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Evaluating Athens as a city-break destination: A marketing management approach in tourism and travel

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ABSTRACT

This research paper evaluates a city break destination with the city of Athens as a case study. Today, Athens is trying to redefine its position on the world map. The research approach of this work focuses firstly, on an analysis which ranks the advantages and disadvantages according to the visitors' opinion and perception and secondly on a description of the city's personality which is depicted by Semantic Differential scales. The results reveal aspects and characteristics of Athens that can guide DMOs and tourism organizations to evaluate their offer, to improve the tourism product and to design effective marketing management strategies.

Key Words: city break destination, tourism marketing management, city's personality, Semantic Differential scales.

INTRODUCTION

The general concept of urban tourism specifies a complex tourism system that consists of all the conditions and manifestations of the tourism activities that happen in the area, taking into account the tourism infrastructure and the attractiveness of the destination as the main reason for the trip. This paper focuses on a city break destination with the city of Athens as a case study. Athens is the historic capital of Europe, with a long history. It is a destination for both leisure travelers and business travelers because of the wide range of activities it offers. In recent years, Athens has flourished in tourism, especially after the economic crisis of 2008 - 2013, where the fall in performance indicators ranged from 40-60%.

Taking into account the importance of the above-mentioned elements, as well as the benefits of tourism for a place and at the same time the flowering of urban tourism, a research was carried out which aimed at studying Athens as an urban destination combined with a number of factors. The research approach of this work focuses firstly, on an analysis which ranks the advantages and disadvantages of the city and secondly on a description of the city's personality which is depicted by Semantic Differential scales. The results could guide Destination Marketing and Management Organizations to implement strategies concerning market segmentation, product design and promotion.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Buhalis and Amaranggana (2014) consider the tourism destination to be an amalgam of tourism products and services produced and offered to the customer as upgraded experiences. According to Saarinen (2004, in Oliveira and Panyik 2015), the tourism destination can be a socially –

culturally constructed place, in a constantly evolving rational practice, promoted as a travel experience unique to each consumer (Tkaczynski, Rundle-Thiele and Cretchley, 2015).

Taking into consideration the above, it is obvious that the tourism destinations that can be developed are unlimited and involve countries, regions and cities. In particular, city tourism in Europe has evolved into a leader of the European tourism industry in terms of tourist numbers and growth rates, with an average relative change in overnight stays of 3.5%. The phenomenon of city trips is mainly European and can be registered as part of urban tourism (Christou & Kassianidis, 2002; Charterina and Aparicio, 2015). Cities offer several products, targeted at tourists, the attractiveness and quality of which determine the competitiveness of cities and, therefore, their development (Lapko, 2014).

In particular, the types of tourism that a city can offer and they can operate, under certain conditions, as poles of attraction are, first of all, cultural tourism (historical monuments, art, architecture, traditions, gastronomy, religion etc). In this point should be underlined that an increase in local and international tourism related to the search for new experiences through culture has been noted (Christou and Nella, 2010; Shadifar et al. 2016; Mc Kercher and du Cros 2002; Valachis et al., 2009; Rodzi et al. 2013). In addition, professional tourism, which is considered to be a considerably dynamic and important sector (Virgil and Popsa, 2014), contributes to the mitigation of seasonality and has a reduced effect on the environmental impact (Gretzel et al., 2012; Konar et al. 2016; Spasić et al. 2014; Virgil and Popsa, 2014). As part of the city tourism, recreation tourism, which is any trip made for entertainment purposes, is also developing (Daly and Gereffi, 2017). Its typical features are, usually, staying in good hotels or resorts, relaxing on the beaches or in the room or taking part in organized guided tours and getting to know local attractions.

In addition, sport tourism with its worldwide development (Peric et al. 2016; Dehnavi et al. 2012, in SlakValek et al. 2014) offers the conditions for promoting the destination and also represents the possibility of building, improving or changing the impression of the destination hosting the sporting events (Salgado-Barandela, et al. 2015). While Radicchi (2013) talks about new lifestyle and consumer patterns, as well as the passion for “unique” experiences and the trend for “adventurous vacations”. Other reasons for visiting the city in one’s free time include shopping, visiting friends and relatives and many other activities (Lapko, 2014). The area where tourism is developing also relates to the availability of hotel units in the area (Lapko, 2014).

Many destinations provide the above types of tourism. Any region or city that believes it has something notable to offer can compete with similar tourism destinations. What differentiates the destination is the experience and quality that will characterize the visitor’s stay throughout its duration. It is therefore not enough for the city – tourism destination to have a range of tourism products and services in order to be chosen by potential visitors. All these features should also act as poles of attraction. According to the findings of the above-mentioned researches, the city should be seen as a destination with obvious advantages that will create a sense of quality to the visitors for the product and the services they have purchased and will contribute to the acquisition of positive and memorable experiences.

As a result, the decision – makers of the destination should periodically investigate visitors’ beliefs and opinions about the data that provide the basis for attracting visitors, such as sights, monuments, availability of appropriate accommodation, gastronomy, the existence of information about the destination, the friendly mood of the residents, the training of tourism employees, the perceived value of the product in relation to its cost and the status quo in an area with respect to safety, delinquency, cleanliness etc.

Therefore, the successful promotion of a destination requires differentiation from the competition or “positive” positioning of the product in the minds of consumers and potential visitors, and in order to achieve this aim the key element is, primarily, the examination of the characteristics of the destination and the perception of the visitors about its advantages and disadvantages as well as the “intensity” with which they are perceived.

Moreover, as the growing global competition makes destinations expendable, apart from identifying their strengths and weaknesses, yet another element, namely the personality they are developing, is becoming a very important factor for their diversification and the development of effective tourism marketing strategies. Chen and Phou (2013) define the personality of the destination as a set of human attributes related to the destination. The personality they develop is considered a sustainable concept for the creation of strong names and unique identities of tourism destinations (Ekinci and Hosany, 2006). The city must be given an identity, a mentality with a set of fixed values and within this logic should be treated as an entity with its own personality (Stigel and Frimann, 2006). The destination is characterized by its personality and a distinct personality is the one that will

differentiate it from the rest, will influence consumer preferences and choice and will create an emotional bond with the place (Christo, 2006; Chen and Phou, 2013; Ekinsi and Hosany, 2006).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify but also to prioritize the advantages and disadvantages of Athens in order to record the “intensity” attributed to them by visitors. It then aims to describe the city through features that capture its personality and its characteristics as they emerge through the scope and perception of its visitors.

METHODOLOGY SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

The sample consisted of foreign tourists who had at least one overnight stay in the city of Athens. Data collection took place at the Athens International Airport “Eleftherios Venizelos”, following a special permit. One hundred and fifty-nine (159) completed questionnaires were gathered.

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN – ANALYSIS

The types of questions that were used for the purposes of this paper were closed-ended questions of multiple answers (advantages and disadvantages of the city) as well as a question on a Semantic Differential scale. Closed-ended questions were also used to record demographics.

Respondents were asked to rank the 5 main advantages and disadvantages of the city, according to their opinion (Ntaka, 2017). For the questions where respondents chose the 5 main advantages and disadvantages of Athens, the order of preference with which each criterion was chosen was considered and the sum of the answers of each criterion was summed up. If the criterion was the first choice of the participant it scored 5 points, if it was the second 4 points, the third 3 points, the fourth 2 points and the fifth 1 point. By finding the total it was easy to determine the ranking order of the criteria. For example, climate conditions were selected as the second advantage in the ranking with a total of 405 points. This result was found by multiplying the total of the answers of each preference (1-5) to the corresponding grade $(43*5)+(25*4)+(14*3)+(20*2)+(8*1)=405$.

The question about the “personality” of Athens, as perceived by tourists, has been analyzed by using the Semantic Differential scale, which measures the perception of concepts, attitudes and behaviors. Through a five-step scale where the two ends were a pair of opposing concepts such as pure – dirty, hospitable – inhospitable etc., the respondents were asked to choose the point on the scale representing their opinion on the subject of the question and in this case on Athens.

PROFILE AND DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

Analyzing the demographics of the sample (Ntaka, 2017), it can be seen that women are slightly more compared to men (54.1% women, 45.9% men) and most of the population belong to the age groups of 18-24 and 25-34, by 26.4% and 36.5% respectively. In addition, age groups 35-44 and 45-54 give, cumulatively, a percentage of 23.9%. Regarding the geographical origin of visitors Europe comes first (44%) followed by America (38.4%). The entry of the Asian market is impressive with the visitor rate reaching a percentage of 15.1% (participants were all from countries like Korea and China).

A percentage of 23.9% had a Masters degree and 2.5% were PhD holders. These data confirm the high educational level of the respondents and attach extra importance to the findings of the research.

The overwhelming majority, 75.5% of the population, visited Athens for the first time and only 24.5% had a previous visit to the city. The main reason for the trip was entertainment with 89.3% while 8.1% visited Athens for business and only 2.5% to visit relatives.

DATA ANALYSIS ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ATHENS

Table 1 presents the advantages of Athens as indicated by the survey participants (Ntaka, 2017). It stands out that the first, by far, advantage of Athens is the archaeological and cultural wealth it offers. Climate conditions come second, while in the third place is the easy walk through the city. The local cuisine which is accessible at any time throughout the day occupies the fourth place. The fifth advantage, as revealed by the research, is entertainment and nightlife followed by the friendly

residents who are always willing to help, the accessibility to other destinations and the variety of accommodation. However, the value of the product and services in relation to their cost shares the tenth position along with the capability of moving around the city.

Table 1. Advantages of Athens.

| 14. Which are, in your opinion, the top five advantages of Athens? | 1 st CHOICE (COUNT) | 2 nd CHOICE (COUNT) | 3 rd CHOICE (COUNT) | 4 th CHOICE (COUNT) | 5 th CHOICE (COUNT) | TOTAL | RANK |
|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|------|
| Climate | 43 | 25 | 14 | 20 | 8 | 405 | 2 |
| Night life – entertainment | 20 | 10 | 12 | 6 | 6 | 194 | 5 |
| Easy to walk around city | 14 | 24 | 27 | 14 | 14 | 289 | 3 |
| Access to other destinations | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 3 | 143 | 7 |
| On line services and information for tourists | 2 | 9 | 7 | 4 | 7 | 82 | 8 |
| Local cuisine accessible all day long | 8 | 25 | 25 | 18 | 23 | 274 | 4 |
| Variety of hotels and other kind of accommodation | 2 | 4 | 9 | 7 | 9 | 76 | 9 |
| Friendly and helpful residents | 11 | 11 | 8 | 18 | 17 | 176 | 6 |
| Value for money on products and services | 0 | 4 | 7 | 12 | 11 | 72 | 10 |
| Shopping areas and malls | 0 | 3 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 43 | 13 |
| Aesthetic appeal | 0 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 3 | 53 | 12 |
| Archaeological sights and museums / Cultural events | 46 | 20 | 16 | 23 | 29 | 433 | 1 |
| Ideal destination for all kinds of tourists (singles, families, older people e.tc) | 2 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 13 | 71 | 11 |
| Transportation around the city | 0 | 5 | 6 | 11 | 12 | 72 | 10 |

Table 2. Disadvantages of Athens.

| 15. Which are, in your opinion, the top five disadvantages of Athens? | 1 st CHOICE (COUNT) | 2 nd CHOICE (COUNT) | 3 rd CHOICE (COUNT) | 4 th CHOICE (COUNT) | 5 th CHOICE (COUNT) | TOTAL | RANK |
|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|------|
| Lack of international promotion of the city | 12 | 8 | 11 | 18 | 15 | 176 | 6 |
| Delinquency | 17 | 17 | 18 | 17 | 14 | 255 | 3 |
| Traffic congestion | 36 | 24 | 15 | 11 | 16 | 359 | 2 |
| Lack of night life – entertainment | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 19 | 14 |
| Means of transportation | 1 | 7 | 5 | 9 | 11 | 77 | 11 |
| Lack of on line services and information for tourists | 6 | 15 | 16 | 13 | 6 | 170 | 7 |
| Variety of hotels and other kind of accommodation | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 45 | 12 |
| Value for money on products and services | 2 | 6 | 5 | 10 | 10 | 79 | 10 |
| Lack of tourist info points | 5 | 10 | 25 | 20 | 21 | 201 | 5 |
| Not enough shopping areas and malls | 2 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 39 | 13 |
| Lack of cleanliness | 48 | 25 | 26 | 21 | 11 | 471 | 1 |
| Strikes and demonstrations | 15 | 19 | 8 | 11 | 11 | 208 | 4 |
| Not enough explanatory signs in English (in museums, sights, public transportation e.t.c.) | 3 | 11 | 15 | 11 | 16 | 142 | 9 |
| Low level of training in tourism employees | 10 | 7 | 10 | 12 | 17 | 149 | 8 |

According to Table 2 (Ntaka, 2017), the first disadvantage is the lack of cleanliness with 471 points. The impact it has on visitors is obvious when it is compared to the second disadvantage faced

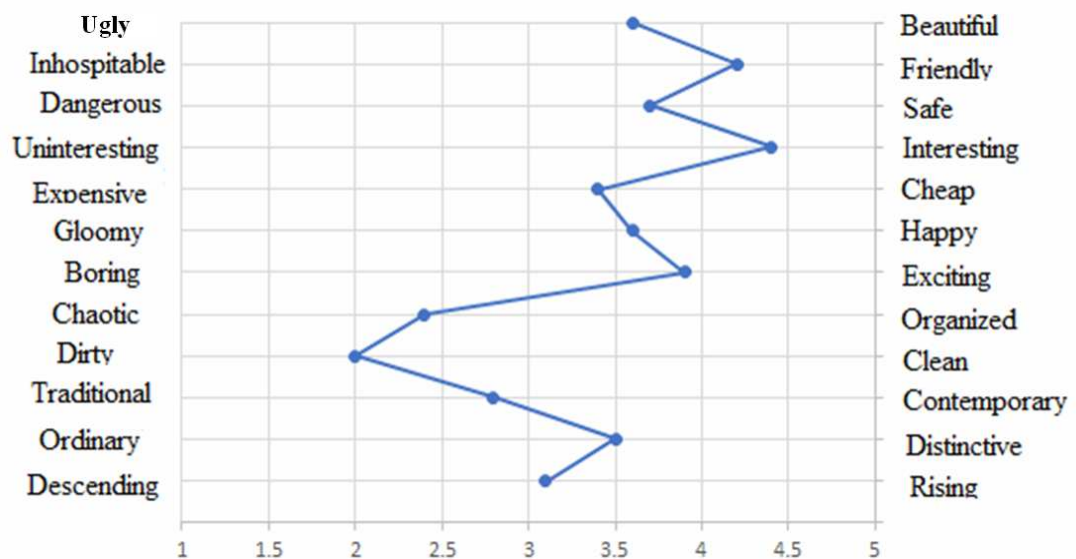
by Athens, which gathered 359 points, and has to do with traffic congestion. The difference between these two disadvantages is more than 100 points and it is quite alarming. The third disadvantage is delinquency (minor thefts), followed by strikes combined with marches, while fifth is the lack of information points for tourists. The lack of international promotion of the city and on-line services and information for tourists come next. In the eighth place, which is considered as a high ranking, is the low level of training of the employees in tourism. A number of other features that is also important in attracting customers as shown in the table above.

THE PERSONALITY OF ATHENS

Table 3 (Ntaka, 2017) presents the answers that shape the personality of the city as perceived by visitors. The Semantic Differential scale has been used to analyze this question. The personality of Athens is defined by a five-step scale (1-5) with its two ends forming a pair of opposing concepts. The negative concept (the left edge) has a value of 1 and the positive concept (the right edge) a value of 5. It is easy to discern the problems, especially the dirty city of value 2, the lack of organization (chaotic) of almost 2.5 value and its characterization as traditional with a value of almost 3. While in positive terms Athens is rated as interesting with a value of 4.4, friendly with a value of just over 4 and exciting with a value of 4. In the intermediate category, with a value of 3.5 characterizations such as distinctive, happy and cheap were found (Ntaka, 2017).

So, on the one hand and according to the members of the sample, Athens gives the impression of an interesting city that is quite welcoming and exciting. At the same time the city is characterized as safe and beautiful, and in terms of cost it is considered quite economical. On the other hand, unfortunately, it is characterized as quite dirty, lacking organization and more traditional than modern. Athens' characterizations as dirty and disorganized outline its negative face and the city is called upon to reversing the terms and emphasizing its positive features.

Table 3.
The personality of Athens.



The findings regarding the visitors' overall view on security in Athens, as presented in Table 3 (Ntaka, 2017) are important. Visitors have a positive view on security, a feature that has to do with the formed opinions by visitors, rather than those presented by news channels that are not always impartial. The finding that came up after examining the disadvantages and has to do with minor thefts does not seem to influence the opinion of the tourists.

RESULTS, COMMENTS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research shows that the main advantages of the city are its archaeological and cultural wealth while they are being followed by climate conditions, easy walking around the city, access to local cuisine throughout the day and nightlife. However, it should not be ignored that features such as the value of the product and the services in relation to their cost are not in the first place of the

advantages but towards the end of the list (tenth position). Even lower are features of the city such as its aesthetics and areas that one can go shopping.

The main disadvantages are the lack of cleanliness, the traffic problem, the delinquency (minor thefts), strikes in combination with marches and the lack of information points for tourists. The lack of international promotion of the city comes next along with on-line services and information for tourists. In addition, visitors also noted the training level of tourism employees as a drawback although it is listed in the eighth position and not in the top 5 disadvantages (nevertheless a high position for a city like Athens). Several important features such as the variety of accommodation, public transport, shopping areas follow. They may not be noted in the main disadvantages, but they should be taken into consideration by the city's authorities. As far as the personality of the city is concerned, it is considered to be a chaotic city facing the problem of cleanliness (a point which coincides with the findings of the disadvantages' section). Nevertheless, Athens, as a personality receives mainly positive characterizations such as interesting, friendly, exciting, distinct and joyful. It is also positively appreciated in terms of prices.

A city like Athens, that has the potential to offer a plethora of tourism types and attract many customer markets, has to minimize the disadvantages and highlight its advantages.

As far as its customer markets are concerned the age group of 18-24, which was the more represented than other age groups, could be a target market as from the age of 18 onwards a kind of independence from the family usually starts due to studies or employment resulting in greater ease for holidays and quest for tourism destinations. A first visit to Athens that will fulfill the needs of the young tourist and create nice memories will lead to future visits in an older age.

Although Athens was preferred by tourists coming from America and Europe, the entry of the Asian market was impressive and given the mileage they are traveling it is a very positive step in opening up to new markets. As for the Asian market, the participants were all from countries like Korea and China.

The high percentage of visitors with a high level of education that Athens attracts, is a powerful form of "mouth to mouth" advertising that could influence their environment, provided that visitors will return to their homes having fulfilled their expectations, so that they will communicate the advantages of the city and not highlight the possible problems they encountered during their stay.

The promotion of the city needs more intensive rhythms (which was emphasized by the participants in the research) and adoption of new technologies. The evolution in the technology that has invaded our life forms the dominant way of informing everyone about everything. Advertising and promotion of a product no longer exists if the product does not appear first in the search engines. The bulk of funds, whether they come from the government budget or from private companies, must be channeled into on-line advertising and social media for the city to be competitive and aim to new generations of tourists.

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