

The Competitiveness of Cultural Tourism Destinations: Case of Stara Zagorain Bulgaria

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Abstract:

Current study tries to evaluate the competitiveness of Stara Zagora (the sixth largest city in Bulgaria) as a tourist destination generally and from cultural tourism perspective in particular. The study was conducted using questionnaires with both closed and open-ended questions. Analyses showed that in addition to reenactment of historic events and Bulgarian traditions and crafts, demand for dining experiences originating from distant parts of the world such as the Far East, India, and Mexico can also be added to the competitive of Stara Zagora. Theoretical and practical implications were also identified and discussed.

Keywords: Cultural tourism, Competiveness, Destination, Tourist perception

Introduction

Culture is a core element of cities which plays an influential role their presence and future prospects. Culture is increasingly used by cities to boost their attractiveness and competitiveness (OECD, 2009). Russo and Van der Borg (2002) contend that cities are trying to secure their niche positions on the world map by investing in cultural attractions. Cultural tourism is widely seen as an experiential type of tourism based on the search and participation in cultural experiences. The demand of such experiences as generated by cultural tourism can be a powerful tool for attracting intellectual and financial resources to destinations, as well as preserving existing cultural resources of places. Tourism competitiveness is the ability of a destination to add value to its visitors' experiences and increase wealth by managing resources, processes and attractiveness (Ritchie and Crouch, 2002).

Scholars have proposed a number of models discussing the factors that

determine the competitiveness of a destination. For the purpose of this study, the researchers chose to focus on Van der Borg and Van der Meer (1995) concept cited in Russo and Van der Borg (2002). Bulgaria is better known as a sun, sea and sand destination. Yet, the country has rich mix of cultural, historical and natural resources that are not utilized to their full potentials for tourism. Bulgaria is a destination with considerable unrealized potentials with tourism activities mainly centered along the Black Sea coast (Mintel, 2007; Mintel, 2013). Up till recent times the tourism industry is developed chaotically, bringing the feeling of unknown capital and unplanned building. Particularly negative aspect should be alienated - the keeping of mono-structure character of tourism supply, staking on traditional formulas for mass tourism - 'mountain, snow, ski' and 'sea, sun, beach'. This study aims to evaluate the competitiveness of Stara Zagora (the sixth largest city in Bulgaria) as a tourist destination generally and from cultural tourism perspective in particular.

Literature Review

Cultural Tourism

Many cities tirelessly invest in building up their cultural capitals in a global race of creating a vibrant creative sector in the hope of generating synergy within their cities' wider urban economy (Russo and Van der Borg, 2002). The crossover of culture and tourism serves as a prime example of developing added-value through enhanced offerings of a place. Nevertheless, the notion of cultural tourism is far from contemporary. Cultural tourism is considered to be one of the oldest kinds of tourism and also considered as one of the fastest growing segments of global tourism. Hughes (2002, in Okumuset al., 2012) identifies several dimensions of cultural tourism. In terms of scope, cultural tourism covers a wide variety of activities and objects including basic elements of daily life, work practices, local dress, architecture, handicrafts, history, historical sites, language, religion, religious sites, traditions, leisure activities, art galleries, music, national cuisine, local cuisines, theatres, museums, special events, festivals, fairs, local communities and neighbourhoods. In terms of type, tourists may prefer to visit museums or watch performances. The time dimension refers to the fact that objects or performances can reflect past or contemporary themes. Finally, the travel dimension suggests that some attractions such as museums are immobile, while others such as performing arts can be mobile.

According to Nyaupane, Morais and Dowler, (2006) there are three dimensions of motivation to participate in cultural tourism activities, namely culture-focused, culture-attentive and culture-appreciative. Additionally, McKercher, Hoa and Du Cros (2005) identify five types of cultural tourists. The first one is the purposeful cultural tourist which means that culture is the main reason for visiting a destination. The second type is the sightseeing tourist who is concerned with cultural highlights only. The third one, the casual cultural tourist,

is not necessarily deeply involved in experiencing culture. The fourth is the incidental cultural tourist who is only superficially involved in any kind of cultural experience. The last one is the serendipitous cultural tourist for whom the cultural tourism may not have been of a great importance, however, when in the destination, the new cultural experience becomes highly intriguing (Tacey, 2011).

In the face of globalization, cities are looking towards a postmodern approach in order to create uniqueness (Bramham and Wagg, 2009). Culture becomes an element for providing local distinctiveness and boosting their competitiveness and attractiveness (OECD, 2009). The consumption of culture is used as a way of economic regeneration and the creation of cultural facilities plays a key role in the competition to attract inward investment to European cities (Bianchini, 1990). Regions now try to differentiate themselves by emphasizing the aesthetic qualities of material commodities and services that represent symbolic capital in order to attract investments and spending power of the middle class. Zukin (1991) argues that culture as "a general way of life" is an important product of a place and that the cultural products of places are a physical form of cultural capital (Richards, 1996).

Destination Competitiveness

A destination is a particular place to which people travel and choose to stay for a period of time in order to experience feature or attractions of some kind. No doubt a destination is the centre for facilities and services where the needs of tourists are met. From a marketing point of view, a destination is seen as a product. It is the point of consumption of a variety of activities. Most of the definitions suggest that it can be a country, region, city or small town to which tourists travel as their main object. A tourist destination may even be a "moving" destination such as a cruise vessel (Tosun and Jenkins, 1996). Tourism competitiveness on the other hand is a complex notion. Ritchie and Crouch (2000) suggest that it encompasses the ability to increase tourism expenditure and to increasingly attract tourists while at the same time providing them with satisfying, memorable experiences and to do so in a profitable way, while enhancing the well-being of destination residents and preserving the natural capital of the destination for future generations. Hassan (2000, in Kunst, 2009, p.136) also states that destination competitiveness is "the ability of a destination to create and integrate added value product that sustain its resources while maintaining market position relative to other competing destinations". In order to view the issue of competitiveness in a more realistic perspective, it should be taken into consideration that the so-called "tourism product" is an amalgam of various individually created and marketed services and products. The more products managed in an appropriate way, the more competitive the destination will be.

Furthermore, in order for a destination to achieve and maintain competitive

advantage, it has to identify its unique resources and factors. Then, attention must be given to how these resources can be utilized in order to create competencies and capabilities which will help the place differentiate from competitors. In this case, creativity and innovation play an extremely important role. One of the most cited models that present factors that determine the competitiveness of a destination is the Model of Destination Competitiveness by Dwyer, Livaic and Mellor (2003). This model brings together the main elements that can influence destinations' competitiveness: a) inherited resources b) Created resources c) Supporting factors and resources d) Destination management; e) Situational conditions and f) Demand conditions.

Inherited resources can be classified as Natural and Cultural. Natural resources, for instance, are physiography, climate, flora and fauna. The destination's culture and heritage, history, customs, architectural features, traditions enhance its attractiveness. Created resources are the tourism infrastructure, special events, entertainment, shopping, and any other available activities that can be related to tourism. The Supporting factors and resources can impact on the success of tourism industry. These are the general infrastructure, quality of services, hospitality and accessibility of a destination. Destination management factors can strengthen the quality of the Inherited and Created resources and enhance the Supporting factors. If not managed properly, however, the effect can be negative. Situational conditions can be the destination location, micro and macro environment, the strategies of destination firms and organizations, security and safety and the political dimension. Finally, the Demand factor is extremely important to competitiveness.

Tourism Development in Bulgaria

Bulgaria is an underdeveloped destination with potentials of becoming one of the most visited countries in Europe. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), "Bulgaria is one of the most appealing "new faces" in the tourism industry". The problems of the Bulgarian tourism date back from the country' transition to market economy and continue to be a concern nowadays. Although Bulgaria is rich in heritage and cultural resources as a destination, the main form of tourism is still the mass market seaside holidays. Strategies for developing cultural tourism are needed for the growth of this potential segment. Current study's focus is placed on one of the biggest cities in Bulgaria with a potential to become a highly competitive cultural tourism destination. Stara Zagora is one of the major cities in the national urban network. It plays a key role in the development of Central Bulgaria with its trading, communication, administrative, scientific, social and cultural functions. It is situated in the centre of Bulgaria. Key transport routes, including part of the national and international transport networks, pass through its territory. The population of the city is nearly 160 000. Stara Zagora is one of the most ancient cities in Europe. It is an

important piece in the European cultural routes mosaic. Inhabited by Thracians, ancient Greeks, Romans, Slavs, Ottomans and Bulgarians, this unique city bears the historical imprint of those past civilizations along with many of their historical treasures. The first Opera and Radio outside the capital were opened in Stara Zagora. The Art gallery and the City theatre are more than hundred years old. Also, the city hosts several festivals throughout the year- Opera and ballet festival, Festival of the Thracian folklore song, National competition for folklore dances, National poetry competition (Regional Administration of Stara Zagora, 2008; Municipality of Stara Zagora, 2014).

Methodology

This research was conducted using a questionnaire (with both open and close ended questions) that has been designed via critical review of the literature and application of the Van den Berg, Van der Borg, and Van der Meer's (1995) destination attractiveness determinants model. Also, Dwyer, Livaic and Mellor's (2003) Model of destination competitiveness was taken into consideration. Likert-type rating ranging from "1-Very poor", "2-Poor", "3-Neither poor, nor good", "4-Good", "5-Very good" to "6- Do not know" was used. As stated earlier, the instrument also contained some open-ended question regarding destination competitiveness. The questionnaires were distributed in person by the first author among host community of Stara Zagora in January 2014. By host community, the researchers meant citizens and people living and working in Stara Zagora including those working in tourism and hospitality sectors. Using SPSS version 20, the quantitative data was subjected to Kruskal-Wallis Test. The open-ended questions were analysed using content analysis.

Findings

A test of reliability yielded. The results were among accepted range by Nunnally (1978) of $.75 > .70$. Toward measuring the internal consistency of the questionnaire internal correlations was measured; equally an acceptable value above $.70$ (Pallant, 2010) was recorded. With a response rate of 66.7 % a total of 100 questionnaires was completed by residents and visitors in Stara Zagora after 150 respondents were asked to participate in the research. Full demographics of the respondents are shown in Table 1. The female responses dominated (75.0%), while 25 males took part in the survey. The highest number of respondents belonged to the 18-24 age group (23.0%), followed by those belonging to the 35-44 and 45-54 age groups. A small number of the participants were aged 65 and over (5.0%). One of the aims of the questionnaire was to separate respondents in different categories regarding their relationship with the city. Seventy of the participants were residents who were not involved professionally in tourism or hospitality. The second largest group consisted of non-citizens of the city not

involved in tourism or hospitality, followed by 10 per cent residents of Stara Zagora working in the industry. Only one respondent was a tourist on a holiday.

Table 1 Demographics of respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Male</i>	25	25,0	25,0	25,0
<i>Female</i>	75	75,0	75,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	
Age	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>18-24</i>	23	23,0	23,0	23,0
<i>25-34</i>	16	16,0	16,0	39,0
<i>35-44</i>	21	21,0	21,0	60,0
<i>45-54</i>	21	21,0	21,0	81,0
<i>55-64</i>	14	14,0	14,0	95,0
<i>65 and over</i>	5	5,0	5,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

According to Mintel (2010) cultural products appeal to a broad demographic but people over 55's are becoming more interested and are the ones engaging in cultural experience most. It is considered that the elderly Europeans are the major consumers of cultural products. However, a crosstab analysis between the age of respondents and the frequency of visits to cultural events and attractions showed that the 45-54 age group consumed cultural products most often (11.0 per cent respondents chose the option "Every month"). The age group 35-44 is the second largest group with 14 participants visiting cultural attractions and events up to five times a year. Full results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2- Relationship between age and frequency of visits to cultural events/attractions

		<i>How often do you go to cultural events/attractions?</i>				
		<i>Once a year (%)</i>	<i>Up to five times a year (%)</i>	<i>Every month (%)</i>	<i>I do not go to any events or attractions (%)</i>	<i>Total (%)</i>
What is your age?	18-24	6	13	4	0	23
	25-34	2	10	4	0	16
	35-44	5	14	2	0	21
	45-54	2	7	11	1	21
	55-64	0	8	6	0	14
	65 and over	0	2	2	1	5
Total		15	54	29	2	100

Table 3 shows the full list of the most preferable methods for seeking information about the destination's attractions and events by the different categories of respondents. Fifty per cent of the residents of Stara Zagora chose "Website/forum" as a way for searching information. Also, this was the most preferable option for non-residents (14%). Overall, 64.0 per cent of respondents chose the "Website/forum" option, followed by 19.0 per cent of answers for the "Tourist Information Office" option. The results were consistent with Ivanova's (2011) and Richards' (2011) findings that the Internet was becoming more and more preferred information seeking method by visitors

Table 3 - Relationship between type of respondent and information seeking method

	How would you seek information about attractions/events?				Total (%)
	In tourist information office (%)	Website/forum (%)	Word of mouth (%)	Other (%)	
Resident not in tourism	14	43	11	2	70
Resident in tourism	2	7	0	1	10
Tourist on a holiday	0	1	0	0	1
Non-citizen in tourism	1	2	0	0	3
Non-citizen not in tourism	2	11	3	0	16
Total	19	64	14	3	100

Perceptions of Respondents of the Destination's Attributes

The present study relied on Van den Berg, Van der Borg, and Van der Meer's (1995 in Russo and Van der Borg, 2002) and Dwyer, Livaic and Mellor's (2003) models with a particular focus on the former. In the questionnaire destination's attributes were grouped into three main categories, making reference to the two models. The three categories were attributes related to the external and internal accessibility of the destination, primary tourist products (cultural attractions and events and their characteristics) and secondary tourist products (restaurants and bars in the city). The final three attributes which respondents had to rate were safety (a situational condition), Municipality' efforts towards meeting the needs of citizens (a Local governments factor) and promotion of primary tourist products (a quality of information indicator) (Russo and Borg, 2002; Omerzel, 2006). Table 4 shows the full list of the mean ratings of the destination's attributes in a descending order.

In general, respondents rated the attributes of Stara Zagora highly with a mean value of 4.025. The mean rating of half of the attributes was recorded to be above 4 and the other half was recorded to be above 3. Quality of cultural tourist attractions was placed at the first position with a mean score of 4.48. The next three attributes also belonged to the primary and secondary products, followed by two highly rated accessibility attributes. Also, the Municipality's efforts received a mean score of 4.16 which showed that respondents felt satisfied with the work of the public sector. This result suggested that the destination was managed in a sustainable way, therefore was competitive (Ritchie and Crouch in Dwyer and Kim, 2010). Variety of cultural attractions was rated lowest among the attributes with a mean score above 4. This showed that although respondents were delighted with the quality of primary products, innovation and new offerings would be beneficial to the destination's competitiveness (Tacgey, 2011). The majority of the accessibility factors evaluated in this study received a

mean score between 3 and 4. This rating was high according to the six-point scale used in the questionnaire. However, the results showed that the city's infrastructure needed improvements, in particular the quality of roads, the quality of the public transport and the availability of signs. Also, quality of customers service in restaurants and bars was rated low compared to the other attributes (mean value of 3.73). In the end, the results showed a high satisfaction with the mix of offers in Stara Zagora. Mean values of less than 3 would have meant that according to its citizens and visitors the destination was not competitive enough.

Table 4 *Perceptions of respondents of the destination's attributes*

	<i>Attribute</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
1.	Quality of tourist attractions	4,4848	,61218
2.	Value-for-money of cultural events and attractions	4,3434	,82266
3.	Variety of food and beverages in restaurants and bars	4,3367	,70263
4.	Quality of food and beverages	4,2347	,71510
5.	Visibility of the location of the tourist information office	4,2200	1,26794
6	Municipality's efforts towards meeting the citizens' and visitors' needs	4,1616	,93358
7	State of infrastructure	4,1414	,70000
8	Variety of cultural events and attractions	4,1212	,68917
9	Promotion of the tourist product	3,9697	,80121
10	Value-for-money of a visit to a restaurant or bar	3,9286	1,03794
11	Safety in Stara Zagora	3,9091	,95928
12	Quality of the public transport services	3,8500	1,40256
13	Quality of the roads	3,7778	,92091
14	Quality of customer service in restaurants and bars	3,7347	,91439
15	Availability of signs	3,7100	1,15728
16	Availability of parking spaces	3,4600	1,18424

Out of a six-point scale: 1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly Agree, 6-Do not know)

Kruskal-Wallis Test

The authors intended to test the relationship between the age of respondents and their overall satisfaction with the destination's offering, their future intentions of recommending the city and how likely they were to visit again. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was initially identified as an appropriate statistical method for analyzing the relationship between the variables. A number of assumptions applied for parametric techniques to be adopted. These assumptions include: level of measurement, random sampling, and independence of observations, normal distribution and homogeneity of variance. Before conducting a parametric technique the researchers had to

check whether the sample was suitable according to these assumptions. The sample in the study violated two of the assumptions. First, non-random sampling technique was adopted when conducting the primary research. Second, normality tests between the independent variable “Age of respondents” and the dependent variables “Overall satisfaction”, “Intention of recommendation” and “Intention of repeated visit” showed that data were not normally distributed. Although Q-Q Plots showed relatively normal distribution in some of the cases, Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests suggested violation of the assumption for normality, $p < .05$ in all cases (See Table. 5) (Field, 2005; Pallant, 2007). Therefore, it could be concluded that the data was not completely suitable for running ANOVA analysis. On this note a non-parametric alternative - the Kruskal-Wallis test was employed.

Table 5 - Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests for normality

	What is your age?	Statistic	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	
			df	Sig.
<i>Overall I was satisfied with the destination's offering.</i>	18-24	,381	22	,000
	25-34	,408	16	,000
	35-44	,383	21	,000
	45-54	,402	21	,000
	55-64	,391	14	,000
<i>I would recommend Stara Zagora to others</i>	18-24	,392	22	,000
	25-34	,323	16	,000
	35-44	,239	21	,003
	45-54	,357	21	,000
	55-64	,352	13	,000
<i>I would visit the city again.</i>	65 and over	,473	5	,001
	18-24	,406	22	,000
	25-34	,431	16	,000
	35-44	,277	20	,000
	45-54	,298	20	,000
	55-64	,331	13	,000
	65 and over	,473	5	,001

Kruskal-Wallis test

The Kruskal-Wallis test allows researchers to compare the scores on continuous variables for three or more groups. To run this test one categorical independent variable and one continuous dependent variable is needed (Pallant, 2007). In this study, the researchers chose to run the test between the independent variable “Age of respondents” and the dependent variables “Overall satisfaction”, “Intention of recommendation” and “Intention of repeated visit” (Table 6 and Table 7).

Table 6 - Kruskal-Wallis test

	What is your age?	N	Mean Rank
<i>Overall I was satisfied with the destination's offering.</i>	18-24	22	56.75
	25-34	16	36.81
	35-44	21	48.98
	45-54	21	57.02
	55-64	14	45.11
	65 and over	5	51.00
	Total	99	
<i>I would recommend Stara Zagora to others</i>	18-24	22	58.95
	25-34	16	46.75
	35-44	21	51.33
	45-54	21	40.29
	55-64	13	52.27
	65 and over	5	40.50
	Total	98	
<i>I would visit the city again.</i>	18-24	22	55.95
	25-34	16	41.22
	35-44	20	51.95
	45-54	20	45.00
	55-64	13	49.69
	65 and over	5	36.10
	Total	96	

Table 7 Test statistics

	Test Statistics ^{a,b}		
	Overall I was satisfied with the destination's offering.	I would recommend Stara Zagora to others	I would visit the city again.
Chi-Square	10.511	6.841	5.470
Df	5	5	5
Asymp. Sig.	.062	.233	.361

a. Kruskal Wallis Test
b. Grouping Variable: What is your age?

The Kruskal-Wallis test revealed that there is not a statistically significant difference in the three continuous variables (“Overall satisfaction”, “Intention of recommendation” and “Intention of repeated visit”) across the six age groups, $p > .05$ (if Asymp. Sig. level was less than .05, $p < .05$, then there would have been a statistically significant difference). However, the generated results did not show a statistically significant difference between the groups. Therefore, performing Mann-Whitney U test was not necessary.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data was analyzed through inductive content analysis. First, notes and headings were written in the text while reading it. After that categories were generated. According to Weber (1990, p. 37) a category is “a group of words with similar meaning or connotations”. Finally, each category was named and subcategories were grouped as categories (Elo and Kyngas, 2008). For instance, initially Question 16 (“What is your current job/occupation?”) answers formed 11 sub-categories. Eventually, these were reduced to seven categories in total. After the creation of the different categories, the number of times they occurred was counted and then converted into percentages (Creswell, 2013).

Five open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire.

Q8: "Which cultural event (s) have you visited recently?"

Q9: "What type of cuisine (apart from Bulgarian) would you like to see in a restaurant most?"

Q10: "Which is the most unique cultural attribute of Stara Zagora?"

Q11: "What cultural event or attraction would you like to see in the city (one that is not present in Stara Zagora yet)?"

Q16: "What is your current job/occupation?"

Q8 responses were categorized into nine different categories: "Theatre play", "Opera play", "Cinema", "Festival", "Arts exhibition", "Concert", "Museum exhibition", "Dance performance" and "I have not visited recently". The primary research generated a total of 78 answers to this particular question. The largest group of responses belonged to the "Theatre play" category, with 26.9 per cent of people stating that they had visited recently this type of cultural event. The second largest group of responses belonged to the "Opera play" category (23.1%). Fifth on the list was the "Cinema" category as 7.7 per cent of respondents stated it. These results showed cultural activities could not only be visits to galleries, museums, historical sites, theatres, festivals, etc, but also other leisure activities (Okumuset al., 2012) such as going to the cinema. Finally, 19.2 per cent of respondents stated they had not visited a cultural event/attraction recently. The lack of an additional question about the reasons why respondents did not participate in a cultural activity did not allow further analyses of the motivations of people to visit or not a cultural event/attraction. However, future research with more open-ended questions may explore to a greater extent the reasons why people would and would not indulge into cultural experiences.

Q9's responses were categorized into six categories: "Southern European", "Western European", "Eastern European", "Asian", "Central American" and "Fish". The categories were formed according to the United Nations' geographical region and composition grouping (UNSD, 2012). A total of 88 responses were given by the studied population. The most responses belonged to the "Asian" food category, as 45.4 per cent of people expressed willingness to be able to try Turkish, Thai, Indian, Japanese, Armenian and Chinese cuisines at the destination. The "Southern European" type of cuisine was second, with 22 respondents mentioning it (25%). Greek, Spanish and Italian meals were embraced by the "Southern European" category. Furthermore, 13.6 per cent of the respondents expressed the desire to taste Mexican cuisine at the destination. Two respondents stated that the destination lacked quality fish restaurants. These findings showed that participants in the study were relatively familiar with European cuisine and there was not high demand for it. However, satisfying the need for dining experiences originating from more distant parts of the world will enrich the tourism offer mix, making the destination more competitive.

Q10's responses were categorized into nine categories, representing

particular cultural attractions at the destination: "The Defenders of Stara Zagora 1877 Memorial Complex", "The Antique Forum of Augusta Trayana", "The Neolithic dwellings", "The Opera", "The Arts gallery", "Museums", "Cannot list only one", "Others", "Do not know". According to the generated results, the most unique cultural attribute of Stara Zagora was the Antique Forum of Augusta Trayana (27.9%). The Neolithic dwellings were also considered unique to the destination (17.2%), although respondents stated that they were not happy with "the presentation bit". The unique historic and cultural character of attractions is not enough for them to be attractive to tourists and residents of a particular destination. As Tacgey (2011) suggests, creative and innovative presentation and utilization of the unique resources of destinations play extremely important role in their differentiation from other places.

Question 11 was aimed at finding out what cultural attractions/events (not present at the destination yet) the population would like to see. A total of 73 responses were generated. Most of the respondents (23.3%) stated that they would like to see more opera, theatre and dance performances of mainly guest troupes. Also, 15.1 per cent expressed their willingness to be able to visit festivals related to cinema and folk dance. "Recreation of historical events and representation of Bulgarian arts and crafts" category was formed by 12.2 per cent of responses. These results showed that people would not like to see or maybe are not familiar enough with creative tourism activities. However, working towards the development of creative tourism can be extremely beneficial to the competitiveness of destinations (Richards and Wilson, 2006; Ohridksa-Olson and Ivanov, 2010), namely Stara Zagora. Also, "Free entrance events" category emerged, although it was formed by 3 responses only (4.1%). This result added credibility to the findings from the SPSS analyses in the previous section. Namely, respondents were satisfied with the value-for-money of a visit to cultural events/attractions and did not feel the need for more free entrance events. Finally, one respondent suggested that the destination needs "an attraction that would be unique to the city and the country as a whole". This answer showed an understanding of how important a unique cultural element was in differentiating cities from one another and making them competitive as destinations (Bramham and Wagg, 2009; OECD, 2009).

Question 16 asked for the respondents' current occupation. 95 responses were generated in total. Although the researcher's willingness was to reach more people related to tourism, the respondents involved in tourism, hospitality and culture represented only 11.6 per cent of the sample. Other categories that emerged were "Students", "Public sector", "Private sector" and "Unemployed". The data was collected from people working in various spheres. However, a higher number of responses from people working in tourism and culture would have been beneficial to the research findings as these were the people with more expertise on the investigated topic.

Overall, it could be concluded that Stara Zagora is a competitive destination for cultural tourism. However, there are particular areas that need to be improved in future.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Cultural tourism is considered to be the oldest kind of tourism and nowadays is one of the fastest growing segments of the global tourism industry (Alvarez and Korzay, 2011). Tourism activities may affect the culture of destinations in a negative way, creating issues such as commodification and loss of authenticity (Griffiths, Bassett and Smith, 2003; Hannabuss, 1999). However, culture can be used to provide local distinctiveness and to boost destination's competitiveness and attractiveness (OECD, 2009). The aim of this study was to critically evaluate the competitiveness of Stara Zagora as a cultural tourism destination. According to the WTO (2012) the number of international arrivals is expected to continue growing and by 2030 it is expected to reach 1.8 billion. Tourism in Bulgaria is also growing (OECD, 2012) with the tourist product mainly centered on the Black Sea coast and the mountains (Mintel, 2013). This study applied mainly the Tourism product concept model by Van den Berg, Van der Borg and Van der Meer (1995, in Russo and Van der Borg, 2002).

Demographic characteristics of the sample showed that 75.0 per cent of respondents were females, while only 25.0 per cent were males. Furthermore, while Mintel (2010) reported that people over 55 are the largest group of consumers of cultural products, a crosstab between the variables "Age" and "Frequency of visit" showed that mostly the 45-54 age group took part in cultural experiences. Also, the Internet was identified to be the most preferred method for seeking information about cultural tourism products. These results were consistent with the findings of Ivanova (2011) and Richards (2011) that more and more consumers searched the Web for cultural tourism experiences. The mean ratings of the attributes showed that Stara Zagora is a competitive destination for cultural tourism based on the perceptions of the residents and visitors. The mean value was recorded to be 4.025. However, there were attributes that needed to be improved such as the quality of roads, the quality of the public transport and the availability of parking spaces. Also, quality of customer service was not satisfactory compared to the other attributes' ratings. Furthermore, future research that involves higher number of experts and professionals in the field of tourism and culture might generate more in-depth data. Employing the Kruskal-Wallis test. A statistically significant difference in the three outcome variables ("Overall satisfaction", "Intentions of recommendation" and "Intentions of repeated visit") was not found across the six age groups.

Furthermore, findings showed that there was a demand for dining experiences originating from distant parts of the world such as the Far East, India, and Mexico. Nearly 50.0 per cent of respondents stated they would like to taste

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Asian cuisine in the restaurants in Stara Zagora. Satisfying this need could be beneficial to the destination's competitiveness. Finally, the majority of participants stated that they would like to see more theatre and opera guest performances, followed by those who expressed demand for more festivals related to cinema and folk dance. Recreation of historic events and Bulgarian traditions and crafts was also one of the categories with a high percentage of answers given. The findings, however, showed that residents and visitors had not still embraced the idea of creative tourism as no one mentioned cultural activities or attractions that could fall in the category of this type of tourism as defined by authors such as Richards and Wilson (2006) and Ohridska-Olson and Ivanov (2010).

The first set of recommendations is based on the identified limitations of this study. Future research, involving more experts in tourism and culture and mainly qualitative data collection can provide useful insights into Stara Zagora's position as a cultural tourism destination. Judgment based on experience, expertise and insight can be a valuable source of information (Crouch, 2011). Also, a more representative sample will allow researchers to run parametric tests such as Factor analysis which can be used for identifying inter-correlation between attributes determining destinations competitiveness (Field, 2013).

The second set of recommendations is based on of the perceptions of residents and visitors of the various attributes. Factors related to the city's infrastructure were rated lowest amongst all. Namely, the quality of public transport and the quality of the roads should be improved. Investments in new, modern vehicles and renovation of roads can boost the attractiveness of the destination. Also, more signs showing the way to the cultural attractions should be put as residents and visitors expressed this need. Finally, car parks can be built at some of the unexploited public areas as the availability of parking spaces received the lowest mean value of all.

The third recommendation is related to the importance of the Internet to destinations and organizations nowadays. As findings from the secondary and primary research showed, more and more consumers search online for travel related information and stay online once at the destination, as well. Information and Communication Technologies are crucial to the competitiveness of tourism organisations and destinations and for the entire industry as a whole. Developments in search engines and speed of networks have increased the number of travellers around the world that use technologies for planning and experiencing their travels (Buhalis and Law, 2008). The creation of a specialized website about Stara Zagora is recommended. A website is the easiest and fastest way to find all the information about the destination directly. Quality content is vital to an effective web site. Quality can be measured by features such as up-to-date information, accuracy, usefulness, innovativeness, professionalism. The speed, ease, of use, visual presentation and accessibility are also important

(Gosh, 1997 and Nell, 1998, in Pradhan, 2012).

A Google search with “Stara Zagora” as a key term generated mainly results of websites with daily news about the destination. Although the first website that appeared in Google was the Municipality of Stara Zagora's web page, it was only in Bulgarian language and did not present accurate information about the cultural events and attractions in the city. A link to the Tourism Information centre website could be found there. However, a specialised web page that would appear on top of Google results can ease the access to tourist information and be beneficial to the destination's competitiveness. Search engine marketing should be utilised effectively which will ensure the appearance of the website at the top of the list when a user types the related key words (Fernandez, 2008).

Finally, a mobile app which will provide residents and visitors with detailed information about each cultural event or attraction should be created. News reported the introduction of such an app in the UK. According to BBC News (2013) academics from the University of Surrey created an app that let gallery and museum visitors receive additional information on exhibits as they viewed them. A similar innovation can be presented in Stara Zagora, taking the destination at a new level of interaction with tourists and residents.

The final recommendation suggests an investment in creative tourism. It is a new generation of cultural tourism, allowing tourists to develop skills and fulfill their needs for self-actualization (Ohridska-Olson and Ivanov, 2010). Tourists will be able to expand their creative potential by actively participating in, for instance, traditional arts, crafts and culinary (Richards and Raymond, 2000). Stara Zagora and the region is famous for its traditions in walnut oil extraction (Kitipova-Popova, 2011) and honey production (OTPБ, 2014b). Knife crafting and wood carving are typical crafts for Chirpan, a small town in the Stara Zagora region (Municipality of Chirpan, 2014). Also, the area is famous for its traditions in rose oil extraction. The only museum in the world, dedicated to the oil-yielding plant –rose, is situated in the town of Kazanlak, the second largest town in the Stara Zagora province (OTPБ, 2014a). The investment in creative attractions, based on all these crafts, might lead to a more competitive destination as well.

Limitations

Like any other study, this study has its own limitation which however does not impact on its usefulness but only dictate that results should be used with caution. As the findings are specific to a particular geographic location generalizability is thus not applicable; however, findings are likely to be indicative of similar locations' tourism competitiveness parameters. The survey as stated earlier generated limited number of responses. The sample size limited the choice of statistical tests that could be employed. However, non-parametric tests are robust option particularly where there are assumption

violations. Finally, the research is predominantly from the perspective of host community. Future research may want to look at tourist perspective and compare with the findings of this study.

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