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UNIVERSITY STUDENT PERCEPTION REGARDING THE TOURISM POTENTIAL IN THE CITY OF LLEIDA

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Abstract

This study analyses the opinion of students enrolled at the Lleida University in regards to the tourism potential of the city where they study. The survey was conducted on a total of 202 students, with the average age of 21.47 years. In order to participate in this study, the respondents had to meet a certain criteria – to be passionate about tourism and to travel at least once a year. The sample population is made up of both Spanish (78.3%) and foreign students who came to study through the Erasmus mobility program (21.7%). The research was carried out in the city of Lleida, Spain between January and April 2015 and the data were processed using the SPSS statistical software.

The analysis of the tourist profile showed that the students are familiar with the city's main tourist attractions and most of them have visited at least one of these sites. Even though financially they are highly dependent on their families, they do value the comfort level of the housing and transportation services while travelling.

The students' opinion is that the city of Lleida has a low tourism potential and they would not recommend it to their friends as a tourist destination. The local transportation infrastructure level and very few leisure opportunities bring a large contribution to this negative image.

Keywords: cultural tourism, tourism in Lleida, Spain, students, tourism, tourism potential.

JEL Classification: L83, Z31.

Introduction

Tourism is a booming industry and a key economic sector in many countries worldwide. The direct and indirect effects are indisputable, contributing to a country's GDP and employment rate growth, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council.

There are also side effects to this industry, especially socially and environmentally (Marzo - Navarro et al., 2015). These side effects are alarm signals for those in charge of development plans. Developments in related sectors of the economy bring swift changes and an increased level of attention towards younger tourists.

A short description of tourism in Spain

A European country who has become an important player on the tourism market is Spain (Eurostat, 2014). Things haven't always been this way though. In the middle of the 1800s, Spain was a destination mainly for its residents. The situation changed when the authorities started to advertise the key elements that turned it into a top destination. Some of the most important features that make tourism in Spain unique are the

attractive climate, extensive shoreline, a well-developed transport infrastructure, competitive prices and last but not least, the local culture (Williams et al., 2015).

Traditionally, Spanish tourism was centered on certain destinations. Seaside tourism was given a lot of attention but recently, in the past decades, other forms of tourism have been developed, such as agro tourism, cultural tourism and gourmet tourism (Torres et al., 2011). Multiple elements were needed in order to achieve this international destination status: a higher level of competition between destinations, changes in the brokerage scheme, the use of new technologies, an increase in the social and environmental impact level and last but not least, changes in the tourist profile (Jimenez et al., 2015). Also, the means of promoting destinations have improved in the last decades, including travel blogs (Bosangit et al., 2015). These means are increasingly popular and have a visible influence on consumer behavior.

The yearly increase in the number of tourists can be attributed largely to the unique attractions, with a total of 39 cultural attractions out of the 44 UNESCO Monuments located in Spain (UNESCO, 2015). There are many positive aspects to this increase in tourism. The local population is able to sell unique products, increasing their wealth level and keeping the local customs alive (Smith et al., 2013).

Economically, one of the most important regions in Spain is Catalonia. It brings the greatest contribution to the country's GDP and has the second largest population, with 16% of the total (The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2015). Cities such as Barcelona, Girona and Lleida are reference points for development and tourist attractions (Smith et al., 2012). Lleida is a 2500 year old city with unique elements such as the local architecture, museums and archaeological sites. The most important tourist attractions are the Seu Vella cathedral – an iconic building, The King's Castle, The Templar House of Gardent, the best preserved ancient crafts compound in Spain (tanneries), Palau of Paeria – an ancient Roman archaeological site (Turisme de Lleida, 2015).

The city can be visited year-round (catalunya.com, 2015) and it houses up to 90 events yearly, such as exhibitions, festivals, concerts, conferences, competitions (lleidatur.com, 2015). Apart from the cultural potential, Lleida is a renowned academic center in the Catalonia region, with over 10 000 students enrolled yearly (udl.es, 2015).

Methods

This study analyses the opinion of students at the Lleida University in the city of Lleida, Spain in regards to the tourism potential of the city in which they are studying. In order to achieve this goal, three objectives were set: the description of the sample population, the description of student tourist's profile and the analysis of student perception in regards to Lleida's tourism potential.

This is quantitative pilot study, conducted on 202 students, on campus, using the questionnaire as a research tool. The questions and research objectives were explained to each respondent and the questionnaire was subsequently administered to the students that enjoy travelling and make at least one trip per year. Thus, the questionnaire was distributed to a sample population selected using these criteria, a population familiar with tourism.

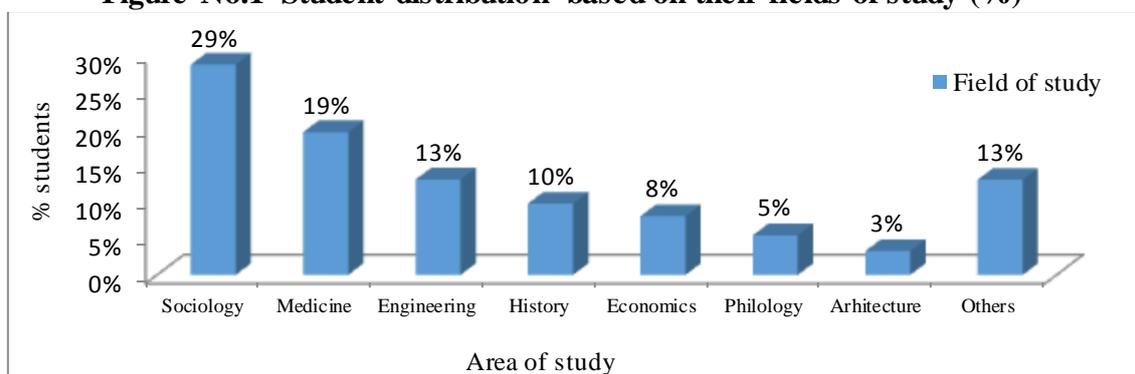
Both closed-answer type questions (with the possibility of a single answer and multiple answers) and open-answer questions were used, and they included issues related to the research goals. This pilot study was conducted between the 1st of January

and the 4th of April 2015 and the data were processed using the SPSS statistical software.

Results – Sample structure and student tourist profile

The 202 students have a mean age of 21.47 years. 66.5% are female and 33.5% are male and most of them pursue a Bachelor's degree – 93.6% while only 4.9% are enrolled in a Master's degree education program. Regarding the field of studies, the majority of respondents 29% study sociology, 19% study medicine, 13% study engineering and 10% study history (Figure. No.1). Out of the 202 respondents, only 8% study economics, 5% philology and 3% architecture.

Figure No.1 Student distribution based on their fields of study (%)

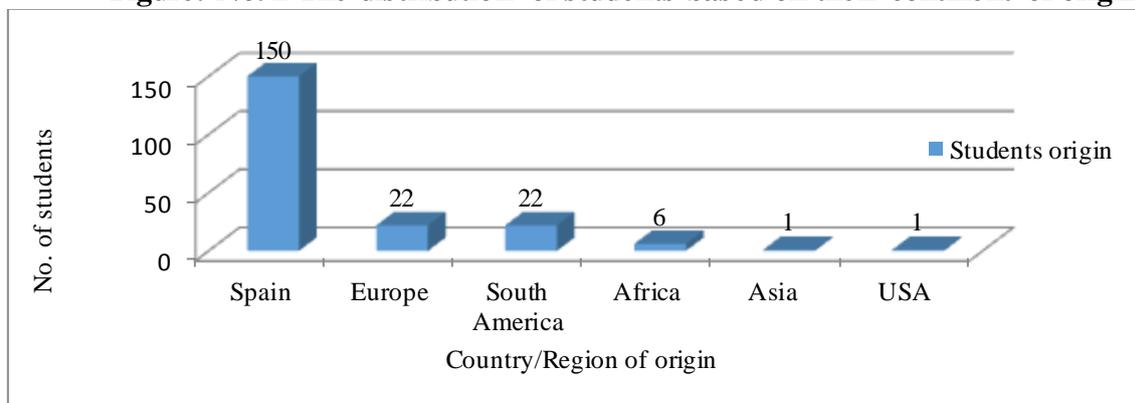


Source: Made by the author based on research conducted between January 1st and April 4th 2015

There are students in other fields in the sample population but their percentage is very low, less than 1%. These fields of study (biology, agriculture, tourism, geography, physics, journalism) were included in the “others” category.

21.7% of the 202 were Erasmus students attending the Lleida University for one or two semesters. The distribution of students based on their continent of origin (Figure. No. 2) shows that, besides the students from Spain, most of them are from Europe and South America – 22 students each, Africa – 6 students and Asia and The United States – 1 student each.

Figure. No. 2 The distribution of students based on their continent of origin



Source: Made by the author based on research conducted between January 1st and April 4th 2015

Based on the country of origin, most of the foreign students are from Mexico (12 students), Brazil (5 students), France (4 students). The main reason for these students to choose Spain as the destination for completing their University studies is the language. The other foreign students come from countries such as the United Kingdom, Argentina, Cameroon, Colombia, Germany, Lithuania, Morocco, Poland, Turkey (2 students from each country) and Chile, South Korea, Egypt, Gambia, Romania, The United States of America (1 student from each country).

The tourist profile of the students is dominated by their interest in the attractions present at the destination. This is also the main reason for choosing their destination. 53.5% stated that the tourist attractions are important when travelling and choosing their destination and for 40.6% the objectives are very important (Table No. 1).

The percentage of those that assign a medium value to the tourist objectives is low – 4% and only 1% find them to be of little importance and 1% of very little importance. This aspect defines the tourist profile of respondents as young people eager to discover new places and willing to improve their cultural knowledge through travel.

Table No. 1 The importance of various factors when choosing a travel destination

| Variable | Frequency | Percentage | Variable | Frequency | Percentage | | |
|---|---------------------------|------------|---|---------------------------|----------------------|-----|-------|
| How important is the comfort level of your means of transportation when travelling? | | | How important is the cost of a trip when travelling? | | | | |
| | Frequency | Percent | | Frequency | Percent | | |
| Valid | Of very little importance | 9 | 4,5 | Of little importance | 4 | 2,0 | |
| | Of little importance | 20 | 9,9 | Valid | Moderate | 8 | 4,0 |
| | Moderate | 52 | 25,7 | | Important | 77 | 38,1 |
| | Important | 100 | 49,5 | | Very important | 113 | 55,9 |
| | Very important | 21 | 10,4 | Total | | 202 | 100,0 |
| Total | | 202 | 100,0 | | | | |
| How important are tourist attraction when travelling and choosing a tourist destination? | | | How important is the hotel's comfort level when travelling? (Including services such as Wi-Fi, parking, TV?) | | | | |
| | Frequency | Percent | | Frequency | Percent | | |
| Valid | Of very little importance | 2 | 1,0 | Of very little importance | 16 | 7,9 | |
| | Of little importance | 2 | 1,0 | Valid | Of little importance | 26 | 12,9 |
| | Moderate | 8 | 4,0 | | Moderate | 40 | 19,8 |
| | Important | 108 | 53,5 | | Important | 92 | 45,5 |
| | Very important | 82 | 40,6 | | Very important | 28 | 13,9 |
| Total | | 203 | 100,0 | Total | | 202 | 100,0 |

Source: Made by the author based on research conducted between January 1st and April 4th 2015

Although students have a low budget, as a result of their dependency on their families at this age, students prefer good housing conditions, in terms of comfort and

services, such as Wi-Fi internet connection, parking, TV. 45.5% of the 202 respondents appreciate these aspects as having a high level of importance and 13.9% as having a very high level of importance. 19.8% assigned a medium level of importance to these aspects, 12.9% a low level and 7.9% a very low level of importance.

The financial situation of respondents affects their behavior as tourists. The cost of travelling is very important for 55.9% of respondents and important for 38.1%. Only 4% and 2% answered that the cost is of moderate or of little importance.

The respondents were also questioned in regards to the importance of the comfort level when it comes to their means of transportation. For 10.4% it is very important and 49.5% find it to be important while only a minority of respondents find it to be of little importance (9.9%) and of no importance (4.5%). 25.7% find it to be of moderate importance.

Although the cost of transportation is very important when choosing a destination, the students do appreciate the comfort level of their means of transportation and housing units.

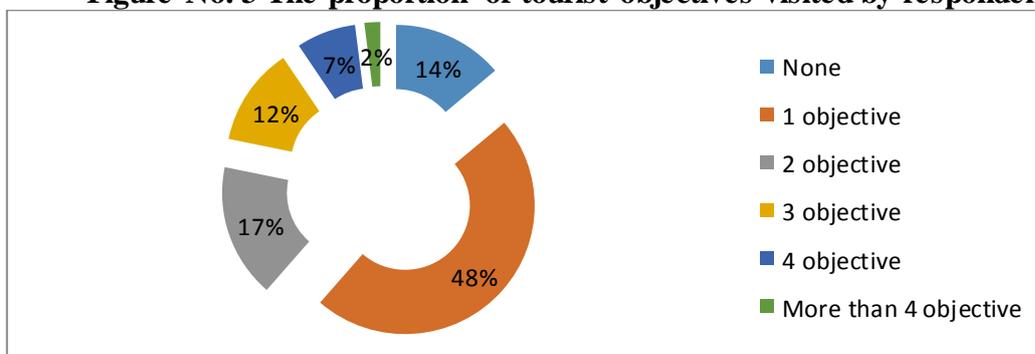
H0: Students in the Spanish city of Lleida consider that the city has a high tourist potential

In order to verify this hypothesis, certain elements were taken into account, such as:

- Student preference in visiting the city's tourist attractions;
- Student opinion regarding Lleida's tourism potential;
- Whether or not they would recommend the city to their friends, as a tourist destination
- Respondent opinion in regards to the transport infrastructure and leisure opportunities, as elements that bring a contribution to the city's image as a tourist destination

Out of the 202 respondents, 14% stated that they haven't visited any tourist objective in the city but they are aware of most objectives because they noticed them, given the close proximity to the University of sites such as the Lleida Castle and Seu Vella Cathedral. Other respondents stated (in 48% of cases) that they have visited 1 objective, 17% have visited 2 objectives and 12% have visited 3 objectives (Figure. No. 3). The percentage of respondents who visited 4 objectives was 7% and the percentage of those who visited more than 4 objectives was 2%.

Figure No. 3 The proportion of tourist objectives visited by respondents



Source: Made by the author based on research conducted between January 1st and April 4th 2015

Regarding the city's tourism potential, the respondent opinion is detailed in Table No. 2. Most students stated that Lleida has a low tourism potential (43.1%). 40,6% stated it has a medium potential and only 4% found Lleida to have a high tourism potential.

Table No. 2 The perception of students regarding Lleida's tourism potential

| Variable | Frequency | Percent | Variable | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|---|-----------|---------|
| How would you grade Lleida's tourism potential? | | | How would you grade public transportation in Lleida? | | |
| | Frequency | Percent | | Frequency | Percent |
| Valid | | | Valid | | |
| Very low | 24 | 11,9 | Very low | 13 | 6,4 |
| Low | 87 | 43,1 | Low | 24 | 11,9 |
| Moderate | 82 | 40,6 | Moderate | 60 | 29,7 |
| High | 8 | 4 | High | 51 | 25,3 |
| Very high | 1 | ,5 | Very high | 2 | 1,0 |
| Total | 202 | 100,0 | Very low | 52 | 25,7 |
| How would you grade leisure opportunities in Lleida (ex: night clubs, pubs, restaurants)? | | | Total | 202 | 100,0 |
| | Frequency | Percent | Would you recommend Lleida as a tourist destination? | | |
| Valid | | | | Frequency | Percent |
| Very low | 6 | 3,0 | Valid | | |
| Low | 31 | 15,4 | Yes | 71 | 35,0 |
| Moderate | 109 | 53,7 | No | 131 | 65,0 |
| High | 50 | 24,9 | Total | 202 | 100,0 |
| Very high | 6 | 3,0 | | | |
| Total | 202 | 100,0 | | | |

Source: Made by the author based on research conducted between January 1st and April 4th 2015

Also, 71 students (35%) stated that they would recommend Lleida as a tourist destination. Their percentage was influenced by their opinion regarding leisure opportunities in Lleida, graded as average by 53.7%, high by 24.9%, very high by 3%, low by 15.4% and very low by 3% of respondents.

Taking into account the large distances between the University buildings compounds – El Camp and Seu Vella – and downtown Lleida, as well as the considerable distances between the University buildings scattered throughout the city, the means of public transportation are very important and 74.3% of respondents use them. These respondents grade the public transportation services as average in 29.7% of cases and high quality in 25.3% of cases. 11.9% find public transportation of low and 6.4% of very low quality.

The link between student opinion related to Lleida's tourist potential and their future recommendations to others about visiting the city is best described using an ANOVA analysis (Table No. 3). The results show how much student opinion, (including that of foreign students) can influence future recommendations to their friends when choosing a travel destination.

Table No. 3 ANOVA

Would you recommend Lleida as a tourist destination?

| | Sum of Squares | Df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|------|
| Between Groups | 5,914 | 3 | 1,971 | 9,633 | ,000 |
| Within Groups | 39,497 | 193 | ,205 | | |
| Total | 45,411 | 196 | | | |

Source: Made by the author based on research conducted between January 1st and April 4th 2015

The ANOVA analysis table showed that it is a relevant model, with a Sig value of less than 0.05. In order to analyze the correlation between Lleida's tourism potential and future recommendations, a Pearson coefficient was calculated (Table No. 4).

Table No. 4. Correlations- Pearson Coefficient

| | What is your opinion regarding Lleida's tourism potential? | Would you recommend Lleida as a tourist destination? |
|--|--|--|
| What is your opinion regarding Lleida's tourism potential? | Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N | 1 -,349** 202 197 |
| Would you recommend Lleida as a tourist destination? | Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N | -,349** ,000 197 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Made by the author based on research conducted between January 1st and April 4th 2015

The analysis showed that there is a moderate negative relationship between the two variables ($r=-0,349$), significant at the 0.01 level – meaning that respondents who consider Lleida's tourist potential as being low would not recommend the city as a tourist destination to their friends. This is an important result because in the long term it can affect the flow of tourists and the information posted online by respondents can easily reach potential tourists.

These results show that H0 hypothesis is rejected. Students don't consider Lleida as having an elevated tourism potential and they would not recommend the city as a travel destination. Local transport infrastructure and leisure opportunities certainly have an impact on these results too.

Limits and advantages

The research conducted on the sample student population at Lleida University is a pilot study and the main limitation is the fact that these results cannot be generalized to the entire population. These results are a starting point both for future research and for decisions that can be implemented at a local level in order to improve the current situation.

The main advantage of this study is the fact that the sample population was chosen using pre-set criteria and all respondents have an interest in travelling, therefore their answers are more relevant. Another advantage is that the questionnaire was distributed on campus, thus shortening the time needed to collect the data.

Conclusions

University students are an important segment of population for the city where they study. They are willing to experience the local culture but at the same time they can turn into the most objective critics, making comparisons between their city of origin and the city where they attend college.

This study analyses the perception of a sample student population in relation to the tourism potential of Lleida city, while enrolled at Lleida University. The tourist profile of the sample population was another important aspect of this research. The respondents were included in the study based on pre-set criteria in order to maximize the accuracy of the results.

The 202 respondents are familiar with the city's tourist attractions and most of them have visited at least one objective. The image of these tourist objectives together with the image of public transportation and few leisure opportunities contribute to the negative opinion towards tourism in Lleida, most respondents stating that they would not recommend the city of Lleida as a tourist destination. The cost of travelling is very important to students but they also value transportation and housing services that offer a high level of comfort.

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