

CERTIFICATION AS A MANAGERIAL TOOL IN TOURISM: IDENTIFYING THE EFFECTS ON SUSTAINABILITY AND COMPETITIVENESS

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Abstract. The environmental, economic and social problems that are encountered in tourism today are largely due to the neglect of purposeful management. The reflection of these negatives affects the environment, leads to a loss of identity, and provokes a decrease in interest in tourist destinations. Therefore, the research purpose is to explore the possibilities for tourism in the new realities of sustainability, within the potential of certification to promote management and competitiveness. A holistic approach is used, combining observation, synthesis, analysis on secondary data. As a result, recommendations for competitiveness in the context of sustainability, applicable in tourism practice, are derived.

Keywords: tourism, holistic approach, sustainable development, certification, competitiveness.

JEL Classification: Q01, Q10, R11.

Introduction

The question of sustainability for the development has a universal sound. In its comprehensiveness, it affects environmental issues, economic processes and socio-cultural phenomena affecting the world as a whole, as well as individual countries in particular. Because of that it encompasses the entire complex system of ongoing relationships between nature and society. Such an interpretation is explained by the terminological specification of the concept of “sustainability”, which should be understood in the focus of a transition of a given system, regardless of whether it is natural or anthropogenic, from one condition to another. The most important thing here is to provide the system in a way that promotes the preservation of its inherent characteristics over certain periods of time and the building of the capacity to resist the external impact. As such, the characteristics of the system remain unchanged, or a mechanism is used to adapt them to changes in the environment. From here, the understanding of sustainable development should be tied to the processes of ensuring those conditions that, regardless of the manifestation of the factors of the external environment, “keep” the system in a condition

of stability. Once a steady condition has been reached, the system must be sufficiently balanced that it no longer passes into other conditions. With all this in mind, global public and private organizations have for years been engaged in the search and derivation of criteria to determine whether a given condition is sustainable or not (UNWTO, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; EUROPARC, n.d.). In the context under consideration, the practice of the EU should be added to the attempts to achieve sustainable development. In the European Environment Agency, in the European Economic Commission, in the European Economic and Social Committee, Eurostat, etc. a set of basic indicators applicable in the field of the environment is used (Executive Environment Agency [EEA], n.d.). Of course, the complexity of the undertaking is obvious, but nevertheless, publications presenting various indicators and models are available. In connection with them, the research regarding the importance of certification and its relationship with the achievement of sustainability is of no less interest. Particularly curious is the aspect where researches focus on the tourism industry which is precisely the subject of the present study. The object of research is certification and the effects of its application in the tourism industry.

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1. Methodological assurance of the research

Tourism in the imagination of most of the people relates to recreation, new impressions and pleasures. It has permanently entered modern life and is an unchanging measure of its quality. At the same time, tourism is one of the most profitable and dynamic sectors of the economy. On a global scale, it is the most important source of foreign exchange earnings, which, even after the unimaginable defeats of the Covid pandemic, manages to cope with the negatives and adapt to the new realities. And at the same time, precisely in the pandemic, it became clear that neglecting the purposeful management of tourism presupposes spontaneous and uncontrolled development as well as problems of an ecological, economic and social nature. Considering the topicality of the issue, the present study attempts to explore the potential and possibilities of tourism to function in the process of the new realities of sustainability, identifying mechanisms contributing to management. For this purpose, standards are being studied and sought, the introduction of which in tourism practice would contribute to ensuring its competitiveness.

In terms of methodology, a holistic approach is used, which is based on the use of secondary data sources, the author's own research, observations and analyses. Based on an expert approach, specific examples of sustainability certificates from the world and European tourism practice are presented. The approach is based on general scientific research methods in which processes and phenomena are studied in their immediate manifestation. And it could be pointed that this is its main advantage – to be carried out under the natural conditions of the studied area, which is an important prerequisite for the achievement of a certain objectivity, in view of the researchers' experience.

2. Conceptualization in sustainability and competitiveness in tourism

The reasoning presented in the introduction actually presupposes a seemingly essential conflict, manifesting itself both in the theory and practice of tourism. Are sustainability and competitiveness compatible concepts? In the conditions of military confrontation, but also of economic instability and social vulnerability, to what extent the tourism system can remain in a state that is sustainable. Of course, the dimensions here are much larger than the question of the sustainable development of the sector, because they directly affect the spatial positioning of the supply in conditions of instability and highly pronounced competition. Clarifying the details requires a holistic approach as well as certain terminological clarifications. First of all, they should be done in relation to sustainability.

Traditionally, the words of Gro Harlem Brundtland from 1987 are accepted as the definition of sustainability from the so-called the "Brundtland Report". With them,

sustainable development is defined as "...development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987). The emphasis on the mutual, deep and irreversible interdependence between economic development and the natural environment reached its emanation during the United Nations Conference on the Environment and development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, provoking a rethinking of the entire philosophy of the future of human civilization.

Over the years, the understanding of sustainable development has expanded. In the terminology of sustainability, new categories appear such as "the magic triangle of sustainable development" (Munasinghe, 1992), with the components of ecological balance, economic security and social justice; global socio-economic, cultural, environmental and conservation goals are defined as well. It is obvious that multiple interpretations can be found on the definition for "sustainable development" (Hardi & Zdan, 1997 in Keiner, 2004; THE PEP, 2006) and the discussion in this direction continues (European Commission, 2010; United Nations, 2008, 2015, 2018; UNESCO, 2019) and Boggia and Cortina (2010).

Competition, on the other hand, in the most general and broad sense, is thought of as a type of relationship that occurs in the pursuit of a goal. In a world of unlimited needs and scarce resources, competitive relationships inevitably arise. There is inevitable and constant competition in consumer markets, as producers constantly compete with each other to attract customers interest and attention. The only and the simplest way to increase profits is to achieve an advantage over the competitor. And this aspiration by presumption inevitably creates prerequisites for a better use of use of resources and satisfaction of more needs.

The development of the theory of competitiveness has its beginnings in the searches of Adam Smith and his seminal work "The Wealth of Nations" (Smith, 1776/1979). Tracing its evolution in the subsequent almost 200-year period, however, should be with accent on the founding ideas and scientific works of Ricardo (1817), Heckscher (1919), Leontief (1953), Vernon (1966), Linder (1961), Krugman (1979), Lancaster (1979), Cho and Moon (2000) and many others.

Competition is at the heart of diversity and increasing the well-being of society. However, this does not necessarily mean that it leads to positive relations between the competitors. The opposite option is more common, mainly because the environment is different, the resources and available capital are also different. And this is clearly visible in tourism, which is why it makes focusing the attention of the rulers, solely on the issue of development, insufficiently effective.

At the destination level, there are examples of a qualitative understanding of these processes. The results achieved by them are impressive. Costa Rica, for example, has been cited by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as a good practice in environmental commitment.

The country has 5% of the world's biodiversity and more than 25% of its area is classified as protected; the share of renewable energy in consumption is 100%. Tourism is the fastest growing industry in Costa Rica. Since 2000, it has been the number one earner in foreign exchange, surpassing the traditional agricultural production of coffee and bananas combined. From the review of the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index, it is clearly visible that the destination (at the country level) is developing successfully, occupying a leading place in competitiveness among Latin American countries (Penkova, 2013). There are other examples: from the Dominican Republic – such as Coulibri Ridge, as a high-end resort with a low-impact on the environment. A good example of technological assurance of functioning using the potential of the sun and wind to reduce the carbon footprint (Independent, 2022). Illustration also can be given from the Thai Hai Village, Vietnam often defined as “ideal destination to experience ethnic groups’ culture and green space” with ecological houses-on-stilts and exhibition the live traditional folk culture of ethnic Tay, Nung (Asia Tours, n.d.).

Sustainable tourism contributes to the sustainability of the entire territory, while protecting nature and culture, and supporting economic development and bringing social benefits to the local population. By all accounts, tourism causes less damage to the environment than other areas of the economy. However, its sustainable development, protecting the natural and cultural environment is not always a top priority in the strategic plans for individual tourist destinations, regardless of the level of identification.

By orienting tourism towards sustainable development, it is committed to minimizing the negative environmental consequences of development. This task is particularly relevant in the light of the rapid development of the industry, which is expected in the coming years, and an increase in the loads on the environment, if the necessary measures are not taken. At the same time, due to the fact that it is not possible for tourism to achieve absolute sustainability in the use of resources, special attention should be paid to the realization of future higher profitability of transport and hotel services, public catering, waste removal and other types of service to guests based on competent environmental justification and standards.

3. Certificates and standards being a tool for achieving competitiveness and sustainability in tourism

Handling standards in tourism has a history showing that their utilization as a regulatory tool can lead to the development of sustainable practices (Renda et al., 2012). Especially as far as certificates and eco-labels are envisaged (BIO2CARE, 2019).

Presumably, certification is voluntary, but in its essence, strongly bound to the quality and ecological

issues, co-relating this way to the dimensions of sustainability. This link is clearly outlined in the documents of the World Tourism Organization at the United Nations, as well as in the quality policy with the environmental policy of the European Union (European Commission, n.d.-a).

Certification can be internal or external, depending on who determines the conformity of the good/service to the “benchmark”. In tourism, in relation to competitiveness and sustainability, it is used as a guarantor of quality, public trust and reliability of the tourist product. There are both internally set certificates (determined by the tourism organization/industry structure, etc., based on criteria and indicators described and set in a purposive certification procedure), as well as external certificates given by an independent external certification body.

It is noteworthy that the certifications associated with sustainable tourism generally follow the popular Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (Global Sustainable Tourism Council [GSTC], n.d.-a, n.d.-b). In Europe it is used the European Standard for Labelling of ecotourism (EETLS), which is also the first standard recognized by the GSTC (European Union, n.d.) as well as the EU Ecolabel tourist accommodation (European Commission, n.d.-b), which is awarded for achieving strict environmental standards within a functioning according to the official website, over 500 hotels and campsites in Europe have received this ecolabel. Already in 2012, more than 100 labels related to quality and its manifestations in tourism have been identified in the EU.

Quality labels in tourism are issued by both public and private organisations, with schemes run by the latter covering specific tourism sub-sectors, while those with public participation are broader in scope and cover all tourism sub-sectors.

It is also noteworthy that most certifications are prefixed with “eco” and are voluntary, meaning they are not required as a legislative norm.

The main value of the certification is ensuring the quality and sustainability of the tourist product. Above all, because it is a guarantee of security, safety, cleanliness and health for consumer-tourists. And, on this base, it presupposes prosperity and a kind of competitive advantage for the holder, thus making it competitive in the market in which it operates. Regarding to that Margaryan and Stensland (2017) found that factors as motivations for operating a nature-based tourism business, beliefs about eco-certification effects, economic and demographic characteristics, are associated with the eco-certification adoption.

Indeed, in the post-pandemic environment, such an advantage is key to success in the race for consumer attention. Among the good practices in this context can be mentioned “Blue Flag”, EarthCheck, the Austrian Ecolabel, the British Green Tourism Business Scheme, the VISIT system, etc.

In fact, “Blue Flag” is an emblem and one of the world's most famous voluntary eco-labels. It is awarded

to beaches, marinas and sustainable tour operators and involves meeting a set of strict environmental, education, safety and accessibility criteria. Blackman et al. (2014) found that Blue Flag certification spurs significant new hotel investment, particularly in luxury hotels and in economically advantaged communities. The official website shows that Blue Flag owns 4,558 beaches, marinas and boats from 44 countries (Blue Flag, n.d.).

No less significant is the Austrian eco-label “Österreichisches Umweltzeichen für Tourismus”, which is the first national eco-label for tourism in the world. It is awarded to accommodation, restaurants and travel packages, to eco-oriented events and meetings (since 2010) and to conference centres and individual venues (since 2014). Today, in addition to Austria, the scope also includes South Tyrol on the territory of Italy. Over 350 “Österreichisches Umweltzeichen für Tourismus” labels have been issued (Austrian Ecolabel for the Tourism and Leisure Industry, n.d.).

An eco-label covering both European and foreign businesses is the British Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS, n.d.), applied in Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, Canada and Zimbabwe. In the first two countries it is officially recognized by the national tourist authorities. Validated by Visit Britain, it is accredited by the International Centre for Responsible Tourism (ICRT), and introduced to the South West of England in 2005 (Jarvis et al., 2010). It comes in gold, silver and bronze and is awarded to hotel chains, accommodation management associations and brands, green suppliers, suppliers, local authorities and agencies. Currently, over 200 businesses are working under this certification scheme (Green Tourism, n.d.).

A globally recognized and used voluntary label for sustainable tourism is “Green Key”, from “Green Key” – International Eco certification Authority. It is received from hotels, hostels, campsites, holiday parks, guesthouses and other small establishments, conference centres, restaurants and attractions. It is implemented in 57 countries and includes over 2,900 sites (Green Key, n.d.).

VISIT, on the other hand, is a union of 10 European eco-labels, under one name, with which it promotes under a common principle, with the aim of generally increasing the market share of the organizations that own it.

Certainly, it is noticeable that the standards applicable in the tourism industry mostly concern the practices defined as sustainable. Their international scope is determined by the condition that they are recognized or accredited by the Global Council for Sustainable Tourism. In Europe, there are over 42 labels for sustainable tourism, and their detailed analysis shows that 12 of them are global, 9 are European and 21 are national (within the European continent) (European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union, 2018). The majority of them are tied to the quality of the tourist product or imply its provision. They are also used as a tool to permanently influence tourists, outlining an advantage over the competition, with which they indirectly influence competitiveness.

And at the same time, in general, they remain disfavoured among entrepreneurs, especially within the mass tourist market. In fact, the following feature could be outlined: the certificates used in tourism are known and sought, above all, by tourists with special interests such as eco, mountain, cultural, gastro tourism, etc.

4. Results and discussion on the effects of certification in tourism

Based on data available in specialized publications and studies, findings can be made as follows:

- some publications emphasize that certification enables the achievement of lasting relationships of trust with consumers (tourists), suppliers, partners and stakeholders. In this way, the assurance and assessment of product quality is stimulated, as well as the choice of consumer-tourists is “directed”, since, by presumption, quality products are indicated by certificates;
- certificates create the illusory feeling for tourists that they themselves have an objective view of the product, as well as that they could control it; hence the additional security in relation to its consumption is stimulated;
- a particularly important point about quality is that certification helps maintain a competitive advantage. It, in turn, makes the organization holding a given certificate more successful in competing on the market (Seliverstov et al., 2018).

These benefits provided by certifications should not be underestimated, and successful organizations are highly interested in realizing them. However, a targeted study on the matter showed that there is a dearth of literature on the topic of the role and impact of standards on sustainability and competitiveness in tourism. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to identify some of the effects of certification on the management of the tourism organization. For example, certificates can support management in the process of overcoming risks by creating conditions for limiting and mitigating threats in the monitoring process, which is among the mandatory components of certification.

Scheduled procedures for maintaining the certificates also create potential for the tourism organizations that hold them to manage opportunities, as well as facilitate easier adaptation to the changing market. Indeed, by monitoring compliance with the prescribed requirements and procedures of a given standard, organizations are able to develop strategies to improve operational efficiency. They can also establish practices for ongoing evaluation of resources as well as for positive communication with various audiences in the public relations system.

Specific practices can be further cited from publications such as those of Tepelus and Cordoba (2005), Anderson et al. (2013), Lo et al. (2014), Rodríguez et al. (2017), Penz et al. (2017), Sipic (2017), Zielinski and Botero (2015), Hellmeister and Richins (2019). The

comment in this direction is that quality and sustainability certificates in tourism are generally not popular enough; however, eco-labelling schemes and codes of conduct highlight a strong environmental focus for tourism business (Tepelus & Cordoba, 2005); at the same time, although the ecolabel can be believed to be trustworthy and reliable, local population does not always understand the specifics and especially in cases where there is sentiment against tourism, it can be inclined to reject them (Rodríguez et al., 2017).

It is obvious that cases differ. Some tourism companies hold certificates obtained according to international certification schemes, but nevertheless specific labels of a regional nature are also often found. One other finding requires special attention, namely – due to existing differences in the regulatory frameworks in different countries, it would be difficult to make a comparative assessment and categorization of quality labels. Thus, taking into account the attitude towards purposeful orientation of industries and society towards sustainability, including the field of tourism, opportunities for lasting influence on consumers (tourists) are increasingly sought, precisely through the development of various information campaigns. However, they fall outside the scope of quality, create confusion due to their large number, and also regarding the customers' perceptions about the positive and sustainable effects. Of particular interest are the results achieved by Hellmeister and Richins (2019), which show us how important are the financial issues and the maintenance of a positive relationship between sustainability commitment and financial and non-financial companies' performance. This is actually a confirmation of some earlier results, ascertained by Anderson et al. (2013), from which it is evident that if tourist companies are interested in labelling, "this interest may be secondary to traditional considerations like price, reputation for safety and service, and previous partnerships" (Anderson et al., 2013).

In the focus of such fundings it could be assumed that the certification is a possible tool for managing the sustainability and competitiveness for the tourism companies. However, using it would be successful if a strategic approach is adopted.

Thinking of this directs the logic and the discussion here to one "old" but "useful" approach such as the Porter's general strategy (Porter, 1990).

In its simplicity, this strategy is highly adaptable. As presented in Figure 1, it relies on achieving strategic/competitive advantage through differentiation and uniqueness which could be provided through adoption of a standardization scheme.

The approach proposed by Porter is widely applied in many industries. It guides managers in making product positioning decisions to maximize profits and increase competitiveness. However, by its very nature, it does not directly address the specific needs of tourism and, more precisely, does not take into account the scarcity of resources at the destination level. On the contrary, it is based on the idea that unlimited resources are available

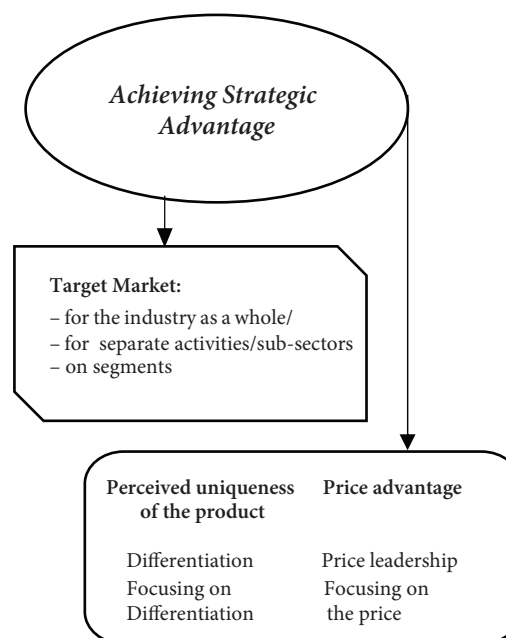


Figure 1. Interpretation on Porter's Generic Competitive Strategies – a model variation for a better performance of the enterprises in a given industry (source: preview on Porter, 1990)

to produce an infinite number of products – especially evident in the price leadership variant of the strategy. It directs companies to increase the volume of production and reduce costs. In tourism, however, natural and anthropogenic resources have a limited capacity that can be exploited.

They are irreplaceable and slightly or non-renewable, and therefore a strategy is needed to provide an appropriate restrictive capacity guaranteeing long-term sustainability. With this specific feature in mind, Porter's approach can be upgraded to include the element of standardization. As a result, tourism organizations using a standard approach can count on the fact that by acquiring a standard, they have greater opportunities to focus on differentiation strategies and sustainably develop their marketing mix. Because, in practice, the standard allows for easier differentiation based on differentiating from others and achieving a qualitative strategic advantage over competitors.

However, it should be clarified that as an idea concept, the approach is not applicable to organizations in the maturity phase (according to the BCG matrix as a classic scheme) that have reached the maximum possible supply. Their ability to promote differentiated tourism products is limited, as their excessive market activity has negatively affected their development potential. Of course, processes have different dimensions in the short and long term and therefore require different management approaches. And since the effects of certification are considered in this case, their demand should definitely be set in a longer time horizon. On the one hand, choosing an appropriate standard is time-consuming and requires a careful analysis of the possibilities. On

the other, bringing the organization in accordance with the requirements of the standard implies the redirection of a large human and financial resource. And, as third, a complete rethinking of the marketing philosophy for the organization is necessary, as well as the implementation of a public campaign, the response of which cannot be immediate. In this regard, it should be born in mind that with the acquisition of a standard, the tourism organization should abandon its expectations of achieving price leadership for the mass tourist, as it is unsustainable and unrealistic in terms of resources. Such a strategy relies on mass production and consumption and assumes unlimited resources and production potential, which is in direct conflict with the concept of the standard. Especially in tourism, and especially when it introduces sustainable practices.

Because, as is evident from other studies (Gkoumas, 2019), not taking into account important factors of cultural, political and socio-economic context, prevents the tourism business from adopting the idea of certification. It is not unimportant that it also hinders the integration of standards, as well their promotion in an appropriate way among potential tourists or using them in the competitive race. And paraphrasing Mak et al. (2012), the extent to which each force influences the choice (of tourists) ..., can be understood along three dichotomous dimensions: “symbolic vs. obligatory, novelty vs. familiarity, and contrast vs. extension” (Mak et al., 2012). Although they write about culinary (Drogala, 2019), placing the research problem in the interval between the global and the local, in fact gives a universality, especially when it comes to the behaviour of tourists.

Conclusions

Within the specifics of the present case, the “symbolic” meaning of the certification can be perceived as an aspect involved in the general perception of the consumers about the tourist products and the destination, provoking social and cultural associations with something “familiar”. On the other hand, the “obligatory” aspect represents a guarantee against the assumption of risk that is involved when the tourists engage in new experiences. The elements of novelty and familiarity refer to the point at which the tourists are familiar with certain certifications schemes in tourism. The familiarity, and hence the demand for certified tourism products/destinations may arise from atypical experiences that tourists have had, which however results in tourists being more open and willing to try the “new” and the “safe”. Thinking in a similar direction, the present study offers a new insight into certification in tourism, and as a novelty, orients it to tourist destinations that seek to differentiate themselves in a homogenic market. And this novelty is primarily associated with emphasizing the importance of certification in tourism as a reliable tool for participating in the competitive reality and achieving a competitive advantage.

In an attempt to summarize, it is logical to see that tourism destinations’ improvement efforts are of utmost importance for their sustainable development, successful planning and management. In their orientation towards certification, in fact, numerous benefits could be found, with indisputable benefits both for sustainability and also for their competitive positioning and behaviour.

It could be underlined that most of the favourable external effects of the adoption of standards that contribute to the improvement of the tourism organization have direct positive effects on tourists and stakeholders. And at the same time, assumptions can be made that in cases where standards are used by tourism organizations, the territory they operate in, as well as local communities, suffer positives, mostly related to improving the public image of increased confidence. All the listed positive moments are due to globally established certification practices and the work of a number of international organizations such as ISO and others. And although the standards offered by them are not directly related to tourism, in organizational terms, the tourism business can rely on the certification to achieve a good image, competitiveness and sustainability.

Within the framework of tourism, the research shows that one of the major limitations stems from the lack of abundant literature on the topic together with a no commitment to the practice of tourism. Additionally, the generalizability of the findings appears to be another kind of limitation. The social character of the under-research phenomena of certification also could not be ignored and therefore, it should be exposed within the external environment.

Therefore, it is suggested that, if possible, future research for the industry of tourism should be conducted on the practice of certification in the specifics of its manifestations and more deeply, on the quality of the tourism offers. In this regard, the evaluation of users could also be of interest.

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