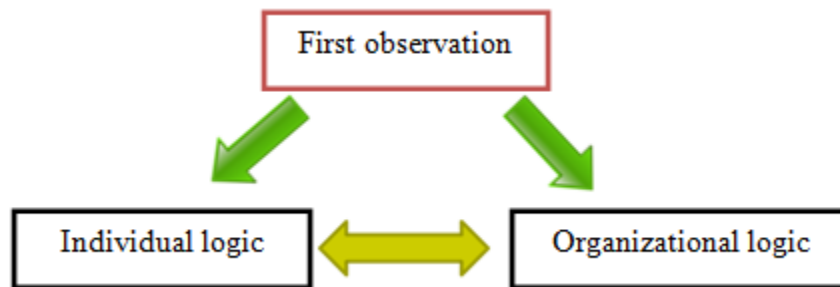
A negative sign (-) means that the proximity does not fulfill any role, or at least slows down, the coordination of the promotion actions of the city of Tangier.

The positive sign (+) indicates that the proximity activates the coordination of the actors of the city. In cases where the respondents did not refer to the proximity, or indicate that the proximity does not influence the promotion, the box is left empty.

**Table 2: A Summary of the results of the role of different types of proximity in the cooperation of tourism stakeholders**

|                       | Geographic proximity | Organized proximity    |                      |                                  |                                 |
|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                       |                      | Coordination proximity |                      | Proximity of resources           |                                 |
|                       |                      | Proximity to mediation | Relational proximity | Proximity to cognitive resources | Proximity of material resources |
| Private tourism actor | -                    | -                      | ++                   |                                  | +                               |
| Public tourism actor  | +                    | +                      | +/-                  | +                                | ++                              |

From the first observation, we note two levels of cooperation action related to the different types of proximity mentioned above. The activation of cooperation between actors takes shape then from individual or collective logics. This distinction is all the most necessary because it makes it possible to identify tensions arising from contradictory individual and collective logics. "The organization is, then, defined as a collective of heterogeneous individual actors in interaction with potentially divergent objectives" (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008). The approach of Bouba-Olga and Grossetti (2008) consists in articulating the two levels of analysis through the embedding and decoupling processes.



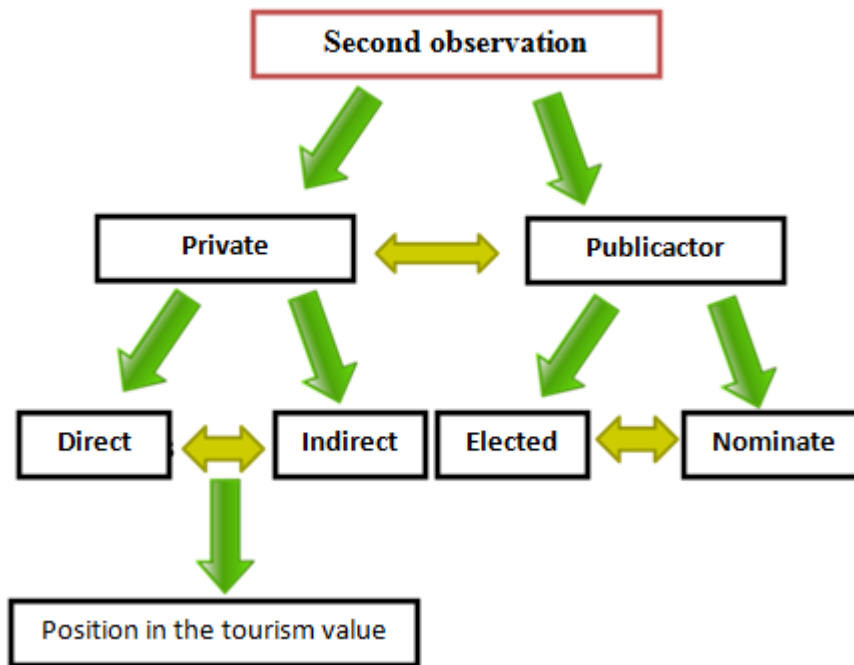
The question that has arisen and imposed itself is in relation to the measures to be taken into consideration in order to transpose the proximities of the individual level to that of the organizations. For instance, it has been clear to us that it is really difficult to make this transition for the cognitive proximity that presents "the risk of a purely metaphorical use masking complex processes such as the effect of personal relationships on choices organizational structures "(Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008). Cognitive proximity as a proximity of immaterial resources. On the other hand, the proximity of material resources presents characteristics that allow a transposition at the level of the organization. In our study, this level is translated by complementarities or similarities of infrastructure or tourism development (an airport for example), funding (to support a promotional structure), staff (dedicated to cooperation), etc. . Relational proximity makes sense through the relationships between organizations in the case of formal and informal engagement.

The proximity of mediation at the level of the organization is to be interested in concrete devices such as travel suppliers, the media, etc. We recall that to activate the coordination of the actors, the joint effects of several proximities are sometimes necessary. Bouba-Olga and Grossetti (2008) state that "relational proximity presupposes a cognitive proximity" because actors sharing the same values will tend to trust each other.

Conversely, cognitive proximity may be the result of relational proximity. The cognitive proximity can then crystallize in the institutions that is to say the closeness of mediation. When reference is made to the two levels of action (individual and organization), the analysis becomes dynamic. If an individual working in organization "A" activates his relationships and contacts an individual from organization "B" to promote the destination, he or she changes the inter-organizational relational proximity. In the case where the individual "A" comes to leave the organization, the inter-organizational relational proximity is not modified. In the other direction, individuals belonging to different organizations can coordinate themselves by the proximity of mediation. For example, both companies can join the same international association of hospitality professionals. These companies can each send an individual to participate in a show organized by this association and thus activate coordination via inter-organizational relational proximity. In our study the individual level of action takes precedence, and the transition to the organizational level is valid only if the related individuals remain in the same organizations, and once they change organizations the proximity is automatically changed by choice of individuals or organizations.

From the second observation, we highlight the great distance that separates the two spheres of private and public tourism actors, with different perceptions of the role that different types of proximities can play in their cooperation, act\_prv\_4<sup>5</sup> affirms "we remain the private, we defend our own interests through our own means", act\_prv\_7 adds "we discuss our problems alone, and if necessary we appeal to public actors".

The geographical proximity does not have any importance for the development of the cooperation of the private actors, whereas the public actors rely strong on this form of proximity for the development of the sector of tourism in the city and try- with means of the edge according to them - to rectify the situation. The table so before shows well the perceptions of the different spheres.



We have also noted that within the same sphere, there are many different positions in relation to certain points raised on the role of proximity in the cooperation of the actors and, subsequently, in the development of the attractiveness of the city Tangier. The sphere of the private actors, and according to the results of the interviews, we felt that the cooperation between them is based essentially on their positions in the tourist chain, the tour operators among them, the hoteliers among them ... and the cooperation between the different levels of the tourist chain is very weak. On the other hand, in the sphere of public actors, there is a divergence of positions between the elected official public actors (town hall and region of Tangier-Tetouane-Alhoceima) and the other nominated official actors (tourism ministry delegation, wilaya of Tangier).

<sup>5</sup>Private actor number 4, for reasons of confidentiality we left only the first letters of the sphere to which belongs the actor with a serial number.

This data confirms the acuity of the problem of cooperation and coordination suffered by tourism stakeholders in the city of Tangier that some actors have described as even a situation of paralysis, the worst is that this situation is worsening continuously, act\_prv\_3 says "how do you want to work or cooperate with the city council for example, when they had financial problems due to their mismanagement, they turned to us directly to recover by increasing the tourist taxes, in addition the problem of parking of our customers' cars right in front of our establishment which became pay-for- overnight and the list is long ".

Finally, we mark in bold the role played by the non-spatial proximity in the cooperation of the actors of tourism of the city of Tangier, and especially, the one related to the material and relational resources. In addition to that, we evoke the role of choice that can be played by a tourism cluster in the cooperation of tourism stakeholders in the city of Tangier, taking advantage of all types of proximity, spatial and non-spatial.

The triangulation of the data (Non-participant direct observation) allowed us to validate our first observations and to affirm that tourist actors of the city of Tangier do not take advantage of their spatial proximity to develop a better cooperation. The efforts provided by the private and public actors are oriented towards the sale and the promotion of the destination than towards the development of a coherent tourist offer. The result of a cooperation based on their spatial and non-spatial proximity. Moreover, we evoke the role of choice that could play networking in the form of tourism cluster in the cooperation of tourism stakeholders of the city of Tangier, taking advantage of all types of proximity, spatial and non-spatial. Tourism cluster is a relevant tool for developing the attractiveness of the city of Tangier.

## 5. Conclusion

This study is relevant thanks to its theoretical, empirical and managerial contribution in the field of tourism.

The theoretical plan, it concerns the complementarity of the types of proximity. Geographic proximity plays a vital role in the process of activating relationships. The geographical concentration of organizations reinforces the appropriation of geographical space through sharing of common representations. In this case study, the essential role of geographical proximity was put into perspective by the lack of willingness of the actors to cooperate. The second contribution highlights the importance of bringing together the objectives of the public and private tourism stakeholders for a cooperation which is capable of developing tourism attractiveness. The results of our study have largely underlined the importance of the support of the elected officials and the political power to develop the attractiveness of the city. From an empirical point of view, this study has the advantage of exploring the perceptions of tourism stakeholders in the city of Tangier, regarding the role of proximity in their levels of cooperation.

At the managerial level, our research highlights the main perceptions of the actors by prioritizing them, which can guide the decision-makers and the tourism managers on the axes guaranteeing a better cooperation of the actors of tourism. This study, thus, has made it possible to identify the active and non-active dimensions of proximities between the different tourism actors of the city of Tangier, which would allow a better reading of the reality of the practices and relations between the various public and private tourism actors of Tangier, and help decision-makers to act on non-active dimensions by building on the active dimensions of proximity. Like any research work, this one presents some limits mainly. It raises the problem of external validity of the research in the sense that our interest has focused on a limited number of actors of tourism. Also, the results from this qualitative study cannot be generalized to the mother population.

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