ASSESSMENT OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS' PERCEIVED SUSTAINABILITY OF A TOURISM DESTINATION

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Abstract:
Despite sustainability attracting significant interest in tourism research, few articles directly analyze foreign tourists' perceptions concerning destination sustainability. So far, the perceptual and preferential focus of foreign tourists evaluates the perspective of destination image, products, attractions, attitude, behavior, activities, and qualitative studies. The interest in the impact of sustainability on tourism destinations and the tourism industry is a more recent phenomenon. Since destination sustainability is related to the perceptual domain, the interest moved to the perceptual variables of destination sustainability elements. The association between the perception and sustainability is of interest to many stakeholders, including management authorities such as municipalities, councils, and tourism management organizations, closely monitoring their operations since the public money funds their project activities. The motivation of foreign tourists concerning sustainability and what they are most concerned about are the two questions that the paper attempts to address. In this paper, the empirical research investigates the perceptual levels of foreign tourists visiting Belgrade, Serbia, highlighting their attitude through economic, social, and environmental elements of destination sustainability. The study shows that foreign tourists perceive sustainability in Serbia slightly above the average. Future research should include time-series data for monitoring and tracking changes in the perceptual levels of destination sustainability elements.

Keywords:
Sustainable tourism, Foreign tourists, Destination sustainability, Perceptual sustainability, Serbia.

INTRODUCTION

There is a significant research effort on the international tourist behavior, activities, attitudes, and "green" image, and there are few studies that are directly focused on the perception of foreign tourists on destination sustainability (Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2019). Also, the concept of sustainability is prone to inconsistency when it comes to interpretation, making it challenging to analyze and research (Hall et al., 2015). Another difficulty arises from granularity in determining scale, attributes, and destinations (Sidali et al., 2017).

There is a gap in the research literature on the Serbian tourism market concerning international tourists' perception of sustainability.

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One of them is how foreign tourists perceive Serbia from the perspective of destination sustainability. Only in the last decade, the Serbian foreign tourism market became a significant income source, creating opportunities for employment, infrastructure development, utilization of tangible and intangible country's resources, and an increase in overall wellbeing. The growth created a need for analyzing the demand side of the Serbian tourism destination market. Therefore, in this paper, the foreign market was placed in the front row for research and analysis since it accounts for 50% and 70% of total arrivals and revenues, respectively.

The number of international arrivals in Serbia grew from 0.8 mils. in 2009 to 1.8 mils. in 2019. Between 2014 and 2019, there is an 80% increase in Serbia's international tourist arrivals (Statistical Yearbook, 2019; Monthly Statistical Bulletin, 2020). In the same period, the interest of the research community to analyze the international tourists' perception in Serbia started to grow. In this paper, the primary concern is if foreign tourists are concerned about sustainability? And if they are, what are the aspects that they are most concerned and sensitive about? The answers to these questions require understanding the perceptual attitude and cultural position towards a destination, which this paper is trying to figure out. The study evaluates the perceptual merits of international tourists' sustainability by examining economic, social, and environmental aspects using empirical data from the survey of 161 responses. The paper enhances our knowledge about tourism by looking at the destination's perception through the lens of destination sustainability elements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

So far, the literature on the perceptions of destination sustainability by foreign tourists has been mostly concerned with specific issues or topics that do not appear in other papers or time-series studies. Most of the evaluations of international tourists' perceptions are on local food, attractions, culture, entertainment, lodging, and interactions with local communities. However, studies concerning common sustainability aspects (economic, social, environmental) are rare (Prayag et al., 2020). Moreover, there is a need for researching perceptions of international tourists on destinations that show signs of poor management of sustainability issues by the authorities.

Jin & Pearce (2011) are concerned with the overcrowding of tourist sites in China, while Prayag & Brittnacher (2014) are interested in Germany and British tourists' environmental impact on French coastal area degradation. Cottrell et al. (2013) evaluated satisfaction with sustainable tourism using a four-dimension framework developed by Spangenberg & Valentin (1999). The model consists of economic, social, environmental, and institutional dimensions. Further, Thyne et al. (2018) suggest that social distance between different tourist nationals impacts the domestic population's attitude. Sidali et al. (2017) argue that strong impressions of a destination landscape and natural beauty, combined with lodging facilities, increase sustainability perceptions.

RESULTS

Methodology in this paper is the descriptive statistics and empirical evaluation of the perception of the foreign tourists who visited Belgrade, Serbia, between December of 2019 and March 2020. A total number of 161 responses uses a sliding 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), cannot tell (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5)). In addition to demographic data, all answers reflect the economic, social, and environmental perspectives. Each respondent answered 18 sustainability and six demographic questions.

Based on the results, foreign tourists regard Belgrade (Serbia) as moderately sustainable or above average (3.57 out of 5). Repeat visitors rank sustainability better than the first-time ones. Male (3.54) and females (3.59) have an almost identical perception of sustainability, with females ranking slightly higher. The age group between 20 and 40 (3.60) and over 50 (3.61) consider sustainability higher than the other groups. The public (3.70) has higher marks for sustainability, while those associated with NGOs have the lowest (2.96). Finally, tourists with an average annual income of under $10k have the highest (3.60) perception of Belgrade (Serbia).

From the sustainability perspective, economic (3.67) and social (3.69) aspects scored slightly higher than the environmental (3.38). Safety (4.02) and friendliness (4.14) have the highest overall score, including the perception of the consumer value (4.02). Not far behind are culture (3.94), local products (3.95), markets for local products (3.58), and services (3.91). Crowdedness (2.91) ranked lowest by foreign tourists.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The overall perception based on the empirical survey and evaluation of Belgrade (Serbia) suggests a moderate shift towards sustainability in Serbia. Still, there is more room for improvement. For the most part, the analysis shows that Serbia, in foreign tourists' eyes, is hovering slightly above the mid-point between sustainable and not sustainable.

The results show that out of three significant aspects of sustainability, the environment is falling behind most. Not far ahead are the other two factors, social and economic. Besides consumer value, friendliness is the most priced social asset that foreign tourists recognize and appreciate in Serbia, followed by safety, local products, and culture.

The findings suggest that Serbia needs to significantly improve its tourism offerings (products and services) and elevate its tourism industry to higher levels and standards, at least from the sustainability point of view. Also, government and private sector stakeholders need to agree on the development strategy that will put the tourism industry in Serbia as a priority by unleashing its tangible and intangible resources and maximizing its tourism potentials under the umbrella of sustainable development.

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