

Critical view on identification of competitiveness attributes and dimensions for choosing a travel destination

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Abstract

Tourism destinations around the world are finding themselves competing against other destinations more than ever before, especially those emerging destinations. Due to global mobility of tourists the competition is no longer just local, but rather fully global. Therefore key attributes – which could provide competitive advantage - need to be investigated to provide the destinations with understanding in which area they could develop in order to keep up with global competition. Several streams of research has been done in the area and couple of key findings can be used as a basis for further studies. Understanding of the attributes and dimension can be of a considerable help to tourism industry.

Key words Decision criteria, Destination attributes, Competitiveness

1. INTRODUCTION

Travel destinations are defined, from the destination management perspective, as a geographical space in which a cluster of tourism resources exist, rather than a political boundary (Pike 2008). Clusters are in this context „an accumulation of tourist resources and attractions, infrastructures, equipments, service providers, other support sectors and administrative organisms whose integrated and coordinated activities provide customers with the experiences they expected from the destination they chose to visit“ (Rubies 2001, p. 39).

The topics of travel destinations and destination management have currently become center of attention in Slovakia due to the Act No. 91/2010 Coll. on Support of Tourism which is being intensively implemented. The Act has greatly contributed to the development of destination management and structured support of tourism in the country. Slovak regions and municipalities have changed their mindsets moving from single initiatives into coordinated destination management and marketing. In order to be competitive; the newly emerged destination management organizations (DMOs) deep dive into the topic of destination attractiveness as one of the challenges in becoming and strengthening their competitive positions in tourism industry. There are two streams of study in relation to their interest in destination competitiveness reflecting two major components of tourism: destination and tourists (consumer-travelers) themselves.

Firstly, the destinations thrive for understanding what are the criteria defining the reasons why the individual travelers decide to travel to particular destination - destination decision criteria as a set of attributes that individual destination should contain to be appealing for consumer-travelers. The main focus is the destination itself in the product sense, or more broadly, in the sense of marketing mix. Product orientation aims to increase the competitiveness of the destination. The product of the tourism sector is generally an experience that is delivered by a destination to its visitors. This experience is produced not by a single firm but by all players, which impact the visitor experience (Crouch 2007). Therefore the destination attributes come from several perspectives. All the research in this stream are considered as destination-specific.

Second area of interest is tourist-specific: travel motivations of people. Here, the emphasis is put onto individual motivations and needs, the factors that influence the decision-making process. These factors cannot be influenced by a particular destination itself, but should be recognized and understood as well. Many researches in the area resulted in classification of tourists into several types based on specific motivations.

In the beginning, researchers started to treat both stream as extremes, distinct and independent of each other in their empirical studies (Chon, Pizan, Mansfeld 2012). The choice of tourist destination was considered as being determined by two factors: pull factors composed of attributes associated with the destination, and push factors consisting of personal characteristics of tourists (Ritchie and Crouch 2003).

However, the further studies from 1990s went beyond the bi-polar understanding, fusing the streams together. The reason behind was the destination competitiveness when tourism researchers began to consider how destination competitiveness ought to be understood and measured.

In terms of competitiveness, the attributes should be assessed based on their relative importance. As Crouch (2011, p.1) identified „the impact of a competitiveness attribute on the relative performance of a destination is a function of both the importance of the attribute as well as the degree to which destinations vary on the attribute.“ Therefore, important attributes should be considered also from the perspective whether they are a determinant of competitiveness. The focus of studies shall focus on ‘determinant attributes’ which are the factors that exert the strongest influence on the competitiveness of tourism destinations (Crouch 2011).

The paper aims to elaborate on the combination of streams mentioned hereinabove - destination choice criteria as perceived by individual consumer-travelers. The main focus is *vacation* destination, that is where predominant purpose of travel is for non-business purposes (leisure time).

2. REVIEW OF RESEARCHES

Destination attributes and criteria has been object of the studies for over thirty years. In general sense, Crompton (1979) has already addressed the topic in his study focusing on students’ image attributes of Mexico and attributes considered as important in choosing vacation destinations. Hunt (1982) tried to elaborate on the topic in the area of USA, but with the constraint that he concentrated purely on American citizens (residents from other states than the one being evaluated) and their perceptions of particular US states. Haahti and Yavas (1983) investigated perception of Finland in terms of some salient choice criteria.

First deep-dive into the multidimensional approach was given in study of Yau and Chan (1990) where they explored the underlying dimensions of vacation destination criteria by factor analysis. 7 key factors (dimensions) resulted the research: 1. Shopping and transportation, 2. Entertainments and attractions, 3. Services in hotels and restaurants, 4. Price, 5. Foods, 6. Weather and 7. Friends and relatives.

The basic studies in the area following multiattribute approach concentrated on determining *if* and *to what degree* particular product attributes are important. More elaborate approach was introduced by Klenosky, Gengler & Mulvey (1994) known as the means-end approach which focuses on *why* and *how* product (destination) attributes are important by assessing the sequence of means-end relations linking product attributes to personal values.

Starting from the 1990s, where the combined approach was adopted and the interest in destination competitiveness increased, destination attributes have been examined by research studies with various focuses.

First group of studies diagnosed the competitive positions of specific destinations, such as the United States (Ahmed & Krohn 1990), cultural tourism in Toronto (Carmichael 2002), a casino resort (d'Hautesserre 2000), Australia (Dwyer, Livaic & Mellor 2003), Hong Kong (Enright & Newton 2004), Asia-Pacific (Enright & Newton 2005), Spain and Turkey (Kozak 2003), European cities (Mazanec 1995), Mediterranean resorts (Papatheodorou 2002), southeast Asia (Pearce 1997) and others.

As stated hereinabove, the main focus of this paper, are vacation destinations, but it is worth mentioning that there were also event studies focusing on convention destinations and defining their determinant attributes (e.g., Crouch & Ritchie 1998, Breiter & Milman 2006 and others).

Other research aimed at particular aspects of destination competitiveness, such as destination management systems or price competitiveness, but these were not related directly to defining determinant destination attributes.

Higher contribution to the destination management research has provided the third stream which concentrated their activities on development of general models and theories connected with destination competitiveness and determinant attributes aiming at developing more comprehensive understanding. The lead studies in the area were done by Crouch and Ritchie who developed a conceptual model tailored to the distinctive characteristics of destination competition, illustrated in figure 1 (Ritchie & Crouch 2003), tailoring general theories of competitiveness to destination management.

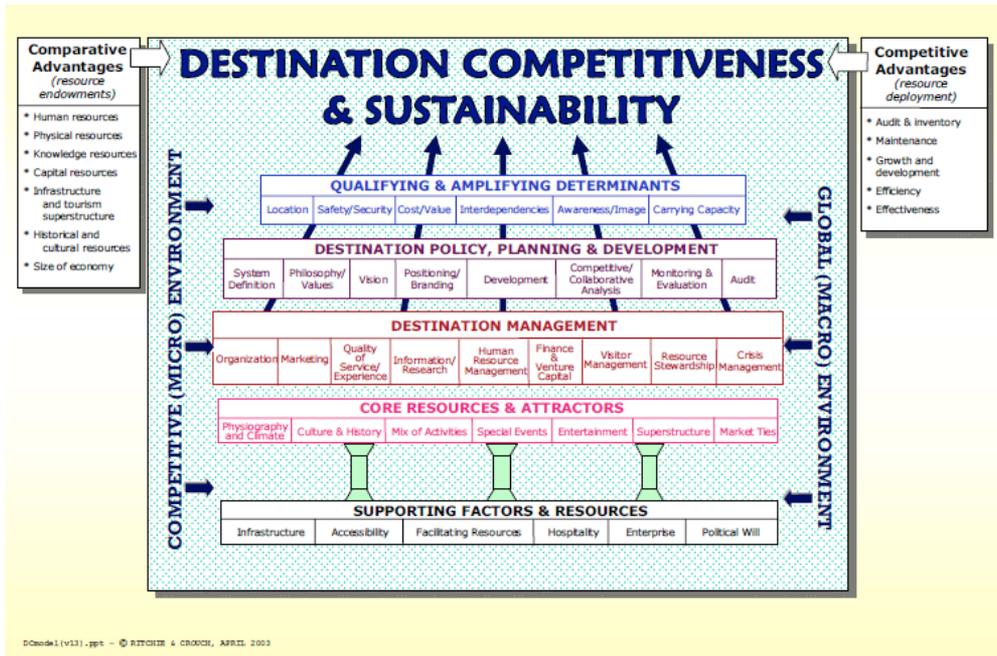


Figure 1: Crouch and Ritchie Conceptual Model of Destination Competitiveness
Source: Crouch 2011

The model is complex, covering all influences and factors of attraction. However, as the model is conceptual, it doesn't provide with determinant attributes directly and doesn't reflect research needs to better understand the relative importance of the destination attributes of competitiveness. To cover the gap Crouch has conducted specific study (Crouch, 2011) which extensively explored the model. Based on synthesis of „expert“ judgement, 36 destination competitiveness attributes were examined to identify the most determinant ones on general destination competitiveness. The Crouch study (2011) is the most current and extensive study regarding the destination competitiveness attributes.

3. ATTRIBUTES – KEY FINDINGS

As the result of the researches, studies and model mentioned hereinabove, several results in form of determinant attributes emerged. Two key findings can be presented. First basic list was presented as the outcome of research by Decrop (2006) ordered based on number of occurrences in the questionnaire responses as presented in Table 1.

Attribute	Number of occurrences	Attribute	Number of occurrences
Climate	93	Friendliness	3
Crowded/deserted	23	Language	3
Nature: geology	22	Mentality	3
Infrastructure	20	Nature: holiday	3
Visits	14	Economy	2
Change of scenery	13	Holistic	2
Quietness	8	Localization	2
Cost	8	Nature: fauna	2
Surroundings	7	Security	2
Space	7	Social	2
Comfort	6	Social intervention	2
Monuments	6	Ambience	1
Authenticity	5	Cleanliness	1
Culture	5	Image	1
Attractions	4	Light	1
Food	4	Nature: flora	1
History	4	Smells	1

Table 1: Key attributes by Decrop
Source: Decrop 2006

Second, more elaborate findings are presented by Crouch (2011). He exploited his conceptual model of 36 destination competitiveness attributes to examine them and provide with 1) determinant attributes of destination competitiveness that are found to be statistically more significant than average (see Figure 2), and 2) the rank orders for the main factors and sub-factors of destination competitiveness in terms of both the estimated importance weights as well as their respective determinance measures (see Table 2).

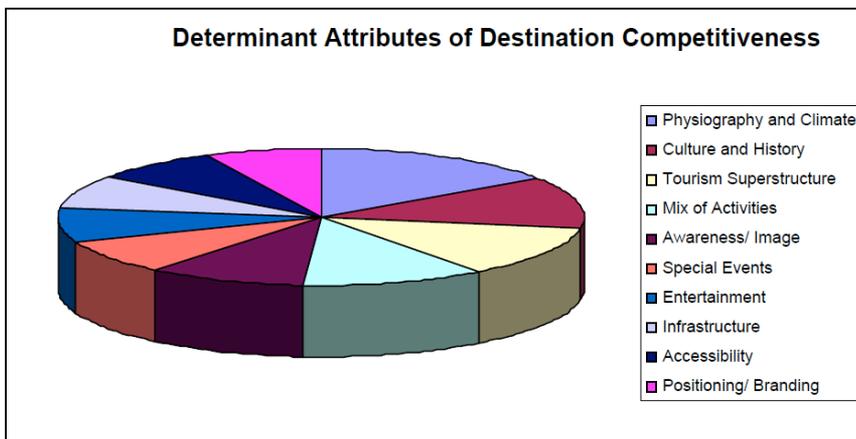


Figure 2: Determinant Destination Competitiveness Attributes
Source: Crouch 2011

Attribute Level	Attribute Label	Importance Ranking	Determinance Ranking
Main Factors	Core Resources and Attractors	1	1
	Destination Management	2	4
	Qualifying and Amplifying Determinants	3	5
	Destination Policy, Planning and Development	4	2
	Supporting Factors and Resources	5	3
Sub-Factors	Physiography and Climate	1	1
	Mix of Activities	2	4
	Culture and History	3	2
	Tourism Superstructure	4	3
	Safety/ Security	5	13
	Cost/ Value	6	14
	Accessibility	7	9
	Special Events	8	6
	Awareness/ Image	9	5
	Location	10	11
	Infrastructure	11	8
	Hospitality	12	20
	Market Ties	13	12
	Entertainment	14	7
	Quality of Service/ Experience	15	19
	Political Will	16	15
	Positioning/ Branding	17	10
	Enterprise	18	17
	Facilitating Resources	19	18
	Carrying Capacity	20	24
	Marketing	21	16
	Interdependencies	22	30
	Development	23	26
	Information/ Research	24	29
	Resource Stewardship	25	23
	Vision	26	21
	Monitoring and Evaluation	27	27
	Audit	28	32
	Organisation	29	22
	Philosophy/ Values	30	28
	Competitive/ Collaborative Analysis	31	25
Human Resource Development	32	34	
Visitor Management	33	36	
Finance and Venture Capital	34	33	
System Definition	35	31	
Crisis Management	36	35	

Table 2: Ranking of Destination Competitiveness Attributes
Source: Crouch 2011

4. CONCLUSION

The literature review and the results of Crouch study suggest that the attributes that comprise a destination's core touristic resources and attractiveness are the cornerstone of a destination's competitiveness. Significance of these fundamentally important elements should be understood by the destination management organizations in order to be competitive. Only by addressing the key attributes and developing them may lead to competitiveness, sustainability and further development of tourism industry in Slovakia. The potential in understanding the attributes is especially significant for undeveloped regions and should be subject to further studies.

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