

# Participation of stakeholders in the internationalization of the city of Medellín

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*Cities find internationalization not only as an opportunity but as a necessity for their survival in global competitive environments. This study identifies stakeholder participation as a critical element in co-creating a city brand, recognizing the importance of their involvement in the branding process. Implementing a qualitative design, including discussion groups and semi-structured interviews, this research captured the perspectives of stakeholders in Medellín, exploring foundational pillars for the city competitiveness. As a result of this research, a novel model is presented for internationalization of cities, incorporating stakeholder perspectives that highlighted key areas such as tourism, exports, cooperation, talent attraction, and foreign direct investment. Our findings offer new insights into the role of stakeholder participation in city branding and competitiveness on a global scale, revealing an optimistic outlook, emphasizing innovation, and public-private partnerships as crucial drivers. The study identifies strengths and challenges, providing insights for developing effective internationalization strategies.*

**Keywords:** *qualitative research, internationalization of cities, stakeholders, Medellín, city promotion, competitiveness*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of cities is a process that is intended to integrate the promotion of the territory and its political agenda with the aim of calling the attention of different buyer personas for the development of the territory and the enhancement of the quality of life of its residents and visitors. This process facilitates opportunities for cities to garner revenue from varied streams, such as tourism, foreign direct investment (FDI), international cooperation, exports, and to allure or cultivate talent.

Cities have found the internationalization process not only as an opportunity but as a way to survive in the global economy. For instance, Saskia Sassen extensively investigates the strategic positioning of cities within the global economy to secure their

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economic survival. Her contributions center on the fact that the so-called *global cities* wield noteworthy influence in the global economic realm due to their concentration of financial, cultural, and economic activities. According to her research, these cities not only capitalize on opportunities for growth but also recognize internationalization as an indispensable pathway for survival in an interconnected world. In essence, Sassen's research underscores that cities perceive internationalization not only as an opportunity but as an imperative strategy for enduring in an increasingly competitive global landscape (Sassen, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2015, 2016).

This has led to more and more territories entering this competition, making it a complex process that requires a coordinated and measured approach to obtain as much information as possible from different stakeholders. Thus, the projected image of the city truly reflects the appropriate values of the territory. As cities are learning systems that borrow knowledge from business practices (Petrikova, Jaššo and Hajduk, 2020), the use of digital marketing as an urban governance plan requires the participation of different actors to design, execute, and measure strategies that let the cities achieve their goals in the international field.

In this process of utilizing digital marketing by territories, stakeholders have been widely described in the literature as a fundamental part of the co-creation of the brand (Eugenio-Vela, Ginesta and Kavaratzis, 2020; Jeuring and Haartsen, 2017; Kavaratzis, 2012; Kalandides, Kavaratzis and Boisen, 2012; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013; Zhao, Cui and Guo, 2022), and their participation in the place branding process has been rated as 'extremely relevant' (Braun, Kavaratzis and Zenker, 2013: 19), understanding the perceptions and opinions of these groups of citizens to build the brand and the promotion process require coordinated and measured strategies to obtain as much information as possible from different stakeholders (Erdoçşan, Bilisik and Kaya, 2018).

This article is the result of an articulated work with the Deputy Office of Tourism of Medellín with the objective of identifying the current status of the city of Medellín, Colombia, in terms of its competitiveness for the internationalization through its stakeholders. To achieve this goal, a set of semi-structured interviews were carried out with different stakeholders including authorities, high-ranked directors of public and private organizations that are considered the 'Private–Public Alliance of Medellín' (Alianza Público-Privada), and whose actions are related with the variables of tourism, international cooperation, FDI, exports, or talent attraction. Although no work has been published before where these five variables articulate the vision for the internationalization of a city, some of them have been mentioned by Sassen in her earlier works, like immigration and investments in 1988 and 1993.

Medellín, Colombia, is a city that has emerged from an obscure past where only bad news was the constant, to a city that has been gaining an important reputation for its innovation applied to urban development and entrepreneurship. With 2.6 million inhabitants (3.7 million including its metropolitan area), it is one of the few Latin American cities to be listed in the Global Competitiveness Index published by The Economist Intelligence Unit and one of the main destinations for tourists and investment in the region. The city has gained attention, especially as an innovation hub after being elected as the most innovative city in the world by the Citigroup and the *Wall Street Journal* in 2013 and, consequently, with the creation of the World Economic Forum Center for the Fourth Industrial Revolution in 2019. This process of transformation will be addressed in Section 4.

In the first part of this article, the reader may find the methodology explained, with the data collection process and its analysis process; further, to understand the subject of study, there is a summary of the background of the city of Medellín and its recent history

and then the findings of the data analysis including a section for each part of the internationalization model (tourism, international cooperation, FDI, exports, and talents) as well as the stakeholder's vision of Medellín's competitiveness in a global context. At the end of this article, there are some suggestions for further research and perspectives.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

For this study, a systematic qualitative literature review was undertaken based on the PRISMA model to establish a theoretical foundation using the concepts 'Internationalization of Cities' and 'Internationalization' AND 'Stakeholders' on Scopus database considering articles published in Spanish, English, and French. The results can be seen in the theoretical framework.

Data collection also involved two discussion groups convened by the Tourism Deputy Office. These groups, comprising representatives from four entities directly involved in Medellín's internationalization, discussed the aforementioned internationalization variables, deeming these foundational pillars for the city's internationalization model in terms of economic development.

Building on these discussions, 13 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with directors, managers, and high-ranking authorities from the Public-Private Alliance of Medellín. This alliance comprises entities, including hybrid private-public-owned companies, which are engaged in activities tied to key internationalization variables: tourism, international cooperation, FDI, exports, and talent attraction.

Intentional sampling was selected as the participants were accessible through the deputy office of tourism of Medellín; moreover, the selected subjects have the experience and knowledge needed to address the topic of internationalization. The selection criteria included to be born or have been living at least five continuous years in the city and that the activities of the institutions they represent should be directly related to the internationalization of the city.

During the first discussion group, five representatives of the aforementioned organizations that belong to the alliance participated; the objective of this first exercise was to identify the way the institutions interact toward the internationalization of Medellín and their perception of the level of competitiveness of the city. During the second exercise, carried out three weeks later, with the same group of participants, the objective was to comprehend what variables favor the presence of Medellín in a global context and the obstacles to achieve the goal of internationalization. Each discussion group lasted around 120 minutes, and the process was carried out including a participant's interaction matrix and a variable matrix that would help the codification process.

The results of the two discussion groups resulted as raw materials to build the interviews and triangulate the vision from the mid-level workers versus the high-level directors of these institutions to identify and reduce bias. These interviews were carried out between September and December 2022. Each interview was intended to last 30-40 minutes, and the objective was to identify the perceptions of the level of competitiveness of the city of Medellín facing an international context; to categorize the strengths of the city in terms of investment, tourism, talents, exports, and cooperation; and to comprehend the challenges that the city may face in a global context. The codification of the interviewees is available in Table 2.

Recordings, totaling 497 minutes, were transcribed using Amazon Web Services. Subsequent textual analysis utilized Nvivo software (version 13) (Allsop et al., 2022), applying the 'a priori' code list derived from earlier discussion groups (open

codification) involving five stakeholder organizations. Post-analysis, additional codes emerged (axial and selective codification).

The process of codification was performed by two of the researchers in blind considering phrases as units of analysis and then an axial codification process was carried out to group the initial concepts into categories. Then, the two researchers compared the results of the axial codification and discussed the categories where there was no agreement. The third author acted as an independent arbiter to mediate in case of disagreement. The initial codification process resulted in 26 categories (that can be seen in Figure 3) and later grouped into the seven codes: tourism, international cooperation, talents, FDI, exports, innovation, and institutions.

Finally, a sociological-discourse analysis was employed to discern stakeholders' semantic positions (Rodrigues-Soares and Kleinübing-Godoi, 2017). This analysis also gauged the frequency of specific terminologies, aiding in pinpointing the city's strengths and weaknesses as a competitive global destination.

The use of qualitative interviews and discussion groups, grounded in a social constructivist framework, enabled the acquisition of primary data from selected respondents. This approach facilitated in-depth information analysis, uncovering new factors and variables through direct stakeholder and community engagement (Aquilino, Harris and Wise, 2021; Şorcaru et al., 2022); the design of this qualitative model is presented in Figure 1.

### 3 BACKGROUND

Located in South America, Medellín was founded in 1675 during the Spanish colonization of the region. Throughout the 19th century and into the early 20th century, the city emerged as a significant political and economic center. This prominence was largely attributed to gold mining activities in the neighboring municipalities and the initial surge in coffee exports. Furthermore, Medellín distinguished itself as a trailblazer in the banking sector. Between 1872 and 1920, the city boasted 22 financial institutions, slightly surpassing Bogotá, the nation's capital, which had 20 during the same time-frame. As a testament to its rapid growth and development, in 1916, Citibank, the first foreign-based bank in Colombia, inaugurated its offices in Medellín's downtown (Mora-Cuartas, Serna-Rodriguez and Serna-Rodriguez, 2011).

During the 20th century, Medellín underwent a transformative shift in its economic paradigm; moving away from a primary-based economy, the city strategically evolved

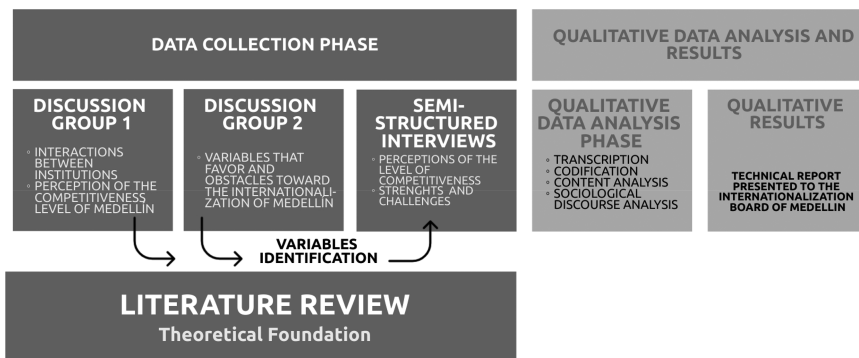


Figure 1 Qualitative research design

as a prominent industrial hub within the nation. Notably, the textile sector emerged as a driving force behind this economic transition, catalyzed by the implementation of 'imports substitution industrialization' approach by the government. This model facilitated a gradual replacement of imported goods with domestically sourced raw materials, fostering a self-reliant economic ecosystem. This transition yielded remarkable outcomes, particularly considering the challenges posed by the Great Depression and World War II.

By the end of the 20th century, the city became heavily reliant on the textile industry, with nearly half of its workforce employed in this sector. While initially hailed as a triumph for Medellín, incorporating its economic success, the city's excessive specialization in textiles eventually became its downfall. The ascent of the low-cost textile industry in Asia began to gain momentum, overshadowing Medellín's dominance (Sánchez-Jabba, 2014).

### 3.1 Drug war

The ensuing economic frailty, compounded by high inflation and rising unemployment, casts a shadow over Medellín; between 1980 and 2000, homicide rates tripled, peaking in 1992 with over 350 violent deaths. This period tarnished Medellín's global image, with criminal cartels and violence-dominating headlines. By the early 2000s, tourist arrivals dwindled to under 200,000 and FDI hit record lows; however, international cooperation began trickling in, harboring hopes of city rejuvenation (Cardona et al., 2005), and a new era of transformation started to flourish.

### 3.2 The transformation of Medellín

Post two tumultuous decades, the 21st century heralded a renaissance for Medellín. Historically, Colombia is the second most influential city after Bogotá; it now thrives on a service and commerce-centric model. A study carried out by the municipality between 2004 and 2007 revealed that the city lacked a strategic internationalization blueprint; by then, this gap led to the '*Integración con el mundo*' (integration with the world) initiative, encompassing international cooperation and city branding. The efforts of the municipal administration also focused on infrastructural projects targeting those neighborhoods most affected by the drug war, with notable interventions including the Biblioteca España and the first mass transit cable car system *Metrocable*.

The establishment of Corporación Ruta N in 2010 symbolized the city's renewed focus on science, technology, and innovation. Concurrently, entities like the Greater Medellín Conventions and Visitors Bureau, Plaza Mayor, and the Agencia de Cooperación e Inversión de Medellín emerged, augmenting the city's internationalization thrust. With the inclusion of entities like EPM (name of the city public utility company, in Spanish Empresas Públicas de Medellín), the Metropolitan Area administration, and several sector-specific associations, Medellín's internationalization framework now boasts a robust structure, encompassing both public and private sectors and representing diverse facets like tourism, exports, and international cooperation.

Additionally, with the Metropolitan Area administration (public entity that conglomerates the ten municipalities of the Aburrá Valley, acts as the public transport authority and urban environmental authority), plus other associations such as COTELCO (hospitality sector), ANDI (business sector), ANATO (travel agencies sector), SAPIENCIA (public entity in charge of the promotion of the postgraduate education), the Deputy Office of Tourism, and the Secretary of Economic and Development of the city, it can

be considered now that the city has the structure it lacked before. These 11 entities were considered for this project as the stakeholders for the internationalization of the city, including visions with public and private approaches and the presence of authorities on tourism, exports, talents, international cooperation, and investments representatives.

## 4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 4.1 The internationalization of cities

Over the past three decades, the ‘Internationalization of Cities’ has emerged as a term of interest, although its scholarly exploration appears limited. A search within the Scopus database reveals a mere 20 documents pertaining to this subject, of which only 12 are articles. To bolster our understanding, a thorough examination of these articles’ bibliographies was conducted.

After the revision of the abstracts, the following documents were considered by their relevance: starting with historical references to city internationalization, the first article can be traced back to Fry, Radebaugh and Soldatos’ work (1989) *The New International Cities Era* who profiled cities, including Atlanta and Boston, as quintessential international cities. In Anthony D. King’s (1989) work, he explained how the ‘internationalization of city and territory’ was rooted in the colonial era, evolving by the late 1980s to resonate with the financial capitals and empires exemplified by cities like London.

In the early 1990s, the French term ‘*internationalisation des villes*’ gained prominence in the writings of Bonneville et al. (1992) where they listed seven attributes that were needed for the internationalization of cities shown in Table 1.

By 1995, Nadine Cattan (1995) critically assessed the European cities’ competitive dynamics in two dimensions: Air Network Nodes, including intensity of international air traffic, degree of international opening (national vs international flights as indicator), international air routes, concentration of international traffic of cities, and urging collaborative strategies, and the Attractivity Differential of Cities assessing the urban function and the territorial belonging; in her article, she questions who has the authority to determine the international role of cities.

The 21st century ushered in new complexities in city internationalization, as highlighted by Bernard Jouve in 2007 who analyzed cities like Rome, Paris, and Montreal,

*Table 1 Attributes for the internationalization of cities*

Attribute	Definition
1	The participation on the international resources (economic, scientific, or cultural exchanges)
2	Availability of services at an international level for the companies (services specifically aimed at the international markets)
3	It is a place where large companies and political and financial institutions are concentrated.
4	Offers residential facilities to accommodate ‘high-end’ foreign populations.
5	Provides event facilities to hold international events.
6	It welcomes communities of foreign residents.
7	It is well known as a center for extra-national business, cultural, or leisure tourism.

*Source:* Own elaboration. Translated and adapted from Bonneville et al. (1992: 115–116).

delineating their distinct internationalization trajectories. In the wake of the World Trade Center attacks, territorial concepts intertwined with security concerns. He further expanded on this theme, identifying economic, political, and social orientations as pillars of a city's international strategy, drawing insights from the CITTA network. Then, the word *Paradiplomacy* emerged as an analogous term, underscoring municipalities' role in international relations. As Milani and Ribeiro (2011) elucidated, cities have increasingly ventured beyond the nation-state's confines, as exemplified by the international aspirations of Brazilian cities.

In recent years, scholars like Herrschel and Newman (2017) have provided nuanced insights into cities' roles as international actors. Their work offers a comprehensive view of city internationalization, encompassing urbanistic and international relation perspectives. Antić (2020) further delves into the interplay between urbanization, globalization, and tourism, highlighting the transformative impact of internationalization on residents' behaviors and perceptions, and Balzan (2022) linked the city branding with the internationalization of territories as a marketing strategy to attract resources from different streams, highlighting the application of this method in different cities around the world.

## 4.2 Stakeholders' participation

The stakeholders' participation in the decision-making of companies for their internationalization has been widely studied, and it is reflected in the literature; to comprehend this process, a new literature review was conducted in the same database using the query: 'Internationalization' AND 'Stakeholders'; a total of 743 documents were found and filtered with the inclusion criteria: articles written in English, Spanish, and French resulting in 519 articles. Then, a revision of the abstracts and authors' keywords was carried out to code each article by the type of internationalization. As result, 257 documents found referred to the internationalization of companies, representing 53% of the literature.

We highlight Escobar-Sierra, Valencia and ValenciaDeLarra (2018) who analyzed the participation of stakeholders for the relaunch of the internationalization of the brand of Juan Valdez, Colombian coffee company as case study; in terms of sustainability, Salvi and Ruël (2022) take diplomacy strategies for internationalizing companies in Chile to handle the exert pressures of stakeholders; in the same path, González-Benito and González-Benito (2010) studied six different variables on stakeholders' environmental pressure over 186 Spanish companies; Barbaglia et al. (2023) studied how internationalization could be affected by the environmental strategies that the company is implementing (or not) in their job; the authors found that the stakeholders' perceived pressures are higher in the national country due to the factor of relocation.

Corporate social responsibility also appears in the results as a way to encourage and engage with stakeholders (Jung and Lee, 2018); the power of states to make companies to adapt or adopt foreign norms is the work developed in China by Marquis, Yin and Yang (2017) or liked, for example, to social media use and fast fashion (Rienda et al., 2023).

Six articles were coded as investment: the case of China is analyzed three times, referring the FDI activities abroad (Li, 2016; Wang, Ng and Olivier, 2004; Xiong and Chen, 2022); African countries are studied in the works of Dakora and Bytheway (2014) with the case of South Africa; Olungo and Ukpere (2018) on Kenya; and the UK with Callaghan (2015).

When analyzing the results for tourism, five articles were coded after the revision of the abstracts. Larsen, Gunnarsson-Östling and Westholm (2011) highlighted the importance of citizens' participation for the offer and consumption of low-carbon

activities and products (including tourism); Aporu, Mafabi and Esemu (2014) took the cultural heritage as case to enhance the internationalization of the territory to attract more visitors in Uganda; Brandão, Breda and Costa (2019) refer to stakeholders' participation in extending the touristic offer beyond the beaches (specifically for coastal areas); Davies and Egas (2022) studied the social corporate responsibility (SCR) and the circular economy in the hospitality sector; and Kumar, Nazir and Nisar (2023) concluded that the content published by the Global Wellness Institute is relevant for academia and the different stakeholders in the hospitality industry.

In terms of international cooperation, only four papers were identified: in terms of science and technology, the so-called south–south cooperation is present in Zhang (2010) as he analyzes how developing countries can cooperate among them without following the 'western' models; also, Meissner (2019) worked with a sample of 20 public–private partnerships in different locations in Europe, Asia, and Oceania; Zhou (2023) took the African and Asian cooperation models based on stakeholders' participation; finally, Volchik, Maslyukova and Strielkowski (2023) created a model based on scientific cooperation in terms of research and development (R&D) taking the National Innovation System as a basis. A big portion of the articles (175) was dedicated to study the internationalization of education, which were not taken into account for this study as this topic is not related with our research; nevertheless, we would like to mention it as those representing almost 34% of the analyzed documents.

## 5 FINDINGS

The Deputy Office of Tourism of Medellín, as defined by local statutes, serves as the Destination Marketing Organization. Consequently, an Internationalization Committee was constituted, spearheaded by academic representatives to steer the data collection and analysis methodology to build the internationalization strategy of the city; to meet this goal, the researchers designed this process to first identify the stakeholders' perceptions of the competitiveness of the city in a global stage; second, to categorize the strengths and weaknesses of the city's internationalization model; and, third, to suggest a path for the integration of the institutions to enhance the competitiveness of the city.

For this research, we conducted two discussion groups with delegates from four autonomous entities that belong to the Internationalization Committee of Medellín (Agencia de Cooperación e Inversión de Medellín, Plaza Mayor, Ruta N, and the Conventions and Visitors Greater Bureau), plus the participation of delegates from the Economic Development Office. The objective of these discussion groups is to collect primary data in terms of the perception of the competitiveness of the city and the integration among stakeholders. The information extracted from this method worked as a basis for the codification of the interviews.

Next, a series of 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with different actors related to the internationalization variables: exports, talents, international cooperation, FDI, and tourism. The objectives of these interviews were to identify the perception of the stakeholders of the level of competitiveness of the city of Medellín in a global context and to analyze the relations between the variables of the new model of internationalization.

The participants were high-ranked directors from organizations that are currently working in any of the variables mentioned before; they accepted the invitation of the research to participate and signed an informed consent to use the collected data for research purposes; in order to protect their identity, the interviewees were anonymized

Table 2 Codification of interviewees

Code	Gender
E01	Female
E02	Female
E03	Male
E04	Male
E05	Female
E06	Male
E07	Male
E08	Male
E09	Male
E10	Female
E11	Male
E12	Female
E13	Male

Source: Own elaboration.

and given a code that is listed in Table 2. The selection of the participants was established by the Internationalization Committee, considering their participation in international activities and who were located in the city of Medellín.

All interviews were recorded, obtaining a total of 497 minutes that were transcribed using Amazon Transcribe on Amazon Web Services. The transcriptions were then uploaded on NVivo version 13, and a process of codification was performed using the *a priori* codes extracted from the discussion groups; then, the sociological-discourse analysis suggested by Rodrigues-Soares and Kleinübing-Godoi (2017) was carried out with the results shown in Figures 2–5.

The discursive positions of the interviewees were carried out in order to comprehend the openness toward internationalization or the regional vision in terms of the activities that their organizations perform. Those positions can be seen in Figure 2. The discursive positions work as a starting point for the researchers as during the interviews, some questions toward the vision of regionalization and internationalization are asked. Considering that the personal opinions and experiences and subjectivity of the interviewees may infer in their answers, the discursive positioning might help the interviewer to conduct further questions without losing sight of the objectives (Winslade, 2005).

Analysis of the discursive positioning reveals that a significant majority of interviewees, 9 out of 13, lean toward a relational stance, intertwining internationalization with regionalization. This suggests a balanced approach; they recognize the imperative of engaging within global networks and environments, while remaining with caution, frequently mentioning concerns associated with the potential dangers of globalization. From the cohort, only four displayed a distinctly global outlook, with a solitary respondent championing a purely regional perspective, highlighting the importance of the conservation of regional identity.

Interviewees emphasized the importance of safeguarding Medellín's unique cultural heritage, protecting local industries, and ensuring equitable distribution of the benefits of international engagement. While the relational stance dominates, a small but vocal minority expressed differing viewpoints. Four interviewees displayed a distinctly global outlook, encouraging a more proactive and expansive approach to internationalization. They emphasized the potential for Medellín to become a leading global city by

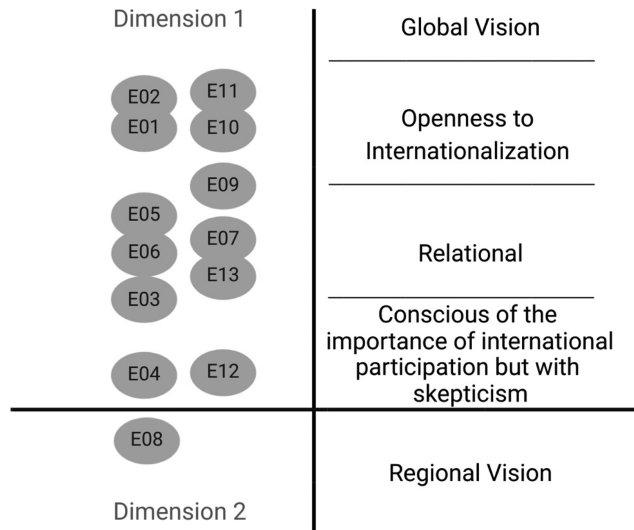


Figure 2 Discursive positions

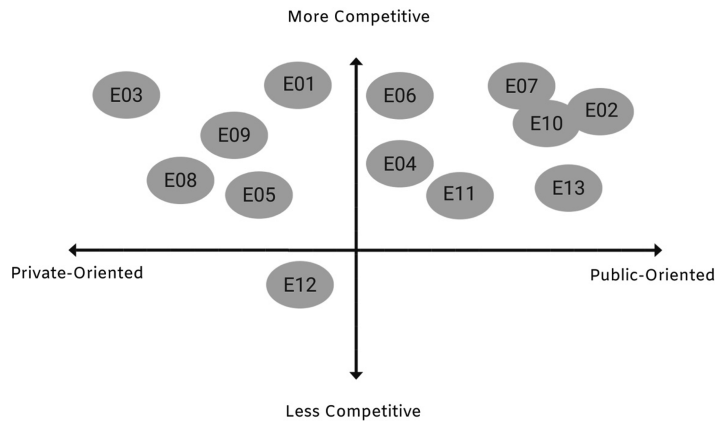


Figure 3 Competitiveness perceptions

embracing international partnerships and positioning itself as a hub for innovation and entrepreneurship. In contrast, one respondent championed a purely regional perspective, prioritizing local development and self-reliance over international engagement.

Following the exploration of their orientations toward internationalization, the discourse shifted to gauge perceptions regarding Medellin’s competitive stature. The ensuing semantic delineations related to competitiveness are encapsulated in Figure 3.

The data portray a spectrum of perceptions, varying based on each interviewee’s organization and its role in Medellin’s landscape. Singularly, one respondent expressed a belief that Medellin trails in competitiveness, particularly when juxtaposed against international benchmarks. This perspective emanated from a primarily private-sector

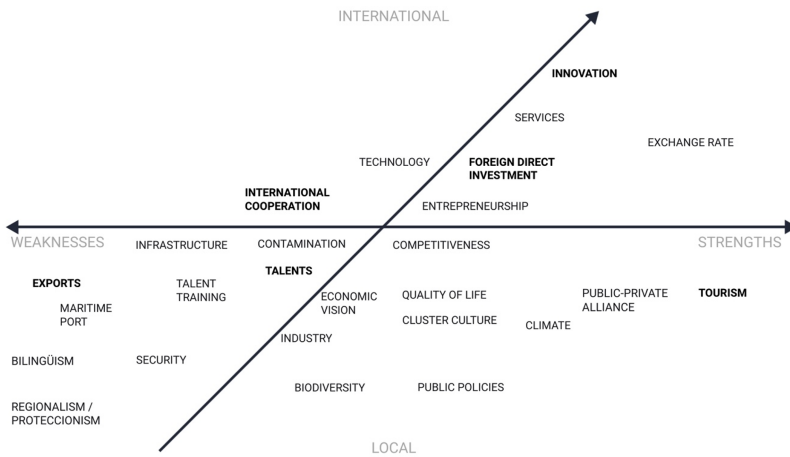


Figure 4 Weaknesses and strengths. Narrative configurations

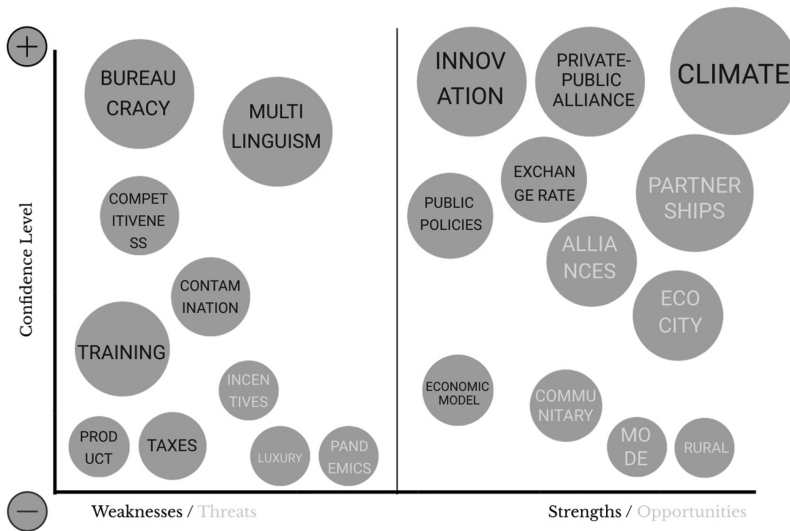


Figure 5 Confidence level. Use of keywords

viewpoint. Contrarily, public organizations exuded a more positive sentiment on Medellín’s competitive edge, overshadowing their private counterparts. Broadly, the overarching sentiment remains optimistic, even when factoring in the challenges Medellín grapples with in its quest to gain recognition as a global city.

During the interviews, researchers probed stakeholders about their perceptions of Medellín’s strengths and weaknesses in relation to both local and international competitiveness. The narrative positions derived from these discussions are depicted in Figure 4. Among the four primary variables under consideration, tourism distinctly emerged as a perceived local strength in Medellín’s internationalization efforts. In contrast,

exports were frequently highlighted as the most vulnerable aspect, a sentiment further corroborated by survey responses.

Beyond these primary variables, stakeholders also touched upon other factors influencing the city's competitiveness. Notably, innovation was frequently mentioned, with stakeholders identifying it as a robust international strength. Additionally, the prevailing exchange rate was cited as another favorable element, with foreign capital flows potentially benefiting from the rate disparities. To provide context, the average exchange rate for the USD-COP in 2022 stood at \$4,255.44 (Banco de la República de Colombia, 2023).

Furthermore, certain terms repeatedly emerged during the interviews, effectively serving as keywords that encapsulate stakeholder sentiments. An analysis was conducted to gauge the frequency of these keywords and to assess the level of conviction with which interviewees associated them with the city's strengths, weaknesses, threats, or opportunities. The outcomes of this analysis are delineated in Figure 5.

Within the scope of this study, our analysis spotlighted potential avenues of opportunity in various aspects, even if some were accompanied by lesser degrees of confidence. Nevertheless, these avenues remain of notable importance. A salient example is the potential presented by Medellín's rural areas. The data suggest that there's an emerging interest in harnessing these territories for developmental objectives, notably in the realm of rural tourism. This presents an avenue for Medellín to further diversify its offerings and appeal to tourists seeking an authentic rural experience.

As part of the social discourse analysis suggested by Rodrigues-Soares and Kleinübing-Godoi (2017), it is important to understand the context in which the interviews were conducted. During this period, Medellín reached its peak number of tourists in 2021, with 1.3 million visitors, a 49% increase from the previous peak in 2019 (before the COVID-19 pandemic). This growth in tourism has been accompanied by significant investment in infrastructure. According to the Colombian Chamber of Commerce of Construction (Camacol), investment in Medellín hotels grew 175% from 2021 to 2022. Additionally, the number of accommodation establishments grew 92.4% in 2022 (compared to the number registered with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism in 2021). Representing a 274% and 272% increase compared to 2020 and 2019, respectively.

Parallel to these findings, a heightened interest in linking meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions tourism with the fashion industry emerged, largely attributable to high-caliber events such as Colombiamoda and Colombiatex de las Américas, hosted in Medellín since 1990. These events have established themselves as leading fashion showcases in the region, solidifying the city's pivotal role in the continental fashion landscape. They are considered among the most important events in the city, attracting not only tourists but also investors and serving as a showcase for local talent.

## 6 RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

This project was planned to evaluate Medellín's competitiveness in terms of its internationalization, and as a main result, we present a novel model incorporating three previously unexplored and interconnected variables: tourism, talents, and international cooperation, plus exports and FDI, offering an updated perspective on city globalization. Additionally, for the first time in the literature, we present the application of sociological-discourse analysis as a qualitative technique for engaging stakeholders in city branding.

Our research design included a literature review to connect the findings with the results of the discussion groups and the interviews, but we found that little has been published on tourism, cooperation, or investment. As presented in the theoretical framework, there is also a lack of studies that address the participation of stakeholders linked to the internationalization of territories.

Through the creation of an Internationalization Committee and the conduction of these discussion groups and semi-structured interviews with pertinent stakeholders, several insightful findings were uncovered: the interviewees showcased a relational stance between internationalization and regionalization, hinting at a cautious perspective, which often stemmed from concerns about the potential risks associated with globalization. While a handful of interviewees embodied a global outlook, only one conveyed a strictly regional viewpoint. These varied discursive positions were foundational, shaping the trajectory of the interviews.

When exploring the perceptions of Medellín's competitiveness, it was evident that representatives from public organizations were more optimistic about Medellín's competitive stance than those from the private sector. Only one individual, with a private-oriented perspective, deemed the city less competitive in its internationalization efforts. Broadly, the sentiment was positive, albeit acknowledging the challenges Medellín faces in its quest to become a global city.

Through narrative analysis, strengths and weaknesses of the city's competitiveness were identified. Tourism stood out as a significant local strength for internationalization, whereas exports were seen as a more vulnerable aspect. Further insights highlighted the importance of factors like public-private partnerships, the city's climate, and exchange rates. Notably, innovation was recognized by many as a competitive advantage on the international stage.

This study also discerned the confidence levels of stakeholders through the frequency of keyword usage pertaining to Medellín's competitiveness. These keywords touched upon strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, offering a deeper understanding of stakeholder perceptions and their potential impact.

Various facets of Medellín's strategy for internationalization and competitiveness came to the fore. The diverse viewpoints from the interviewees ranged from conservative to optimistic, reflecting the multifaceted approach Medellín might adopt toward internationalization. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis revealed core strengths such as tourism and innovation, while also spotlighting the city's challenges, especially in exports. The partnership between public and private entities, while perceived as a strength, also unveiled differing perceptions, suggesting a complex interplay of factors and actors influencing Medellín's global competitiveness.

The insights from this research provide a roadmap for shaping Medellín's internationalization strategy. The positive outlook shared by many stakeholders underscores a commitment to address challenges and position Medellín on the global stage. Recognizing both strengths and areas for improvement offers a foundation for targeted initiatives to bolster competitiveness.

Our study had some limitations, as it focuses on Medellín, Colombia; our findings might not be generalizable to other cities or contexts; also, when determining the participants, we intended to include city council members and the mayor as part of the interviewees, but due to their schedules, it was not possible to obtain their perceptions which we considered relevant. We encourage other researchers to replicate this model in different cities, especially in those that are starting or changing their paths of internationalization, involving different stakeholders in their promotion and branding processes. A further study that we propose as a prospective is to create a model that

measures the impact of the five variables identified in this project on the internationalization of the cities with metrics that can be used on different territories.

In conclusion, this study not only offers valuable insights for Medellín but also serves as an example for other cities and territories, encouraging them to gauge stakeholders' perceptions as they chart their own paths toward internationalization. The identification of these variables for the internationalization of the city of Medellín can serve now as a theoretical base to be studied in other cities.

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