Original Article

Means of assessing a sport tourism destination's competitive advantage sources

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to determine the extent to which Arges County is considered a mountain-based tourism destination, as well as the undertaken sports activities' awareness degree, highlighting its competitive advantage and the way in which it was communicated. In this regard, a marketing quantitative research, survey type, applied to a sample of 276 young people aged 18-24 years has been conducted. The results of the research shall establish a starting point for the Arges County destination marketing audit, as a sport tourism destination with a depth of focus for the mountain-based tourism.

Key-words: sport tourism, awareness degree, competitive advantage, sport tourism destination

Introduction

Theoretical framework:

The current trends in destination marketing aim, generally, at capitalizing to a greater extent non-traditional, isolated or unknown destinations, for which niche marketing is preferable, being thus able to create a unique experience for the targeted consumer, closely related to the tourism destination profile and its specific activities. These trends are supported by the changing needs, desires and attitudes of tourists, seeking to attain, increasingly often, personalized services. Clearly defined, all these interdependent services, (*i.e., accommodation, transportation, leisure, food services etc.*) tend to conglomerate a general impression in the consumer's mind, usually associated with the destination itself. Therefore, consisting of a series of natural, cultural, artistic, environmental etc. resources, the destination acquires the characteristics of a global tourism product, offered in a specific geographical area. Including elements of attractiveness and hence, competitiveness of the region, the destination comprises a complex portfolio of products and services, acting as an umbrella-brand, which supports the creation of a holiday experience in compliance with the consumer's needs.

In the specialist literature, it has been emphasized a clear distinction between resources, competencies and capabilities within a tourism destination (Haugland, Ness, Grønseth, Aarstad, 2010, p.272), additionally being created a unique, inimitable combination between these three concepts, as a basis of gaining competitive advantage. The resources, natural and anthropic, renewable and non-renewable (*i. e., human, physical, knowledge, capital, infrastructure resources* (Porter, 1985, as cited in Cracolici, Nijkamp, 2008, p.336) etc.) refer to all the elements inside a destination, which could become inputs for touristic products and services, while competencies regard the knowledge level and skills, which enable resource-based activities. In practice, resources are used individually, while skills are deployed in tourism enterprises. Furthermore, capabilities aim at a continuous configuration, integration and development of the resources background, being competence-based, in order to elaborate touristic products and services, while expressing the extent to which a destination fulfills its purpose in terms of tourism, simultaneously adding value to stakeholders. Given the dynamic nature of competition, and more notably, of the consumer's needs, the success of a destination (Cracolici, Nijkamp, 2010, p.337) depends, in this case, even more, on the resources' combination and reconfiguration by enriching them or even by relinquishing some of them in order to build touristic products; accordingly, these processes play an important role in maintaining or even creating competitive advantage. Regarding sport tourism, it is necessary that a touristic product's adjustment is based on the changes in the environment (*i. e., economic, political, legal, natural environment, given the climatic and setting conditions etc.*) or on the changes in consumer's requirements, needs and desires.

According to Michael Porter, there are only two types of competitive advantage a company can possess, regardless of the complexity of its strengths: differentiation and domination by costs. They derive from the way a company manages to cope with the influence of the five major forces of the industry (new entrants, substitute products and services, suppliers, customers and competition) better than its competitors (Porter, 1985, p.235). Referring to the niche forms of tourism (*i.e., business tourism, shopping tourism, sport tourism etc.*), the role of product and service differentiation upon customer satisfaction is obvious, which is derived from the clearly defined motivations and from the refined needs and desires of the individuals. The multiple sources of

competitive advantage (Cruceru, 2007, p.98) concern market study, profitable market segments identification, segmentation and positioning, continuing with the four components of the marketing mix, all of these converting into real ways of obtaining competitive advantage.

Each destination is differentiated at a regional level through a set of unique features regarding its attractiveness, its attributes which contribute to customer satisfaction and its political, cultural and economic structures (Kozak, 2002, p.513). However, the competitiveness analysis of a destination should not be confined to certain characteristic attributes, as quantitative and qualitative strengths compared to those of its competitors, being necessary to include the tourists' perceptions and tourism enterprises' competitiveness operating within it, due to their influence to the destination competitiveness (Cracolici, Nijkamp, 2010, p.337).

The first step in forming the competitive advantage in a tourism destination (Melian-Gonzalez, Garcia-Falcon, 2003, p.723) is to identify the necessary elements, specific to its forms of tourism, sport tourism or mountain-based tourism, in the case of Argeș County. These numerous resources belong to the natural environment and to the touristic and sports infrastructure, as mountaineering (Băltescu, 2010, p.6) includes a large range of leisure, spiritual and economic activities, which can be developed in various mountain-based regions. After detailing all the setting conditions in accordance with the rules and regulations imposed by sports and tourism, in the second phase, the current status of the destination resources shall be evaluated, both absolute and relative to the competition's resources. The next step in building the competitive advantage refers to the destination resources' classification according to the extent to which they can contribute to the form of tourism, namely attractive, neutral or unattractive resources, which are considered inappropriate, incongruous with the form of tourism or require too significant investment in order to be transformed into attractive resources. In the last stage, after the analysis of the destination potential regarding the considered form of tourism, the resources' attractiveness and their degree of imitability can be compared with those of the competition. The strengths that will underpin the formulation of competitive advantage can also be identified, resulting from those resources that competitors do not possess, being difficult to imitate and obtain.

Based on the model of Michael Porter, Crouch and Ritchie (Crouch, Ritchie, 1999, p.42) defined a new conceptual competitiveness model of a tourism destinations, also highlighting the relationship between resources, competencies and capabilities. This model unrolls by two main axes, namely the comparative advantage and the competitive advantage. The comparative advantage refers to the natural resources, cultural knowledge and skill endowment, while competitive advantage concerns their efficient and effective use. This precedes (Cracolici, Nijkamp, 2010, p.338) the elaboration of a marketing audit, including resources listing, with the purpose to preserve them, to grow and develop their background, using the entire information as a part of transformation processes, which ensure economic results. The model applies both at micro level, referring to comparable basic elements of the destination (*i.e., travel agencies, tourism markets, destination public - local people employed in tourism, associations, local financial institutions etc.*) and macro level, considering those external factors which have a significant impact on the micro-environment (*i.e., closer attention to environment, economic restructuring, demographic changes, advancing technology etc.*). According to the two authors, a destination's competitiveness is based on these two levels and covers four major components: basic resources and attractions (*i.e., special events, geographical, cultural, historical, recreational factors etc.*), factors supporting basic resources (*i.e., infrastructure, accessibility, facilities, hospitality etc.*), destination management, by capitalizing basic resources and attractions and by improving their supporting factors and identity and identification elements (*i.e., location, interdependent relations, safety, awareness, image, brand etc.*) (Vodeb, 2012, p.273).

Another point of view on the tourist destinations competitiveness belongs to Poon (Poon, 2006, as cited in Crouch, Ritchie, 1999, p.143), identifying four basic principles that a tourism destination must meet in order to become competitive, namely the attention to environment, the importance of tourism, the strengthening of the distribution channels and the building of a dynamic private sector. Regardless of the views of experts on destination competitiveness, it cannot be analyzed without taking into account the satisfaction of the visitors, namely those needs, motives and preferences referred to it.

Operational framework:

From the total area of Argeș County, of about 6.800 km², approximately 25% is covered by mountains, from the low and medium to the high ones, with altitudes exceeding the height of 2.500 m, including the highest peak in Romania, Moldoveanu, of 2.543 m. Additionally, Argeș County has Carpathian hills and plateaus covering over a half of the county (Badea, Niculescu, Roată, Buză, 2001, p.8). This means that there exist over 5.000 km² allowing the practicing of some forms of sport tourism, both during winter and summer.

The most important massive of the Argeș County, Făgăraș, has a total area of approximately 1.550 km², representing 10% of the Southern Carpathians (Badea, Niculescu, Roată, Buză, 2001, p.27). In Argeș County, Făgăraș Mountains' ridge extends over a length of approximately 40 km, including 140 peaks over 2.000 m, 29 peaks over 2.400 m and 6 peaks over 2.500 m, including the highest peak in Romania, Moldoveanu, heighted 2.543 m (Barco, Nedelcu, 1974, p.12). This aspect of Făgăraș Mountains on Argeș County territory comprises a competitive advantage in relation to the neighbouring counties or to the other counties whose administrative

territories include Făgăraș Mountains, namely Brașov and Sibiu. At the same time, Făgăraș is renowned for the level of development of the largest and most complex ice setting (Badea, Niculescu, Roată, Buză, 2001, p.27). Due to the fact that the highest level difference in Romania, of 2.200 m, exists between Moldoveanu Peak and Olt River Valley, in Căineni, (with a slope gradient variation depending on the area between 35 and 50 degrees, respectively between 15 and 35 degrees), it is obvious that these mountains address to a segment of medium and high training level tourists, in terms of physical preparation.

Făgăraș Mountains' main ridge dominates in the south Ghițu and Frunții Massives, with altitudes which do not exceed 1.650 m, having a total area of approximately 67 km² (Badea, Niculescu, Roată, Buză, 2001, pp. 50-51). Located on both sides of Argeș river, these two massives, considered parts of Făgăraș Mountains, allow sport tourism practicing on varied market segments, from beginner to medium training level. Another advantage of these two low-level massives is given by Poenari Castle, by a rural area dominated by Arefu village, and also by the Dracula legend.

The variety and diversity of its landscape allows the practicing of all forms of winter and summer sport tourism. Despite this touristic potential, Făgăraș Mountains, including Ghițu and Frunții Massives, are crossed only by 19 legally approved touristic routes in Argeș County, most of them addressed to highly trained tourists. The same mountains, located in Brașov County, include 19 legally approved touristic routes as well, while Sibiu County has 23 legally approved touristic routes. Regarding the infrastructure, in terms of quantity and quality, the three counties are similar, although the south access is more difficult than the north one (Table 1).

Table 1: Competitive advantage of the Făgăraș Mountains

Mountains	Competitive advantage	Basis of comparison	Consumer segments
Făgăraș (19 legally approved touristic routes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ridge of 40 km – 140 peaks over 2.000 m, 29 peaks over 2.400 m, 6 peaks over 2.500 m; - highest peak: Moldoveanu, 2.543 m; - diversity of the setting conducting to almost all forms of summer or winter tourism practicing; - ice setting; - slope gradient oscilating between 15-35 degrees, 35-50 degrees; - Poenari Castle; - Arefu village. 	<p>Brașov County:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 19 legally approved touristic routes <p>Sibiu County:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 23 legally approved touristic routes. 	medium and high training level for tourists with cultural motivations

Iezer-Păpușa Mountains are located south-east of Făgăraș Mountains. With an area of 520 km² (Badea, Niculescu, Roată, Buză, 2001, p.35), the massive is located entirely within Argeș County. Even if it does not have peaks over 2.500 m, Iezer-Păpușa encompasses in its main ridge three peaks over 2.400 m, culminating with Vârful Roșu, heighted 2.469 m. In Iezer-Păpușa, the altitude difference between the extreme points oscillates around 1.500 m and slope gradients vary between 15 to 35 degrees. Compared to Făgăraș Mountains or Piatra Craiului Mountains, slope gradients are lower, allowing access to diverse segments of sport tourists, in terms of theoretical and practical training. Anew compared to Făgăraș Mountains and Piatra Craiului, Iezer-Păpușa is more limited in terms of practicable forms of tourism. At the same time, its geographic position and geomorphologic aspect configure an exceptional view of the surrounding mountain areas. However, all things considered, (i.e., surface, altitude, general geomorphology, ice landscape, geographical location, direct connection to Făgăraș), the massive is not crossed by any legally approved touristic route (Table 2).

Table 2: Competitive advantage in Iezer-Păpușa Mountains

Mountains	Competitive advantage	Basis of comparison	Consumer segments
Iezer-Păpușa (no legally approved touristic routes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 peaks over 2400 m - the highest peak: Vârful Roșu, heighted 2469 m - exceptional view of the surrounding mountain areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - legally unapproved touristic routes, yet attractive for the targeted market segments 	diverse sport tourist segments (lower slope gradient than the one in Făgăraș and Piatra Craiului)

Piatra Craiului Mountains, with a total area of 130 km², covers less than 1% of the Southern Carpathians (Badea, Niculescu, Roată, Buză, 2001, p.32). Despite the relatively reduced area, the massive reaches its highest point at Piscul Baciului Peak (La Om) with an altitude of 2.238 m, located at the boundary between Argeș and Brașov counties. Among that, the mountains also include peaks over 2.100 m. Additionally, the total length of the ridge is 25 km, with extremities' heights of 1.800 m. The significant altitude difference

between the ridge and the surrounding region is 1.400 m, on a length of 4 km. Due to the high energy of setting, the access in the mountains is to a certain extent restricted. Therefore, this conveys a disadvantage in terms of the increased tourist traffic in general and increased sport tourist traffic in particular.

The massive is covered by 16 legally approved touristic routes connecting various attractions located within Argeș and Brașov counties. In Brașov County there are 20 legally approved touristic routes, outperforming thus Iezer-Păpușa Mountains. The competitive advantage of Argeș County, compared to Brașov, in terms of geography with implications for sport tourism development, is given by the presence of karst setting in the Podu Dâmboviței-Dâmbovicioara area, therefore including specific phenomena as caves and gorges. The presence of the two major rivers, Dâmbovița and Dâmbovicioara, allows river rafting practicing, establishing a competitive advantage in relation with other massives of the county or even with similar regions from the surrounding counties (Table 3).

Table 3: Competitive advantage in Piatra Craiului Mountains

Mountains	Competitive advantage	Basis of comparison	Consumer segments
Piatra Craiului (16 legally approved touristic routes)	- karst în Podu Dâmbovicioarei -Dâmbovicioara area - river-rafting practicing posibility	Brașov (20 legally approved touristic routes)	all sport tourism segments

Leaota, the last important massive of Argeș County, neighbours on its eastern boundary with Dâmbovița County. With a total area of 336 km², the massive covers approximately 2% of the Southern Carpathians (Badea, Niculescu, Roată, Buză, 2001, p.18). Although the main rock of the massive is the crystalline, north-east of Dragoslavele, near to Rucăr, the limestone forms isolated peaks with a beautiful panorama of the region, respectively, karst phenomena, caves and gorges, sometimes inaccessible. Its main peak, Leaota, heighted 2.136 m, is located at the boundary between the two counties, in a central position, being connected to Bucegi in the Bucșa point. The connection with Bucegi represents a significant advantage, which unfortunately is not highlighted in the touristic infrastructure; in Argeș county there is no legally approved touristic route (Table 4).

The practicable forms of tourism which sport tourists can perfect in Leaota region are more reduced, focusing on trekking, especially during summer. However, there exists unleveraged potential, due to the fact that the massive is crossed by a series of valleys, along which there are unmodernized roads, allowing relatively easy access to remote areas. Leaota is also located near to major tourism destinations, having an important number of establishments of tourism reception with accommodation functions (*i. e., Dragoslavele, Rucăr, Podu Dâmboviței etc.*).

Table 4: Competitive advantage in Leaota Mountains

Mountains	Competitive advantage	Basis of comparison	Consumer segments
Leaota (no legally approved touristic routes)	- the surrounding massives' view - karst setting - Bucegi connection	legally unapproved touristic routes, yet attractive for the targeted market segments	- beginner sport tourists - medium-level of physical training tourists

It should be emphasized, however, that although Argeș County has a natural heritage of outstanding value in mountain and sub-mountain areas, there is a single tourism resort of local interest, Albeștii de Muscel. The resort's profile is oriented to a greater extent to health tourism, rather than sport tourism or active tourism, although the main resource of the administrative-territorial units is the natural heritage.

A negative aspect is related to the accommodation capacity of the county. There are approximately 200 touristic reception structures with accommodation functions classified in accordance with the current legislation; more than half of them are concentrated in Curtea de Argeș (12 structures), Cîmpulung (10 structures) and six other localities: Arefu (25 structures), Corbeni (20 structures), Dâmbovicioara (14 structures), Dragoslavele (6 structures), Lerești (7 structures) and Rucăr (24 structures). The positive aspect is related to the concentration of the accommodation capacity in the mountain area. At the same time, this concentration indicates an uneven coverage of the administrative territory of the county.

Materials and methods:

The quantitative research, descriptive-type, has been deployed in October-November 2012, on a sample of 276 young people, aged 18-24, with higher education in course of development and has aimed at identifying the awareness degree of sport activities practiced in Argeș County. Therefore, a matrix containing activities practiced in each of the four groups of mountains of Argeș County (Făgăraș, Iezer-Păpușa, Piatra Craiului and Leaota) has been created, in which respondents were asked to fill in the activities they recall being practiced there. Additionally, a set of questions measured on ordinal Likert scale has been used in order to measure the degree in which Argeș County is considered a destination for sport tourism in terms of the following criteria: climate, touristic infrastructure, differentiation, attractiveness and recognition.

Results:

To begin with, the main forms of tourism were studied, which were considered to be representative for Argeș County. These include rest and recreation tourism, selected by 232 respondents, followed by cultural tourism, selected by 198 respondents. Mountain-based tourism is the third most commonly selected form of tourism, chosen by 143 respondents (*Figure 1*). A significant percentage of the respondents chose rural tourism as a form of tourism that should be practiced in Argeș County. Conversely, the less representative forms of tourism were considered shopping tourism and business tourism.

Figure 1: Representative forms of tourism for Argeș County

Afterwards, the selected representative forms of tourism have been arranged ascendingly by the respondents considering their importance. Thus, most commonly, cultural tourism appears on the first place (selected by 85 respondents), followed by rest and recreation tourism (selected by 83 respondents). Since the main form of tourism of Argeș County is rendered, in terms of natural and touristic infrastructure resources, by sport tourism, specifically mountain-based tourism, it is important to study the place this form of tourism occupies as an appropriate form of tourism for the county among the respondents. The fact that almost half of respondents did not include this mountain-based tourism in the first set of choices indicates an insufficient communication of the undertaken mountain activities and of the existing resources. On the other hand, approximately 23% of the respondents consider it the main form of tourism representative for Argeș County (*Table 5*).

Table 5: Representative forms of tourism for Argeș County

	Representativeness	Absolute frequencies	Relative frequencies
Mountain-based tourism	First place	63	22,8%
	Second place	53	19,2%
	Third place	27	9,7%
	No place	133	48,1%
Total	-	276	100%

Considering the existing resources, most practiced sports are basically individual, nature-based and implying a relatively high degree of risk sports. In this matter, there have been studied three sets of variables (team sports/individual sports, inside sports/nature-based sports, low risk sports/high risk sports) depending on which, there were determined the dimensions of respondents' segments, whose motivations and preferences are consistent with destination resources (*Table 6*). In terms of individual and nature-based sports, approximately a half of the respondents fit the mountain profile of Argeș County, yet much less of them practice sports implying a relatively high degree of risk (9%).

Table 6: Types of practiced sports

Types of practiced sports	Absolute frequencies	Total	Cumulative frequencies
Individual sports	114	276	41,3%
Nature-based sports	142	276	51,4%
High degree of risk sports	25	276	9%

The natural and infrastructure resources allow summer and winter sports practicing, including a wide range of sports activities. Thus, 46% of the respondents prefer the two above-mentioned seasons for sports, the rest of them preferring sports that do not depend on the season, which are mainly indoor sports. (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2: Preferences for practicing sports season

Regarding the set of practiced sports activities in the four main groups of mountains, their level of awareness has been analyzed by means of a global table listing absolute and relative frequencies. Thus, there has been observed a low degree of awareness, most of the sports activities in Argeș County being recognized at a rate less than 20% (Table 7). It also notable the fact that the most commonly known group of mountain in terms of performed sports activities is Făgăraș, where climbing records a degree of awareness of over 70% (incomparably superior to all other activities, regardless of the group of mountains), and also and a higher awareness degree of the majority of other practiced activities. Conversely, the least known group of mountains is Leaota, fact explained by the existence of fewer competitive advantages recorded in the analysis of the tourism destination. The least known activity for all groups of mountains is canyoning, registering percents of 7.2%, 6.1%, 5%, 3.9% among the respondents.

Table 7: Awareness degree of the practiced sports activities in Argeș County

Group of mountains	Sports activity	Absolute frequencies	Relative frequencies
Făgăraș	Trekking	63	22,8%
	Climbing	195	70,6%
	Cross Country Skiing	54	19,5%
	Freestyle Skiing	58	21%
	Snowboard	103	37,3%
	Mountain Biking	87	31,5%
	Paragliding	70	25,3%
	Canyoning	20	7,2%
	4x4 Car racing	75	27,1%
Iezer-Păpușa	Moto Enduro	43	15,5%
	Trekking	39	14,1%
	Climbing	71	25,7%
	Cross Country Skiing	27	9,7%
	Freestyle Skiing	35	12,6%
	Snowboard	40	14,4%
	Mountain Biking	73	26,4%
	Paragliding	40	14,4%
	Canyoning	17	6,1%
Piatra Craiului	4x4 Car racing	47	17%
	Moto Enduro	26	9,4%
	Trekking	45	16,3%
	Climbing	105	38%
	Cross Country Skiing	37	13,4%
	Freestyle Skiing	43	15,5%
	Snowboard	58	21%
	Mountain Biking	85	30,7%
	Paragliding	60	21,7%
Leaota	Canyoning	14	5%
	4x4 Car racing	50	18,1%
	Moto Enduro	31	11,2%
	Trekking	44	15,9%
	Climbing	64	23,1%
	Cross Country Skiing	26	9,4%
	Freestyle Skiing	24	8,6%
	Snowboard	28	10,1%
	Mountain Biking	58	21%
Total	Paragliding	47	17%
	Canyoning	11	3,9%
	4x4 Car racing	35	12,6%
Total	Moto Enduro	19	6,8%
	Total	276	100%

Analyzing the matrix groups of mountains-sport activities, it appears that climbing is the most recognized sports activity, mostly in Făgăraș and Piatra Craiului (*Figure 3*), fact which can be translated into the most important competitive advantage regarding the sport tourism destination.

Figure 3: Climbing awareness degree

Analyzing the consumer segments and the resources of Argeș County, it has been noticed that a major sports activity is embodied by trekking; although the matrix does not show that trekking has the highest awareness degree, being surpassed by climbing, mountain biking and for some groups of mountains by snowboarding and 4x4 car racing, the authors consider that this sport, having an equal level of awareness in all the massives from Argeș (with connections to other counties), could consist in a differentiating factor, which should be taken into account in the product strategy development for all market segments, regardless of age or physical training degree.

Considering the fact that there are other practiced sports activities with a high degree of awareness among respondents which could differentiate the groups of mountains, it has been elaborated an analysis according to this criterion. Thus, Făgăraș Mountains are known primarily for climbing, snowboarding and 4x4 Racing cars (*Figure 4*). The awareness degree of the sports activities, although relatively low compared to the number of respondents, is the largest of the four massives analyzed within the research, therefore Făgăraș Mountains becomes the best known group of mountains in the county for sports activities.

Figure 4: Sports activities in Făgăraș

In Iezer-Păpușa Mountains, the main recognized activity is mountain biking, followed by climbing, with 73, respectively 71 respondents (*Figure 5*). Other known activities are 4x4 car racing, paragliding and trekking with percents from 14% to 17% of respondents.

Figure 5: Sports activities in Iezer-Păpușa

In Piatra Craiului Mountains, the most popular sports activities are climbing, selected by 105 respondents and mountain biking, selected by 85 respondents (*Figure 6*). These two sports are popular in all massives, but in Făgăraș Mountains and Piatra Craiului Mountains it has shown the highest degree of awareness.

Figure 6: Sports activities in Piatra Craiului

The least known massive of the four analyzed groups of mountains, Leaota, recorded for its most popular sports activity, climbing, a degree of awareness of only 23% of respondents (*Figure 7*), existing other sports activities with awareness degrees even of 4% (*i.e.*, *canyoning*).

Figure 7: Sports activities in Leaota

In order to aggregate and analyze the opinions regarding Argeș County as a mountain-based tourism destination, there have been analyzed the following criteria: climate conditions, touristic infrastructure conditions, differentiation, attractiveness and recognition (*Table 8*).

Table 8: Statements regarding Argeș County as a mountain-based tourism destination

Statements regarding Argeș County	Strongly disapprove		Disapprove		Undecided		Approve		Strongly approve	
	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
There are no climate conditions for mountain-based tourism.	147	53,3%	53	19,2%	51	18,5%	13	4,7%	12	4,3%
There is no touristic infrastructure for the mountain-based tourism.	56	20,3%	70	25,4%	84	30,4%	47	17%	19	6,9%
It does not differentiate from the perspective of the practicing sports activities.	148	53,6%	63	22,8%	41	14,9%	17	6,2%	7	2,5%
It is not attractive from a touristic point of view.	148	53,6%	63	22,8%	41	14,9%	17	6,2%	7	2,5%
It is not recognized as a sport tourism destination.	46	16,7%	47	17%	105	38%	46	16,7%	32	11,6%
Total	276	100%	276	100%	276	100%	276	100%	276	100%

Although in the case of „touristic infrastructure” and „recognition” variables, the highest recorded percentage stands for those who do not distinguish the destination according to these criteria, it is noticed that Argeș County, in their view, accomplishes the climate conditions for mountain-based tourism, also being attractive and differentiated from other mountain-based tourism destinations. Therefore, for each group of mountains, marketers should be able to develop a product strategy (focused on improving the two elements registering the most „undecided” scores), respectively a communication strategy.

Conclusions:

Argeș County holds to a large extent the necessary conditions for developing mountain-based tourism, in terms of climate and tourism infrastructure; however, the research conducted revealed the fact that there exists a low degree of awareness of the actual sports activities related to the existing, favourable resources. Thus, marketers should take into account the current level of awareness of every group of mountains in particular and the required training degree in developing the product strategy. In order to achieve this, a product-market matrix shall be designed, containing sports activities and the assumed difficulty degree of the physical training (*i.e., trekking for all touristic segments regardless of physical training degree*) in order to characterize the potential touristic products that can be offered in terms of perceived image and identity. Depending on this, in elaborating conventional marketing strategies, along with the product, price, distribution and promotion ones, marketers will need to consider, due to the nature of the county also the specific strategies of tourism services, namely „packing” and „programming”, especially since, in 2013, under the initiative of the European Commission, Pitești City has been elected, the „European sport city”.

Limits:

The main limitation of the study is related to the representativeness of the sample, whose size was restricted by the short time allocated to data collection; furthermore, due to the lack of similar, previous studies for Argeș County, a continuity of the destination marketing strategy can be ensured only if future researches are performed, including for other market segments with similar age and motivation.

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