THE INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS OF MALTA

AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

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ABSTRACT

Many small islands depend on sustainable tourism to attain long term economic prosperity and well-being for their citizens. As they become more dependent on tourism for their growth, they are more concerned with improving their competitiveness to adapt to a highly charged competitive environment and to the dynamic market conditions. The quintessential problem is how to achieve, maintain, and enhance competitiveness. There is limited research on tourism destination competitiveness (TDC), and much less on small island destinations. This study concentrates on TDC with a special focus on Malta as a small Mediterranean island in an attempt to develop a comprehensive TDC framework that is useful to small island destinations, and advances models and measures to assess competitiveness based on importance-performance analysis techniques (IPA). To achieve its research objectives, this study adopts a methodological position reflecting pragmatist assumptions and uses a sequential, exploratory, Mixed Methods design strategy. In the qualitative first phase of the design, thirty-five in-depth interviews are conducted with key ‘experts’ in tourism. It emerges from the participants’ description that sixty tourism-specific and business-related determinants provide a broad framework for assessing TDC. In the second phase, survey research is applied in order to develop quantitative measures to reveal the relative importance of the competitiveness factors, to assess the performance of the destination on these factors, and to identify priority areas that require immediate attention for improvement. Statistical measures and procedures are modified, introduced, and tested to establish a valid model for measuring TDC. Results show that the diagonal approach and the adjusted weighted partial ranking method for measuring importance and performance are the best combination that satisfies validity criteria. When applying these techniques to assess Malta’s competitiveness relative to a competing set of Mediterranean destinations, twelve tourism attributes and fourteen business-related factors are identified as priority areas for improvement, with the competitiveness deficiency gaps in business factors being notably higher than those in tourism-specific areas. This study has several implications for the development of TDC theory, methods, and application to small islands. It provides tourism researchers, policymakers, and practitioners with a theoretically robust framework that can assist them in the formulation of policies, the management of the destination, and the implementation of strategies to optimise resource allocation in order to enhance a destination’s competitive position. Given that there are few studies that focus on the development and measurement of TDC models for small islands, this study makes a valid contribution to knowledge. The methodological approaches adopted in this inquiry have substantive application in IPA studies both within and beyond tourism studies. The study’s outcomes are also transferable to small island destinations operating in similar environments.