



The significance of cultural resources in enhancing competitiveness of tourism destinations: TOURCOMSERBIA model

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Abstract

Cultural resources play a pivotal role in attracting and captivating tourists, contributing to the overall appeal and distinctiveness of a destination. The unique cultural heritage, historical sites, traditional arts, festivals, cuisine, and cultural events all contribute to creating an authentic and memorable experience for visitors. Destinations rich in cultural resources often possess a competitive advantage over others, as they offer a deeper understanding of local traditions, customs, and ways of life. The preservation and promotion of cultural resources not only drive tourism but also stimulate economic growth, generate employment opportunities, and foster community development. Strategies aimed at leveraging and showcasing these resources effectively can enhance a destination's competitiveness, and increase visitor numbers, length of stay, and overall tourist satisfaction. Ultimately, recognizing and investing in cultural resources can significantly contribute to the success and sustainability of a tourism destination. The article will outline the methods used by the TOURCOMSERBIA project to continuously assess Serbia's tourism competitiveness, with a focus on its cultural resources and the degree of its tourist attractiveness. The model was developed over the course of four phases, including a thorough literature review, the Delphi method, pilot testing, model setting, and validation of the model. The TOURCOMSERBIA analysis explored a lot of different tourism competitiveness-related publications. These findings will be highlighted in this research since cultural resources are one of the most often used measures of competitiveness. The goal of this study is to draw attention to the significance of valuing cultural resources in the context of boosting a tourism destination's competitiveness in the global tourism industry.

Keywords: TOURCOMSERBIA model, tourism destination competitiveness, cultural resources, Serbia


1. Introduction

As nations increasingly vie for attention on the international stage, the ability to attract tourists and compete effectively in the global tourism market has become a matter of economic and cultural significance. The concept of tourism competitiveness is paramount in this context, as it represents a multifaceted framework for evaluating and enhancing a destination's image and sustainability. This paper delves into the pivotal role of cultural resources in bolstering the competitiveness of tourism destinations, with a specific focus on the case of Serbia, a nation whose competitive position in the worldwide tourism market has not been the most favorable.

Tourism competitiveness is a multifaceted concept that encompasses a destination's ability to attract and retain visitors while ensuring the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of its tourism sector. It extends beyond mere visitor numbers and takes into account factors such as infrastructure, marketing strategies, political stability, safety, and, significantly, cultural resources. These cultural resources refer to the historical, artistic, and cultural heritage of a destination, including landmarks, traditions, festivals, museums, and the intangible elements of a community's identity. Cultural resources are often the heart and soul of a tourism destination, providing a unique sense of place and identity that sets it apart in a crowded marketplace.

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The competitive nature of the global tourism industry cannot be overstated. Destinations worldwide are constantly vying for the attention of travelers, offering a diverse array of experiences, from the tranquil beaches of the Maldives to the bustling streets of Tokyo. In this fiercely competitive arena, a destination's cultural resources serve as a distinctive selling point. Travelers are increasingly seeking authentic and immersive experiences that allow them to connect with the local culture, history, and traditions of a place. Therefore, a destination's ability to harness and showcase its cultural assets can significantly enhance its competitiveness.

The growth of tourism competitiveness evaluation has resulted in several methods in models for destination competitiveness. It produced measures that may be used to assess a tourism destination's competitive position in today's tourism industry. However, not all models can be applied to all tourism destinations (Pavlović et al, 2023). Each tourism destination and its competitive set require a distinct approach and model that represents the environments and situations in which they compete. The models from the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2019; WEF 2022), Ritchie and Crouch's model (Crouch, 2006), and the model of Dwyer and Kim (Kim and Dwyer, 2003) remain a culmination of earlier frameworks with an appropriate amount of utilized invention and improvement (Pavlović et al., 2023).

Other research studies focused on the indications and norms of destination competitiveness. In the economic literature, there are a number of definitions of competitiveness, such as the one from Scott and Lodge (1985) who state that, a nation's ability to innovate, manufacture, distribute, and/or offer services for goods traded worldwide while achieving rising returns on its resources constitutes competitiveness on a national scale. Poon (1993), among other earlier academics, outlined the fundamentals of gaining a competitive advantage. Serbia, situated in the heart of the Balkans in Southeast Europe, boasts a rich tapestry of cultural heritage that spans centuries. Its history is marked by the confluence of Eastern and Western influences, resulting in a unique blend of traditions, architecture, and art. Serbia offers visitors a chance to explore historic cities like Belgrade and Novi Sad, with their charming old towns and vibrant cultural scenes. The country's natural beauty, including the picturesque landscapes of Tara National Park and the scenic banks of the Danube River, complements its cultural riches.

Serbia's tourism sector is growing, but there is still a long way to go since this country has to be better positioned in the market. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council's 2022 report, tourism accounted for 5.9% of Serbia's GDP in 2019, 3.7% in 2020, and 3.6% in 2021. Because of this, the goal of this study is to highlight the TOURCOMSERBIA model framework that is appropriate for Serbia as well as the cultural resources indicators that were selected through a literature analysis and a larger methodology approach, as well as to present the findings of the conditions of these indicators for Serbia.

Despite its considerable cultural and natural assets, Serbia's competitive position in the global tourism market has faced challenges. While the country has made significant strides in recent years to promote its tourism offerings, it has not yet reached its full potential. Factors such as limited marketing, infrastructural improvements, and political stability have contributed to Serbia's tourism competitiveness lagging behind that of its European counterparts.

Recognizing the importance of enhancing its tourism competitiveness, Serbia must undertake a comprehensive evaluation of its tourism sector. To address the particular difficulties and possibilities that the country faces, a specialized approach for evaluating Serbia's competitiveness as a tourism destination is essential. This model should take into account not only quantitative aspects such as visitor numbers but also qualitative elements, particularly the utilization and promotion of Serbia's cultural resources.

The significance of cultural resources in enhancing the competitiveness of tourism destinations cannot be overstated. These resources provide the unique and authentic experiences that today's travelers crave. Serbia, with its rich cultural heritage, is poised to become a more competitive tourism destination on the global stage. The development of a comprehensive model for evaluating its competitiveness is a vital step toward harnessing the full potential of its cultural assets and ensuring a sustainable and prosperous future for its tourism industry. This paper will further explore the specific dimensions of Serbia's tourism competitiveness and propose strategies to leverage its cultural resources effectively.

2. Selection of The TOURCOMSERBIA Methodology and Cultural Resources Indicators

Developed through a multi-step process, the TOURCOMSERBIA model undertakes a comprehensive journey. The study's objective revolves around assessing Serbia's appeal as a tourism destination, particularly focusing on elements related to cultural resources and destination allure. In this research, the first three phases of the process are examined. To evaluate a tourism destination's appeal, competitiveness, and the literature on cultural resources, the SCOPUS database serves as a valuable resource. This investigation aims to provide an in-depth assessment of reference indicators, concentrating on the methods and models employed to evaluate a destination's cultural resources.

Within the period from 2000 to March 2022, 108 English-language publications mentioning "indicators of cultural resources in tourism" were identified by SCOPUS. These publications are currently undergoing meticulous examination. Consequently, Table 1 offers an overview of scientific studies on cultural resource indices that both internal and external

stakeholders in Serbian tourism consider crucial for the country's competitiveness as a travel destination. The assessment encompasses Ritchie and Crouch's conceptual model of destination competitiveness, Dwyer and Kim's Integrated model of destination competitiveness, and other tourism competitiveness studies, all of which place significant emphasis on the identification of a wide array of cultural resource indicators for evaluating Serbia's competitiveness as a tourist destination.

Moreover, the Delphi technique is employed to secure consensus on the cultural resource indicators deemed most pivotal in determining Serbia's tourism competitiveness. Its primary aim is to garner the support of industry leaders to ensure the inclusion of the relevant indicators. The Delphi process unfolds through multiple rounds of anonymous surveys, with each round building upon the insights of the previous one. This method is frequently employed in scenarios characterized by high levels of uncertainty, complexity, or lack of clear consensus. Its underlying principles strive to eliminate bias, minimize the impact of dominant personalities, and guarantee equal participation opportunities for all experts.

Crucially, the accuracy of data collected using the Delphi technique hinges on the selection of appropriate respondents, particularly when engaging professionals and academics. The Delphi approach in this study encompassed a diverse range of participants, including academics, researchers, and stakeholders from the public and commercial tourism sectors, such as tour operators, hotel management, and NGOs. Across three testing phases, the study witnessed the active involvement of 42 professionals in the first round, followed by 35 specialists in the subsequent two rounds. In the concluding phase, 17 members from the scientific community and 18 industry professionals contributed to the Delphi process.

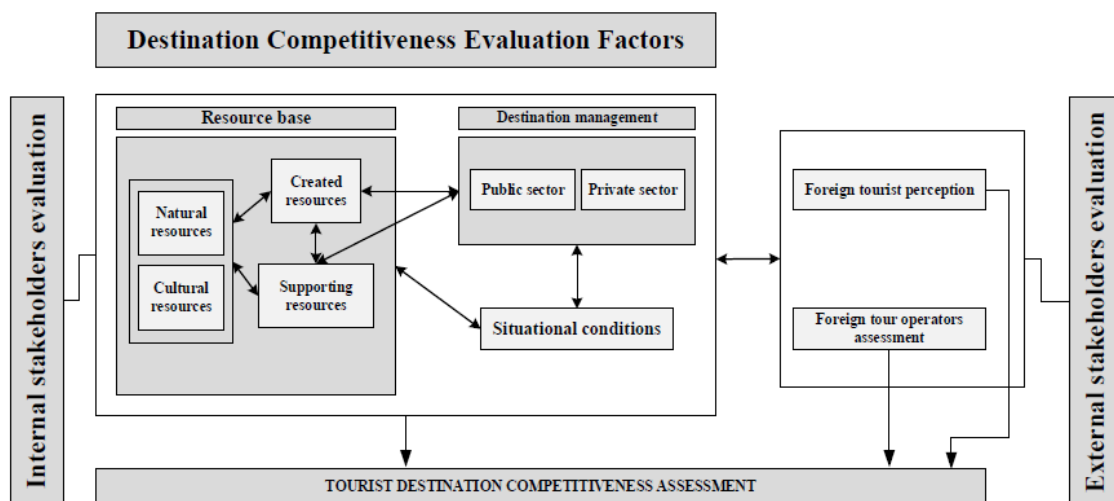
The indicators are selected and then divided into three questionnaires: one for internal stakeholders (such as members of the local community and business professionals), one for foreign tourists, and one for global tour operators (the TORUCOMSERBIA model Framework is shown in Figure 2).

Figure 1. The process of developing the TOURCOMSERBIA model



Source: Authors

Figure 2. TOURCOMSERBIA Conceptual model Framework



Source: Authors

Each questionnaire contained three variables relating to cultural resources issues, in addition to other competitiveness factors. Pilot testing was the first step in preventing mistakes or misunderstandings during the final research stage. In July and August 2022, pilot testing was conducted through email and on-site accommodations. Respondents were asked to rate statements about the Republic of Serbia's present destination competitiveness on a scale of 1-I strongly disagree to 5-I completely agree. In addition, respondents were given the option of marking 0 or 6 if they "didn't have enough

knowledge to answer" or if the question "wasn't correctly constructed." The methodological technique for generating the model is depicted in Figure 1.

The pilot survey had 130 participants, consisting of 63 international tourists, three foreign tour operators, and 64 internal stakeholders.

In addition to being one of the most important measures of tourism competitiveness, we discovered that cultural resources are typically overlooked in the TDC study. The cultural resources component assesses the protection, development, and promotion of cultural resources. The amount of UNESCO cultural World Heritage Sites, major stadiums capable of hosting significant sporting or entertainment events, and a measure of Digital Demand for a country's cultural sites and entertainment are all included. The number of UNESCO Creative Cities is also given, which reflects initiatives to safeguard and enhance cultural and creative activities and enterprises in metropolitan areas. (WEF, 2022, p.10).

3. Results

In recent research, the prominence of cultural resources in tourism offerings and their quality has garnered increased attention. This subject remains an ongoing point of interest among tourism scholars. The most frequently employed techniques for assessing indicators related to cultural resources included interviews (accounting for 10% of the studies), the Panel/Delphi method (comprising 16%), and surveys and questionnaires (making up 62% of the analyzed publications). Additionally, researchers also reported the use of alternative approaches, such as the utilization of pre-existing data and a theory-based approach. Secondary data from sources like Eurostat and the World Economic Forum's tourism statistics were commonly referenced in these studies (Pivčević et al., 2020).

In the study, data from multiple research organizations, as well as government agencies, have been frequently cited. (Foronda-Robles et al., 2020; Lozano-Oyola et al., 2019). Additionally, research has drawn upon a range of sources including UNWTO data, as well as other datasets i.e., EU MEANS criteria, UN data, EEA, etc. (Rosciano, et al., 2013; Blancas et al., 2015).

Scientific studies have also been dedicated to identifying key target groups and stakeholders within tourism, encompassing both internal and external stakeholders, such as DMOs (Dias et al., 2021), both domestic and foreign visitors (Zeng et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021, Jangra et al., 2021), members of the local community (Chee-Hua et al., 2016; García-Almeida & Gartner., 2021; Lai et al., 2021) as well as experts and members of academia (Wong et al., 2008; Blancas et al., 2015) and representatives of public and private sectors within the destinations (Goffi & Cucculelli, 2019; Ndivo & Manyara., 2018).

Furthermore, the participatory approach has not yet been fully considered in research on the competitiveness of tourism destinations, although it has been acknowledged as a good tool for assessing attitudes toward sustainable development, based on the research conducted. According to Guijt (2022), to term it as a participatory approach, stakeholders must not only have information but also experience the impact of changes and events occurring within the industry branch in which they operate. In order to better understand the indicators and increase public participation in decision-making on tourism restrictions, this study uses this approach including the valid views and opinions of the scientific community as well as all stakeholders in tourism of Serbia.

Table 1. Assessment of cultural resources and attractiveness indicators and the clarity of the item's formulation

Indicators	Reference (Adapted to suit the case of Serbia)	Tourism stakeholders Mean	Local Community Mean	Tourists Mean	Foreign Tour operators Mean
Cultural resources indicators					
1. As a tourist destination Serbia has unique cultural resources	Alberca and Parte (2020); Milićević, Petrović, Kostić and Lakićević (2020); Krešić and Prebežac (2011); Crouch (2011); Lemy, Nursiana and Pramono (2020)	4.39	4.45	4.38	4.00
2. Serbia as a tourist destination has unique architectural features (local architecture)	Zehrer, Smeral., and Hallmann (2017); Pavić, Veljković and Bilić (2016); Cucculelli and Goffi (2016)	4.00	3.65	4.12	4.00

3.	Serbia as a tourist destination has a rich tangible cultural heritage (monuments, buildings, archaeological/historical sites/parks, monasteries and other heritage objects, museums, etc.)	Jangra, Kaushik and Saini (2021); Guizzardi, Stacchini and Costa (2022); Pansiri (2014)	4.46	4.50	4.25	4.33
4.	Serbia as a tourist destination has a rich intangible cultural heritage (unique traditional values, oral tradition, language, social practices, rituals, festive events, traditional crafts, etc.)	García-Almeida and Gartner (2021); Lopes, Muñoz and Alarcón-Urbistondo (2018)	4.44	4.58	4.41	5.00

Source: Authors

Table 1 shows the difference in mean scores for all items. “As a tourist destination Serbia has unique cultural resources” was the highest evaluated by the local community (4.45), while the tourism stakeholders and tourists gave very similar marks. The lowest mark came from the foreign tour operators (4.00). The poorest results address the distinctiveness of local architecture (Indicator no.2). This is mostly indicated by the results obtained by the local community, which are also the weakest in the entire research regarding the evaluation of indicators of cultural resources (3.65). Stakeholders and foreign tour operators gave equal ratings (4.00), while this indicator was rated slightly higher by tourists (4.12). The best-rated are the indicators that recognize the wealth of material and immaterial cultural resources. In terms of tangible cultural resources, the local community (4.50) and tourism stakeholders (4.46) gave the best ratings, while foreign tour operators (4.33) and foreign tourists (4.25) had a somewhat weaker opinion. Nonetheless, intangible cultural treasures received the highest score (5.00) from foreign tour operators, indicating how appreciative they are for the marketing of the destination on the international tourism market. Somewhat lower ratings, but certainly very high, were also given by representatives of the local community (4.58), tourism stakeholders (4.44) and foreign tourists (4.41).

While the Delphi technique is widely adopted for gaining expert approval, it's worth acknowledging that the study has certain limitations. The findings stem from the initial phase of the research, which involved pilot testing. In the upcoming research endeavors, there will be an emphasis on larger sample sizes and verification. TOURCOMSERBIA is carrying out further investigations in cooperation where the minimum threshold of the responses is set much higher compared with pilot research. Likewise, a similar study will be conducted in countries considered to be Serbia's competitive counterparts such as Hungary, Romania, etc.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

In recent decades, a surge in scholarly endeavors has illuminated the paramount significance of cultural resources in contemporary tourism research. The methods employed for assessing cultural resources and gauging tourism attractiveness predominantly involve interviews, surveys, and questionnaires. Complementing these primary methods, secondary data extracted from reputable sources such as the WEF, Eurostat, etc. have been instrumental in informing research endeavors. This multifaceted approach extends beyond conventional metrics, delving deeper into the dynamic interplay between cultural resources and destination competitiveness.

A distinguishing hallmark of recent research lies in its concerted efforts to identify and engage with pivotal stakeholder groups. The canvas of inquiry spans diverse constituencies, including the local community, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), the governmental and commercial sectors within destinations, the discerning tourists, and the reservoir of expertise represented by academia and industry experts.

In a commendable stride toward precision and clarity, scholars have meticulously delineated and consolidated a panoply of indicators into succinct and contextually meaningful statements. This refined approach, as exemplified by the TOURCOMSERBIA framework, lends greater coherence to the evaluation of destination competitiveness. By categorizing these statements into three core groups, research has not only simplified assessment processes but has also created a robust foundation for analyzing and enhancing competitiveness within the tourism sector.

However, it is worth noting that despite the admirable strides made in participatory methodologies for evaluating attitudes towards sustainable and innovative utilization of cultural resources, the tourism research landscape still reserves limited attention for this vital dimension. Consequently, there emerges a palpable need for a broader understanding of these indicators, coupled with a call for enhanced public engagement in the formulation of tourism legislation. This engagement must embody a participatory ethos, fostering dynamic interaction between scholars and a spectrum of stakeholders, thereby charting a course towards a more sustainable, inclusive, and culturally rich tourism industry.

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