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Touristic SME's Competitiveness in the Light of Present Challenges—A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract: Competitiveness of SMEs (Small or Medium Enterprise) within the tourism field has been of a great interest for many scholars over time. Due to the crisis conditions specific to the present time, the issue of competitiveness becomes a very sensitive one, giving rise to sometimes contradictory points of view. Our research aims to analyze the opinions and perceptions of SME managers in the field of tourism in terms of the concept of competitiveness, how to measure it and sources of competitiveness still viable within the context of the current crisis or specific to it, etc. In order to be able to properly analyze the above, qualitative research was initiated and conducted in the form of an in-depth interview with 42 Romanian SME managers in the tourism field. The results of the study reflect a mature approach of managers in terms of possible new sources of competitiveness—the emphasis on technical solutions capable of managing the socio-medical dimensions of tourism consumer behavior, a prevalence for an organic growth strategy and for additional investments in qualified personnel, as well as online management of most aspects related to services and openness to collaboration within tourism clusters.

Keywords: competitive advantages of SMEs; touristic SME's competitiveness; in-depth interview; organic strategy; crisis

1. Introduction

The broad context in which our research has been developed is referring to the evolution of the competitiveness concept itself, with a closer look at the competitiveness concept that is specific for the tourism field. Competitiveness can be seen as the basis for any competitive strategy. It comprises a diversity of economic, managerial, normative, technical etc. factors organized as a system that ensures the high quality of a product or service and a proper demand in the market [1].

Additionally, competitiveness can be analyzed from the perspective of the ideas related with growth, economic impact, and multiple benefits for a specific targeted community through economic activity.

Among the first efforts to analyze what may be the main basis for the competitiveness of tourism organizations is the work of Morey and Dittman (1995), who used data envelopment analysis with seven inputs and four outputs for the evaluation of 54 hotels dispersed all over the USA continental area, from the point of view of management performance [2].

As another early approach of studying tourism companies' competitiveness, the work of Baker and Riley (1994) can be mentioned, who took into consideration management's ability to forecast demand

as well as the assessment of the actual performance of the hotels leading to a model of supply–demand mismatch. At the same time, these authors proposed a holistic-type model of hotel productivity [3].

Later, Hwang and Chang (2003) analyzed managerial performance and the efficiency change for 45 hotels, using data envelopment analysis and the Malmquist productivity index. These authors provide evidence that efficiency changes due to difference in sources of customer and management styles, and the managerial efficiency of international tourist hotels is related to the level of internationalization of hotels [4].

In the same line of work, we can review the research conducted by Barros (2004), which used a stochastic cost frontier model in order to investigate the performance of a Portuguese hotel chain. The results show non-varying efficient scores, mixed between different hotel units [5]. Another piece of research conducted by the same author in 2005 used the data envelopment analysis technique in order to assess the efficiency of individual hotels belonging to a bigger chain. The technique was capable of evaluating the competitiveness of the whole organization through the grouping of the attributes of efficient hotels and blockages of inefficient hotels, respectively [6].

More recent studies have analyzed the potential link between destination competitiveness, efficiency, and firm competitiveness. Using the same data envelopment analysis techniques, authors have tested a mediation model in order to link global technical efficiency, pure technical efficiency and scale efficiency. Results confirm a positive relationship between destination competitiveness and firm competitiveness, without the power of efficiency to play a mediating role between them [7].

The tourism industry remains one of the most important branches contributing to the evolution of the world economy, with a significant contribution from the perspective of investment and economic growth in various regions worldwide [8–10].

The current context, characterized by the manifestation of an unprecedented crisis that has affected even the tourism industry to a very large extent, raises a number of challenges for the competitiveness of tourism companies, which face unpredictable phenomena—changes in the consumer behavior of tourists, legislative changes that limit or even prohibit the development of the usual activity of accommodation and dining, profound changes in the hotel and catering (HORECA) industry, etc.

The study of the companies' competitiveness in the field of tourism in crisis conditions has been approached only to a small extent in the literature, and research to investigate the intimate mechanisms of competitiveness in the current economic, social and biological crisis, even less so. In this context, efforts to analyze the perceptions of those who make decisions regarding the adaptation of companies in the field to the challenges listed above acquire a certain importance.

The present research seeks to identify the perception of managers in tourism companies on competitiveness and especially on sources that can create competitiveness in the harsh conditions that the industry is currently going through. Thus, we used a qualitative approach to identify the perceptions and attitudes of managers in the field to test ways to measure competitiveness in the current conditions and to highlight the views on cooperation within clusters as a solution to increase competitiveness in crisis conditions.

We have developed our approach based on the literature, applying a semi-structured in-depth interview format designed for managers of tourism organizations. Within the in-depth interview guide, we explored the main perceptions of the importance of the competitiveness concept applied for tourism companies by their managers, as well as the opinion of managers about a set of indicators that can "measure" the competitiveness of tourism companies.

The first part of the paper presents the literature review concerning competitiveness in tourism and the specific competitiveness of a destination as being the most discussed approach specific to the field. It also highlights the important role played by the affirmation of sustainability principles specific for organizations within the tourism field and the activities they engage in as an essential framework for the development of long-term competitiveness.

The next section presents the research context and methodology, followed by a section comprising the results and a discussion of the empirical research. The last part of the paper concludes by highlighting theoretical and managerial implications of the research, as well as some possible future research directions. Predictions for the evolution of the current crisis are very hard to make and, as a consequence, tourism companies' competitiveness will still be difficult to achieve.

2. Literature Review

We cannot discuss competitiveness in the field of tourism without connecting this concept to that of sustainability. A truly competitive tourism service provider can only be an organization that is run and developed according to principles that highlight long-term sustainability.

The substantiation of sustainable tourism should be a basic indicator of the achievement of economic, social, and aesthetic goals, while the protection of cultural values, social integrity, key ecological processes, and biological diversity is assured [11].

The development of new practices within the tourism industry, which intend to achieve high levels of sustainability, has led to the proliferation of new concepts such as the "green hotel" or "green tourism". A green hotel can be defined as being an accommodation facility that was built incorporating friendly environment materials and procedures, reduces the environmental impact of current touristic activities through saving energy and water and promotes the same environmental friendly attitude among different categories of employees [12]. This approach, eloquent for the new models of implementing sustainability in tourism, becomes relevant for the modern dimensions of tourism competitiveness. Research using 317 Italian SMEs in the HORECA domain shows that investments in actions regarding food products/food-chains and customer information are strong predictors of a positive perception regarding companies' competitiveness in terms of a "green hotel" strategy [13].

Sustainability that goes beyond a simple orientation towards environmental protection makes it possible to obtain a certain social value for the green strategy of an accommodation unit. There are two main orientation choices in establishing the green strategy: focusing on structure, such as waste management, water saving, energy saving etc., or focusing on service such as obtaining differentiation through the sustainability of food and beverages, which implies a different approach to supply chain management, both choices require consistent efforts to apply green principles along the process [14].

Beyond the general framework offered by the application of the principles of sustainability, the competitiveness concept approach implies the analysis of some practical ways through which it can be interpreted/measured and finally highlighted. Thus, in the case of providers of tourist accommodation services, it is possible to discuss a better positioning in relation to competition, higher levels of consumer satisfaction and higher benefits as a result of a superior staff motivation.

The development of the term competitiveness in tourism was achieved gradually, starting with analyses related to the concept of competitive advantage taken from the classic marketing literature and reaching the development of the touristic destination competitiveness concept as a specific expression of the conceptualization of competitiveness in tourism.

Thereby, Crouch and Ritchie (1999) developed the Calgary competitiveness model based on the theory of competitive advantage (Porter, 1990) as well as comparative advantage (Smith, 1776; Ricardo, 1817), adapted to the different features of a tourism destination [15]. According to them, the term refers to the destination competitiveness that encompasses natural features of the region (beautiful scenery, species diversity etc.), climate, cultural features, services infrastructure (transportation, touristic capacity etc.), cost/price ratio, social unique elements, political stability, medical features, laws and regulations including visa procedures etc. [16].

Later, Dwyer and Kim (2003) proposed the "integrated model of competitiveness in tourism", which considers the inherited resources, the created resources and the support resources the main components in the success of a tourism destination and the basis of tourism competitiveness [17].

Overall, theoretical studies on tourism competitiveness emphasize the following factors (at least at the level of economy branch): public policies, foreign direct investment, tourism marketing, cultural resources, human resources, natural resources, infrastructure, quality and price [18].

Different authors consider that within the services field, the brand of the organization can be an important source of competitive advantage, presenting the possibility to different organizations of standing out individually and obtaining a strategic position in accordance with the advantages and benefits associated with the provision of services. [19–23]

The potential of the brand as an important source of competitive advantage is presented by the fact that within the structure of a service, we can see a significant intangible component. Thus, the brand image can play a special role in reducing or even eliminating the perception of the potential risks associated with consumption [24–26].

In the context of the assessment of the overall competitiveness of the tourism and travel industry, we can talk about a strong relationship between the competitiveness and the business environment along with the infrastructure, and of course with a specific regulatory framework [27]. Apart of these factors, there are of course also influences from the areas of human, cultural and natural resources.

As we stated before, competitiveness in tourism actually embraces the form of destination as part of the competitiveness concept. This concept starts from the idea that before a visit, tourists develop an image about the destination, as well as a set of expectations based on previous experiences, word of mouth advertising, advertisements, etc. During their stay, they consume the destination as an experience without realizing that all of the elements of the destination are produced and managed by independent actors. The tourists' experience consists of multiple small meetings with a variety of tourist agents, such as taxi drivers, hoteliers, and others not related to tourism such as local businesses and infrastructure. Additionally, it is important to consider all the elements of the local attractions: museums, theaters, parks, and other resources. A study conducted on major world-class tourist destinations recognized by UNESCO World Heritage Sites (we are referring to the cities of Morelia from Mexico and Alcalá de Henares from Spain) revealed the fact that tourism competitiveness of the cities where the fieldwork was conducted is the result of the relationships between the following factors: marketing, foreign direct investments (FDIs), public policies, human resources and cultural resources [18].

In this context, some regions may be regarded as a firm that tries to attract a maximum share of tourist demand (national and international) through an efficient combination of input resources. As a consequence, tourist destination performance can be evaluated through the measurement of its efficient resource use. [28,29]

Through the creation of public policies, the tourism products of a given destination can be improved through measures aimed at enhancing the quality of services and conditions of the sites and thus increase their competitiveness. The public policies can ensure the viability and competitiveness of tourism destinations and businesses, to be able to continue to prosper and achieve long-term benefits [18].

A new dimension of the factors that can be used to assess the level of competitiveness for a certain destination is related to new information technologies—true knowledge creation tools. Within the decisional process involving the choice of a particular touristic destination, smart systems have become very popular as they are considered to be capable of optimizing the choice process for almost every destination available [30].

Within this context, a new concept has been developed—smart tourism—a concept that implies an ICT-integrated tourism platform capable of offering access to different resources such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, Internet of Things, extensive touristic information databases, mobile media communication integration etc. In order to expand the use of smart technologies, different initiatives have emerged to transform former touristic destinations into smart touristic destinations, such as web-based applications that offer touristic information, mobile applications for virtual touristic guides and applications capable of booking reservations for local restaurants etc.,

with many of them based on beacon technology, which allows real-time connection to devices that are capable of transmitting information when the mobile phones are in range. [31].

From the point of view of the relation between competitiveness and innovation, qualitative research conducted on nine cultural and balneotherapy touristic services providers from Romania shows that the development of new products in tourism actually consists of new combinations of the services provided, the use of complementary services or tourism products with novel content, with all of the above actually being seen as new consumption experiences [32].

Despite the fact that, in most cases, innovation is one of the most important factors that leads to competitiveness, in tourism much of the innovation is incremental, most of the time being the result of everyday interactions with customers and less often the direct result of an internal research and development activity [33,34].

3. Research Methodology

3.1. The Research Context and the Sampling Strategy

The methodology agreed by the specialists regarding the sampling applied in the case of qualitative research involves the selection of a sample that is not based on probability, as it is not representative of a targeted statistical population as is the case with quantitative research. In qualitative research, the richness and quality of information are taken into account, and the certain dimension of a sample in order to ensure statistical representativeness is not followed [35].

In the case of nonprobability sampling, which is used in qualitative research, researchers does not want to select the sample based on probability theory, but to create a sample that is actually a quasi-random sample [36].

The actual size of the sample used for qualitative research is influenced by a number of specific factors from one research to another: the purpose of the research, the characteristics of the studied population, the analytical approach considered and even the logistical resources available to researchers [35,37].

Specialists consider that the optimal principle to be able to assess the adequacy of a deliberately selected sample as it is used in qualitative research is that of saturation [38].

Saturation is seen as the best guarantee for the rigor and quality of qualitative research. Saturation can be assessed—achieved at different levels—at the level of individual constructs or at the level of the overall study. Therefore, we can speak about a kind of “code saturation” that is obtained at the point when no additional issues can be added in the process of analysis of the data provided by the respondents, and the codes used are beginning to “stabilize”. Additionally, we can refer to a “meaning saturation” that is related to the point when no other new meanings, details or insights can be added from the discussions carried out with those interviewed [35].

For this research, the authors have chosen a pool of hotel and tourist pension managers from Romania, as the tourism field is representative for its contribution to the national GDP. The share of travel and tourism in Romania has displayed a constant growing tendency between 1999 and 2018, ending at 5.3% of GDP in 2018 [39], and reaching 3% of total exports at the level of the national economy [40]. The goal of the present research is to analyze and explain the perceptions, opinions, and attitudes of various touristic SME managers regarding the competitiveness of their companies, taking into consideration the present crisis period. The tourism and HORECA industry in Romania as well as in Europe, and worldwide, have been heavily affected by the present crisis. Therefore, finding new solutions to increase competitiveness for touristic SMEs is both a challenge and a necessity at the same time.

The criteria for including the respondents in the sample considered for the interview were chosen to meet the objective needs related to the organization and the conduct of the research in good conditions. Of particular importance were the purpose of the research, the objectives identified, and the nature of the information provided [41].

Thus, the criteria used for selection can be considered as:

- Experience in the field of hotel management for at least 5 years;
- The current executive position of SME tourism manager;
- Type of organization—hotel or pension with at least 3 stars and 2 daisies, respectively;
- Not participating in the last 3 months in another marketing research, such as an in-depth interview or focus group;
- Existence of any conflict of interest of any kind with the people in the research team (collaboration contracts, consultancy, joint projects or partnerships, etc.);
- The financial soundness and the stable situation of the manager's tourist SME;
- The express written agreement to participate in the interview according to the ethical and methodological norms in the field, requested from the manager.

The qualitative research was implemented in the format of in-depth interviews based on a semi-structured interview guide. In the case of the present research, the need to define a conceptual code referring to the indicators that can measure competitiveness of tourism SMEs required a greater range of data, reaching 42 effective interviews capable of fully capturing the meaning of the defined codes. In order to achieve true meaning saturation, an iterative process of sampling is needed, capable of monitoring the depth of data, its diversity and clarity [42].

We have used the purposive sampling method, which means a kind of judgmental sampling that is based on the researchers' knowledge or expertise in relation to a certain group, in order to select the subjects that can represent the specific population [43]. The selected sample was employed from a population analyzed with the help of certain criteria.

Furthermore, at the same time, our sampling method was similar to the snow ball sampling method generally used within qualitative research when the subjects are hard to reach from the perspective of a certain specific knowledge level or characteristics (in our case, relevant managerial experience and a certain level of seniority in the field). The initial selected managers have provided referrals for other qualified subjects that have been further selected according to the established criteria.

For the research, we selected a final sample that comprises 42 managers that were willing to participate in an interview and to disclose ideas, attitudes, opinions etc., on the explored topics. The sample was selected from a group of hotel and pension managers as follows: 3 star hotel managers (18), 4 star hotel managers (15), and 3 star (flowers or daisies) pension managers (9). They are representing, in terms of seniority in the field of tourism SME management, the categories of 5–10 years seniority (6), 10–15 years seniority (8), 15–20 years seniority (6), 20–25 years seniority (10), and over 25 years seniority (12). In the process of establishing the final sample size, the number of respondents took into account the requirements regarding reaching the saturation point in the collection of qualitative data [35,44].

3.2. Interview Design

Interviews represent a very effective way to collect information if the research endeavor is oriented toward a specific objective related to the need to understand perceptions or determining how participants are attaching specific meanings to different phenomena and events [45]. Following literature recommendations, the objectives of the research were established as follows:

- Identifying the respondents' opinion about the SME's competitiveness concept;
- Identifying the possibility for the development of a strategy based on organic growth of SMEs;
- Determining the opinions regarding sources of competitiveness for touristic SMEs, before the COVID-19 pandemic period and how they were affected during the pandemic period;
- Characterization of managers' concern for identifying new sources of competitiveness adapted to post-pandemic conditions;
- Measuring the availability of managers for cooperation in clusters aimed at increasing competitiveness.

Regarding the hypotheses, in most cases of qualitative research a series of “working hypotheses” are adopted, elements that capture the “suspicions” and the beliefs of the researchers in relation to some aspects related to the object of the research. These working hypotheses may change during the research process [41].

In the case of the present research, a series of working hypotheses were advanced that were attached to the identified objectives. Hypotheses from which we later started to achieve the topics addressed in the interview guide: there is a high level of awareness of the concept of competitiveness, especially in the case of SME managers in the field of tourism who have more than 10 years of work experience; most managers are in favor of implementing organic growth strategies in the current context; before the pandemic of COVID 19, the main sources of competitiveness were considered to be the reputation and number of stars of the location, while during the pandemic, competitiveness is seen by managers as an expression of concern for the health of tourists and proximity to medical units that can provide emergency medical services promptly; tourism SME managers are strongly motivated to identify new sources of competitiveness adapted to the specific conditions of their organizations after the onset of the crisis; the willingness of managers to engage in partnerships in the form of clusters is determined by the degree of familiarity with this concept, and by local customs in terms of developing business relationships.

The information was grouped into five different thematic categories, according to the objectives of the interview and the semi-structured guide [46]. These were, respectively: (1) awareness and understanding of the concept of competitiveness for a SME, and possible indicators that are capable to measure competitiveness for the SME within the tourism field; (2) respondents’ opinion about possible sources of competitiveness for touristic SMEs before and during the current crisis; (3) the potential competitiveness strategies for touristic SMEs; (4) respondents’ opinions regarding new potential sources of competitiveness for touristic SMEs; (5) attitudes regarding the cooperation within clusters and the possibility to consider it a viable solution for raising the touristic SMEs’ competitiveness. For data interpretation, use was also made of references from previous research in the literature [47].

In developing the research instrument, authors have taken into consideration literature guidelines regarding the measurement of competitiveness [48].

The in-depth interview method (one-to-one interviews) that was used to collect the data is ideal when sensitive individual data are being obtained as is the case of this research, where the interviews focused on face-to-face interviews with managers in the field of tourism, more precisely on managers of hotels and pensions both from the coastal and the mountain areas. The data generated through the research are notes and audio recordings that have then been transcribed according to the topics [49].

The interviews were conducted during August 2020, with audio transcripts and data analysis being finalized during September 2020. After transcribing the interviews’ content and defining analysis units, the information was organized as a grid that can also highlight the general image of the interviews and the particular perspective offered by the opinions and perceptions of each manager regarding the measurement of competitiveness, possible sources of competitiveness ante and during the pandemic crisis, eloquence of new forms of tourism to identify sources of competitiveness and the importance of cluster development and the implications of rising levels of competitiveness of individual touristic SMEs [27].

Another important issue regarding the data analysis refers to the fact that reflexivity has been taken into account during the analysis of the qualitative data. Authors try to avoid the subjective interpretation of the assumptions made by managers, as the topic regarding how a touristic SME can achieve competitiveness is closely related to the individual’s business culture, experience, and views on the matter. The necessity of making a self-analysis of the degree of reflexivity is well established in the literature [50,51].

In order to ensure a proper methodology and analysis of the information obtained through the research process, authors organized the sampling, the implementation of the interviews, and the data analysis according to the COREQ (Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research)

comprehensive checklist, which is considered a proper method to preserve the quality of an demarche in the field of qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews [52,53].

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Theme 1: Respondents' Understanding and Awareness of the Concept of Competitiveness

Managers interviewed displayed a wide range of opinion regarding the concept of competitiveness and its importance for a touristic SME activity. The varied perception of the importance of competitiveness is seen from the following statements: *“very important—makes you being present on a specific market”*, to *“it depends, we are in competition with no one but ourselves”*. The concept itself is defined from a very practical perspective, due to the experience of every manager and their own personal vision related to the marketing strategy implied by their companies: *“competitiveness means to come all the time with new stuff, new ideas, new solutions, and new offers. You have to improve all the time”, “to be well represented on the market. To have good services and a quality employees”, “to invest all the time, to strive to offer something different for the tourists, year after year”*. Regarding the definition of competitiveness, we can also see some radical opinions, stating that: *“there is almost no competition. Everyone offers some different services, with pluses and minuses, depending of the customers that are implied”*.

As a general observation, the interviewed managers had a positive attitude about the interview and a well-represented interest about the topic of research. Non-verbal cues such as body language, gestures, directional gaze etc., displayed sufficient awareness about the importance of the discussion and denoted a positive, sincere attitude, which is very important for the validity and reliability of the qualitative research demarche [54].

Questioned about a list of possible indicators that are able to properly measure the competitiveness of touristic SMEs, the managers were asked to give marks to the following elements that can be considered as viable measurement units for competitiveness: the occupancy rate and the capacity of the accommodation, the approved tourist standard corresponding to the company offering (number of stars or flowers), the attractiveness of the locations that are part of the company offering, the diversity of services offered, employees' labor productivity, employees' degree of motivation, employees' level of training/qualifications in the field, the positive ratio between the volume of the company's activity and the volume and structure of the employed staff, customers' satisfaction degree, the degree of tourists' likelihood to return to consume, willingness of customers to make recommendations to the company, degree of market attractiveness for the prices charged by the company, degree of price and offers of diversification, image capital accumulated by the company, ability to convey promotional messages in the market, and income per visitor.

In order to assess the importance given to different elements that can define competitiveness according to the opinion of the managers, a numerical scale was implemented, whereby the respondents gave marks from 1 to 10 to the indicators that can measure competitiveness (where one represents the respondents' perspective that the indicator has the lowest capacity to measure competitiveness and 10 the highest capacity). Every manager gave a mark for each indicator, and the aggregate score for all the respondents can be found in Figure 1.

The first two indicators are considered by some of the managers as being “relative”. The occupancy rate and the capacity of the accommodation are considered to work better for in-town hotels that have a pretty much constant demand of business-type customers. For the seasonal hotels in the seaside and the mountain regions, this indicator was considered by some managers as being inappropriate to use as a competitiveness measurement due to the externally influenced fluctuations of the numbers of tourists. The issue of the attractiveness of the locations that are part of the company's offering deserves a special discussion, as it received the lowest average mark. The majority of the managers did not consider it as a relevant competitiveness indicator due to the fact that their own organizations do not have a proper relationship between their touristic services and the locations' attractiveness. This issue deserves special future attention within research endeavors because different literature sources have

previously shown that overall competitiveness of touristic SMEs is related and positively influenced by the competitiveness of the destination. Full recognition for the capacity to measure competitiveness in the opinion of managers has been awarded to both the degree of customer satisfaction and image capital accumulated by the company. Both of these elements are important sources of competitive advantage for any SME in the field, so it is relatively easy to explain why they have been preferred by all the respondents. The income per visitor, although perceived as being very important in order to measure the competitiveness of touristic SMEs, has revealed some conflicting feelings, ranging from “it doesn’t show how much competitive you are, because prices are different from a period to another, maybe it shows how competitive you are against others”, “it depends on the company vision: to make money or to make customers” to “it is very important as it shows the mastery of the management”.

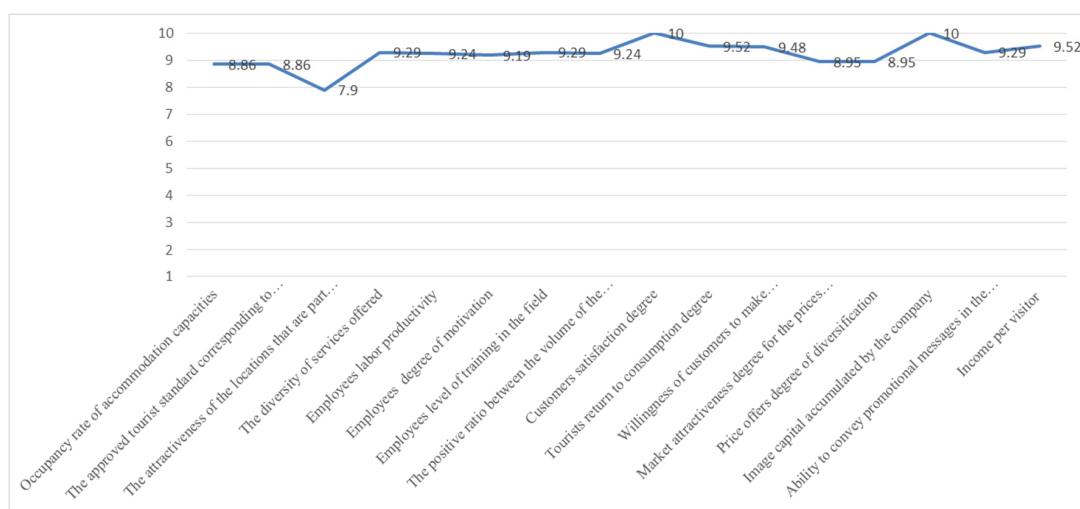


Figure 1. Average marks for each criterion regarding possible indicators that measure the competitiveness of touristic SMEs. Source: own research results.

In the context of the topic discussed, we have also identified a correlation between the type of the hotel, the level of seniority of the managers and opinions regarding indicators that measure competitiveness: about 70% of the respondents who come from three and four star hotels and have over 15 years of experience gave maximum marks to the following indicators for measuring competitiveness: the level of training in the field of employees, the degree of visitor satisfaction, the capital image accumulated by the company and the degree of tourists returning to consume.

This can be interpreted in the sense that, in the case of companies providing better positioned tourist services on the market (three and four stars), their competitiveness is seen at the management level as being associated with classic elements for a proper grounded marketing strategy, related to visitor satisfaction, the degree of return for consumption and employee motivation.

4.2. Theme 2: Possible Sources of Competitiveness for Touristic SMEs before and during Crisis

Discussion corresponding to the second theme can be divided into two broad categories of answers—possible sources, factors that can bring competitiveness in normal socio-economic conditions present before the current pandemic crisis and the potential sources of competitiveness during the pandemic crisis.

The opinions regarding the potential sources of competitiveness before the crisis period can be divided from the point of view of their link to the marketing mix elements. From the “product” point of view, managers consider that everything surrounds the idea of “customer’s experience”, how customers actually “feel” inside the location and how they build their experience upon “little details” that can count. The “state of mind” is very important—confident, relaxed customers are very valuable from the perspective of positive impressions transmitted to other customers. Other opinions consider that at the

base of competitiveness, from the perspective of the product policy regarding the provision of tourist services, are the quality elements that make the difference in regard to other competition—the generous space and the possibility to diversify the services. The cross-analysis of the responses shows that 64% of the managers that came from four star SMEs consider the existence of a generous open space at the disposal of the resort as a source of competitiveness during the pandemic. Here, managers' opinions were very similar to the literature in the field that considers the aggregate level of quality as being a factor that can enhance competitiveness [55,56]. The idea of competitiveness is built around the constant strive to *“invest, care for, preserve and develop”*. It is a constant effort to balance the influence of external business environment factors, especially in the field of legislation, taxation etc., which are factors whose evolution and effect are difficult to predict with internal resources; for example, hotels can sell a large amount of tickets in advance using early booking, and then later on find themselves in a position where they have to deal with a raise of the local taxes.

For the price element, competitiveness is obtained by the possibility to offer more pricing schemes. The majority of managers did see price as an element that helps positioning but *“the level has to be the expected one”*. The danger of an SME to be sub-classified by customers because it practices a too low price is real in the case of Romanian consumers. In normal economic conditions, price can be adjusted according to demand, and thus is a proper instrument to measure competitiveness. In the opinion of managers, the rise in bookings and the demand was a trigger for levelling up prices because it was the middle of the season, so again opinions are in line with literature in the field, which regards competitiveness through the fair ratio between quality, price and demand [57–59].

In terms of distribution, the situation is different according to the type of touristic SME. The middle positioned hotels, pensions and the smaller ones are relying on top agencies' collaboration and online booking platforms, meanwhile the resorts and highly positioned hotels are dealing with their own channels of distribution—autonomous online platforms and their own sales department. Accordingly, for resorts and highly positioned hotels, competitiveness is obtained by the quality of their own sales department, its cohesion and motivation.

In the case of managers of bigger hotels and resorts, opinions are centered on the idea that, for this topic, competitiveness is merely a problem of perception *“if you choose to work with the top agencies in the country that means that you are competitive also for the little ones and everybody wants to work with you”*.

On the other hand, managers of little hotels and pensions consider that, *“working with an agency that has 500 sales points all over the country is far more profitable”*, *“Agencies have experienced salesmen network, which knows how to sell ... ”*. Even before the current pandemic crisis, utilization of social media for the distribution of touristic services was considered a tool capable of ensuring competitiveness.

In relation to promotion, the general opinion amongst the interviewed managers pointed out, as expected, the boom in online channels. However, as a particular element here, respondents highlighted the fact that, for sure, a source of competitiveness before the current pandemic crisis was building their own platforms and booking systems—especially in case of large resorts and hotels with enough financial power to simultaneously invest in promotional activities and sales activities alike.

In connection to the contact staff, managers expressed a particular opinion about the proper way to motivate the staff. *“ ... You can't deliver a proper experience without the intrinsic motivation of the contact staff”*. Competitiveness in the field of touristic services is strongly connected to the level of competitiveness reached by the contact staff [60–62]. Other opinions stressed the issue that the typical Romanian employee does not have enough intrinsic motivation, with their motivation most of the time being connected to the material reward from the customer. Managers have to deal with the yearly fluctuation of staff, and the poor quality of it, as it comes from the labor market. The current crisis caused by the pandemic is also characterized by paradoxical phenomena of the labor market—despite the existence of an increased demand from case to case, there is a lack of highly qualified staff in some areas. In the field of tourism, it is hard to find properly trained employees, who are capable of developing an intrinsic motivation toward the goals of SMEs. The cross-analysis of the responses

reveals that a correlation between the seniority of managers and the perceptions of staff motivation can be made, as about 50% of managers with over 20 years of experience in tourism management consider staff motivation dependent on the dialogue initiated by the manager and the degree of recognition of the merits of the employee that he manages to display. It is worth remembering that there are managers aware of the importance of recognition in the field of the relationship between management and operational staff. Motivated staff have a high level of awareness regarding the recognition that she/he gets from their superior.

In the conditions created by the current pandemic, the commitment of the staff, their deeper involvement and the interest given to the problems that were caused by the rapid changes are basic ingredients for competitiveness in terms of personnel management.

Regarding the current possible sources of competitiveness during the crisis, managers' opinions are diversified, ranging from *"everything is blocked"* to *"things can be done if you implement the proper measures"*.

The current situation was perceived as being very different to the one before the pandemic. Managers considered that changes at the level of consumer behavior within touristic services are dramatic: the destination is very different, tourists that are going abroad are just a few and mainly the ones that enrolled before the pandemic, and that the use of holiday tickets is a must—especially for local tourism inside Romania.

At the lowest level of confidence regarding possible new sources of competitiveness during pandemic, we found opinions such as: *"... we do not know anything, we are still in the middle of the pandemic, and we do not know what will be next ..."*

Some managers pointed out that *"people that never used a single online payment are now forced to buy everything online"*. The situation seems to be special for SMEs that also have their own touristic agency—managers are afraid to lose their credibility if they expose their customers to the different dangers related to the pandemic, for example, the risk associated with local quarantine for the desired location, the danger to get ill themselves etc. A strong source of competitiveness for this period of crisis is found in the capacity of the touristic SMEs to develop close communication with the customers, people have a very strong, clear need to get emotional comfort regarding their buying decisions. Maybe online platforms such as Booking.com are very competitive based on their prices, little waiting time and the ease of the process, but clients want more than ever *"personalized counseling, a warm, humane dialogue, as well as information to effectively help them minimize risks and make the right decision"*.

The main source of competitiveness during the pandemic crisis was considered by the sample of managers to be the set of measures implemented by the touristic SMEs against the COVID pandemic. Managers declared that: *"All the guests, pay attention at how many measures against the pandemic we have been implemented"*, *"people are coming because they feel safe—this is a source of competitiveness"*.

Another source of competitiveness during the pandemic crisis, even if it is to a lesser extent, according to the sample of managers, consisted of a low price strategy, managers were in agreement with the fact that *"we do not afford the luxury to raise the price if we have just some rooms available like it was before pandemic, ... now we strive to obtain a lower price than our direct competitors"*. The conditions are very difficult as the summer season was almost lost because of the governmental interdictions regarding the commercial activity of touristic SMEs.

Competitiveness is also given by the material conditions including available space, logistics of events, and the possibility for a certain resort to be isolated. Some of the managers pointed out that many of the customers need extra safety elements in order to become more relaxed *"the people are not as much relaxed as before, at least in the first stage, when they see the conditions, the cleanness, and interact with the professional staff they become eventually more relaxed ..."*

A source of competitiveness indicated during the pandemic crisis refers to the quality of the management, the level of training gathered by the SMEs' management team, the capacity to adapt in real-time to the new restrictive conditions from the point of view of the serving process itself. Many touristic SMEs do not have the possibility or capability to adapt quickly in order to serve meals outside, successfully managing the cold and the need to preserve the fresh food. Another dimension of

the managerial effort that can lead to competitiveness, or lack of competition, was the need to serve breakfast in every room, the possibility to hire supplementary staff in order to do that, to create waiting stations, and to recover crockery and cutlery. Every single implied new cost was a source for low levels of competitiveness for the majority of touristic SMEs.

Investing in online platforms and booking systems during the pandemic crisis and afterwards was also nominated as a possible source of competitiveness for hotels with more than 200–300 rooms. Connecting with the latest achievements in terms of technology comes in line with studies made regarding the importance of the implementation of new technologies in order to gain competitiveness [63–65].

Managers think that “the consumer behavior seems to be changed, for touristic services it can be observed the tendency to repress and use them as an outlet for consumption without being rational.” Therefore, it becomes more and more important to be truly connected to the inner motives of the consumption of people. Customers will search not only for comfort and rich experiences, but for safety and tangible standardized elements of the touristic performance. Competitiveness will be achieved by the companies that deeply understand these needs, and then invest in order to fulfill them and develop creative ways to make services tangible before providing them.

4.3. Theme 3: Competitiveness Strategies for Touristic SMEs Adapted to the New Conditions

Touristic SME managers believe that the pandemic conditions have imposed a strategy based on organic growth. There are some respondents who have highlighted the orientation of their companies, which was traditionally focused on such a strategy that mainly uses the internal resources of the organization “we are working with the banks only in relation with the bare necessities, . . . we do not have any current credits, if we afford to do something we implement it, if not we wait for the proper moment to take initiative”. Using their own resources allows touristic SMEs to adapt better in crisis conditions. This is similar to the findings from the scientific literature that shows that organic growth strategies are the best solution in times of crisis for achieving competitiveness [66,67]. Best practices, such as using own natural resources for the restaurant supply, green hotel principles (recovering electric power, water, building’s heat etc.), are practical solutions for crisis challenges. However, some managers believe that a real organic strategy is best suited for larger hotels, while for smaller ones a survival strategy is more appropriate.

The scientific literature in the field emphasizes the importance of defining the touristic destination’ competitiveness concept [68–71]. The interviews highlighted the relationship between this type of competitiveness and the touristic SMEs’ offering. Answers ranged from “we didn’t do anything special to link the attractiveness of the region, its competitiveness with our services offer, and we do not intend to do so anytime close”, to “it exists like a transfer from the touristic attractiveness of the region tour own competitiveness. It can be integrated at the level of the tourism unit and be used to increase competitiveness, but it is even better when you think at the level of the resort and you go with the whole resort on a niche . . . ”.

Maintaining the relationship between the offering of the company and destination competitiveness is a solution for the future.

Resorts that can offer true all-inclusive packages, with a much-diversified range of services, can differentiate and position themselves as superior to the competition. Some managers that stressed their company’s intention was to invest in big future projects that are developing the competitiveness of the region (e.g., biggest aqua park in Europe), and to include these elements in their own future offerings.

4.4. Theme 4: New Possible Touristic SMEs Competitiveness Sources

Underpinning the searching process for the new sources of competitiveness is direct competition analysis: “where my competitor has a weak point I develop a strong point and I am becoming more competitive”.

This was indicated by the interviewed managers as an optimization process, consisting of closely monitoring the competition and investing strategically. Other opinions were centered on the idea

that the future belongs to the online channels and future strategies have to contain investments in this direction.

Within this topic, the need to ensure the mental, psychic comfort of the customers was stressed, through the best hygiene conditions ever. Companies that massively invest in best materials, protocols, and techniques to prevent and contain the pandemic will have a strategic advantage.

There are practical solutions exposed from this point of view—the use of small groups for excursions and a contract made with an emergency physician to deal with tourists that are having diverse symptoms (other than COVID induced ones). An important source of competitiveness during the current pandemic crisis seems to be the effort to provide advice for tourists and to actively participate in their consumer experience.

Regarding new ways to communicate with the tourists, in addition to online channels that have become a “standard”, some of the managers are implementing different personalized elements such as a postcard or email on the occasion of birthdays if they fall within the out of season period, or a bottle of champagne and a cake if the tourists are within the location. It is all about an integrated communication that gives tourists the possibility to feel that they are in the spotlight. Managers are aware that in order to be competitive during the current pandemic crisis they will have to take advantage of the fact that the majority of Romanian tourists did not go abroad, preferring to go to Romanian resorts, and for touristic companies to present a consistent offer in order to succeed in view of the changed mentalities.

Different types of niche tourism—such as dental tourism, religious tourism and weekend tourism—are taken into consideration by the managers as possible sources of competitiveness, but the general opinion is that the tour operators did not implement viable circuits adapted for this kind of niche tourism (as it was, for instance, in the case of wine tourism).

The majority of managers are not familiar with the type of slow tourism consumers, but are very close to scientific literature’s accepted definitions, considering that the concept of slow tourism is arguably designed for young people and people with a higher level of education, capable of appreciating a more authentic cultural local experience, slow food resources, longer traveling and deeper immersion in local customs [72]. Therefore, implementing a slow tourism strategy is not a viable competitiveness strategy, at least during this period of dramatic and unexpected changes. Before the pandemic, slow tourism was in full development, being integrated with the strategy for sustainability of many SMEs in the field, but during the crisis it has become rather problematic to develop a slow tourism approach.

A similar situation is related to the concept of downshifting—reducing the life standard in order to raise the quality of life. It is about changing the individual’s lifestyle in favor of a more fulfilling state, which may entail reducing standards (income, comfort, facilitations etc.). The concept was not very familiar with any of the respondents, and regarding the tourism field, it was seen as being inappropriate especially during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

4.5. Theme 5: The Importance of Cooperation within Clusters as Viable Solutions for Rising the Competitiveness of Touristic SMEs

The interviewed managers are relatively familiar with the concept of cooperation within clusters, and perceptions regarding the possibility of getting involved in such partnerships are differentiated according to the level of managerial knowledge, business culture and customs of the region in which each SME operates. Thus, we can find opinions starting from “*what is all about? I didn’t know about it until very soon*” to “*I am much familiarized with the concept of clusters, as long as I attended a couple of days ago a conference on this topic . . . !*” Some managers had the idea that working together within a cluster is almost impossible for Romanian touristic SMEs from their region, as they are very individualistic and do not have the proper organizational culture adapted for resource sharing and common strategy implementation. Others gave a lot of credit for initiatives similar to this and considered it as a possible source of competitiveness during the pandemic crisis. At this point, the cross-analysis shows that over 80% of the managers with over 25 years of experience in the field of management stated an openness

to the idea of involvement in partnerships in the form of clusters, seen as a solution to increase competitiveness during the crisis caused by the pandemic. There were also opinions that considered clusters a proper solution for the competitiveness at a bigger scale—that of a tourist city resort. The managers that were most familiarized with the concept thought that *“the cluster can be a solution for merging different businesses and regarding the tourism field in particular, in order for the cluster to work it is important to consider the whole supply chain (for example—SMEs from agriculture to have products for hotels and pensions etc.), and thus a cluster can offer an enhancement of the individual competitiveness for each member of the cluster”*, opinions that are also supported by the literature in the field [73].

5. Conclusions

This study, conducted among managers of Romanian touristic SMEs, shows their perceptions and opinions on a very important topic for any modern organization, and especially for the ones involved in the tourism industry at the present time. Managers defined competitiveness from a practical perspective, each opinion being related with their very own business experience and company’s vision.

Perceptions about possible indicators that can measure competitiveness revealed the following as the top indicators: the degree of customer satisfaction and the image capital accumulated by the company. For the interviewed managers, their general orientation before the beginning of the pandemic crisis was that competitiveness is built around a constant strive to “invest, care for, preserve and develop”. During pandemic, managers became fully aware of the strong and dramatic changes that have occurred in terms of consumer behavior, legislation, incoming, and outgoing tourists’ flows. They saw the capacity to develop a special communication with customers as a strong source of competitiveness for this period of crisis, as it resulted in reducing the anxiety and negative emotions associated with the danger of infection in regard to the new virus. Key words such as “little details”, “customer experience”, “state of mind” and “feelings” are very valuable. For certain, a strong source of competitiveness during the pandemic comes from the measures implemented against the pandemic as tourists need safety and a relaxed atmosphere.

Managers agreed that an organic growth type strategy is prevalent, at least at the level of bigger organizations such as hotels with 200–300 rooms, smaller hotels tend to have more of a survival strategy. Different and new concepts and trends, such as niche tourism (religious, dental etc.), slow tourism and downshifting, do not have much currency for the managers as possible instruments that would allow competitiveness to grow during the pandemic. From a theoretical perspective, the research is an overview of the managers’ vision on a possible competitiveness strategy during a very demanding and complex event such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. Competitiveness of the touristic SMEs is closely related with the destination competitiveness concept. Furthermore, for modern tourism organizations, competitiveness cannot be conceptualized outside of the sustainability principles that have to be implemented within their activity. Instruments capable of measuring competitiveness have to take account of the internal and external driving forces that can shape the business environment of the companies. From a managerial perspective, this paper gives professionals in the field, and especially tourism SME managers, an overview of the complex process implied by the competitiveness developing strategy. Making a comparison between ante-crisis sources of competitiveness and those sources during the current crisis brings useful insights to this complex phenomenon. In fact, the themes discussed in this research can be taken as a possible good practice guide, useful to be applied at the level of touristic SMEs within the process of identifying and evaluating their own sources of competitiveness. Additionally, policy makers in the field of tourism, local and central administrative authorities alike, can benefit from the insights presented, especially surrounding the idea that many of the tourism SMEs’ managers declared their support for a proactive attitude of authorities regarding cluster cooperation in the field. The consistent advantages of the clusters, seen as a potential tool for the competitiveness achievement during the pandemic, were highlighted, particularly among managers with the longest seniority in managerial activity, aware of the importance of creating effective supply–delivery chains within the clusters.

However, the present research has its limits too, having only been conducted at the level of hotels and pensions, ignoring the situation of other important actors within the touristic industry such as agencies, tour-operators etc. In the case of the latter, competitiveness is certainly developed based on another set of variables and different factors can emerge within the external specific business environment. The research was made using a limited amount of financial resources, respondents did not have any financial incentives to take part in the research. Additionally, a limit that is inherent in qualitative research is the lack of statistic representativeness of the implied sample. Future research could make a comparative analysis of the customers, touristic agencies, and tour operators, with the help of quantitative and qualitative research alike, in order to ascertain feasible sources of competitiveness.

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