

## COMPETITIVENESS OF NEW OUTDOOR TOURIST AREAS: A CASE STUDY OF THE RESIDENTIAL REGION OF A MINORITY GROUP

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents certain aspects of modern tourism management of outdoor destinations. Destination management now includes programmes that reinforce the competitive capabilities of a destination by taking into consideration both the demand and the supply sides of tourist services. After a brief description of pertinent international examples, a case study of a potential tourist region in Greece is presented, with particular emphasis on the perspectives of a resident religious minority. The paper emphasizes community involvement in planning practices, and how this can influence sustainable tourism development in association with local and regional government authorities.

*Keywords: case study analysis, community involvement, competitiveness of new outdoors tourist areas, Greece, internal image analysis, minorities and tourism development, sustainable destination management.*

### 1 CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND TOURISM IMAGE ANALYSIS

According to Sirgy and Su [1], the focus of tourism research in recent decades has been on the analysis of the image of the products and services of tourism. Through such analyses, the purchasing behaviour of consumers can be examined. Before the 1980s, research was limited to the analysis of such topics as the purchase object, the time of purchase, the place of purchase and the manner of purchase. The subjective nature of the psychological factors involved in such matters and the difficulties in measuring them with standard models of analysis have led researchers to avoid analysing problems related to psychological questions, such as why visitors buy [2].

An alternative approach has been the psychographic approach to the views of customers, which includes image analysis. According to Krippendorf [3] the offered product of tourism includes the anthropological factors involved in promoting it. These factors include lifestyle, customs, traditions and more general social factors.

Modern marketing now incorporates the concept of ‘internal customers’, and posits that they influence the quality of rendered services. In the case of a tourist destination, local inhabitants can be understood as ‘internal customers’ whose *expectations* of quality can be different from their *perceptions* of quality with respect to the promotion of their region [4, 5, 6]. As Grönroos [7] observed:

One of the effects which is important to management is that image has an internal impact on employees as well as the external effect on customers. The less clear and distinct the image is, the more this may affect employee attitudes toward the organization as an employer. This, in turn, may have a negative influence on the employees’ performance and thus on customer relationships and quality. On the other hand, a positive image, say, of a firm with excellent service, communicates clear values internally and may thus strengthen positive attitudes toward the business among employees. Such a firm easily attracts good employees, too.

## 2 DESTINATION MARKETING MANAGEMENT AND THEORY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATION

The long-term perspective of destinations (especially those with attractive natural characteristics) must be based on the tailoring of an image that is environmentally friendly. To attract investors who are sensitive to environmental quality and sustainable development, the needs of local inhabitants involved in private enterprise should be met while developing programmes that support and maintain the cultural inheritance of the local communities. In addition, the expectations of various groups of citizens, tourists and professionals in the private sector must be taken into account [8, 9]. According to McCool *et al.* [9], the viability of a tourism destination must be understood in terms of an ongoing discussion among the three main groups who are involved in decision-making about the tourism development of a region—the relevant planning offices, the representatives of the tourism industry and the local inhabitants of the specific geographical area in question.

The local inhabitants' understanding of the image of a destination is an important element to be considered in the process of developing an overall image for the destination. The inhabitants' participation in the rendering of services is of vital importance in shaping the final perception and image formed by visitors. The lifestyles, attitudes, interests and activities of local inhabitants all influence the broader image of destinations. Groups of citizens can contribute to the promotion of the qualities and advantages of new tourist destinations.

The local inhabitants of a region can thus affect the development of an 'internal image' of a tourist destination, and this has a direct effect on efforts to develop an image of the destination that is externally and internally coherent [10, 11, 12, 13, 14]. The local inhabitants' perceptions of the destination can influence their future behaviour if the perceived image is rejected by them as being different from their everyday life experiences [15]. In turn, the inhabitants' behaviour (in terms of their happiness with their lifestyle and their courtesy towards visitors) is an important element in determining visitors' perceptions of the destination. In addition, a viable development strategy for the region is more likely to be successful if the desired lifestyle of inhabitants and their local culture is left undisturbed [16, 17, 18], and if the image of the destination that is promoted and communicated is supported by the inhabitants [19].

Research that analyses the images and perceptions of the people who inhabit a particular geographical region can be used to complement quantitative research on the appropriate planning to be adopted with respect to infrastructure. Such complementary research increases the likelihood of planning applications being successful, improves the success of marketing strategies (e.g. the formation of an image for the destination through selected promotion strategies) and encourages inhabitants' participation in the decision-making process [20, 21].

It is thus apparent that, before undertaking a financial analysis of a tourism project in a specific geographical location and before deciding upon the broad nature of the final tourism product, emphasis should be placed upon coordinating all pertinent actors [22]. In particular, efforts should be made to coordinate significant local actors and the wider local community [23]. This process can be regarded as an extension of the Theory of Social Representations (TSR), which places great emphasis on the creation and diffusion of knowledge among several groups in society [15]. According to Moscovici [24, 25], 'TSR is a network of concepts and images [or] a relation between the signifier and what is signified'. This is relevant to destination management because TSR suggests that the image of the tourist destination should be commonly accepted by the representatives of the local society.

The development of tourist activities and the competitiveness of a region seem to be affected by the 'optical records' that are impressed in the minds of the members of the local community and those who use tourist services [26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32]. 'Optical records' are images that affect the competitiveness of the destinations because they are related to the predisposition of visitors to come to a destination (and to revisit it) and to the level of complaints about the destination [33]. In many cases,

the image of a destination is conveyed through the communication of individual people in various words, gestures, drawings, visual symbols and other images [34]. A strong image of both the inner and the outer environment of the destination supports the process of social representation—as shown by the successful practices adopted by various international tourist destinations (e.g. Buchschachen in Austria).

In what follows, this paper presents a summary of social representation practices. The paper then presents a case study of differences in the perceptions, images and ‘optical records’ of representatives of the local community and market players in the possible tourist development of a mountainous country region in Greece populated with a significant Muslim minority.

### 3 INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATION

Social representation is an important element in programmes of tourist development of specific geographical areas. It is considered to be especially important in realizing development plans that strengthen the viability and competitiveness of tourist destinations. TSR practices can be observed in a variety of forms. These include [35, 36]:

- local strategic plans of tourist development—as in Austria (Buchschachen), Nepal, Uganda, the Himalayas, Switzerland (St Martin), Kenya, and Nigeria (Abuja);
- peripheral development plans—as in the Czech Republic and Canada;
- national development plans—as in Mexico and Fiji;
- local programmes for creating information centres for tourists (as in Mexico) and wider networks for informing visitors and professionals (as in Vietnam);
- programmes for protecting the cultural and natural heritage—as in New Zealand;
- programmes for creating joint usage—such as food production and accommodation promotion (as in Dadia, Pelio and the Prespes area of Greece).

To take the last example, women’s associations were formed in the region of Dadia (Greece) during 1994–1998. These associations aimed to improve women’s incomes, maintain the cultural inheritance and form a common touristic awareness. Women worked together in the production of foods and the promotion of accommodation. There is a forest resource in this region that is particularly interesting in terms of flora and fauna. During 1993–1997, loans were provided to similar women’s associations in another geographical region of northern Greece—in the area of the Prespes lakes. These loans were to promote quality cooperative schemes of a similar nature to those pursued by the women’s associations in Dadia [35]. In central Greece, in the region of Pilio, a project under the aegis of ‘ECOSERT’ (European Cooperation for Sustainable Environmental Regional Development through Tourism) has been financed by Recite II and the Communal Program of Inter-regional Cooperation, with the participation of the Prefecture Authority of Magnisia, the Municipality of Chester (UK) and the province of Avellino (Italy) [37].

Similar cooperation among participants can include professionals and local government authorities (e.g. Buchschachen in Austria, Budongo Forest in Uganda, Ghale Kharka Siklis in Nepal and Hindukush in Himalaya), local groups of people or interests (women’s organizations as in Dadia, Pelio and the Prespes region of Greece), tourist agents (Kenya and Wales) and various community-based committees (Australia, Mexico, Mongolia and Pakistan).

In such cooperative exercises, the participation of the local communities might be rendered ineffective as a result of negative influences arising from institutional, socio-cultural, administrative, environmental and financial issues, or as a result of the nature of the relationship between the local public administrator and various private individuals and investors [38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44].

As previously noted, the success of tourist destinations is also influenced by the image or the general perception created in the internal and external environment of the destination. This, in turn, is related to the forms of communication, ages and education of the people [45], as well as the intimate attributes of the local residents of developing familiarity, gender, incomes and marketing factors (such as recommendations, attractiveness and uniqueness of the 'optical themes') [46]. It is also affected by the simplicity and clarity of the contents of the touristic plan [47], the level of cooperation between the local government and the tourist agents [48], the form of marketing implementation and realization [49], and the level of coordination of the government agencies and the local community [50].

## 4 CASE STUDY

### 4.1 Methodology

The objective of the present research was to determine the conditions prevailing in a mountainous destination in Greece where the Pomakes of the prefecture of Xanti reside. The word 'conditions' is used here to describe the level of convergence or divergence among the perceptions of various groups with respect to the potential touristic promotion of the region.

The degree of 'attractiveness' was examined in relation to the natural, cultural and artificial characteristics of the region that could be used for a future touristic promotion. The perceptions formed by the inhabitants were examined, along with those of local authorities, travel agencies and potential visitors. A standardized research questionnaire was used for this purpose. The research findings are presented below; they include the following specific views:

- the perceptions of the local administration in the examined region with respect to natural, cultural and artificial factors that affect the touristic promotion of the area;
- the perceptions of Muslim inhabitants in relation to factors raised by the local authorities, and the perceptions of the younger generation through an analysis of paintings produced by pupils in the Elementary School of Glafki in relation to potential touristic promotion of their region;
- the perceptions of the market, i.e. the perceptions of travel agencies and potential visitors in relation to the characteristics expressed by the previous groups as important elements for the touristic promotion of the region.

A case study is presented below. The case describes a mountain destination in Greece and the defining of a common image and perception among administrative actors and inhabitants with a view to promoting a sustainable tourism scheme in this mountain destination.

### 4.2 Background information on the study area

The case study involved the mountainous country region of Xanthi in Greece where a religious Muslim minority, the Pomakes, resides. The first step was to define the characteristics of the geographical region that affect tourist development and competitiveness. The research was based on the hypothesis that a region's tourism can be enhanced by using the attractive natural and cultural characteristics of the area and by providing appropriate marketing needs—both internal (preparatory tutoring of inhabitants and businessmen) and external (informing and attracting groups of clients, provision of promotional information, and provision of appropriate infrastructure in terms of accommodation, roads and services) [51]. Data on these characteristics were collected and analysed from secondary sources (official government studies of the Greek Periphery, the prefecture, the Ministry of Development) and primary sources (local government agencies, residents, travel agencies and visitors).

The analysis of these data focused on the touristic planning for the region [51]. This included analyses of:

- cultural resources such as local history, archaeology sites, folklore and cultural activities (dances, music, lifestyle and customs of the inhabitants);
- natural resources such as water resources, morphological features (gorges, slopes, mountains, caves, springs, therapeutic mineral springs) and flora and fauna;
- artificial resources such as museums, parking areas, information kiosks, medical facilities, tele-communications, postal services, accommodation, entertainment and sporting facilities.

These analyses provided a basis for in-depth interviews with six inhabitants of the region. Four were representatives of the local authorities (representatives of the Municipality of Myki, the Community of Satres, the Community of Thermes and the Community of Kotyli). The remaining two were owners of coffeehouses in Sminthi and Kotili. These interviews aimed to define convergent views on the natural, cultural and artificial factors considered to be important for the touristic promotion of the region.

The factors that emerged from these interviews were included in the instrument that was used to rate the research's collection of primary data from the Muslims of the region. This rating instrument was a standardized questionnaire with mainly closed questions covering 41 variables (see Table 1).

The questionnaire contained 35 questions, and respondents were asked to rate their responses on a five-item Likert-type scale (0 = 'absolutely insignificant feature' to 4 = 'particularly important feature'). The remaining questions related to the sample demographics and to potential factors that could possibly affect the touristic promotion of the region according to the inhabitants' perceptions (but not included in the questionnaire).

A similar rating instrument was created for market interests (travel agencies and visitors) using the same 35 questions. In this case, the research focused on the factors already identified as important by the local inhabitants in the previously conducted research.

Following the completion of interviews, data were analysed using a statistical processing package (SPSS 10.0). This allowed the detection of variations among the perceptions of the various surveyed groups (local authorities, inhabitants and market). A theoretical model was then developed to support the creation of common touristic awareness and image.

#### 4.3 Perceptions of management agencies

The sample included representatives of four local government agencies and local businesses. According to the representatives of local government, the tourist development of the region was significantly affected by natural and cultural factors, and even more significantly by artificial factors.

Using a map of the region, the respondents then located and identified particular regions of tourism importance, as they understood them. The map analysis showed two mountainous areas (areas of Kotyli and Thermes) as being most frequently selected by respondents, followed by four other areas of importance (Pachni, Sminthi, Centaur and Medusa).

In addition, 15 natural characteristics of the region, 11 cultural characteristics and 7 artificial characteristics were identified. The important natural characteristics that could promote the region were: herb tea, therapeutic mineral baths, two local caves, flora and fauna, hunting, water springs, copse, landscape with rivers, rocks with eagles' nests, wild goats, and bears in the gorge. The 11 cultural characteristics included: traditional watermill, footpaths, three temples or mosques, traditional buildings, traditional oven, library, rock paintings (representing the Persian god, Mythras), traditional flourmill and folklore costumes. The 10 artificial characteristics of the region mentioned by the representatives

Table 1: Region's characteristics as expressed by the members of the local authorities and rated by the inhabitants in terms of their appropriateness for touristic promotion of the region where the inhabitants reside.

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*Region's characteristics*

- Natural
  1. Natural beauty of the landscape
  2. Climate
  3. Caves
  4. Rocks in impressive formations and bird nests
  5. Wild goats and bears
  6. Potable water
  7. Forestry areas
  8. Tobacco growing and small farms
  9. Rivers and natural riverside areas
- Cultural
  1. Traditional mills and traditional buildings
  2. Traditional bridges
  3. Historical, religious temples
  4. Writings on rocks (archaeological findings)
  5. Traditional ovens
  6. Historical points
  7. Libraries and printed matter related to the culture of a region
  8. Folklore elements
- Artificial
  1. Taverns and restaurants
  2. Hostels, rented studios and hotels
  3. Sport fields
  4. Health centres
  5. Telecommunications
  6. Post service
  7. Parking areas
  8. Therapeutic baths and facilities
- Actions
  1. Herb gathering
  2. Baths in therapeutic springs
  3. Hunting
  4. Observation of nature, landscape, animals
  5. Hiking in traditional streets and mountain paths
  6. Visits to religious temples, mosques
  7. Study and examination of the local history and visits to archaeological sites
  8. Sports
  9. Visits to fields and cultivations
  10. Good food and drinks

*Open questions detecting potential problems*

- Problems related to the touristic development of a region
- Perception of the inhabitants for a future touristic development in the region

*Demographics*

- Sex
- Place of residence
- Age
- Profession
- Permanent resident of a region

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of local authorities were: taverns, hostels for hunters, a modern soccer field, health centre, telecommunications organization, post office, trout farming (and taverns), hostel, rented studios and facilities associated with hot springs.

#### 4.4 Perceptions of residents

The research on perceptions of residents was based on standardized questionnaires that were completed in the homes of Muslim inhabitants or at common meeting places of the heads of the families (headmen, leaders), i.e. in cafés of three municipalities (Sminthi, Oreó, Glayki). Two researchers of the municipality of Miki also conducted in-depth interviews in houses and the cafés.

In all, 198 fully answered questionnaires were gathered. The responses were coded and used in a statistical program for elaborating data (SPSS/win 10.0). In the questionnaire, some important characteristics for the enhancement of tourism in the destination, according to the local administrative agencies, were included. A Likert-type scale was again used (0 = 'very unimportant' to 4 = 'very important characteristic'). The characteristics that resulted in higher mean scores from the region's residents were: (i) natural beauty (mean score: 3.2); climate (mean score: 3.0); drinkable water (mean score: 3.1); the forest area (mean score: 3.0); rivers and tributaries (mean score: 3.0); health centres (mean score: 3.3); telecommunications (mean score: 3.1); churches and mosques (mean score: 3.0). A low marking (mean score: 1.7) was expressed for the characteristic of 'hunting'.

The residents then expressed their perceptions about every characteristic's suitability for enhancement of tourism, again using a Likert-type scale (0 = 'absolutely unsuitable' to 4 = 'absolutely suitable'). None of the characteristics registered a mean score of 3 or above. The highest mean scores were for: wild goats and bears (mean score: 2.1); libraries and press (mean score: 2.0); taverns and restaurants (mean score: 2.1); rented rooms and hotels (mean score: 2.4); exercise courses (mean score: 2.3); hot springs and facilities (mean score: 2.3); visits to fields and farms (mean score: 2.0). Lower scores (below 1) were recorded for the following characteristics: natural beauty (mean score: 0.7) and climate (mean score: 0.9).

At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents answered two general questions about: (i) the most important problems that they faced; (ii) the prospects for local tourism growth and the region's competitiveness. In answer to the first question, of the 183 respondents, the condition and organization of the local roads was mentioned by 38%, followed by deficiency of various infrastructure (24.8%), general government policies (31.8%), deficiencies in lodgings (14%) and lack of residents' education (8.2%). With respect to the second question about the future prospects for growth of tourism, 34% of 184 respondents stated that future tourism growth was impossible. However, 40.2% believed that, under certain conditions, tourism growth was possible. Another 20% of the respondents were uncertain.

In parallel with the research on the residents' perceptions, another study was conducted on perceptions of students at the region's primary school in Glauki. The research took the form of sketches or drawings, and these were analysed in accordance with the patterns of analysis of Pearce *et al.* [52]. The analysis showed that 48 students had visions of growth that mainly included natural characteristics and artificial characteristics. Cultural characteristics (such as museums, archaeological sites, libraries, demonstrations and festivals) did not feature in the children's perceptions.

#### 4.5 Perceptions of tourist offices and visitors

Groups of university students (escorted by the research supervisor) interviewed tourist offices in Thessaloniki. In all, 28 fully answered questionnaires (which contained questions on regional characteristics) were gathered and coded in a similar manner to that described above for residents.

A total of 17 characteristics had a mean score of 3 or more. The following received the better scores—natural beauty (mean score: 3.7); rented rooms and hotels (mean score: 3.5); forest areas (mean score: 3.4). ‘Hunting’ again received a low score (mean score: 1.1). With respect to the importance of the characteristics, respondents from tourist offices were asked to respond on a scale from 0% (‘non-important characteristic’) to 100% (‘especially important characteristic’). The natural characteristics registered a mean score of 94%, cultural characteristics scored 85%, activities scored 83% and artificial characteristics scored 80%.

Research also took place at the Macedonia Airport of Thessaloniki. In this study, 200 visitors answered similar standardized questionnaires. A lower evaluation was again expressed for the characteristic of ‘hunting’ (mean score: 0.9). With respect to the importance of various categories of characteristics, a scale from 0% (‘non-important characteristic’) to 100% (‘especially important characteristic’) was used. Natural characteristics had a mean score of 89%, cultural characteristics had a score of 80%, activities scored 70% and artificial characteristics scored 64%.

#### 4.6 Analysis of results

On the basis of the above research, a model was created to support regional tourism and development programmes in a grounded and effective manner. From the evidence supplied by the local government agencies, the model emphasizes the natural peculiarities of the region while diminishing the importance of hunting activities. Social participation is supported as a result of the investigation of the citizens’ views. In addition, an analysis of the visions of the adult and younger citizens of the region provides further support for the promotion of the region’s natural characteristics. The case study also demonstrates that training programmes would contribute positively to tourism enhancement. This was shown in the declaration of 34 (mainly young) citizens who expressed their desire to participate in training programmes and involvement in the financing of tourist projects (mainly creation or renovation of accommodation for visitors). In addition, the perception of younger people seems to be that the competitiveness of their region at the level of the lower middle-class tourist businesses would be assisted by their participation in European financial programmes.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

To achieve sustainable development of tourist destinations, development procedures should adopt a methodology that aims to promote the *internal image* of destinations. This methodology should take into consideration the current needs of inhabitants while simultaneously incorporating the planning policies of local authorities with respect to the development of the destination’s competitiveness. This should all be based on the unique characteristics of each area and should constitute an attractive proposition for potential visitors and market players (such as travel agencies). In developing such a methodology, local and regional government authorities are responsible for managing information and for creating a common awareness in the wider regions for which they are responsible.

The procedure should address two important questions:

- Is the programme for promotion of regional tourism as suggested by administrative bodies in accordance with the views of local inhabitants and professionals?
- Is the programme suggested by administrative bodies both feasible and sustainable?

A positive answer to both questions increases the likelihood that the suggested programme will be supported by the inhabitants and that it will be successful, because it will be in accordance with the market’s assessment of positive touristic characteristics in general and in the region in particular.



The procedure for the development of an internal image requires knowledge of the inhabitants' views. The collection of views using questionnaires administered by independent bodies (e.g. business consultants or research centres) can assist by improving the analysis of the perceptions and suggestions of various population groups (such as local inhabitants). This ensures their support and informs local authorities of potential weaknesses in their plans, e.g. inhabitants' views that the development of the region might destroy its unique natural and cultural characteristics. This can also facilitate the provision of information about the internal image through training seminars and similar programmes organized by local and regional authorities with a view to the formation of a shared image and awareness of tourism for the region. The participation of minority population groups in the decision-making process helps them to understand that the touristic promotion of their region is in their interests. The stages of a suggested methodology are presented in Fig. 1.

As can be seen from the numbered steps in Fig. 1, the local government or the regional administration examines the ideas of local government authorities before drawing up a plan for the touristic promotion of their region. Emphasis is laid on the natural, cultural and artificial characteristics of the region. Business consultants and other specialized professionals cooperate with local governments to examine the characteristics perceived as important for the touristic promotion of the region and to prepare a suitable questionnaire and rating instrument. Data are collected from adult inhabitants and future inhabitants (school students). Characteristics that are rated as important are noted to ascertain the convergence or divergence of perceptions between the local inhabitants and the local government. In addition, alternative solutions and characteristics concerning the touristic promotion of the region

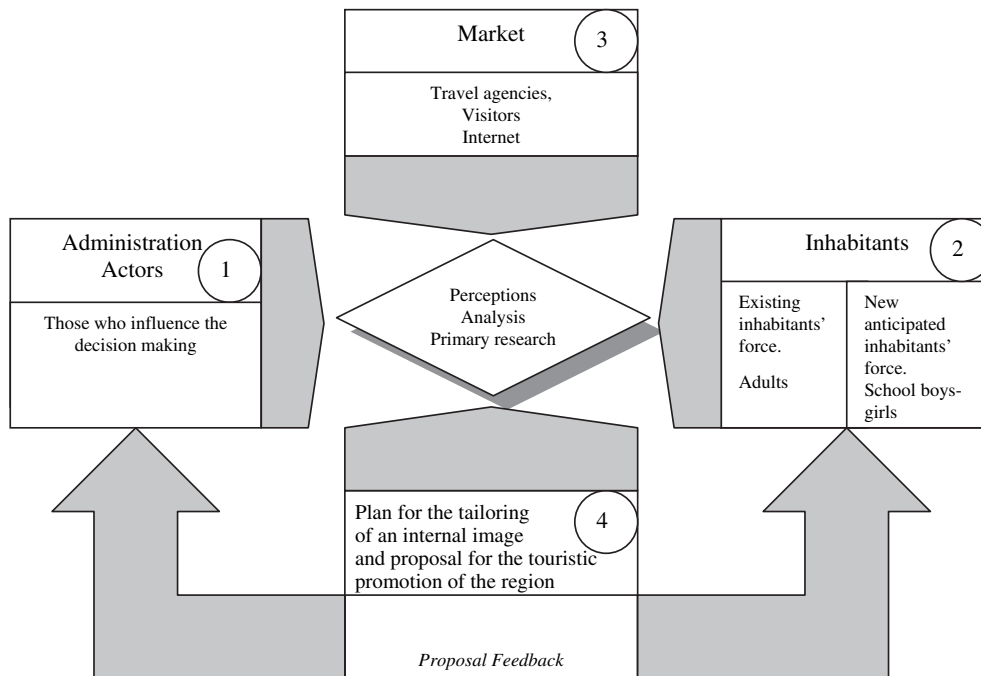


Figure 1: The analysis stages of the suggested methodology so as to present an internal image that is also accepted by the inhabitants, in the light of promoting and manifesting a viable destination. The numbers 1, 2, 3 and 4 correspond to the staging of phases following the perceptions analysis.

are obtained using open-ended questions. The views of administration authorities and inhabitants are examined by market representatives using the same instrument that was used for collecting and rating primary data. Results are analysed and conclusions are reached at the level of the local government or the regional authorities regarding the convergence or divergence of the perceptions of the representatives of local authorities, inhabitants and the market.

Viable policies are then defined. Agreement among administration authorities, inhabitants and the market ensures a more competitive basis for the destination with the crucial support of inhabitants who constitute an important element of the specific tourism product.

Feedback can be received on the final recommendations of the pertinent local authorities. This feedback can be obtained in common meeting places, coffeehouses or schools, as well as in local government offices, to ensure that possible differences are detected and policies adjusted accordingly.

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