

**TOURIST DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS: BETWEEN
DESIRABLE AND IMPERATIVE**
**COMPETITIVITATEA DESTINAȚIILOR TURISTICE: ÎNTRE
DEZIRABIL ȘI IMPERATIV**

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Abstract: The problem of competitiveness is a current one, which has to be approached not only at a microeconomic level, but also at a macroeconomic one, because, at the moment, unfortunately, the lack of competitiveness of the products/Romanian services is obvious on the internal market as well as on the external one and has consequences in the national economy. With the strong competition on the oversaturated tourist market by countless elements, which are considered far from the quality meaning, ensuring the competitiveness constitutes a primordial strategic objective, this being a fundamental notion in the strategy and the strategic analysis.

Key words: development, competitive, sustainable, potential, tourism, destination.

Cuvinte cheie: dezvoltare, competitivă, durabil, potențial, turism, destinație

The success of a tourist destination is determined by the way in which this one manages to guarantee and at the same time to ensure its visitors, through its entire offer, an experience that can equal or exceed the multiple alternative destinations.

In other words, through all that a tourist destination offers, from the first contact of the potential tourist with the destination, - under the form of information, images, impressions, until the moment of sharing the experience lived – it has to trigger interest, to associate with an achievement. Only such an approach of the tourist destination can ensure a high competitiveness.

Although in the literature the problem of competitiveness of a tourist destination has been discussed by many experts, among which M. Porter, who put in practice in THR Barcelona an application of the diamond model in the tourism sector, Crouch and Ritchie who invented a model which bears their name etc., at the moment there is no unique model of the competitiveness.

However, the existing models have very many elements in common, differentiated by the different names of some determiners and by some of their components.

By synthesising the models proposed in the above-mentioned studies, a

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possible model of competitiveness of the tourist destination is rendered below (Fig. 1)

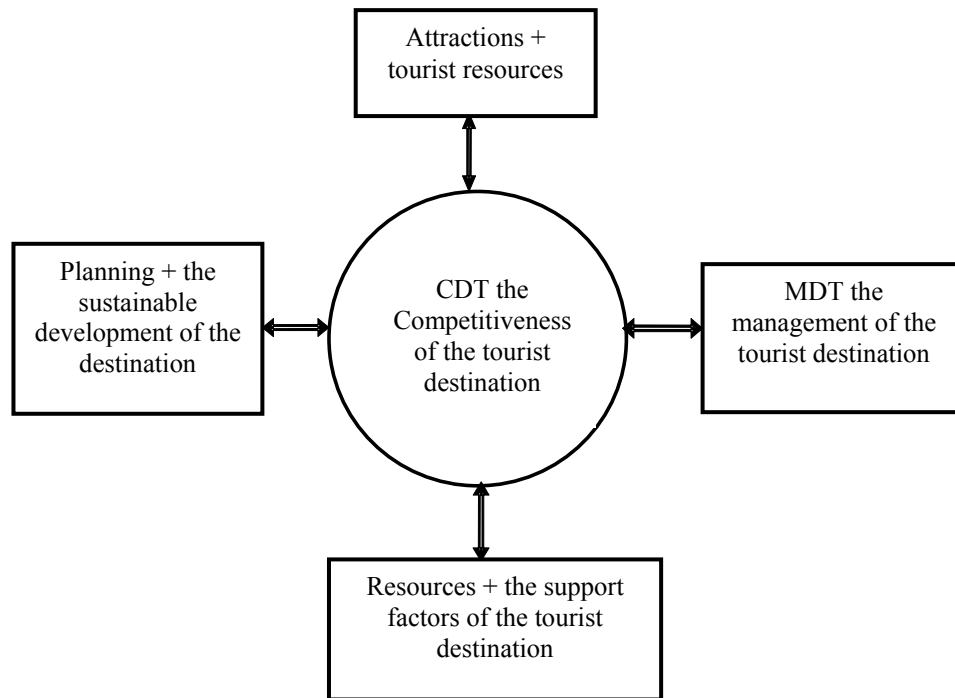


Fig. 1 Determining factors for the competitiveness of the tourist destination

The model includes six determiners: the attractions and the tourist resources of a particular destination; the support factors and other resources; the situational conditions/determiners; qualifiers; amplifiers; the conditions of the demand; the policy; the planning and the development of the destination; the inventory/the management of the tourist destination.

The attractions and the tourist resources existent at the level of a tourist destination include: the geographic position, the natural and anthropic tourist resources, the organisation of some events, the relaxation and animation activities, the tourist equipments, and the commercial network dedicated to the tourists.

The geographic position – as determiner of the competitiveness of a tourist destination leaves its mark/influences the following aspects: belonging to a continent, the distance that outbound tourist have to travel to reach a particular destination; relief, climate conditions and the tourist transit.

Being situated on a continent can be a positive or negative aspect according to the perception of that continent – as well as the distance between the outbound countries and the destination, the existent forms of relief, the climate conditions which can positively or negatively influence the attractiveness of the destination (temperature, winds, precipitation, the presence of dangerous meteorological

phenomena).

The main condition for success of any destination is the attractiveness elements which this one offers: the natural and man-made tourist attractions doubled by the multiple possibilities of passing the spare time during the day as well as during the night, the events organised etc.

The natural background, with its components: relief, hydrography, flora, fauna, climate, the possibility of treatment, natural reserves, form the material support for the enrolment of the tourist activity. If its characteristics have aesthetic values, these can generate important fluxes of tourists or can represent in other cases only the “background” of other categories of attractiveness elements. Among the tourist resources with aesthetic values we can mention the following: the landscape aspects generated by the peaks, steep valleys, strangely shaped rocks, canyons, river valleys, waterfalls, lakes, geysers, outstanding flora and fauna, beaches, deltas and estuaries; sometimes, due to their content and their structure, they favour different types of tourism: skiing areas, river courses, natural factors for treatment, hunting and fishing bases etc.

Together with the natural attractions, the richness and the variety of human creations produced along the evolution of different civilizations, contribute to their historic value, their cultural and artistic value, their technical value etc., they contribute to the increase of the attractiveness of the area or represent, by themselves, an element of attractiveness on their own.

Regarding the strong points of the tourist potential which leave a mark on the competitiveness of the tourist destination, we can emphasize: the degree of attractiveness, diversity, value, specificity, originality/uniqueness (in some cases), the new, the old, dimensions, shape, specific, function, degree of preservation, measures of protection used, international recognition of their value (the recording in the UNESCO heritage), degree of accessibility of these elements in order to ensure their visitation in conditions of safety and protection of the tourist objectives etc. At the same time, we have to take into account the fact that the tourist potential of the destination grows simultaneously with the number of its components, their quality, the way of association in the territory.

At the same time, the richness and the value of the tourist potential must be related to the forms of tourism that can be practiced in the respective area; the more varied forms of tourism are practiced, the more can it can meet the demands of various segments of tourists, ensuring the intensification of the tourist traffic in the area.

The revaluation of the existing tourist resources in a destination represents the existence of adequate material means capable of ensuring the satisfaction of the tourists' requests during their holiday, brought together under the generic name of material base. Through the dimension, structure, technological level of the equipments, it determines the access and the presence of the tourists in the area and the size of the tourist fluxes. If the tourist potential represents the essential and permanent condition of enrolling the tourist activity, the decisive factor is represented by the general and tourist infrastructure together with the human resources.

The existence of multiple possibilities for spending the spare time represents

another element of the attractiveness of the tourist destination. For this, the relaxation and animation activities are extremely important (entertainment, sport, cultural and artistic activities), offered by a particular destination, the organisation of special events like, for instance, festivals, reunions, congresses, conferences, major sports events, which have the role of attracting a large number of tourists, in the periods with lower requests. These types of events are usually organised in spring and autumn, offering the tourists the possibility of knowing and appreciating that destination. One of the attractions preferred by a large number of tourists is shopping. Consequently, tourist destinations are more and more interested in developing the commercial sector to address tourists. Thus, the development of neighbourhoods and tourist streets with chic shops which offer a wide variety of souvenirs, but also products of the local industry, together with small traditional restaurants that offer quality food, cafés and different cultural and artistic units which have entertainment programs by day and by night, can increase the attractiveness of the tourist destination.

Another determiner of competitiveness is the resources and the support factors, like: infrastructure, within which a very important place is held by the accessibility, the features of the local population (hospitality, welcoming), the safety and the security of the destination.

The general infrastructure meant to ensure the normal function of all the sectors of national economy leaves its mark on tourism, ensuring the accessibility of the tourist destination (the network of roads and means of transportation and telecommunications), providing the technical elements necessary for the optimal enrolment of the production processes of services and of the specific goods in tourism (the network of water, gas, electrical energy, thermic energy utilities), as well as of some possibilities of passing the spare time, the network of commercial units and of the ones which provide different services.

The most important component is represented by the transportation which has to ensure multiple possibilities of fast and easy access to the resort (by air, terrestrial, by railways or by water), correlated with the main segments of clients, a fast, comfortable, at affordable prices and safe transportation, with optimized links between the different means of transportation whose timetables are correlated with the tourists' program to the resort as well as inside the resort.

The length and the distribution in the territory of the different means of transportation (terrestrial, railways, by air or by water) as well as the extent to which the means of transportation manage to ensure the combination between the main requests related to the quickness, the comfort, the safety and the cost, represent other important determiners of competitiveness.

In a world of information, the degree of development of telecommunications: the development of the land phoning, of the mobile phoning, of the internet network, of television etc., represents another determinant element in the appreciation of the competitiveness of the destination.

To all these, we can add the connection to water, gas, electrical energy and thermic energy utilities in conditions of efficiency and with no disturbances, the

efficiency of waste disposal services that could prevent the existence of waste, chemical residues, plastic waste which floats on the waters of the resort and in the proximity, ensuring a clean, unpolluted air and as many green places as possible.

An important component of the infrastructure is the commercial network, which, in the conditions of adapting to the tourists' requests, can offer them the pleasure of shopping, the possibility of spending the spare time, as well as important supplementary sources of income for the local community.

Building a cult for quality in tourism is a difficult process that needs the professional qualification of the personnel and an ethic education for the change of mentalities.

In order to achieve this, an education and motivation program of the staff is necessary divided on groups of professions and especially for the managerial levels, differentiated for those who will directly take part in the creation of a proper quality climate within the team, as well as showing attention, the desire to satisfy the needs, to answer to these needs as well as possible. This means among others: to apply the quality management, to completely involve the personnel of the unit regardless of the job and the qualification, to implement systems of evaluation and rewards, to elaborate rules and to educate the personnel etc.

We must emphasize the fact that between the degree of development of the area where the resort is located and the development of the resort there is a conditioning relationship.

The tourism, being a consequential activity, is based on the activities enrolled in numerous branches and sectors, its development being influenced by a series of factors resulted from the process of economic and social development of the local community. The increase of the inhabitants' quality of life has positive influences in tourism.

Thus, the development of tourism can lead to the revaluation of some local products which can constitute a competitiveness factor due to the quality and the prices of these products. The local agriculture can offer fresh, ecologic, best quality products at small prices. The products obtained within the local small and medium sized companies: bakery products, dairy products, meat, fruit, different products resulted from crafts can be successfully revaluated in tourism.

At the same time the degree of economic and social development influences the level of infrastructure development: transportation, construction, culture, art, which are in direct or indirect relationship with the development of tourism, taking adequate measures for the creation of an unpolluted environment, the fundamental premise of tourism development as well as for the preservation of the aesthetic of the city.

Although these determiners are very important in the assurance of the success of the tourist destination, in the economic terminology they are considered only sources of the comparative advantage. The competitive advantage is related to the capacity of a destination to use these resources in an efficient way on a long term as well. Thus, in the research studies, the assurance of success of the tourist destination is determined by the association of two attributes: the competitiveness and the sustainability.

To support this idea, we can say that another determiner holds an extremely important place: the policy, the planning and the development of the tourist destination. This means a vision at the level of the destination, shared by all the actors who directly or indirectly take part in the elaboration of the tourist product, the knowledge of the strong and weak points, the elaboration of a marketing strategy adapted to the existent conditions as well as the successful practice of this strategy.

The development of tourism, the transformation of a territory into a successful destination, means the elaboration and especially the application of adequate strategies at a macroeconomic as well as at a microeconomic level (of tourist operators).

As governments become aware of the importance of tourism in society, they intervene in its development through a series of measures of the economic policies. While in the developed countries, the governmental factors must draw the direction towards the development of tourism, to guide the private sector and the local management in order to encourage the development of tourism in some regions; in the majority of the developing countries the government has a central and dominant role within the planning process.

This involvement is necessary in both types of countries, the differences consisting of the strategies used.

Regarding the nature of the governmental factors involvement in tourism, this can be defined as being active or passive.

The active involvement means a deliberate action of these in order to support the tourist sector which involves not only an acknowledgement from the government part of the specific needs of the tourist sector, but also the necessity of its operational participation in order to achieve the proposed objectives.

This involvement can be achieved from a managerial point of view, the role of the government being the one to establish a set of objectives in the tourism sector, grouped in a tourist development plan and to introduce the organisational and legislative support in order to achieve these objectives.

Thus, the government can award facilities for investments in tourism, it can support the foundation of a bank for the development of tourism, and it can negotiate bilateral agreements in the field of air transportation with the specific purpose of developing the tourist traffic.

Regarding the passive involvement, this represents some actions of the government which can have consequences in tourism without their express intention to favour or develop tourism, like: the adoption of a law which encourages investments, the negotiation of bilateral agreements regarding the air services or the organisation of foreign languages courses. These are actions which aim at the country as a whole and do not have the intention to favour especially the tourist sector, although they have consequences in tourism as well.

The inventory/the management of the tourist destination represents the determiner which offers the margin of manoeuvrability for the achievement of the competitiveness of the tourist destination to the extent that it includes programs, structures, systems and processes that can be produced and managed by individuals, organisations, collective actions. It means actions related to the

application of the frame for the policy and the planning of the tourist destination and it aims at the reinforcement of the attractiveness of the destination, it aims at the improvement of the efficiency and the quality of the resources and of the support factors and the adaptation to the imposed constraints as well as to the opportunities offered by the external environment. This determiner has seven fields of activity related to the quality management: to guaranty the quality of the experience offered to the visitors, to elaborate the marketing of the destination, to permanently inform the partners, to develop the human resources and to adapt them to the existent needs, to ensure the financial aid and the capital adapted to the needs, to manage properly the fluxes of visitors, to protect the environment.³

This function belongs, at regional level, to the local communities, which can, through a series of specific actions, stimulate the development of tourism and to modernize the related services. These can ensure the rehabilitation of the areas, of the monuments, of the buildings, ensuring the increase of the tourist attractiveness and the development and the modernisation of the physical infrastructure.

At the same time, the local authorities can get involved in the support of the private initiative in the creation and the development of tourist units, with services at international standards, to redesign the areas with hunting, ethnographic, cultural and landscape potential, for the development of tourism, to attract a larger number of tourists through promotional actions in the country and abroad.

Among these, we must mention the ones related to the attraction of funds through the pre-adherence programs such as PHARE, ISPA and SAPARD, community programs (FP6, Leonardo da Vinci – phase II, Socrates, Youth, Culture 2000) or the post-adherence ones which aim at the development of small and medium sized companies for the creation of complementary industrial activities, or other sectors of the material production which can ensure the development of tourism, the development and modernisation of the agriculture in the region based on the principles of ecologic agriculture, representing an advantage for tourism.

Other actions with impact on the development of tourism are: the stimulation of the development of the human resources potential, the qualification and re-qualification of the work force employed in the economic sector, the training of the personnel who works within the services sector through programs of training and professional orientation for young people, the stimulation of the tourist education parallel with the modernisation and the consolidation of the education units, their material base, the development of the general infrastructure, the improvement of the drinking water supply of localities, the rehabilitation of the water supply systems in the rural localities, the improvement of the equipments in the networks of localities with drainage installations and cleaning stations, the improvement of the transportation conditions on the network of public roads (county roads and locality roads) through consolidation, the improvement of the auto connections to/fro the areas without railways, the development of programs which ensure the development of the tourist offer, the adaptation of the tourism forms to the tourist

³ The Couch Ritchie competitiveness model.

potential of the county, the revaluation and the introduction of new tourist paths, the harmonious and balanced development of all the localities, the rehabilitation of the cultural units.

Situational conditions/determiners, qualifiers include: the competitiveness of the microenvironment, macro-environment, the technological environment, the social environment.

The competition position of a tourist destination depends on the competitiveness of the different categories of economic agents or sectors which directly or indirectly take part in the elaboration of the product, on the way in which they understand to get involved in the tourist activity and to adapt to its requests.

Thus, firstly the need for the existence of economic agents supplying the competitive tourist services must be emphasized: transporters, accommodation units, food units, treatment facilities, cultural and artistic units and entertainment units etc., because only in this way the competitive tourist services will be conceived and traded. This depends on a series of elements, among which: the existence of a strategic vision of the activity, ensuring an optimal balance price-quality, the renewal and the diversification of the products offered etc.

Together with the competitiveness of the suppliers of tourist products, ensuring the competitiveness of the associated sectors is also necessary, especially those of: taxi services, banks, medical services, travel agencies, cultural and artistic institutions, trading units etc., as well as the industrial services providing: the food and agricultural products, the hotel units and equipments etc.

An important role in ensuring the competitiveness of a destination is the one held by the education services which must train the qualified work force and to ensure its continuous training. That is why this sector must provide specialty courses, at all the levels and to offer a good theoretical and practical training. Through the means of education, a general tourist culture can be achieved, so that the local population can answer and offer the information requested by the tourists, in different international languages.

We must emphasize as well the role of the professional associations in tourism which can get actively involved in the enrolment of information, promotion, professional training programs etc.

The macro-environment, with all its components: the economic, the political and legislative, the technical and the social environments, exercises a powerful influence on the competitiveness of the tourist destination which can constitute itself either in opportunities if anticipated and if there exists a quick capacity of reaction, or in limits.

The economic environment, through the PNB evolution, the inflation, the interest rates, the exchange rate, the consumption customs, the prices and the tariffs practiced, finishes a certain course of activity enrolled by different participants in the creation of the tourist product.

The political and legislative environment, through the means of laws, public policies and the political orientation of the central and local administration, the

activity of pressure groups, can influence directly or indirectly the objectives and the strategies of the organisation, being constituted in limits or constraints in the economic activity or creating opportunities for development. This constitutes a reference element of economic, social and political stability.

At the same time, situations can appear where the economic objectives of the company can enter in conflict with the economic policy, or with the external policy of the country.

The technological environment, through the technical progress and the size of the scientific research, can offer solutions for the improvement of the quality of the products offered, their renewal, the reduction of costs etc. The fast rhythm of changes in the technological field makes the permanent connection to these necessary, and the information represents an important element and has become one of the most important resources of a company.

The knowledge of the social environment, which includes actions, desires, faith, convictions or interests of people, represents an important element which has to be taken into account in the relationships with different partners, in the harmonisation of the tourists' interests with those of the local community etc.

Regarding the conditions of the request, we must emphasize that the measure of competitiveness of the tourist destination is given by the way in which the destination manages to answer those requests, the preferences of the tourists. The extremely accentuated dynamism of the request, under the influence of numerous economic, social, demographic, psychological, political factors, makes the permanent study under many aspects necessary: the volume, the structure, the features of the target segments, the identification of the markets in evolution, of the market niches etc.

The dimensions of the request are influenced by the image of the tourist destination which has to be permanently improved through promotion actions.

The competitiveness of the tourist destinations, fashion or imperative?

The evolutions manifested on the world level regarding the increase of the quality of life, of the life standard, as well as the tourists' maturity, have determined mutations in the structure of the tourists' requests which have started to ask for more and more sophisticated tourist products, have become more exigent regarding the quality terms and the authenticity of the offer. The intensification of the competition between the tourist companies have changed the terms of competitiveness, the main influencing factors being the quality, the balance quality-price, the renewal, the diversification, the innovation, the knowledge and the orientation towards the client.

Thus, the problem of ensuring the quality of tourist services has become the number one priority at a microeconomic level as well as at a macroeconomic level; more and more countries and tourist companies (especially hotel chains) elaborating their own quality books.

The quality of the tourist services offered by each supplier in particular is the result of the combination of two components: a quantity one, with a generally

material feature, represented by the equipments and the endowments existent, the food, the background, the work methods, and a quality one, behavioural (Lupu, 2003, pg. 244).

Regarding the material component, this one leaves its mark on the quality of tourist services through the comfort, function, aesthetic, ergonomic requests which the equipments of different units can satisfy. An important aspect which influences these requests is the level of technology incorporated. Thus, the higher it is, the greater the effects on comfort and quality of services will be due to the thermic, phonic isolations and to the different facilities in the room, like internet access, better equipments and installations, smaller maintenance expenses and fewer complaints. By using some light installations, sanitary facilities with sensors, the suppliers of tourist services can save water, energy etc. The introduction of the electronic inventory of the services has positive effects on the quality of those services as a consequence of freeing the personnel of the bureaucratic activities who have now more time for the client, the possibility of fast drawing up of the bill at any time, the correctness of the bill etc., as well as current and complete information of the management regarding the main economic indicators achieved. Even if the initial investments are bigger, on a longer term the benefits are obvious.

At the same time another important element is the dimension and the organisation of different categories of space which, besides the requests emphasized earlier, must aim at a series of aspects related to the flexibility of the offer, that is, to ensure, during extra-season periods, the conception of a complementary offer, like: the organisation of congresses and conferences etc.

The card of the unit is the interior design, the atmosphere created by the background, the colours, the intensity and the colour of the light, the thermic comfort (the temperature, the air humidity), the air freshness, and the sound. All these individualise the offer, give the unit's identity.

The most important component of quality is the behaviour of the personnel which most of the times is neglected, the personnel problems of the company being limited at employing the corresponding number of people, with the best qualification in the field, who know their tasks and the work methods. That is why, a professional conduct based on an honest smile, amiability, a particular attention to each client, can contribute to the appreciation of quality more than the luxury of the material component. In some cases a proper professional conduct can compensate a series of insufficiencies of the quantity component.

The effects of the professional conduct are felt directly on the quality of the services, that is, on their quality perception. Unlike the material components emphasized above, the effects of the professional conduct are not easily predicted and are difficultly reversed in time. They are in direct relationship/ generated by the number, structure, and level of training and the motivation of the personnel as a whole. That is why, all the components of the professional conduct (Stanciulescu et.al., 2002, pg. 117) should be taken into account when selecting and employing the personnel: intellectual: the professional training, the work experience, the level of abilities; structural: the set of abilities and customs; intentional: motivation,

interests, aspirations, emotions, the love for the work or profession; ethical: moral attitude during the work process and the professionalism, besides the satisfaction of the tourists' basic needs, the staff have to answer the superior needs of recognition, of agreeable passing of the spare time.

As a consequence, ensuring the competitiveness of the products and tourist services must have as base the quality management, this being a way of ensuring the competitiveness and implicitly the credibility of the company on the market.

The success of a tourist company, the effect of its competitiveness (Fig. 1) are determined by the process of attraction, winning, satisfaction of the clients' needs, and especially by gaining their loyalty, offering good quality services and products. Following this pattern, the company will record the expected profit, following the effects of cooperation for the achievement of the competitiveness of a tourist destination. (Fig. 2)

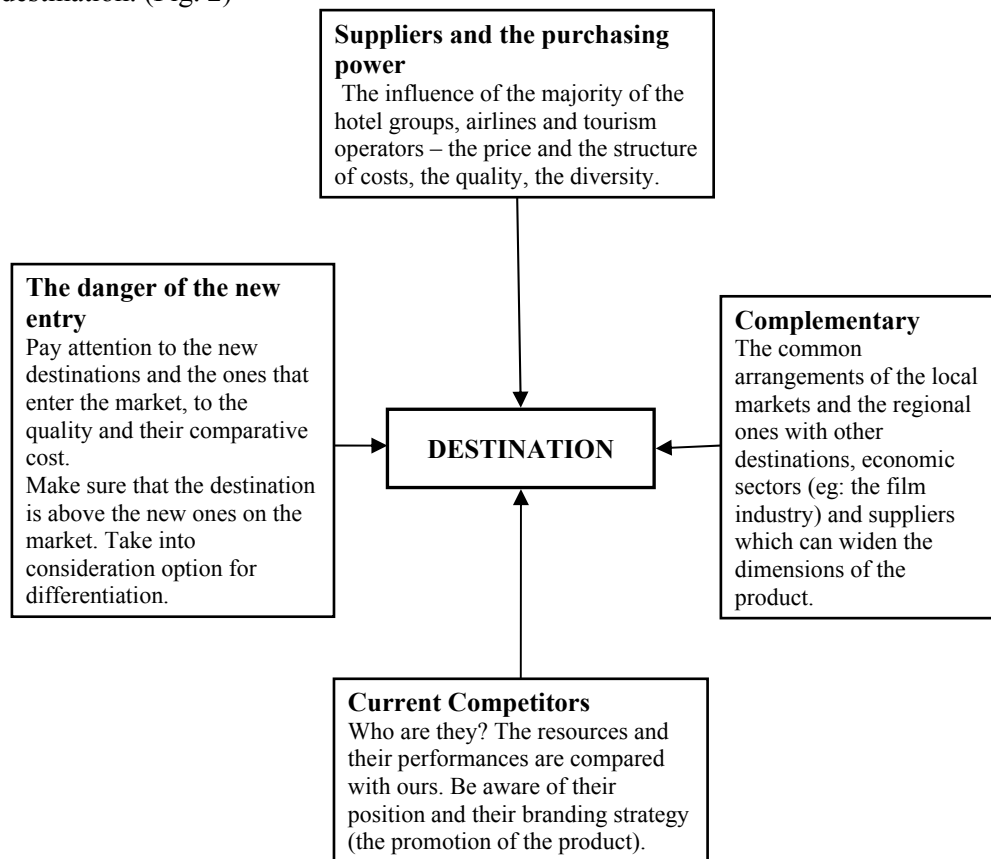


Fig. 2 The effects of the Competitiveness of the Destination.

The quality management is defined according to ISO 9000 as being “the assembly of activities of the general function of management which determines the policy in the field of quality, the objectives and the responsibilities, in order to implement them within the system of quality through specific means like: the

planning of quality, the control of quality, ensuring the quality and the improvement of quality”.

The essential objective of quality management is the achievement in conditions of maximum efficiency of those products which: entirely satisfy the client's requests, are in conformity with the requests of the society, with the standards and the applied specifications, take into account all the aspects regarding the protection of the consumer and of the environment, are offered to the client at the price and the deadline agreed together.

The introduction of a quality system brings benefits to all the parties involved: the country as destination, the companies, the consumers, the intermediaries.

This means keeping a constant level of quality. That is why the implementation of quality is achieved through the assembly of requests named standards and grouped in types, according to the field they function in: performance standards, service standards, referential professional standards, standards which include specifications, standards with operation procedures.

Obtaining quality does not require only the elaboration of standards and ensuring its conformity with these, but also the performance of quality must lead to the satisfaction of requests and expectations of clients.

In this context, the systematic analysis of the quality of services/tourist products and taking the measures necessary represent an important priority.

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