

RELATIVE WEIGHT OF THE ATTRIBUTES OF A DESTINATION'S ATTRACTIVENESS: THE CASE OF A HISTORIC TOWN

Ilinka TERZIYSKA
Southwest University, Bulgaria
lynnterziyska@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

When assessing a destination's competitiveness, it is important to be aware of the factors that influence it. There are several models, which offer determinants of destination competitiveness and most of them are thought to be generic. Yet, as different types of tourists have different motivations, it is questionable if the same set of attributes is applicable for all types of destination, or even if so, if they would be of the same relative importance. The paper presents the results of an empirical study on the significance that visitors to a cultural destination assign the attributes that form destination attractiveness. The so-called "soft" measures, forming the core attractors of Ritchie and Crouch's model of destination competitiveness, as well as some of the main determinants of destination attractiveness, have been used as a basis.

KEYWORDS

Cultural tourist destination; Determinants of destination competitiveness

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the continuous emergence of new destinations have extremely raised the level of competition in the tourist industry during the last few decades. The issue is getting even more current with the global economic recession, which has influenced the sector and set higher requirements to managers, planners and marketers in the tourist business. It is therefore no surprise that competitiveness has become a central subject in a great number of studies. This paper will try to give some insight into the different factors that affect destination competitiveness and the cultural tourism destination in particular. The study is focused on the attributes of destination attractiveness (as part of destination competitiveness) and its main objective is to provide information in order to determine their relative significance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The most significant study on competitiveness that served as a basis of all further research is, undoubtedly, the Competitive Advantage of Nations (Porter 1990). Despite the indisputable value of Porter's Diamond, however, it was widely recognized that there was a need from developing a competitiveness model which would serve the specific requirements of the tourism industry. As Dwyer and Kim note, "A major reason for attempting to develop a model of competitiveness that focuses specifically on the tourism sector is that there appears to be a fundamental difference between the nature of the 'tourism product' and the more traditional goods and services for which the above models were developed." (Dwyer and Kim, 2003:373).

To answer to this need, several models of tourist destination competitiveness were developed, the most popular being those of Ritchie and Crouch (Ritchie and Crouch, 2000) and Dwyer and Kim (Dwyer and Kim, 2003). They are both premised on the concept of comparative and competitive advantage. The comparative advantage consists of the destination's endowed resources (human, capital, historic, infrastructure and superstructure, while the competitive advantage is referred to as the way these resources are employed to achieve effectiveness and, consequently – competitiveness. The main groups

of determinants that are included in the models are: Resources, Supporting factors, Destination management, Situational Conditions, and Demand, although in Ritchie and Crouch's model they are grouped in a slightly different manner, namely: Core Resources and Attractors, Supporting Factors and Resources, Destination Policy, Planning and Development, Destination Management, and Qualifying and Amplifying Determinants.

Although these models provide a well-founded comprehensive framework for destination competitiveness (most of the determinants they provide are generic and can be applied to any case), it is arguable that the different forms of tourism (ecotourism, cultural tourism etc.) would be influenced to the same extent by the same factors. Moreover, as Dwyer and Kim note,

“There is a need to explore the different types of indicators relevant to the different contexts (levels) in which the model can be applied. The model developed herein is intended to be able to serve as a framework for determining the competitiveness of an entire country as a tourist destination as well as its sub regions, some of which can be quite small in size. It would be interesting to explore, for example, the relevance, advantages and limitations of the model for determining the competitiveness of a city or geographically small destination. While the model developed herein is intended to have generic import, specific problems may arise in particular applications.” (Dwyer and Kim, 2003:405)

Research in this direction includes Hudson et al's (2004) study of Canadian ski destinations, Lovelock's (2007) study on hunting tourism, and many others, exploring destination competitiveness at a level other than national, or focusing on a niche form of tourism, but no comprehensive study on a cultural destination competitiveness has been performed so far.

Another problem, stated by Dwyer and Kim (Dwyer and Kim, 2003), concerns the relative significance of the determinants. Research on the issue was done by Crouch (Crouch, 2006), in which expert opinion was used to determine the relative weight of the major determinants. Though this is the most common method of such assessment, it can be argued that some of the arguments could be more

reliably assessed by consumers – the potential visitors to such destinations, and this assessment could be added to the expert one in order to reduce subjectivity and obtain more reliable results. Such studies are however, rare. Moreover, there are no generic figures that could be universally applied, because different forms of tourism are related to different push and pull motivating factors. An example in this respect is the study on the importance of destination attributes in destination choice of birdwatchers by Cakici and Harman (Cakici and Harman, 2007).

The present study is based on Ritchie and Crouch's competitiveness model because its authors have also provided data about the relative significance of the different determinants, which enables comparison between the present study and Crouch's findings (Crouch 2006). The determinants that are subject to the study were chosen because of their reference to destination attractiveness, which on its turn is best assessed by tourists.

METHODOLOGY

As the data that was sought was quantitative, the research instrument that was chosen was a self-administered survey. The convenience sampling approach was followed. The study was conducted in the town of Melnik, which is an architectural reserve that boasts with rich history, an abundance of archaeological and religious sites and famous wine, alleged to have been one of Winston Churchill's favourite ones. The reason for choosing it was that it is an exclusively cultural tourist destination, which means that most of the tourists there would be motivated partially or entirely by cultural reasons and the results would be indicative for a destination of this type, namely – a small town with a rich architectural, historical and cultural heritage.

The questionnaire consisted of three modules. The first one aimed at identifying the reason for travel and the tourist behaviour in the destination. The second one was about respondents' assessment of the importance of predefined destination attractiveness attributes. The attributes were derived from Ritchie and Crouch's model of destination competitiveness. Taking into consideration the fact that the study was about cultural tourism the determinant “culture” was subdivided

into “architecture, museums, religious sites, historical/archaeological sites”, “traditions, art and crafts”, “local food and drinks”, “daily life of residents” and “special events/festivals”. These groups were formed, following the major dimensions and elements of a destination’s cultural attractiveness, as outlined by Ritchie and Crouch (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003, pp. 117-118). The third module included questions about the socio-demographic profile of respondents.

The study was conducted in two weekends in May and June 2009 and most of the respondents were Bulgarians.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaire was distributed among 50 tourists, of which 33 agreed to complete it. The number is relatively small, because the destination itself is quite small – the number of permanent residents is only 241 and the tourist flow is limited by the small size of the place.

The profile of the respondents is as follows:

Gender: men - 37%; women - 63%;

Education: secondary – 18%; bachelor degree – 36%; master or doctoral degree – 46 %;

Age: 16-19 – 6%

20-29 – 18%

30-39 – 55%

40-49 – 18%

50-59 – 3%

60 or over - 0%

43 % of the respondents indicated that visiting a cultural attraction was the primary reason of their travel. The other 57 % had visited at least two cultural attractions during their stay. Following Richard’s classification, the first group can be described as specific (who travel specifically to visit the cultural attractions) and the second group as general cultural tourists (who see cultural tourism as a secondary activity, subordinate to other tourism activities). This part of the respondents’ profile, together with the setting of the study (a cultural tourist destination) allows us to conclude that the results that were obtained can be considered as an assessment of attribute relative importance, specific for a cultural destination.

The results regarding the importance that respondents assigned to the different attributes are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1.
Consumer assessment of attribute importance

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
climate	29	3,79	1,236	,229
nature	26	4,54	,811	,159
culture	17	4,24	1,033	,250
architecture, museums, historic sites	32	4,44	,801	,142
traditions, art, crafts	30	4,20	1,095	,200
local food and drinks	31	3,61	1,383	,248
daily life of residents	31	3,42	1,432	,257
festivals	31	3,48	1,288	,231
range of activities	31	2,68	1,351	,243
shopping	32	2,44	1,343	,237
entertainment	32	3,03	1,513	,267
accommodation	32	3,84	1,273	,225
accessibility	32	3,66	1,310	,232
service quality	33	4,55	,869	,151
hospitality	33	4,55	,794	,138
prices	33	4,15	1,202	,209
atmosphere	33	4,64	,742	,129
safety	33	4,39	,933	,162

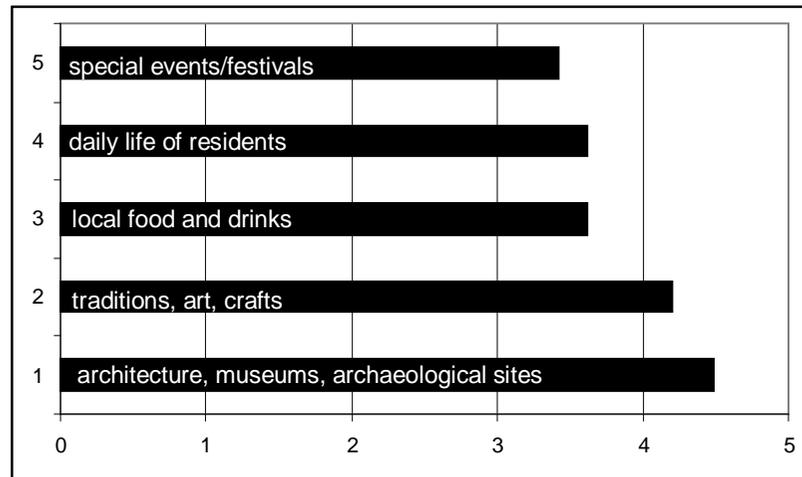
Response categories range from 1 (Not at all important) to 5 (very important).

The attributes that are perceived as most important by respondents are: nature, culture (as a whole), service quality, hospitality, special atmosphere, and safety.

It might also be of interest to examine the relative importance of the elements of culture (Chart 1.). The existence of unique architecture, museums, religious and archaeological site, along with the chance to get in touch with local traditions, art and craft are indicated as the main factors that make a cultural tourism destination attractive for tourists. Local food and drinks, daily life of residents, and special events are of medium, almost equal, importance. The great importance assigned to traditions, art and craft once more confirms the shift towards the intangible resources, which is evident in the last few years, although the tangibles still hold a leading position.

CHART 1.

Consumer assessment of elements of culture importance



The results could be interpreted from two dimensions. Firstly, the importance tourists assign to the different elements is to a great extent related to their motivations and can therefore provide marketing specialists with valuable information. If a cultural destination (and

more specifically – an architectural reserve) is to be in the “consideration set”, its advertising policy should stress on the uniqueness and aesthetic value of architecture, as well as on traditions and crafts, and the special atmosphere that set it apart from competitors.

The second dimension is customer satisfaction, which also plays a crucial role in destination competitiveness. While it is important to market the destination so that it is the “consideration set”, it is also important that the tourist who has chosen to visit the destination is satisfied, which would reflect in repeat visits, favorable word-of-mouth etc., and in the end – affect the level of competitiveness. With regard to the findings of this study, areas that should be prioritized include protection of nature, conservation of historic and cultural monuments, revival of traditions and crafts, enhancement of service quality, hospitality of local people, reasonable pricing and safety. Surprisingly, accommodation was ranked much lower, which can be attributed to the fact that cultural tourist often seek simple, family-style accommodation establishments. Another possible explanation is that when motivated by culture-related reason, tourists are prepared to put up with little inconvenience in terms of accommodation or transport.

Researchers in the field of destination competitiveness can use the findings of the study to determine the relative significance of the factors that affect competitiveness. They can be used solely or in combination with other methods, e.g. expert evaluation.

If we compare these findings with the values in Crouch’s study (Crouch, 2006), some differences can easily be noticed. First of all, in Core resources *Tourism superstructure* is seen as most important, followed by *Culture and history*, *Physiography and climate*, and *Mix of activities*, while the present study indicates much lower positions for accommodation and mix of activities. As for the Supporting factors, in his study Accessibility and Infrastructure are ranked higher than Hospitality; the latter has a definitely higher ranking here.

CONCLUSION

In order to achieve competitive power, it is important to not only know the factors that influence it, but also which of them are of greater significance. As the present study has shown, their relative weights may vary with different types of tourism. As the significance of the attributes associated with destination attractiveness are highly dependent on consumer preferences, specific research is needed for every different kind of destination. It should also be noted that these values are not constant and will change with any shifts in demand. Further research is needed to compare results of respondents of different nationalities and cultures.

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