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PHD THESIS

Analysing the competitiveness and performance of the tourist destination

- SUMMARY -

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Table of Contents of the PhD thesis summary

Abstract	5
Keywords	6
Part I. Introduction in context: purpose, relevance, approach	6
The purpose of the research.....	7
Theme and originality of the research	8
Motivation.....	9
Relevance of the research	11
Thesis structure	12
Part II. Research methodology and analysis of results	13
Research questions, hypotheses and methods.....	13
Exploring the model.....	16
Part III. Conclusions and contributions.....	21
Theoretical contributions	24
Managerial implications.....	26
Research limitations	27
Suggestions and future research directions	27

Contents of the PhD thesis

List of tables	
List of figures	
List of abbreviations	
Summary.....	5
INTRODUCTION.....	6
Theme and originality of the research.....	7
Research aim.....	8
Relevance of the research	11
Research Questions and Methods.....	11
Exploring the model.....	16
Thesis structure.....	12
CHAPTER 1. ANALYSIS OF TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS AND PERFORMANCE - CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES	14
1.1. The tourist destination – an overview	14
1.2. Classification of tourist destinations - conceptual approaches.....	19
1.3 Attractiveness of tourist destinations	25
1.4 Performance of tourist destinations	28
1.4.1 Competitiveness - performance - strategic approach	31
1.4.2 Competitiveness - performance - efficiency approach.....	34
1.5 Sustainability of tourist destinations.....	38
1.5.1 Competitiveness - sustainability	40
1.5.2 Sustainability from a tourism destination management perspective	42
CHAPTER 2 – APPROACHES TO TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS. .	45
2.1 Tourism destination competitiveness - theoretical perspectives.....	45
2.2 Evolution of the concept of competitiveness.....	48
2.3 Determinants of destination competitiveness.....	55
2.4 Competitiveness and performance indicators.....	60
2.5 Models of competitiveness of tourist destinations	69
2.5.1 RITCHIE and CROUCH model.....	72
2.5.2 DWYER and KIM model.....	75
2.5.3 Travel and Tourism Development Index - WEF.....	77

CHAPTER 3 – MEASURING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS IN A NEW CONTEXT	83
3.1 Competitiveness of rural tourist destinations.....	86
3.2 A new model for measuring the competitiveness of tourist destinations: RIMS.....	90
3.2.1 Tourism Resources Component.....	95
3.2.1.1 Tourist attractions	96
3.2.1.2 Tourist assistance.....	99
3.2.2 Infrastructure Component.....	101
3.2.2.1 General infrastructure	103
3.2.2.2 Accessibility	106
3.2.3 Destination Management Component	109
3.2.3.1 Destination marketing.....	110
3.2.3.2 Public policies.....	114
3.2.3.3 Monitoring	119
3.2.4 Sustainability Component.....	121
3.2.4.1 Socio-cultural aspects	123
3.2.4.2 Environment	125
3.2.4.3 Performance.....	128
CHAPTER 4 - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	131
4.1 Research context.....	131
4.2 Aim of the research.....	133
4.3. Research objectives	134
4.4 Methodological research strategy	135
4.4.1 Research approach.....	137
4.4.2 Data collection	140
4.4.3 Questionnaire - data collection tool.....	143
4.4.4 TecDev method.....	150
4.4.5 RIMS formula.....	151
4.5 Construct analysis	155
4.5.1 Pearson Correlation Coefficient	155
4.5.2 Cronbach’s Alpha	156
4.5.3 Descriptive statistics	156
4.5.4 Principal Component Analysis (PCA).....	158
4.6 Contextual analysis.....	166
4.7 Model testing.....	174

CHAPTER 5 – RESEARCH RESULTS	182
5.1 Data analysis.....	182
5.1.1 Pearson Correlation Coefficient	182
5.1.2 Cronbach Alpha.....	185
5.1.3 Descriptive statistics	187
5.1.4 Principal Component Analysis - PCA	199
5.1.5 Expert analysis.....	203
5.2 Results obtained.....	207
5.2.1 Results with ACP weights	207
5.2.2 Results with expert weights	211
5.2.3 Equally weighted results.....	214
5.3 Discussion and comments	218
CONCLUSIONS	233
Theoretical contributions.....	227
Managerial implications.....	26
Research limitations.....	230
Suggestions and future research directions.....	231
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	233
ANNEXES	242
<i>Annex 1. Competitiveness of Tourism Destinations Questionnaire.....</i>	<i>242</i>
<i>Annex 2. Importance of competitiveness factors Questionnaire</i>	<i>251</i>
<i>Annex 3. PCA calculation methods.....</i>	<i>260</i>

Abstract

Tourism is recognised as a crucial sector for the development of all countries, making a significant contribution to income generation, employment and economic prosperity. In addition to these aspects, tourism has an essential impact in promoting the image and perception of a destination. Thus, in an increasingly competitive environment, both nationally and internationally, it becomes vital to assess the level of competitiveness of a tourism destination. The aim of the present research is to develop theoretically and empirically test a model for measuring the competitiveness of tourism destinations, suitable for the Romanian reality and adapted to the rural context, with the intention of providing the tourism industry with the theoretical and practical framework and to serve as a monitoring and management tool for decision makers.

Given the growing concern of many countries and regions in assessing the internal competitiveness of their major tourism destinations in order to adopt effective public policies, there is a need to address this issue given the lack of models for measuring the competitiveness of tourism destinations in the literature in Romania. The proposed model aims to introduce a new and practical approach to the evaluation of tourist destinations. In order to achieve this main objective, the following research objectives have been set: identification of key factors that have an impact on the competitiveness of a destination, selection of main indicators to assess competitiveness, development of information collection tools (questionnaires), design of a scoring formula, testing the applicability of the model on a representative rural tourist destination, (statistical) processing of data, interpretation of results and proposal of future research directions.

The methods used in this research included the collection of primary data through questionnaires addressed to tourism representatives and experts. The data obtained were statistically treated and then used to calculate the score function using a mathematical model. After analysing the results, we can conclude that the model is functional, stable and shows strong correlations between components, and the set of weights used can be validated either on the basis of statistical analysis or on the basis of expert knowledge. In assessing the competitiveness of a tourist destination, the choice of key factors and the appropriate evaluation method is particularly important. In addition, by adjusting the weights we can highlight certain aspects or determining factors in order to obtain relevant information for the decision-making process.

Keywords

Competitiveness of tourist destinations, performance, sustainability, competitiveness measurement model, competitiveness index, rural tourism, competitiveness assessment, competitiveness factors

Part I. Introduction in context: purpose, relevance, approach

The tourism industry is one of the most dynamic and prosperous sectors globally, and competitiveness is a key element of this industry. In recent years, the study of competitiveness in the tourism industry has grown significantly. This trend reflects the progress of individual tourist destinations as they become more visible and attractive to tourists.

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), tourism's direct contribution to global GDP has been growing steadily from 10.2% in 2016, evolving to 10.4% in 2017, 10.6% in 2018 and reaching 10.8% in 2019. The tourism sector also contributes to the employment of one in ten jobs, accounting for 8.1% of the global workforce. These figures highlight that the travel and tourism industry has been growing steadily ahead of the pandemic and is one of the most dynamic sectors. Today, the tourism industry is back in a phase of sustained growth and is showing particular resilience after the global crisis generated by Covid-19, which unexpectedly interrupted its development.

Tourism industry experts such as the World Tourism Organisation and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), as well as most analysts, believe that rural tourism has great potential to be one of the first sectors to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic and to grow. This potential is largely based on changing tourist behaviour. Whatever the reason for this change, be it their choice or limitations imposed by authorities, people are expected to increasingly shift their interest in the coming years to destinations that are less crowded, closer to nature and also closer to their places of origin (Marti, 2022). UNWTO (2020), notes that the COVID-19 pandemic has generated an increase in tourists' interest in authentic, rural and natural experiences, avoiding crowded areas (Dumitru and Cosma, 2023).

According to Ritchie and Crouch (2003), essential for a tourism destination to be competitive is its ability to generate tourism revenues and attract an increased number of visitors by providing them with memorable and satisfying experiences. This should be done in a profitable way, contributing to improving the living standards of the local community and preserving natural capital for future generations.

Developing, maintaining and strengthening the positions of tourism destinations in an increasingly competitive market is a major challenge in the tourism industry (Wang and Pizam, 2011). Therefore, it is crucial that destinations are able to assess their level of competitiveness in order to identify both strengths and weaknesses and develop appropriate future strategies.

The purpose of the research

In a context of increasingly intense and fierce competition, both domestically and internationally, it is crucial to determine the level of competitiveness of a tourism destination. Thus, this paper aims to identify those aspects that contribute to the development of a coherent framework for assessing competitiveness and to create a model for measuring it, followed by empirical testing. This responds to the needs of decision-makers, who need to be aware of the increasingly demanding requirements of tourists, who are becoming more informed, educated and experienced. At a time when both established and new, developing destinations are making their way into the tourism market, it is essential that decision-makers understand these needs and respond appropriately to ensure the success of destinations.

The aim of the research is to provide the tourism industry with the theoretical and practical framework that would enable tourism destinations to recognise their level of competitiveness, identify strengths and weaknesses and provide valuable data. It could be used by Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), public authorities, as a tool to measure economic, social and environmental impacts, allowing the implementation of more effective strategies and policies that contribute to increasing visitor numbers, revenues and quality of life for residents.

The present research aims to develop a model for measuring the competitiveness of tourism destinations, suitable to the Romanian reality and adapted to the rural specificity, with the intention to serve as a monitoring and management tool for decision makers. The model also forms the basis of a questionnaire whose purpose is to collect primary data, as objective as possible, in order to achieve a clear and accurate assessment of the tourist destination.

Theme and originality of the research

The theme of our research is the analysis of the competitiveness and performance of the tourism destination by creating a model for measuring competitiveness.

The mission we started from was to analyse various approaches, factors and models used to assess the competitiveness of tourist destinations and to develop a framework for measuring these factors. The end result is a model that takes into account the specificities and particularities of small, rural destinations. The selected components have been integrated into a graphical analytical model in order to visually highlight their convergence. **We have named the model RIMS**, from the acronym of the main components: **Tourism Resources, Infrastructure, Destination Management and Sustainability**. The model consists of 4 components, subdivided into 10 determinants or factors, 50 indicators and 14 sub-indicators.

The originality of the proposed model lies in the very choice and development of a model applicable to small, rural tourist destinations, with the aim of creating a measurement and subsequent positioning mechanism using a limited number of factors available in destinations that have access to a limited set of indicators, different from those at macro level, but which perhaps have a much greater need to identify their strengths and weaknesses, to position themselves in relation to their competitors, and to improve those aspects which rank them lower in terms of the competitiveness of their tourist destination.

The mathematical calibration of this model also brings elements of novelty and **cross-disciplinarity** by using a formula based on the allocation of appropriate weights. These weights were obtained through statistical analysis and consultation with a panel of experts, thus providing both a methodological and a qualified approach.

Our research stands out for its originality, as the subject is little explored in the literature in our country, thus contributing to a better understanding of the concept of competitiveness. This reflects the importance and actuality of the topic, with long-term implications and consequences. In other countries, tourist destinations or organisations, this topic is treated with great attention and interest, making our approach timely and relevant.

Finally, this approach is intended to be useful for authorities and managers in the tourism sector, as a starting point for future studies, in line with the evolution of the phenomenon and closely linked to economic and social trends.

Motivation

Competitiveness is a multidimensional concept. The development of a model for measuring the competitiveness of tourism destinations starts from a general understanding of the notions of competitiveness, taking those elements that can be applied to tourism, according to our purpose, our interest. **There is no universally accepted, recognised model, applicable to all tourist destinations, at all times and in all circumstances.** Thus, after reviewing the literature and identifying the models previously developed, both conceptual and empirical: Buhalis (2000), Go and Govers (2000), Hassan (2000), Heath (2002), Ritchie and Crouch (2003), Dwyer and Kim (2003), Heath (2003), Dwyer, Livalic and Mellor (2003), Enright and Newton (2005), Gooroochurn and Sugiyarto (2005), Omerzel Gomezelj (2006), Omerzel Gomezelj and Mihalic (2008), Crcacolici, Cuffaro and Nijkamp (2008), Crouch (2010), Barbosa (2013), Goffi (2013), Dwyer, Cvelbar, Mihalic and Koman(2014, 2015), WEF (2017, 2019, 2021) and many others, we have adapted the models initially developed at country (macro) level for use at local or regional (micro) level for destinations with specific characteristics, such as rural tourism.

So far, the models applied by countries with advanced economies have been seen as successful examples to follow. However, in the case of small destinations, additional or alternative factors may be needed. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse these destinations in more detail to determine whether there are specific factors contributing to their progress in tourism (WEF, 2011).

Although research on tourism destination development and management has grown significantly in recent years, with the aim of providing insights and solutions to the challenges faced by destinations, the majority opinion today is that the complexities and autonomous nature of destinations require the **use of customised models.**

Romania is considered one of the main destinations with a high potential for sustainable tourism development due to its beautiful and unspoilt rural landscapes, traditions and rustic lifestyle (Dumitru and Cosma, 2023). However, in **Romania there is a lack of studies and research on the competitiveness of rural tourism.** This lack of data and information makes it difficult to identify effective strategies to develop and promote rural tourism in our country. Thus, there is a need for detailed research to analyse the competitiveness and specific potential of rural tourism destinations in Romania, hence providing a solid basis for the development of appropriate policies and strategies in this field. In order to stimulate the sustainable development

of tourism in rural regions, assessing its competitiveness is a key issue. By investigating and understanding more deeply the factors that influence competitiveness in the rural context, opportunities for continued growth and improvement of the country's rural tourism destinations can be discovered. Conducting a rigorous analysis of competitiveness in rural tourism allows the identification of specific strengths and challenges in this field, thus facilitating the development and implementation of effective strategies.

In the context of the present research, in order to develop a model for measuring the competitiveness of the tourism destination, a number of steps have been taken, namely the identification of key elements that influence competitiveness, knowledge of relevant factors and indicators as found in the literature and the identification and understanding of different models of competitiveness in tourism, resulting from the analysis of previous research. Next steps included rigorous analysis of secondary data derived from studies and statistical documents, qualitative primary research, discussions and analysis with tourism experts. These insights are intended to understand the context of the research and to create the necessary framework for destination evaluation.

Therefore, knowing the reality faced by tourist destinations in their efforts to become as competitive and efficient as possible, but having little information, models and measurement and management tools at hand, we considered it appropriate to develop a model adapted to the Romanian reality and calibrated to the predominantly rural specificities. Rural tourism is one of the main types of tourism, which contributes significantly to the attractiveness and economic growth of the country.

Tourism is becoming a crucial factor in the economy of any country or region with valuable tourism resources. It is both recognised and regrettable that, despite Romania's remarkable tourism potential, it fails to capitalize on the available resources to enhance the country's competitiveness, both domestically and internationally. Knowledge of the factors and mechanisms that contribute to increasing the competitiveness and performance of a tourist destination is of key importance, as it helps tourism stakeholders to understand these aspects and develop effective marketing strategies. The concepts of tourism destination, competitiveness and performance are complex, and dealing with them requires not only adequate knowledge but also solid experience in the field. Without acknowledging the importance of promoting competitive and sustainable tourism, Romania will continue to lose out in a sector where it has significant competitive and competitive advantages. In this respect, the literature can play a key role in providing the necessary guidance. We aim to bring clarity

to this area and present both relevant theoretical concepts and the results of empirical testing on a small, rural destination. This comprehensive analysis included key issues such as definitions and characteristics, history and evolution of patterns, influencing factors and more.

Relevance of the research

In recent decades, the importance of destination competitiveness in the tourism industry has grown significantly, capturing the attention of researchers and professionals in the field. Although there is an increase in studies on this subject, the lack of consensus in the literature is evident, given the diversity of concepts, approaches, methodologies and units of analysis investigated. In most of the conceptual models developed so far, different factors are considered to play a key role in determining the competitiveness of tourism destinations, but there is no clear ranking of their importance. According to research carried out by Kozak and Baloglu (2011), destination competitiveness analysis can be influenced by several factors, including customer expectations, customer motivation, previous experiences, location and destination accessibility. These factors can play an important role in determining destination competitiveness. Various models and theoretical frameworks have been proposed in the literature for analysing the competitiveness of tourist destinations, but the most comprehensive assessment, encompassing most of the factors, is that of Ritchie and Crouch (2003). However, their model did not identify causal relationships of factors, while other studies were unclear about the specific attributes of tourist destination competitiveness and were not based on any empirical model of competitiveness.

The present research has been carried out taking into account both academic and practical objectives. Thus, the research was designed to analyse the mechanisms and factors that influence the measurement of competitiveness and performance of small, predominantly rural tourism destinations, while respecting the rigour of academic standards, but also to meet essential practical needs in tourism management.

Therefore, the essential contribution of this work is primarily a practical one. It is also part of a wider literature on destination competitiveness, where the relevant factors of competitiveness and their assessment from the supply side, tourism operators and tourism experts' perspective are analysed. The results of this research can provide decision-makers and practitioners in the tourism industry with a comprehensive picture of competitiveness.

Starting from the observation that many countries and regions want to assess the internal level of competitiveness of their main tourism destinations in order to develop specific public policies and given the **lack of models for measuring the competitiveness of tourism destinations in the Romanian literature, we initiated this academic research to provide the tourism industry with a theoretical and practical support as well** as an internal **analysis tool**. The proposed model aims to introduce a new and practical approach to the evaluation of tourism destinations. It analyses **competitiveness from the perspective of tourism supply**, tourism service providers and decision-makers **in rural** or small tourism **destinations**. A full understanding of the factors influencing competitiveness is crucial for the implementation of active policies, and its continuous evaluation remains a major topic of interest.

Thesis structure

In order to present our research in a coherent and logical manner, we have structured the thesis as follows:

Chapter 1 - Analysis of Tourism Destination Competitiveness and Performance - Conceptual Approaches includes definitions of the main concepts used in the thesis, namely tourism destination, attractiveness, performance, sustainability and their relationship to competitiveness, along with relevant classifications and theoretical perspectives.

Chapter 2 - Approaches to Tourism Destination Competitiveness, starts with definitions of tourism destination competitiveness, reviews the evolution of the concept of competitiveness and relevant empirical research, examines the determinants of competitiveness, indicators of competitiveness and performance, presents the key issues that define competitiveness and the models used to measure it, with particular attention to Ritchie and Crouch model (2003), Dwyer and Kim model (2003) and WEF's Development Index.

Chapter 3 - Measuring the Competitiveness of Tourism Destinations in a New Context sets out from the purpose of this research and analyses the situation of rural tourism destinations, proposing a new model, called RIMS, for measuring competitiveness. This chapter describes in detail all the components, determinants and indicators that make up the new model.

Chapter 4 - Research Methodology starts with the definition of the research context, the research aim and objectives, then presents the methodological strategy followed, the research approach and model calibration, data collection, the questionnaires used and the mathematical formula underlying the evaluation, as well as the TecDev method of analysing the

results. This chapter also covers the validation of the model through statistical constructs and analysis, using Principal Component Analysis (PCA), Pearson Correlation Coefficient, Cronbach Alpha and descriptive statistics. This chapter further presents the situation of the tourist destination on which the model was tested, namely Maramureş.

Chapter 5 - Research results presents the analysis of the data obtained from the application of the model and statistical processing, both in terms of the means obtained and the weights, and then compared on the basis of the mathematical formula. The chapter concludes with discussion and concluding remarks.

The Conclusions chapter summarises the hypotheses and results obtained, highlights the theoretical contributions made to the development of the field and the managerial implications, indicates the limitations of the research and proposes future research directions.

Part II. Research methodology and analysis of results

Research questions, hypotheses and methods

In order to achieve the purpose of the research, the main objective is to develop a model for measuring the competitiveness and performance of tourist destinations, adapted to the Romanian reality with predominantly rural characteristics.

In order to achieve this objective, in this research, we tried to answer the following research questions:

- What are the factors that influence the measurement of the competitiveness of a tourist destination?
- Which indicators can be used to measure the competitiveness of a destination?
- How can the competitiveness of tourist destinations be measured as objectively as possible?
- What impact do the components have on the results?

In terms of research methodology, we proposed a set of hypotheses whose validity could be confirmed or invalidated after processing the responses.

The hypotheses from which we started are:

H1: Attractiveness of resources (natural and cultural) is the main factor that makes a tourist destination competitive.

H2: Accessibility influences competitive position.

H3: Destination management is a key factor.

H4: Competitiveness is based on sustainability.

The way of measuring competitiveness proposed in this paper builds on some of the previous research, theories, approaches and models that are considered significant and validated in this regard. Our model is supported by the competitiveness models developed by Ritchie and Crouch (2003), Dwyer and Kim (2003), Dwyer et al (2004), Gooroochurn and Sugiyarto (2005), Enright and Newton (2005), Barbosa (2012), Goffi (2013) and WEF (2015, 2017, 2019, 2021). In order to create a destination competitiveness model, Ritchie and Crouch's (2003) conceptual model was chosen due to its widespread use in academic research, being the first model of its kind, widely cited in the literature. Also, due to its general nature, the model has wide applicability, as it fits various situations rather than a specific situation. Previous models have focused on large tourist destinations, either countries (as a whole) or large areas or regions. In contrast, the model proposed by Ritchie and Crouch (2003) aims to be applicable to any tourist destination, covering all possible aspects, rather than focusing only on narrow aspects. In contrast, the WEF index is only applicable at the national level and has limitations in terms of the characteristics it considers. Dwyer and Kim suggest the importance of new studies tailored to the needs of destinations. Most empirical models start from existing conceptual models, which are then adapted to the specific context. In our case, the model has a triple support: conceptual, based on the literature; methodological, from statistical-mathematical processing; and qualified, from the experts' perspective.

Thus, our study was based on **exploratory research**, complemented by **descriptive research**. This approach allowed us to gain a deeper and more detailed understanding of the context. From the analysis of previous research, it emerged that many studies have used **primary data** and analysed destinations from a **demand perspective** (tourists' perceptions). These include Goodrich (1978), Haahti (1986), Javalgi, Thomas and Rao (1992, 2008), Driscoll, Lawson and Niven (1994), Kozak and Rimmington (1999), Kozak (2002), Bahar and Kozak (2007), etc. Another group of researchers also opted to use primary data, but the analysis was done from the **supply side** (tourism operators). Some of the best known are Yoon (2002), Dwyer

and Kim (2003), Enright and Newton (2004, 2005), Dwyer et al. (2004, 2012, 2015), Dwyer, Livalic and Mellor (2003), Omerzel Gomezely (2006), Omerzel Gomezely and Mihalic (2008), Crouch (2010), Goffi (2013), etc.

Enright and Newton (2004) indicate that tourists can relatively easily assess the general features that define a destination's attractiveness, but may have significant difficulty understanding and identifying the many factors that act and contribute to a destination's competitive position. In the same line, Omerzel Gomezelj and Mihalič (2008) consider that people who are directly involved in tourism possess valuable knowledge about the factors that contribute to the competitiveness of a tourist destination and can provide useful information for conducting such studies. Therefore, for the collection of qualitative primary data, the expertise of the participants and their ability to analyse data and provide valuable information based on their experiences was used.

Therefore, data collection was based on a thorough literature review, secondary data, focus group with experts and the development of two separate questionnaires. Based on the list of established factors and indicators, the **first questionnaire**, entitled "**Competitiveness of Tourism Destinations**" was developed and **addressed to entrepreneurs, managers and tourism authorities**, and the **second questionnaire**, "**Importance of Competitiveness Factors**" was **addressed to** selected **experts**. For the first questionnaire, a 5-point Likert scale from very low to very high (1-5) was used, which can be easily applied, is easy to administer and leads to more precise results in the form of scores. For the second questionnaire, which was administered to the selected experts, as the aim was to assess the relative importance of the factors by establishing weights, a **constant sum scale** was chosen to assess the importance of each component in the model. Thus, with the help of a specialised online questionnaire platform called FormPlus, two self-administered electronic questionnaires were created in Romanian language. In the end, 111 completed questionnaires were collected, indicating a good response rate, taking into account the specific nature and relatively high technical level of the questions, as well as the limited area tested (Maramures, in the case of this model).

Given that most previous research has focused on the tourists' perspective, the aim of this research was to analyse competitiveness from the perspective of the tourism offer, i.e. from the point of view of those who have the necessary knowledge, understand the challenges, recognise the potential and have a perspective on reality and expectations. The benefits and advantages of using tourism experts are significant. Experts have extensive knowledge of the destination's resources and can contribute to its correct positioning in the tourism market.

To validate and statistically strengthen the model, after data collection and processing, a series of tests or statistical procedures were carried out to estimate the reliability of the questionnaire used and to reveal significant differences between the average dimensions of competitiveness in the core groups for the selected destination. In the statistical analysis, **descriptive statistics** (such as mean, median, standard deviation, variance, skewness and kurtosis) were used to provide a complete description of the data. The purpose of principal component analysis (PCA) is to extract relevant information from the data table and represent it by a set of new variables, called principal components. Therefore, following the application of statistical testing, favourable results emerged that support the validity of the data and the relevance of principal components analysis (PCA) in our context.

The collected data were analysed and statistically processed using **Principal Component Analysis (PCA)**. By applying statistical testing, **weights were obtained for each component in the RIMS Model**, as well as for the ten specific determinants, indicators and sub-indicators, which represent the contribution and importance of each factor to the total variation of the dataset. At each level, the sum of these weights is 100%.

A mathematical model, a formula that is defined as an extended weighted sum for each *component, determinant and indicator* considered relevant, **has been proposed** to assess the competitiveness of the tourist destination. **The mathematical model proposed for the evaluation of the competitiveness score is open, adaptable and decision-oriented, and is notable for its ability to incorporate an unlimited number of determinants and indicators**, as well as for its ability to weight certain dimensions. In this way, different weights can be assigned to each indicator, determinant and component. Thus, using these weights, scores for each main RIMS component were calculated, using the specially developed mathematical formula, resulting in a **Tourism Destination Total Competitiveness Index**.

Exploring the model

In order to develop a comprehensive framework for sustainable tourism competitiveness, a number of issues need to be considered. The model proposed in this thesis builds on the key factors and indicators identified and used in established models of tourism destination competitiveness by adapting and complementing the various determinants to meet the specific needs of destinations. Similar to Ritchie and Crouch (2003), Dwyer and Kim (2003), Heath (2003), Gooroochum and Sugiyarto (2004), Barbosa (2012), Goffi (2013) and WEF (2021), this

research identified and classified the elements that influence the competitiveness of a tourism destination into categories or components, factors and indicators. This structured approach facilitates a detailed and qualitative analysis of the relevant aspects.

The proposed model aims to include the elements considered essential in the literature, but also brings specific contributions to the Romanian context. It is based on a set of indicators that can be applied to a general framework for assessing the competitiveness of tourist destinations. The proposed approach consists in selecting a limited number of meaningful and sustainable indicators, relevant for decision-makers, in order to assess and measure the competitiveness of tourism over a period of time. The results should provide policy makers with the necessary information on competitiveness in the tourism industry to implement more effective policies. These policies will contribute to strengthening the competitive position of tourism destinations in the global market.

In order to implement the model, which was named RIMS, **4 components** were defined, which were subdivided into **10 determinants** or factors, **50 indicators** and **14 sub-indicators**. The core of this new competitiveness measurement model is thus based on four main components, namely: **Tourism Resources, Infrastructure, Destination Management and Sustainability** (Figure 1).

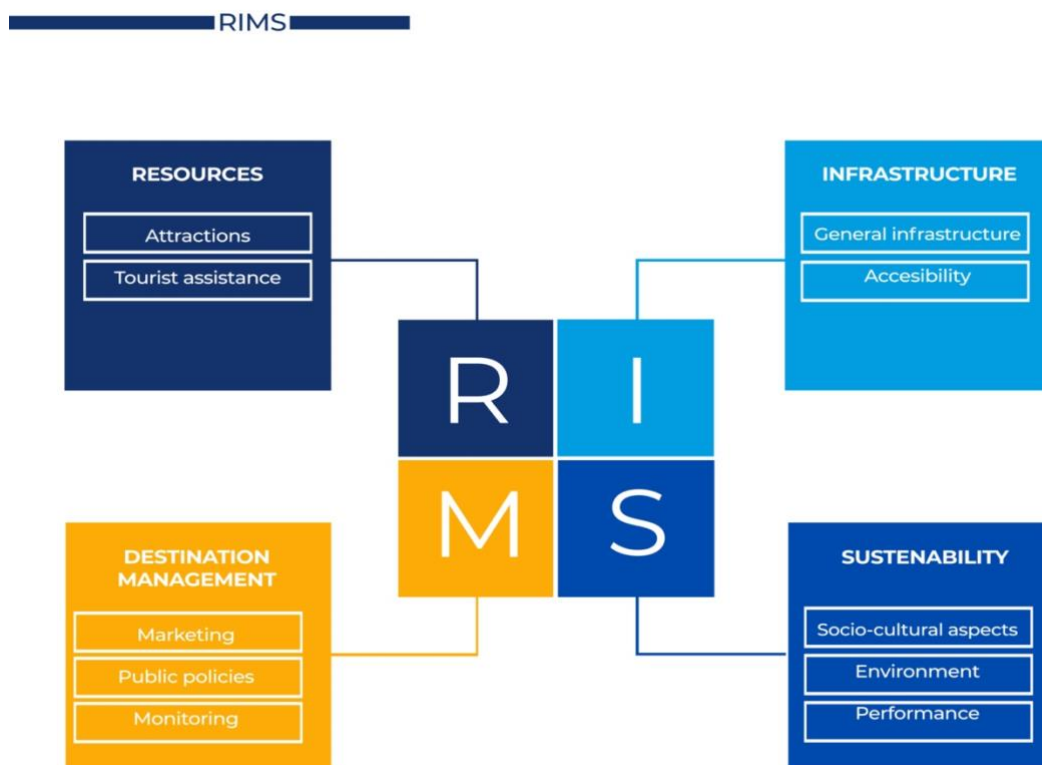


Figure 1. RIMS model for measuring the competitiveness of tourism destinations - components and determinants

Tourism resources represent the attraction and strength of a destination and are divided into two important sub-components: **Attractions** and **Tourist Assistance**. Going into more detail, **Attractions**, in turn, **include**: *Natural resources*, which refer to flora, fauna, landscapes, natural attractions, *Cultural and historical heritage* refers to the cultural heritage, local customs and traditions, the multitude of museums, monuments, sights and the quality of heritage. Another important variable within Tourist Attractions refers to the annual *Events* that take place in the tourist destination and contribute to the attractiveness of the area. *Leisure activities* are also an important indicator to be considered in any model that wants to evaluate and measure the competitiveness of a destination. These, together with *Traditional products and crafts* are also included in the subcategory of tourist attractions and last but not least *Local Gastronomy*.

Tourist assistance includes the following indicators: *Tourism signage*, which refers to the system of signs, signals and boards that facilitate the orientation and guidance of tourists within the destination, *Tourist reception facilities*, which refers to the number and variety of accommodation options and *Level of services* (quality assurance in all aspects of tourism). Two other important indicators are also part of this determinant: *Human resources*, a key component of competitiveness, which refers to the level of training, communication and information skills, knowledge of foreign languages, etc. and *Local communication and information*, i.e. the presence and effectiveness of tourist information centres (TICs) and the existence and quality of tourist guides.

Another basic component of any competitiveness measurement model is **Infrastructure**. In the case of the model proposed in this paper, infrastructure is supported by two sub-components. These are **General Infrastructure** and destination **Accessibility**. The **General infrastructure** refers to the *Safety and security* in the destination, to the *Medical services* available, to the *Financial and banking services* available to tourists, to the use of *IT services*, both by the economic agents in the destination, through the existence of their own websites promoting accommodation, leisure and catering establishments, the services of tourist information centres and the possibility of using electronic means of payment (card payment, etc.). The general infrastructure also includes *Accommodation capacity*, the number of places or beds available, *Catering capacity* and, lastly, *Hygiene and sanitary conditions* are an important aspect contributing to the tourist experience.

For the other sub-component, "**Accessibility**", the indicators taken into account are: *Transport to the destination*, both air, road and rail, *Transport within the destination*, which

refers to the available means of public transport, frequency of rides. Also important is the *Level of transport infrastructure*, quality and length of paved roads. *Proximity* to major tourist attractions or big cities is an indicator that influences the tourist experience, together with *Access of tourists to natural areas*.

The third component of the model is **Destination Management**, which encompasses the following key factors: **Marketing, Public Policy and Monitoring**. **Marketing**, as an essential element of competitiveness, is analysed in terms of the following indicators: *Destination Promotion*, with its two sub-indicators: tourism product promotion and participation in tourism fairs. The existence of *Marketing Strategies*, together with *Brand Image and Awareness*, are also important indicators in assessing competitiveness, especially as it is known that an important function of destination marketing is to create a strong image of the tourist destination. In view of technological progress and changing communication methods, a separate indicator should be chosen to assess the level of *Online promotion*, both through the destination's website and promotion on social media.

Perhaps one of the most important factors affecting the development of a tourist destination, but often the most neglected, is **Public policy**. This implies the existence or *Organisation of a local structure*, a Destination Management Organisation (DMO), whose main task is to implement tourism development strategies. Therefore, the competitiveness assessment also takes into account such an indicator reflecting the existence and level of implementation of the local tourism *Development strategy and planning*. As many elements that contribute to the competitiveness of a destination are considered as "public goods", it is essential to have an indicator that measures the level of *Involvement, support and coordination in tourism* provided by public authorities, but also by the other tourism operators acting in the same market. The economic development of a tourist destination is a key driver, so it is important to pay attention to *Tourism projects and funding*, both attracted and available. Although often underestimated in measuring competitiveness, *Strategic Alliances* should be one of the key indicators, especially for small, often rural tourism destinations. These alliances play a key role in supporting horizontal development and maintaining a balance between all stakeholders in the tourism development and promotion process.

Monitoring is the seventh factor considered in the new model for measuring competitiveness and included in the category "Destination Management". It includes indicators that assess the level the destination has reached in terms of *Visitor Management, Resource*

Inventory and Tourism Offer, as well as the *Impact of Tourism Activities*, *Satisfaction Level* and *Length of Stay*.

The fourth and final component that forms the new model, RIMS, is **Sustainability**. This includes the following factors or determinants: Socio-cultural aspects, Environment and Performance. **Socio-cultural aspects** comprise a variety of indicators covering both destination characteristics such as *Hospitality* or attitude of locals towards tourism, *Conservation of architecture and landscapes*, as well as indicators measuring *Access to education* and Supporting local communities through *Consumption of local products and services*. Sustainable tourism aims to respect local culture and heritage, but also to support access to education and professional development.

Beautiful landscapes and scenic charm are distinct characteristics of rural destinations, and in order to assess their competitiveness, it is imperative to include the **Environment** factor in the model. The indicators that have been taken into account in the context of competitiveness assessment include *Environmental Protection Measures*, with two distinct sub-components: the *Level of waste collection* and the existence of *Environmental Conservation Projects*. To these are added the level of *Connection to utilities* (running water, sewerage, electricity), as well as *Conservation Measures for existing protected natural areas*.

Subject to extensive discussion and analysis, the 10th fundamental variable in the model for measuring the competitiveness of tourism destinations is **Performance**. There is much debate about the relationship between competitiveness and performance, whether performance should be considered a criteria or an outcome. The implementation of the model implies the use of certain indicators, namely: *Tourism revenue*, *Accommodation occupancy*, *Value for money*. Also, the level of *Local entrepreneurship* and *Jobs generated by tourism* are considered as key indicators to measure competitiveness. *Price levels* are another important indicator included in the competitiveness assessment model. It reflects the costs associated with tourism services and products offered in the destination. Favourable and competitive prices have the capacity to attract a large number of tourists, thus increasing the competitiveness of the destination. In addition, value for money contributes to the sustainable development of tourism, ensuring that tourists get fair value for their money and that local communities benefit fairly from this revenue.

In order to manage tourism development, public authorities and destination management organisations need to understand the interdependence between competitiveness, sustainability and performance. This understanding enables them to use this relationship as an effective

management tool in promoting sustainable tourism and achieving the established development goals.

Thus, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the new RIMS model, we have chosen Maramureş tourist destination, as the region offers a variety of tourist attractions and elements of rurality. Assessing its competitiveness would be of great help in guiding decision-makers on the current situation and could contribute to the establishment of policies and strategies for the development of tourism in the region. Choosing Maramures as a destination for testing our RIMS model, we aimed to assess the model's ability to recognise, understand and address the rural features of this region. By collecting and analysing data from Maramures, we will be able to improve the performance of our model, ensuring that it is able to respond to the specific needs and requirements of its users in the rural context.

Part III. Conclusions and contributions

The aim of this research was to provide the tourism industry with a theoretical and practical framework to assess competitiveness using a new model that focuses on the tourism supply perspective. Thus, the research approached competitiveness analysis from the point of view of professionals, who have the necessary knowledge, understand the challenges, recognise the potential and have a perspective on reality and expectations, thus providing a solid basis for assessing and improving competitiveness in the tourism industry. The use of tourism experts brings many benefits and advantages. These specialists have a broad knowledge of the resources available in the destination and can contribute significantly to its correct positioning in the tourism market.

Analysing the results, we can conclude that **the model is functional, stable** and shows strong correlations between its components. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the ten determinants shows that all results indicate statistically significant relationships, either strong or moderate. These relationships show a positive linear relationship and **support the proposed model** with strong connections between factors, **thus strengthening its validity and consistency**. This emphasises the importance and effectiveness of the model in understanding and applying the research problem considered. In order to verify the reliability of the model, we used Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, where all constructs recorded values higher than 0.7, thus confirming the validity of the applied questionnaire.

In order to calculate the Total Competitiveness Index we proposed to include a **mathematical model that represents an extended weighted sum** for each component, determinant and indicator considered relevant and that is **based on the allocation of weights**.

Thus, the set of weights used at all three levels, macro (components), dimensional and variable, was validated either on the basis of expertise (expert panel) or on the basis of the Principal Components Analysis (PCA) method. There was, however, also a third approach, the equi-important approach, in which the weights are equal, in which no greater or lesser importance is attached to a component or determinant, as proposed by the WEF in its latest Competitiveness Report.

Given the existence of these distinct approaches, an objective one based on PCA analysis and a subjective one based on expert analysis, we considered that the WEF method, with equal weights, being balanced and equidistant, can serve as a reference. Therefore, we chose to use this balanced approach and considered it as a **benchmark** or reference **destination** in our analysis process and applied the **TECDEV method** to analyse the results obtained for the other two approaches.

The results obtained for each component were compared with each other and correlated with the results of the benchmark destination (with equal weights). This comparison provides valuable information in terms of assessing and positioning the destination in relation to expected performance. Analysing the results obtained by the different methods of analysis, we can observe some significant differences in the assessment of the key components of the RIMS model. In the case of the "Tourism resources" component, the PCA method assigned a higher score (2.8934) compared to the expert assessment (1.2663) and equal weights (0.8328). This suggests a higher importance given by the PCA method, but also by the experts, in identifying tourism resources as a determinant of competitiveness. The other three components, Infrastructure, Destination Management and Sustainability, scored lower than the benchmark destination, meaning that they are deficient or underdeveloped. Thus, by taking measures to correct and improve the identified weaknesses, there is the potential to balance the situation and bring the results of the components closer to the benchmark destination. In this way, as each component makes progress and improves its performance, it will move closer to the ideal destination situation. It is essential that authorities and decision-makers are aware of these weaknesses and take effective measures to correct them and ensure a sustainable and competitive development of the tourism destination.

In conclusion, the results obtained in the competitiveness assessment may be influenced by the method of analysis chosen and the importance (weight) attributed to the different aspects,

components or determinants. Thus, the results support the use of this model in research and provide a solid basis for further exploration and analysis of the area of interest.

Following the research carried out, based on the processing of primary data from the 111 questionnaires completed by tourism operators, we can state that the results obtained in our research **support the hypotheses** formulated.

The hypothesis that *"the attractiveness of resources (natural and cultural) is the main factor that makes a tourist destination competitive"* is confirmed in this study. Regardless of the analysis method used - Principal Component Analysis (PCA), expert panel or equal-weighted method - the "Tourism resources" component always ranked first, with an average score of 3.3387. A detailed analysis of the 10 key determinants or factors of the RIMS model reveals that the determinant "Tourist Attractions" ranks first with the highest average score of 3.6216. In the Principal Component Analysis (PCA), the component "Tourism resources" scored a total of 2.8934, while the determinant "Tourism attractions" scored 2.9471. The expert assessment gave the component "Tourist resources" a total score of 1.2663 points, while "Tourist attractions" scored 2.4032. These consolidated results confirm the major importance of tourism resources and tourist attractions in determining the competitiveness of a tourist destination.

The results also confirm the hypothesis that *"accessibility has a significant influence on the competitive position"* of tourist destinations. Detailed analysis of the ten determinants shows that accessibility ranks lower in the ranking, ranking only eighth out of ten, with a low average of 2.8535 points. This determinant is a particularly important one as it looks at the competitiveness of the destination in terms of access to it, and the results through PCA analysis show a low score of 0.5724 for "Accessibility". Authorities and policy makers need to pay particular attention to this aspect and take immediate action to improve the current situation of transport to and within tourist destinations. The model used to assess the competitiveness of tourist destinations is a valuable tool for decision-makers and the comparative and in-depth analysis of the results allows us to identify and improve weaknesses in order to ensure a stronger competitive position for the tourist destinations analysed.

The hypothesis that *"destination management is a key factor in competitiveness"* is confirmed at the end of the study. In the model tested, the "Destination Management" component scored the lowest, averaging only 2.8387. It ranks last out of the four main components of the RIMS model. The detailed analysis revealed that, unfortunately, in the hierarchy of the ten determinants, the last place is occupied by "Public Policy", which is considered a core element of "Destination Management". Given its importance for

competitiveness, a more active involvement of the responsible stakeholders is needed to overcome the situation and to engage more responsibly in improving those aspects that are clearly underdeveloped. The total score obtained by the PCA places the “Destination Management” component in third place in the RIMS model, with a value of 0.1807. A commitment to improving these aspects would help to increase results and further improve competitiveness. **The aim of our research to provide a theoretical and practical framework** for measuring the competitiveness of tourism destinations, useful for decision-makers and authorities responsible for tourism development, **has been achieved**. By obtaining a low score, the "Destination Management" component confirmed the need for such an evaluation model, which provides valuable information for the decision-making process, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of tourist destinations.

Given the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that the hypothesis that “*competitiveness is based on sustainability*” is confirmed. Sustainable tourism plays a crucial role in enhancing the competitiveness of tourist destinations through the conservation of natural and cultural resources. In addition, it can also contribute to increasing the reputation and differentiating the destination from competitors. Statistical analysis of the data shows a strong correlation between tourism resources and sustainability, indicating an interconnection between the two components and a common increasing trend, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.753$. Sustainable tourism is also recognised as an important element in any competitive destination management strategy. The importance of the relationship between “Destination Management” and “Sustainability” is supported by a strong connection, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.742$. This connection is crucial because destination management has a direct role in promoting sustainable development of the tourism destination. Destinations that prioritise sustainable practices are seen as responsible and consequently make a significant contribution to increased competitiveness.

Theoretical contributions

Tourism researchers are still hesitant to determine and assess the competitiveness of tourism destinations because of the factors that influence it. Competitiveness is a multidimensional concept, which is why tourism specialists have developed competitive models using different indicators.

This paper makes a key contribution by setting it in a wider context of the literature on destination competitiveness. In this paper, the **relevant factors of competitiveness** are analysed and **assessed from the perspective of supply**, tourism operators and tourism experts. In addition to these aspects, it focuses on an **innovative perspective, namely that of small, predominantly rural tourism destinations**.

In addition, a **mathematical model** for the evaluation of the Total Competitiveness Index (valid both for a single or even comparing several destinations) has been proposed to assess the competitiveness of the tourist destination. It is defined as an extended weighted sum for each component, determinant and indicator considered relevant for the model analysing competitiveness in tourism.

However, there is also a distinct, innovative approach involving the **use of weights**, obtained both from a methodological perspective, through statistical processing by Principal Component Analysis (PCA), and from an expert perspective. In the case of using the expert panel, the weights can be defined in such a way that certain components of the model take precedence over others, giving this model decision-making power to reveal a particular direction for optimising the competitiveness index. The model also allows the monitoring of changes in the competitiveness of the destination over time. The use of scores associated with certain components or the Total Competitiveness Index can provide a dynamic perspective on the competitiveness of the destination at different points of the assessment. The model facilitates the assessment of the competitiveness of the destination in a specific context, being able to take into account even different types of evaluators (including tourists) or by comparison with a competing destination or a set of competing destinations. Thus, trends in destination competitiveness can be correlated with various public sector initiatives or other variables.

In conclusion, when analysing the competitiveness of a tourist destination, it is important to choose the right evaluation method as this will influence the results obtained. Different methods may give different importance to the aspects, components and determinants involved in the evaluation. If we want to focus more intensively on a particular component or determinant, we can increase the weight allocated to it in the calculation formula. This approach allows us to gain a more detailed perspective and to analyse in depth the impact of that component on the overall competitiveness of the destination. By adjusting the weights, we can highlight certain key aspects or determinants and obtain more relevant information for managerial decision-making. In this way, we can identify the strengths and weaknesses of the destination as well as opportunities for improvement. Finally, the flexibility offered by the adjustable weights allows

us to tailor the assessment to the specific needs and priorities of the tourism destination, thus providing valuable information for its development and management in an efficient and competitive way.

Managerial implications

This research was approached from both an academic and a functional perspective. Our aim was to provide the tourism industry with the theoretical and practical framework that would enable tourism destinations to analyse the mechanisms and factors that influence competitiveness and performance **and to create a tool that could be used as a monitoring and management tool** by Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) and public authorities in tourism. Thus, the **essential contribution of this paper is primarily a practical one**.

Knowing, from personal experience, the reality faced by tourist destinations in their efforts to become as competitive and efficient as possible, but having little information, models and measurement and management tools at hand, I considered it necessary to create a **model adapted to the Romanian reality and tailored to the rural specificities**. Rural tourism is one of the main types of tourism, which contributes significantly to the attractiveness and economic growth of the country.

The results of this research can provide policy makers and practitioners in the tourism industry with a global picture of competitiveness. This paper presents detailed findings on the issues that require more attention from both public and private sector managers in order to achieve sustainable tourism development. The detailed analysis of the components can provide relevant information, helping managers and decision-makers to identify and prioritise the actions and measures needed to improve destination competitiveness. Thus, it is important to consider the diversity and interconnectivity of factors influencing competitiveness.

The analysis shows that "Destination Management", although of crucial importance, is underdeveloped. For this reason, a comprehensive **model for measuring the competitiveness of a tourist destination becomes an essential tool in its sustainable development**. The model presented in this paper, proposed to be applicable to the Romanian rural tourism reality, could also serve to guide other models for similar destinations.

Research limitations

Every research involves making decisions that outline a direction to follow. Consequently, the limitations of this research are the effects of these choices, but they can contribute to the development of future approaches.

Although this research is based on a comprehensive review of existing literature, factors, indicators and models, there may be limitations in their selection and inclusion in the proposed new model. The absence of a model adapted to the rural context makes the challenge even greater. Therefore, other indicators can be added to the model over time.

In addition, the research explores competitiveness analysis from the perspective of tourism supply, operators and tourism specialists. Given the testing of the model on a **limited geographical area** (Maramureş), there is a possibility that this may influence the full objectivity of the participants' responses. Therefore, it is recommended to extend the testing to a larger territory (extension of the geographical area), or to carry out a comparative analysis between two similar destinations. Stakeholders in one destination may have different perceptions compared to tourism operators in other areas.

Another limitation of the model could be the **lack of involvement of local people**, residents of the area, local producers or craftsmen in the assessment process. They may have different perspectives on tourism development in the region, but their exclusion is due to the rather specialised nature of the questions in the questionnaire and the fact that it was self-administered. Thus, this limitation could be addressed by conducting a series of interviews with the local community or those involved in activities closely related to tourism.

A major challenge is to **integrate subjective and objective factors** in the construction of the model, and to find a way to measure them and translate them onto a common scale with those analysing perceptions. In order to assess competitiveness, further research is needed to determine the correct weighting of objective and subjective criteria. Attention also needs to be paid to **incorporating economic factors** into the construction of the model, as the focus is now on the perceptions of tourism operators.

Suggestions and future research directions

From the limitations presented, possible directions for future research can also be identified. These include **extending the application and testing of the model to other**

representative rural **destinations**, such as Bucovina (identified as a notable direct competitor to Maramures, based on the completion of questionnaires) or rural Transylvania. A **comparative analysis** between two or more similar destinations would also be of interest.

The model tried to approach the tourist destination from the perspective of the tourist offer, but neglected the involvement of the wider local community. Therefore, it would be interesting to add results that **include the perspective of local people**. Moreover, an attempt could also be made to approach this model from the **tourists' perspective**, by carrying out a comparative analysis between their perspective and that of the tourism offer, operators and specialists.

Integrating objective and subjective factors is also a challenge for future research. Finding a way to include them in the measurement model and developing a common scale would be of crucial importance in assessing competitiveness.

The objective of our research was to develop and test this model for assessing the competitiveness of small, rural tourist destinations. Although the RIMS model provides a comprehensive approach, it is important to note that the assessment of the competitiveness of a tourist destination can be influenced by a number of contextual and subjective factors. Therefore, the interpretation of the results should always be made in a broader context, taking into account the specificities and unique characteristics of each destination. In addition, in order to focus more attention on a particular aspect, we can adjust the weights used, as it is crucial to constantly monitor and update the indicators and weights to reflect the dynamics and changes in the tourism industry.

In conclusion, an extremely important aspect to highlight in the development of this model is **its potential to be applied in the form of a software or web application**, which could be used even by smaller tourist destinations such as towns, villages or communes. This would bring multiple benefits, enabling them to assess and monitor their level of competitiveness in a more efficient and accessible way. These destinations could thus benefit from tools tailored to their specific needs and resources. Through such an application, destinations could collect and analyse relevant data, assess their level of competitiveness and identify their strengths and weaknesses. They would also be able to compare their results over different time periods and analyse their evolution. In this way, they could observe changes in their tourism performance and make informed decisions about development strategies. This functionality would add flexibility and adaptability, allowing destinations to continually adjust in response to changes, and could be a valuable and affordable solution for developing and strengthening tourism in smaller local communities.