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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL ENVIRONMENT BY INNOVATION IN TOURISM

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Abstract

Tourism is today a mass phenomenon, with serious implications in the economic, social domain and in population welfare from the areas where it is practiced.

In this paper we have studied the village Viscri - an example of success in the development of sustainable rural tourism by innovation and originality. Viscri is a Saxon village located in the commune Buneşti in Braşov County, Romania.

As early as the 2000s, the local community in Viscri, supported by the Mihai Eminescu Trust Foundation (MET) has managed to develop a tourism concept that is based on the local population. By developing a new concept of tourism organisation, Viscri inhabitants have proved that Romanian villages can attract tourists by creating a stable and sustainable system of tourism by capitalizing all resources, from the human capital to the traditions, customs and stories of an area.

In the paper we will analyze, by means of a quantitative marketing study, the perceptions of the inhabitants in Viscri about the development of rural tourism. The research aims at identifying

the underlying aspects for the development of sustainable tourism in the village Viscri by studying the way of thinking and behaviour of the locals.

Keywords

Rural Tourism, Innovation in Tourism, Rural Environment, Marketing Research, Viscri Village

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the best-developed domains in the service sector, as it is a sector where the client is part of the creation of experience and where, due to the growing competition and to the desire of the population to travel, innovation is becoming more and more a necessity. (Olteanu, 1999).

Since the 21st century, the industry of tourism and travel has represented the most dynamic sector of activity in the world and, at the same time, one of the key sectors for the generation of jobs. (Pătraşcu, 2008). From an economic point of view, tourism can be considered a major source of recovery of the national economies, especially for those countries that have got a wealth of tourism resources that they exploit properly. It is a sector that generates a secure labour market for the workforce and the redistribution of the redundant. Tourist services play a role in the economy by the fact that they generate new jobs, thus, greatly contributing to the diminution of unemployment. (<https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic-impact-research/regions2019/world2019.pdf>)

Innovation is a process that implies both a creative force and a development factor that can become a business model. Innovation marketing is one of the new specialties of contemporary marketing, as it encompasses all the activities, strategies by which an organization manages to provide its clients with a consistent and quality buying experience, thus succeeding in setting apart from the competitors in the eye of the consumer. (Bălăşescu & Dovleac, 2012). The innovation process presupposes an extensive collaboration with other organisations and the involvement of several market players, including the customers who are more and more involved in the process of innovation creation. (Popescu, 2016).

Innovation has become one of the main concerns of companies. They have developed specialised innovation departments and they even collaborate to develop their sector of activity.

Yet, there are domains where innovation was initially perceived with scepticism, one of them being the service sector. The explanation is the intangible character of services which is difficult to quantify in tangible results. However, today, innovation plays an important role in the

services sector, as well the companies permanently look for innovative methods to create experiences for their customers.

When talking about innovation in tourism, that is to say, about the sphere of services, we must pay attention to the fact that what distinguishes innovation in tourism from innovation in the production of goods are the characteristics of services, namely, their immaterial, intangible and perishable or unstocking nature. Besides that, we can add the inseparability or simultaneity of production and consumption in service activities. (Nagy, 2010)

Thus, there is the advantage that, in the innovation of tourism services the end consumer must be involved, which greatly contributes to a quicker and a closer-to-reality realization of the wishes expressed by the end consumer, and equally to the improvement of the products or services offered in accordance with consumers' requirements.

2. Literature Review

Rural tourism is hard to define, it should be based on areas that are rural in all their defining aspects and they should include small family businesses that could connect tourists to rural life activities by completing them with eco-tourism and agro-tourism activities. (Dimitrovskia, Todorović & Valjarević, 2012)

Rural tourism is often connected to other activities based on the protection of cultural and natural heritage, on the preservation of traditions and their promotion in the interaction between the local community and tourists. It is connected to the idea of rusticity and authenticity that depend on a natural and preserved environment. (Bouchona & Rawatb, 2016).

Lately, there has been a global crisis of rural areas that are increasingly affected by the urbanization phenomenon. (Biddulph, 2014). This phenomenon is particularly present in highly developed countries, where both traditional agriculture and rural culture have disappeared as a consequence of the rapid globalization. These rural areas were places for relaxation, rest, that is, destinations for rural tourism. (Gao & Wu, 2017).

Evgenia Bitsania and Androniki Kavoura bring into discussion a very important aspect in tourism in their paper 'Host Perceptions of Rural Tour Marketing to Sustainable Tourism in Central Eastern Europe. The Case Study of Istria, Croatia' where they talk about the importance of the local community's attitude towards the tourist activity in the area. It is important that the locals should consider the place where they live attractive, to know its story and to be aware of the beauty of the place so that they can further promote the area. Moreover, the local community

must be aware of the economic importance of tourism and of the benefits that this sector brings along. (Bitsania & Kavoura, 2014). Thus, it is noteworthy that the promoters of an area should also consider the local community as a separate sector with which they should communicate effectively with the purpose of educating them to promote the region.

At the same time, quality rural tourism requires the preservation of traditions and of the rural character, as well as a process of infrastructure modernization and innovation in creating attractive tourist offers. (Matei, 2015). Innovation in tourism must be seen as a permanent, global and dynamic process. (Cosma, Păună, Botă & Fleseriu, 2014).

It is noticed that rural tourism is becoming more and more attractive due to the fact that it offers the tourist the chance to disconnect from the urban agitation and because it offers a healthy environment for relaxation.

Sustainable rural tourism have been attracting researcher interest due to the many benefits it provides for not only host community but also for all stakeholders of rural tourism such as tourists, tour operators and tourism business managers. (Yahya & Teng Yan Fang, 2019).

3. Short Description of the Village Viscri

Romania has got some varied tourist potential and some rich natural and artificial heritage, having the necessary resources for the sustainable development of this sector. (Ispas & Onuț, 2004).

Viscrici is a Saxon village located in the commune Bunești in Brașov County. The village is an example for the development of rural tourism, being visited by thousands of tourists annually.

Since the 2000s, the local community in Viscrici, supported by the Mihai Eminescu Trust Foundation, has managed to develop a concept of tourism that has at its heart the simple things of rural life. Innovation in this case is an incremental one, the locals building and improving what they have had for centuries in order to attract tourists to the area and moreover in order to ensure economic stability to their village.

In Viscrici, the tourist product consists of the careful combination the daily life details of the locals. The product begins as in any type of tourism with accommodation and dining services and it ends with recreational and cultural activities organized in the village.

The cultural heritage of the village includes the Fortified Evangelical Church, the architecture of the village houses, as well as the customs and traditions of the locals. Both the village and the fortified church in Viscri are included in the UNESCO heritage list, and this has contributed to the attraction of tourists in the area. The locals have set up a museum with popular objects and costumes where tourists are told about the history, traditions and culture of the village.



Figure 1: *The Fortified Church - Viscri Village*

For the tourists that love nature, the locals from Viscri have set up bicycle paths. It is also the locals who organize carriage trips around the village, visits to traditional craft workshops, horseback rides and other activities meant to offer a full rural experience to tourists.

Thus, the tourist product that is offered is a complete one. In Viscri, the accommodation units themselves are a special experience for tourists. All guesthouses operate in old houses, restored in such a way as to preserve their architectural authenticity. Food is also traditional and it is made by the village women with products obtained in their household.

The concept of tourism developed at Viscri has at its centre the local community. In order to ensure an efficient and complete distribution of services, the locals have created a distribution system that has two goals: meeting the needs of the client and offering a job for all the locals involved.

By promoting the village, the emphasis is placed on the simplicity of countryside life, a pervasive concept in everything tourism in Viscri means. By using a complex promotional mix, the association and the locals have created an image and an identity for the village, as it gradually became a brand of Romanian rural tourism that attracts tourists from all over the world. Projects such as Viscri Jam, Viscri socks and the traditional workshops are from among those that have contributed to the creation of an identity and have transformed Viscri into a brand.

By developing this rural tourism concept, the Mihai Eminescu Trust Foundation and the locals in Viscri have demonstrated that Romanian villages can attract tourists by creating a stable and sustainable system of tourism by capitalizing on all resources, from the human capital to the traditions, customs and stories of an area. The number of tourists who visit the Viscri village annually reaches 15,000. The village has been included in UNESCO's heritage for 15 years. Recently, a portion of the access road has also been restored, so experts estimate that the number of tourists will be higher. Tourism has exploded in Viscri, the village that has only 500 locals. Last year, almost 50 thousand tourists visited the town. Their number is more than 100 times greater than that of the inhabitants. (<https://www.uncover-romania.com/attractions/unesco-heritage-romania/viscri/>).

4. Research Methodology

In this paper, we have carried out a quantitative marketing study entitled '*Perceptions of Viscri locals on the rural tourism development in their area.*' The research is based on an opinion poll, by the help of a 25 question questionnaire. In this case, the surveyed population is made up of permanent residents of the village Viscri (approximately 420 locals aged 18 to 70). Data collection took place between March and April 2019 at the residence of the subjects. Two of the locals who were present in the household at the time of the application of the questionnaire were questioned, the youngest and the oldest member of the household.

The general objective of this scientific project is to make up a profile of the locals in Viscri, a profile that we can consider as a model in the education and guidance of the local populations from other villages with tourism potential in Romania.

The specific objectives of the research are:

- Knowing the local people's views on the state of tourism development in Viscri and its implications, their degree of appreciation of the innovation in their area's tourist development.
- Establishing the general characteristics of the Viscri locals in as far as their attitudes towards certain aspects of tourism development are concerned, such as: the involvement in tourism activities, their readiness to learn a job, their availability to help develop the necessary tourist infrastructure and get involved in local associations for tourism development.

- Determining the extent to which the locals consider important certain factors in the development of the Viscri tourist destination.

After having collected the information with the help of the questionnaire, the statistical data processing was done with the SSSP (Social Sciences Statistics Package) system. The first step was to define the relevant variables of the research. Afterwards, the response options were encoded in order to facilitate data computerization. The encoding was done according to each question and to the scale used for this question. The SSSP database was completed after all questionnaires were introduced and, in the end, the data were centralized as tables and graphs of frequency.

5. Research Results

Rural tourism creates economic benefits for the area where it is practiced. It is an attractive type of activity that contributes to the survival of local communities and to the preservation of national identity. In this context, there was a need for a quantitative marketing research meant to analyze the perceptions of locals in the village Viscri, a model village for the rural environment, from the point of view of sustainable tourism development.

The research has revealed a lot of information, the most relevant of the issues under consideration being presented below. For better clarity of the obtained results, they are presented in a centralized manner according to the specific objectives of the research:

To the question ‘What do you think attracts tourists to Viscri?’ the statistics of answers show that 46% of the respondents state that the tourists choose this village because there are no such villages in their residential areas, 25% of the respondents consider that the tourists are attracted by 'the traditional village', 16% consider that the tourists might be attracted by the ‘prince Charles story, and 13% of them appreciate that what attracts tourists to come to the village is ‘nature and tranquillity.’ (Figure 2)

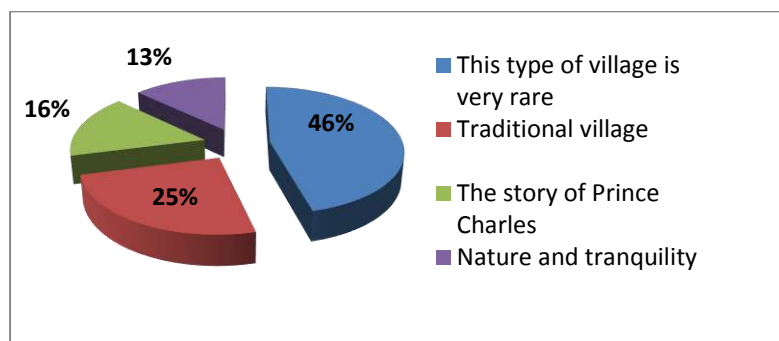


Figure 2: *What do you Think Attracts Tourists to Viscri?*

Similarly, as far as the opinion of the locals about their village as a model of tourism innovation and the extent to which they feel proud of their membership to this destination, the following responses were outlined: most of them were given for the ‘different’ variant, representing 80% of the total of responses to this question. On the next places, the answers are ‘innovative’ with 16% and ‘new’ with 4%. (Figure 3). We observe that an acceptable percentage consider that the village Viscri is an innovative model.

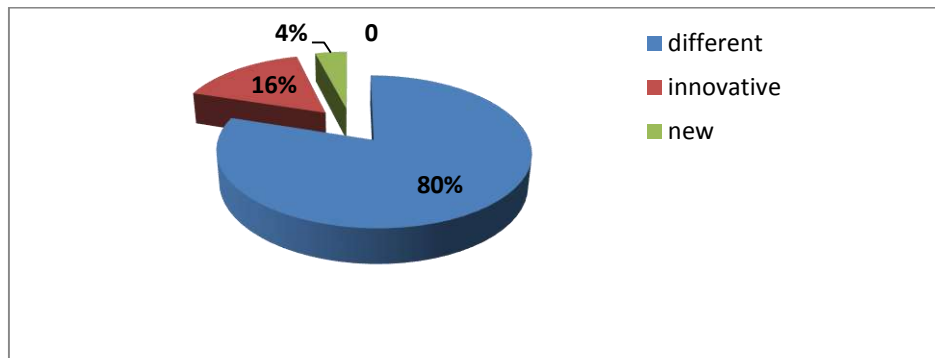


Figure 3: *How do you consider that the Tourists perceive this Village Model?*

Being asked to express their opinion on the way in which tourism in Viscri has developed lately, the analysis showed that, at the level of the population surveyed, the average of the evaluations equals 4.66 on a scale from 1 to 5. (1 = ‘Not good’ to 5 = ‘Very good’).

The second objective of the research is to shape out a profile of the locals in Viscri from the point of view of their attitudes to some important aspects for tourism development.

As for the involvement of the locals in tourism activities, the research results show that 76% of the respondents carry out tourist activities during the season. The activities they are involved in are ‘food services’ 33.3%, ‘tourist accommodation’ 28.1%, ‘traditional product sales’ 22.2%, ‘tour guide’ 5.9%, ‘clothing’ 4% and ‘other activities’ 5.9%.

When analyzing the availability of locals to learn a job, it has been noticed that 49% of them are willing to learn a job in the field of tourism in order to practice in Viscri. Simultaneously, the research has indicated that there is a link between the respondents' age and their openness to learn a new job.

The local population in Viscri has also been analyzed in terms of their availability to create the necessary tourist infrastructure and to get involved in local associations. Thus, 76% of

the sample members have traditionally refurbished houses and 44% of the sample members were at the time of research part in an association of the locals.

For the locals to be able to get involved in tourism, vocational re-training courses were organized in Viscri and projects were implemented to support those who wanted to develop small family businesses. The local population by means of these projects and courses has been able to understand that the tourist development of the area is beneficial for all the members of the society. The results of the survey also show that the locals in Viscri are very open to participate in the development of the area, most of them have traditional houses and they get involved in tourist activities. Moreover, there is a readiness of the local people to learn and get involved in associations of the locals.

The third objective in the research was to establish the extent to which the locals consider important certain factors in the development of Viscri tourist destination. Thus, the majority of the respondents has considered that the involvement of the MET foundation has played a decisive role in the development and promotion of tourism in Viscri.

At the level of the surveyed population, as for the support granted by the Mihai Eminescu Trust Foundation in the development of tourism in the area, the average appreciation is 4.30 points on a scale from 1 = 'Totally unimportant' to 5 = 'Very important'. In order to ensure a permanent and sustainable development of an area, it is necessary to have an entity responsible for the management of the developed projects and for the implementation of an integrated marketing strategy that effectively communicates with the target audience.

Among the limits of the research we consider that the results are relatively particular and difficult to generalize. The closed questions in the present quantitative research have limited possible answers. Considering these limits, however, the quantitative research carried out is considered to have achieved its objectives.

6. Conclusions

Innovation marketing is one of the new specialties of contemporary marketing; it encompasses all the activities, strategies by which an organization manages to offer to its public a consistent and quality buying experience, thus succeeding in being different from the competitors in the eyes of the consumer. (Dovleac & Bălăşescu, 2012).

Thus, by developing a new concept of tourism organization, the locals in Viscri have proved that Romanian villages can attract tourists by creating a stable and sustainable system of

tourism by capitalizing all resources, from human capital to traditions, the customs and the stories of an area. The importance of the local population's attitude in tourism is crucial. The way in which it relates to tourism activity can increase or stop the development of Romanian rural areas, especially since in our country the idea of a community involved in joint projects is often rejected. This model of innovation in tourism can be valid for any rural environment, not only for Romanian villages.

A successful example where a lot of locals got involved is the 'Viscri Socken' project, well known both in the area and abroad. In this project, 90 women weave wool socks and felt slippers which they sell to tourists at prices ranging from 15 to 40 lei (the socks) and between 70 and 110 lei (the slippers). The locals opened a shop near the fortified church where they sell these products, and the way in which the women in the association get their money is completely innovative. Each pair has the name of the woman who made it and the number of the house where she lives. Thus, at the end of the day, the one who sold the socks knows whom to take the money to, and the tourist is induced the feeling of utility and contribution to the welfare of the local community. The involvement of the local population is very important in the decision making and implementation of development projects. (Girivati, Hava, Pamungkas, Iyati & Hidayat, 2019).

This paper may contribute to the development of an innovative tourism model that has the local population at the core. This represents the main element that generates the synergy of the whole innovative tourism model. Simultaneously, the data from the research can be used as a starting point for the tourism development of other villages in our country, but also as a direction for the education and involvement of the locals from any area with tourism potential.

Our future research will aim to analyze the opinions and attitudes of tourists coming to Viscri, how they see this new concept of tourism, what they appreciate most and what suggestions they have regarding the activities carried out in the Viscri.

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