

Chapter 8

Restaurant Online Reputation and Destination Competitiveness: Insight into TripAdvisor Data

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Abstract

Building on a TripAdvisor data for five Mediterranean destinations, namely, Greece, Croatia, Italy, France and Spain, this study analyses the constituents of restaurants' online reputation and their interrelation with destination competitiveness, in particular two Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) pillars, namely, Prioritisation of Travel and Tourism and Price Competitiveness.

The analysis has revealed that restaurants' online reputation is positively influenced by two factors, namely, *Core elements*, i.e. cooking, service and price-quality ratio, and *Price*. Furthermore, the restaurants' online reputation does not influence destination competitiveness (TTCI) directly, but indirectly throughout its main constituents, i.e. service and price. Price is the only variable with significant influence on overall TTCI. Within the sample of these destinations, Balkan countries, i.e. Greece and Croatia, perform very well in terms of their restaurants' online reputation. On the other hand, considering the overall TTCI rating, their competitive positions are substantially lower than those of Italy, France and Spain.

The study provides new insights into the relationship between gastronomic offer and destination competitiveness, and valuable practical implications for destination and hospitality management. Moreover, this study addresses various gaps in existing research on this topic. Specifically, it validates the reputation elements presented online using TripAdvisor data and analyses the impact of electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) not only as the outcome variable of other constructs, as is the case in the literature, but also as a central construct of the analysis. In doing so, it extends current research on this topic and fills the gap regarding the inclusion of the

supply-side stakeholder perspective, which has long been recognised as necessary in any attempts to measure competitiveness.

Keywords: Online reputation; destination competitiveness; TripAdvisor; gastronomy; tourism development; Western Balkans

Introduction

Destination competitiveness is defined as the destination's ability to provide high-quality travel experiences to tourists and high quality of life to residents based on the proper management of identified tourism resources. Many studies have analysed the competitiveness of tourism destinations (Abreu Novais, Ruhanen, & Arcodia, 2018; Andrades & Dimanche, 2017; Cîrstea, 2014; Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008; Kova, Dragi, & Mileti, 2017; Park & Jang, 2014), given that it has been identified as the indicator of the destination's success (Buhalis, 2000; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Mazanec, Wöber, & Zins, 2007). A general model of destination competitiveness, proposed by Crouch and Ritchie (1999) and Ritchie and Crouch (2003), stresses the importance of resource endowments for destination competitiveness and for the destination's capacity to deploy these resources to attract tourists. The initial model (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999) consisted of 36 proposed destination competitiveness attributes clustered into five main groups. Dwyer and Kim (2003) proposed the Integrated Destination Competitiveness Model that builds upon Porter's (1990) diamond framework, while the World Economic Forum (WEF) introduced a widely cited and often used Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI). Within the vast literature on destination competitiveness, the relative emphasis has been on destination resources rather than on management activity (Armenski, Dwyer, Mihalič, Knežević Cvelbar, & Dragičević, 2014). Although the literature highlights a substantial number of indicators or drivers of destination competitiveness, limited availability of real-time data hampers current understanding of this phenomenon. Additionally, the changes occurring, especially those related to the social and demographic (Millennials and Gen Z¹), and technological environments, emphasise the need for continuous and devoted destination management to sustain competitive advantage. Thus, an insight into the consumer perspective is needed for tourism destinations to be able to deploy policies aimed at achieving optimal tourism development and ensuring that hospitality businesses can meet visitors' expectations. This study focuses on online reputation, a complex construct that reflects the dynamics of modern society (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2012), and its interrelation with tourism destination competitiveness.

Online reputation is closely linked with mass media because the latter are among the most critical sources of mediated experiences of masses of people and play a significant role in informing and shaping socially shared value frameworks (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2012). In the context of this chapter, online

reputation is seen as an electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) construct, i.e. any positive or negative statement or rating shared by a former customer about the product consumed that is made available to a multitude of people via the internet (adapted definition of eWOM from Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Studies (Yen & Tang, 2019) have shown that the attitudes towards a service consumed may be influenced directly by first-order (e.g. product or service attributes) and second-order predictors (e.g. perceived service quality and satisfaction). However, further empirical research is needed to validate the reputational elements presented online. In particular, the field of persuasive technologies can contribute to weighting the elements presented online (e.g. the internal factors influencing the overall rating of a specific hotel or restaurant, such as price and service attributes). Thus, a weighting system should be realised in order to understand how vital each reputation element is for prospective travellers during their encounter with online content and their decision-making process.

Recent studies have demonstrated the prominence of online reputation and eWOM in travellers' decision-making (Mariani, Borghi, & Gretzel, 2019; Yen & Tang, 2019); therefore, it is reasonable to analyse its potential influence on a destination and its competitiveness. In this study, we analyse the sophisticated online reputation–destination competitiveness construct. In particular, the focus is on factors influencing restaurants' online reputations and their interrelation with destination competitiveness. This study delivers a comparative analysis of leading Mediterranean destinations, namely, Greece, Croatia, Italy, France and Spain, based on TripAdvisor data. The results provide new insights into the relationship between gastronomic offer and destination competitiveness, and valuable practical implications for destination and hospitality management.

eWOM and Destination Competitiveness

Electronic Word of Mouth

Prospective tourists have at their disposal numerous and diverse options in all phases of their trips. Coupled with the intangible and perishable nature of tourism products, choosing tourism services requires time and effort; thus, travellers often engage in extensive information search before they travel (Ballantyne, Hughes, & Ritchie, 2009). An essential element for reducing the risk and uncertainty in this process is the testimony of others, which serves as the most influential source of information when choosing an experiential good or service (De Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2013). These testimonies are significant since tourism products cannot be easily evaluated without first-hand experience (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Others' testimonies are a form of WOM defined as the 'oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, product, or service offered for sale' (Arndt, 1967, as cited in Yen & Tang, 2019). As an informal communication among consumers, it fundamentally differs from the communication initiated by merchants and

marketers in that it is not only positive (Chang & Wang, 2019; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009); thus, it is often perceived as more credible (Ahmad & Laroche, 2017; Li, Xu, Tang, Wang, & Li, 2018; Trusov et al., 2009).

Advances in and the widespread usage of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has prompted eWOM that could be defined as

...any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet. (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004)

Channels of eWOM are numerous, including e-mail, instant messaging, websites, blogs and virtual communities, newsgroups, chatrooms, product review sites, bulletin board systems, industry portal discussion areas and online forums (Wang, 2015). Prospective customers search for online trip-related information, which affect their behaviour and decision-making concerning product purchase (Chang & Wang, 2019; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Williams, Inversini, Ferdinand, & Buhalis, 2017). As eWOM can reach a much wider audience and is less limited by geography and time, it has a stronger effect on businesses (Yen & Tang, 2019). As opposed to traditional WOM, eWOM posted online can be seen as public opinion that can be retrieved and used as answers to an implicit survey (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2012) and, thus, measured by marketers (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Considering that eWOM is relatively easily accessible and cost-effective (Wang, 2015), it is increasingly used in both market research and travel-related decision-making processes (Marine-Roig, 2019).

Web 2.0 has enabled consumers to share their attitudes and opinions. The result of such sharing is user-generated content (UGC), often in the form of online travel reviews (OTRs), which is the most accessible and prevailing form of eWOM in modern, online tourism (De Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2013). eWOM was found to influence the tourist decision-making in all critical travel-related aspects, i.e. choice of destination, accommodation, attractions and eating places (Fileri & McLeay, 2014; Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012; Ganzaroli, De Noni, & van Baalen, 2017; Sparks, Perkins, & Buckley, 2013). Primarily driven by travel-related forums, tweets, Facebook posts, multiple social media, online photographs, travel blogs and OTRs, UGC is becoming an increasingly important data source in tourism and hospitality research (Li et al., 2018; Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2018). The growing volume of such studies has been the subject of several reviews in recent years (Hlee, Lee, & Koo, 2018; Kwok, Xie, & Richards, 2017; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015; Mariani et al., 2019; Schuckert et al., 2015; Serra Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Yang, Park, & Hu, 2018). The insights from such reviews reveal that most studies are focused on the accommodation sector (Kwok et al., 2017; Marine-Roig, 2019; Schuckert et al., 2015) or destination (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015; Marine-Roig, 2019). Studies addressing restaurants are less frequent, constituting 12–18% of the total number of relevant studies (Hlee et al., 2018; Kwok et al., 2017; Marine-Roig, 2019; Schuckert et al., 2015). Within

hospitality-related studies, most deal with OTRs in relation to consumer decision-making (Kwok et al., 2017; Schuckert et al., 2015), consumer satisfaction (Ahani et al., 2019; Guo, Barnes, & Jia, 2017; Li et al., 2018; Zhao, Xu, & Wang, 2019) and business performance (Hlee et al., 2018; Kwok et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018) while destination level studies focus on the interrelation between OTRs and destination image (Bigne, Ruiz, & Curras-Perez, 2019; Marine-Roig, 2019), destination expectations (Chang & Wang, 2019), satisfaction (Franzoni & Bonera, 2019; Song, Kawamura, Uchida, & Saito, 2019) and destination eWOM during an event (Williams, Inversini, Buhalis, & Ferdinand, 2015; Williams et al., 2017).

Destination Competitiveness

Competitiveness is a comprehensive concept, which can be observed through macro and micro perspectives. From a macro perspective, competitiveness refers to the

...degree to which a nation can, under free and fair market conditions, produce goods and services that meet the test of international markets while at the same time maintaining or expanding the real incomes of its citizens. (Young, 1985)

It is measured using social, cultural and economic indicators that depict the performance of a country in international markets (Dos Santos Estevão, Garcia, & De Brito Filipe, 2015). The micro perspective of competitiveness refers to a firm's ability to satisfy customers' needs and remain profitable at the same time and is measured by both quantitative and qualitative indicators. In tourism, the macro perspective of competitiveness refers to a destination. Despite the unabated attention on researching competitiveness of tourism-related firms (micro tourism perspective), interest in studying the competitiveness of tourism destinations has been on a growing trend since 1999, and since Crouch and Ritchie's first model of destination competitiveness.

Following Crouch and Ritchie's work on destination competitiveness, the topic progressed to include various *perspectives* of the term, among others, micro and macro, supply-side and demand-side, comparative and competitive advantages and policymakers' perspectives (Abreu-Novais, Ruhanen, & Arcodia, 2016; Abreu Novais et al., 2018; Andrades & Dimanche, 2017; Buhalis, 2000; Cimbalević, Stankov, & Pavluković, 2018; Crouch & Ritchie, 2006; Dwyer & Kim, 2003), as well as different *definitions* of the construct (Abreu-Novais et al., 2016; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999, 2006; Enright & Newton, 2004; Hanafiah, Hemdi, & Ahmad, 2015; Hassan, 2000; Heath, 2003). Researchers have developed various conceptual and empirical models (Andrades & Dimanche, 2017; Assaker, Hallak, Vinzi, & O'Connor, 2014; Croes & Kubickova, 2013; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008; Hassan, 2000; Park & Jang, 2014; Djeri, Stamenković, Blešić, Miličević, & Ivkov, 2018;

Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Weldearegay, 2017), identified a wide range of *determinants and factors* with related indicators (Azzopardi & Nash, 2016; Cimbalević et al., 2018; Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009; Crouch, 2011; Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016; Dwyer, Cvelbar, Mihalič, & Koman, 2014; Dwyer, Forsyth, & Rao, 2000; Goffi & Cucculelli, 2014; Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008; Manrai, Manrai, & Friedeborn, 2018; Sánchez & López, 2015; Zehrer, Smeral, & Hallmann, 2017) and applied various measurement approaches to broaden the understanding of this conception (Assaker et al., 2014; Ayikoru, 2015; Cîrstea, 2014; Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009; Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016; Dwyer et al., 2014; Enright & Newton, 2004, 2005; Goffi & Cucculelli, 2014; Kozak & Rimmington, 1999).

In the abundance of literature, three models have received the most attention, namely those proposed by Ritchie and Crouch (2003), Dwyer and Kim (2003) and Heath (2003), with the first one laying the foundations of the competitiveness determinants' clusters. In these models, as well as in recent ones (Abreu-Novais et al., 2016; Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016; Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008; Manrai et al., 2018; World Economic Forum-WEF, 2017), the destination competitiveness determinants are clustered into categories usually covering the destination's physical plant, cultural and natural attractions; built and created resources; destination management; and external factors.

The critical challenges, often stressed in the destination competitiveness literature, are predictors, i.e. objective ('hard' measures) and subjective ('soft' measures) factors and indicators that are used to analyse destination competitiveness (Abreu-Novais et al., 2016). Hard measures refer to published secondary data while soft measures refer to the empirical evaluation of a number of subjective indicators of tourism competitiveness, surveyed on key tourism stakeholders (Andrades & Dimanche, 2017; Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009; Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016; Dwyer, Cvelbar, Edwards, & Mihalic, 2012; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2004, 2005; Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008). The holistic approach to destination competitiveness requires a combination of both quantitative and qualitative, hard and soft measures (Abreu-Novais et al., 2016). Destination competitiveness can be analysed with merely several (such as in Chen, Chen, & Lee, 2011 and Manrai et al., 2018) or even with more than 80 indicators (as in Dwyer & Kim, 2003 and World Economic Forum-WEF, 2017). Recently, a range of smart technology-based destination competitiveness indicators have been introduced (Cimbalević et al., 2018), indicating in that manner the potential of smart technologies to foster the competitive advantage of tourism destinations and enhance the quality of life of both residents and tourists (Boes, Buhalis, & Inversini, 2016; Iunius, Cismaru, & Foris, 2015). Although there is no unanimous set of indicators applicable to all destinations (Goffi & Cucculelli, 2014), researchers have focused on the evaluation of their relative importance (Crouch & Ritchie, 2006; Enright & Newton, 2004, 2005; Lee & King, 2006), highlighting indicators related to the destination's primary resources, safety, gastronomy and attractions as the most crucial ones. Within the elements shaping destination appeal, gastronomy seems to be a very important category influencing the authenticity of a tourism destination (Dražković, 2016; Komšić & Dorčić, 2016; Sánchez & López, 2015; Sedmak & Mihalič, 2008) as well as the visitor experience (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Folgado-Fernández,

Hernández-Mogollón, & Duarte, 2017). Closely related, quality of restaurant service is usually associated with a destination’s reputation, image and visitor loyalty (Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000; Kivelä & Chu, 2001; Sparks, Bowen, & Klag, 2003; Williams et al., 2015). Consequently, it seems reasonable to investigate the interrelation between restaurants’ reputations and the destination’s competitiveness, and thus contribute to the limited number of studies that evaluate this perspective (Chen, Chen, Lee, & Tsai, 2016).

Materials and Methods

This study builds upon data on destination competitiveness and online reputation, i.e. TripAdvisor ratings that were collected during the Interreg Mediterranean ShapeTourism projectⁱⁱ (<http://www.shapetourism.eu/>, 2019) and used to develop the ShapeTourism Observatoryⁱⁱⁱ (<http://www.shapetourism.eu/main-output/shapetourism-observatory/>, 2019). The data on tourism competitiveness have been retrieved from the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (TTCR) 2017^{iv} and official European-level data (NUTS2) from the Eurostat website (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/>, 2019). The former analyses the individual performance of 136 economies in terms of the TTCI and provides insights into the strengths and areas for the development of each country to enhance its destination competitiveness by allowing cross-country comparisons. The Index measures four broad factors of competitiveness organised into four sub-indexes (Fig. 1), namely, the ‘Enabling Environment’, ‘Travel and Tourism

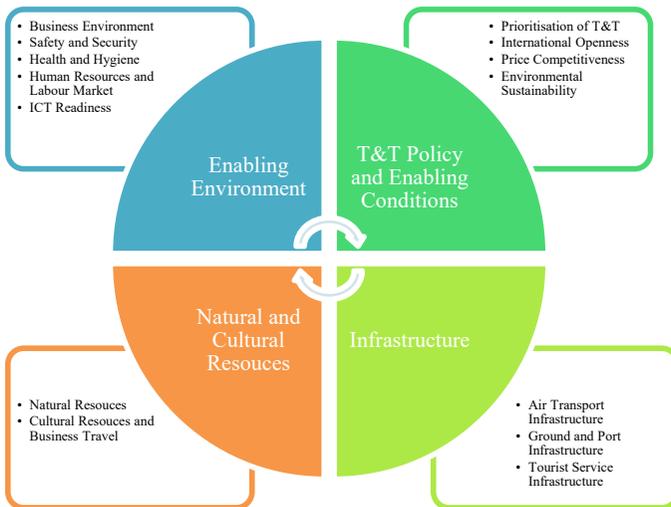


Fig. 1. Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index. *Source:* Adapted from World Economic Forum-WEF (2017).

(T&T) Policy and Enabling Conditions’, ‘Infrastructure’ and ‘Natural and Cultural Resources’ (Fig. 1). These four sub-indexes are further divided into 14 pillars. This study focuses on the interrelation between destination competitiveness and online reputation, through the latter’s impact on one of the four competitiveness sub-indexes, namely, T&T Enabling Conditions, more precisely, on Prioritisation of T&T and Price Competitiveness. Prioritisation of T&T reflects the extent to which the government actively promotes and orchestrates the development of the tourism sector, while Price Competitiveness measures how costly it is to travel or invest in a country or destination. Both pillars encompass indexes that are directly or indirectly related to the reputation construct, e.g. tourism-related governmental expenditure, the effectiveness of marketing and branding to attract tourists, price index and purchasing power parity. For this analysis, a regionalised version of TTCI for selected NUTS2 regions was calculated and used (Table 1).

The UGC, i.e. restaurants’ online reputation data, for regions included in this analysis has been retrieved from the TripAdvisor website (<https://www.tripadvisor.com/>, 2019) through a web scraping method using R software. In the context of this analysis, online reputation reflects the overall visitor rating (Table 1) of a particular hospitality business listed on TripAdvisor on a five-point Likert scale, at the time the scraping was conducted, i.e. the autumn of 2017. Since this website allows users to evaluate different aspects of service, e.g. price, service and value, and also retains visitors’ data including time of visit and type of traveller, it is also possible to analyse the factors influencing the overall rating of the specific hospitality business. For this analysis, 3,407,582 observations (NUTS3 level data) for selected coastal destinations, i.e. Greece, Croatia, Italy, France and Spain, were retrieved. These data were later aggregated (NUTS2 level) to analyse regional rankings and performances. Table 1 delivers a final list of the 40 NUTS2 regions included in the analysis. Additionally, it provides their ranking within the overall TTCI sample at NUTS2 level, and their comparative within-sample and TripAdvisor within-sample ranking.

Insight into TripAdvisor Data

Analysis

The analytical process consisted of three steps, namely, dimension reduction, i.e. principal component analysis (PCA), to determine the factors influencing online reputation, followed by regression analysis and correlation to analyse the linkages between selected variables (Fig. 2). The analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS statistics 20.

Factors Influencing Restaurants’ Online Reputations

The first step in this analysis was to evaluate the factors influencing restaurants’ online reputations. To do so, we have conducted a PCA for each of the five destinations (Greece, Croatia, Italy, France and Spain) after confirming the

Table 1. Regional Ranking Based on Regionalised TTCI and Aggregated TripAdvisor Ratings for Regions Included in the Analysis.

NUTS 0	Name of the Region (2006–2010)	NUTS2 Region Code	TTCI (1)	Rank TTCI, Overall (2)	Rank TTCI, Sample (3)	Average TripAdvisor Rating (4)	Rank TripAdvisor, Sample (5)
Spain	Aragón	ES24	4,219	45	8	3,916	39
	Cataluña	ES51	4,394	7	3	4,069	30
	Comunidad Valenciana	ES52	4,224	41	7	4,127	23
	Illes Balears	ES53	4,268	22	6	4,230	9
	Andalucía	ES61	4,206	48	9	4,128	21
	Región de Murcia	ES62	3,994	125	15	4,252	8
	Ciudad Autónoma de Ceuta	ES63	3,947	130	17	4,062	31
France	Midi-Pyrénées	FR62	4,284	19	5	3,917	38
	Rhône-Alpes	FR71	4,495	2	1	4,072	29
	Languedoc-Roussillon	FR81	4,297	16	4	4,030	33
	Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur	FR82	4,485	3	2	4,012	34
	Corse	FR83	4,169	62	10	4,112	25

Table 1. (Continued)

NUTS 0	Name of the Region (2006–2010)	NUTS2 Region Code	TTCI (1)	Rank TTCI, Overall (2)	Rank TTCI, Sample (3)	Average TripAdvisor Rating (4)	Rank TripAdvisor, Sample (5)
Greece	Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	GR11	3,300	241	40	4,330	5
	Thessalia	GR14	3,409	219	34	4,274	6
	Ipeiros	GR21	3,345	234	39	4,347	4
	Peloponnesus	GR25	3,385	226	38	4,415	2
	Anatoliki Attiki	GR30	3,408	221	35	4,183	18
	Voreio Aigaio	GR41	3,387	225	37	4,399	3
	Crete	GR43	3,448	215	33	4,505	1
Croatia	Jadranska Hrvatska	HR	3,397	224	36	4,171	19
Italy	Piemonte	ITC1	3,909	137	19	4,084	27
	Valle d'Aosta/Vallée d'Aoste	ITC2	3,791	157	25	3,500	40
	Liguria	ITC3	3,997	124	14	4,128	22
	Lombardia	ITC4	3,937	133	18	4,037	32
	Provincia Autonoma di Trento	ITD2	3,827	149	21	4,000	36
	Veneto	ITD3	4,075	101	11	3,982	37
	Friuli-Venezia Giulia	ITD4	3,868	143	20	4,093	26
Emilia-Romagna	ITD5	3,976	126	16	4,077	28	

Toscana	ITE1	4,001	123	13	4,226	10
Umbria	ITE2	3,800	154	23	4,257	7
Marche	ITE3	3,797	155	24	4,187	17
Lazio	ITE4	4,033	115	12	4,120	24
Abruzzo	ITF1	3,745	160	26	4,200	13
Molise	ITF2	3,708	166	30	4,192	16
Campania	ITF3	3,722	162	27	4,147	20
Puglia	ITF4	3,719	163	28	4,197	14
Basilicata	ITF5	3,648	179	32	4,195	15
Calabria	ITF6	3,709	165	29	4,211	12
Sicilia	ITG1	3,695	171	31	4,214	11
Sardegna	ITG2	3,815	151	22	4,001	35

Notes: (1) A regionalised score of TTCI. (2) Ranking of the regions included in the analysis based on regionalised TTCI scores (NUTS2 level, all TTCI regions included). (3) Ranking of the regions included in the analysis based on regionalised TTCI scores (NUTS2 level, only sample regions included).

(4) TripAdvisor rating – aggregated values for regions included in this analysis. (5) TripAdvisor rating – ranking of the regions included in sample.

Source: Own research.

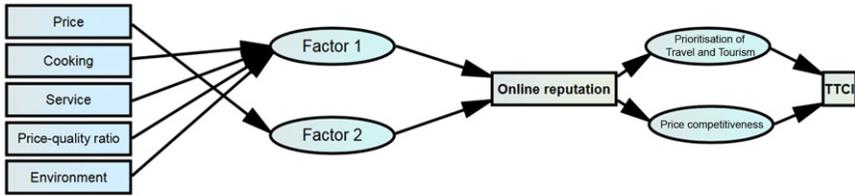


Fig. 2. The Analytical Process. *Source:* Own research.

validity of the underlying assumptions of this approach. For five items, i.e. price, cooking, service, price-quality ratio and environment, we had more than enough independent observations,^v i.e. 64,292 at the NUTS3 level. Considering PCA should be conducted if the items are sufficiently correlated, the correlations and anti-image matrix were constructed. The analysis for each of these five destinations at the NUTS3 level and for the aggregated data at the NUTS2 level yielded satisfactory results; therefore, we have proceeded with the analysis.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistics and Bartlett's measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) for each of the six models (Table 2) suggest that the tested variables are sufficiently correlated. Moreover, all the variables lie above the threshold level of 0.50 in the anti-image matrix. Regarding the extraction and determination of the number of factors, i.e. components, we follow the Kaiser criterion, i.e. extraction of all components with an eigenvalue greater than one. To facilitate the interpretation of the factors, we have used the Varimax orthogonal rotation method. Additionally, following the rotation of the factors, we have retained the factor scores, which were produced using the regression method,^{vi} and have used them in subsequent analysis (Table 3). The goodness-of-fit measures suggest that the proportion of residuals higher than 0.05 in all models was less than 50%. Moreover, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of internal consistency over the items belonging to a specific component has a satisfactory value (minimum value of 0.719) across all models, thus indicating that the models are reliable.

Table 2 suggests that the PCA has yielded consistent results. For three destinations, namely, Croatia, Greece and France, there is only one factor that potentially influences restaurants' online reputations, which explains approximately 67% of the variance for each of these three. On the other hand, PCA produced two factors for Italy, Spain and the model based on aggregated NUTS2 data, explaining 83–85% of the variance in each case. In all six cases, considering factor loadings, three variables should be assigned to the first factor, namely, cooking, service and price-quality ratio ratings. All of these variables have loadings above 0.9, indicating that the factor represents these variables well. Considering that these variables highlight the core of the tourism offer, i.e. product, hospitality and value for money, we name this factor *Core elements*. Considering the second component or factor potentially

Table 2. Component Matrix: Scoring Coefficients for Factor Analysis (NUTS3 Level Data).

Variable	Croatia	Greece	*Italy		France	*Spain		Aggregated NUTS2	
	Component	Component	Component		Component	Component		Component	
	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	2
Price	0.540	0.495	0.019	0.904	0.471	0.120	0.845	0.35	0.990
Cooking	0.960	0.962	0.960	0.194	0.965	0.958	0.229	0.926	0.042
Service	0.958	0.957	0.953	0.202	0.961	0.957	0.222	0.936	0.002
Price_quality	0.951	0.956	0.970	0.132	0.961	0.970	0.177	0.968	-0.090
Environment	0.572	0.619	0.372	0.647	0.613	0.238	0.764	0.704	0.184
	KMO = 0.809	KMO = 0.811	KMO = 0.804		KMO = 0.795	KMO = 0.808		KMO = 0.670	
	Bartlett ≤ 0.000	Bartlett ≤ 0.00	Bartlett ≤ 0.00		Bartlett ≤ 0.00	Bartlett ≤ 0.00		Bartlett ≤ 0.00	
	MSA ≥ 0.50	MSA ≥ 0.50	MSA ≥ 0.50		MSA ≥ 0.50	MSA ≥ 0.50		MSA ≥ 0.50	
	Cronbach's	Cronbach's	Cronbach's		Cronbach's	Cronbach's		Cronbach's	
	Alpha = 0.848	Alpha = 0.850	Alpha = 0.823		Alpha = 0.857	Alpha = 0.833		Alpha = 0.719	
	% of Variance:	% of Variance:	% of Variance:		% of Variance:	% of Variance:		% of Variance:	
	67.250781	67.657110	84.852414		67.501597	85.544061		83.830000	

Notes: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

*Rotated Component Matrix: Rotation Method – Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation. Rotation converged in three iterations. Variable description: Price (price category); Cooking (average cooking rating); Service (average service rating); Price_quality (Average price-quality ratio rating); Environment (Average environment rating).

Source: Own research.

Table 3. OLS Estimates of Different Specifications of the Regression Model.

Specifications	Dependent Variable – Restaurants' Online Reputation (ROR) – TripAdvisor Rating (NUTS3 Comparison)					Dependent Variable – ROR – TripAdvisor Rating (NUTS2 all Regions) 40 NUTS2 Regions
	Croatia	Greece	Italy	France	Spain	
Core elements (Standardised Coefficients, Beta)	0.532***	0.435***	0.570***	0.656***	0.616***	0.841***
Price (Standardised Coefficients, Beta)	–	–	0.126***	–	0.164***	0.356***
<i>N</i>	3,289	8,302	34,290	4,884	13,527	40
<i>R</i>	0.532	0.435	0.583	0.656	0.638	0.913
Adjusted <i>R</i>	0.283	0.189	0.340	0.430	0.407	0.825
<i>F</i>	1,300.138	1,938.958	8,836.131	3,688.979	4,636.789	92.67567
<i>p</i> -value	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Max VIF	1	1	1	1	1	1
Durbin–Watson	1.592	1.999	1.785	1.951	1.601	1.792
Std. Error	0.909	0.810	0.765	0.929	0.856	0.069

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Own research.

influencing *restaurants' online reputation*, in all three cases (Italy, Spain and aggregated), the variable *price* has the highest factor loading. Thus, this factor will be named *Price*.

In the second step of the analysis, we have used the previously produced and retained factor scores to generate two new variables, namely, *Core elements* and *Price*, and to analyse the impact of these variables on *restaurants' online reputation* (Table 3). The benefit of using factor scores is that potential collinearity between variables, which is one of the underlying assumptions in the regression analysis, is no longer a problem (Mooi & Sarstedt, 2011). Using the *TripAdvisor rating* as the dependent and *Core elements* and *Price* as independent variables, we have constructed three bivariate linear regression models for (1) Croatia, Greece and France, and three multiple linear regression models for (2) Italy, Spain and the aggregated data to test the relationships between these variables.

$$(1) y = \alpha + \beta_1 x_1 + \varepsilon$$

$$(2) y = \alpha + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \varepsilon$$

where y refers to *TripAdvisor rating*, α represents the constant term, x_1 is *Core elements*, x_2 is *Price*, β_1 and β_2 are the coefficients for each independent variable and ε represents the residual error.

The sample for this analysis includes 64,292 observations at the NUTS3 level, which is far above the required minimum of $50 + 8 \times k$ (Green & Green, 2017). The maximum variance inflation factor (VIF) value in each of the model specifications is 1, which eliminates multicollinearity as a potential problem of the model. For all models, the calculated Durbin–Watson test statistic values are within the critical threshold, suggesting that there is no autocorrelation. In the analysis, we use the enter method for selection of variables and ordinary least squares (OLS) to estimate regression models. The R values provided in Table 3 seem highly satisfactory considering that, across all model specifications, they exceed the value of 0.30, which is common for cross-sectional research (Mooi & Sarstedt, 2011). Corresponding values of adjusted R are significantly lower in all cases, which could indicate that we have used too many independent variables, some of which could be removed. This is unsurprising considering we are using factor scores, which contain most of the original variables' information but are mutually uncorrelated. The F -test values in all models are significant (p -value ≤ 0.05), indicating that the overall regression models have a good fit.

In each of the six proposed models (Table 3), the variables are significant (p -value ≤ 0.001). The standardised coefficients, i.e. beta, in all of the model specifications are positive, which indicates that both variables, i.e. *Core elements* and *Price*, are significantly and positively related to *restaurants' online reputation* on both the NUTS3 and NUTS2 levels.

Interrelation between Restaurants' Online Reputations and Destination Competitiveness

As previously elaborated, the TTCI encompasses 14 pillars grouped into the four sub-indexes. Considering the scope of each of these, and the indicators used, we have decided to analyse the potential influence of the restaurants' online reputations on one sub-index, i.e. T&T policy and enabling conditions, and more precisely the two pillars: Prioritisation of T&T and Price Competitiveness, as well as the potential impact on the overall T&T competitiveness score at the NUTS2 level. For this purpose, we have constructed three multiple regression models (3), using individual variables with the highest factor loading from the first analysis (Table 2) and the overall TripAdvisor rating score (Table 1):

$$(3) y = \alpha + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \beta_3 x_3 + \beta_4 x_4 + \beta_5 x_5 + \varepsilon$$

where y refers to Prioritisation of T&T in the first model, Price Competitiveness in the second model and overall NUTS2 level TTCI in the third model; α represents the constant; x_1 , x_2 , x_3 , x_4 and x_5 represent the TripAdvisor rating, price, cooking, service and price-quality ratio, respectively, with $\beta_1 \dots \beta_5$ representing the corresponding coefficients; and ε represents the residual error.

This time, the analysis was conducted on a sample of 40 NUTS2 regions, using linearly aggregated NUTS3 level data for each region (Table 1). The VIF was 6.9 in the first two models and 2.1 in the third, which is below the threshold of 10 (Miller, 1986) and thus, acceptable. For all models, the calculated Durbin–Watson test statistics are within the critical value, suggesting that there is no autocorrelation. We have used the enter method for selection of variables and OLS to estimate regression models. Both R values and adjusted R values appear satisfactory, given that they exceed 0.30. The F -test values in all models are significant (p -value ≤ 0.05), indicating that the overall regression models fit.

The standardised coefficients suggest that the variable *service* significantly and positively relates to both Prioritisation of T&T and Price Competitiveness (Table 4). Furthermore, variable *price* is significantly and positively related to the overall TTCI. The analysis, therefore, indicates that the restaurants' online reputations, seen as an average TripAdvisor rating construct, does not influence destination competitiveness directly, but indirectly throughout the influence of its constituent factors, in particular, service and price.

Implications for Destination Marketing and Management and Hospitality Businesses

Tourism destination competitiveness has tremendous ramifications for the tourism industry, which makes it of considerable interest to practitioners and policymakers (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999). Thus, the aim of destination managers should be, among others, to understand how tourism destination competitiveness can be enhanced and sustained (Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008). Although competitiveness is increasingly seen to critically influence the performance of tourism

Table 4. OLS Estimates of Different Specifications of the Regression Model (NUTS2 Data).

Standardised Coefficients, Beta	Specifications		
	Prioritisation of Travel and Tourism	Price Competitiveness	Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index
TripAdvisor rating	–	–	–
Price	–	–	0.418**
Cooking service	0.98**	1.27***	–
Price_quality	–	–	–
<i>N</i>	40	40	40
<i>R</i>	0.573	0.638	0.744
Adjusted <i>R</i>	0.229	0.32	0.488
<i>F</i>	3.317	4.672	8.436
<i>p</i> -value	0.015	0.002	0.000
VIF (for sig. var)	6.949	6.969	2.137
Durbin–Watson	0.322	0.755	1.204
Std. Error	0.677	0.409	0.236

Note: ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Own research.

destinations in world markets (Enright & Newton, 2005), the empirical attempts to identify and assess destination competitiveness remain constrained by the debates and contradictions in conceptualising the term. Thus, Abreu Novais et al. (2018) suggest that investigation of destination competitiveness should be informed by a more thorough understanding of the conceptualisations of the term from the stakeholders who are responsible for operationalising the concept in practice, that is, supply-side stakeholders including business owners, and tourists whose perspectives have long been recognised as necessary in any attempts to measure competitiveness.

The literature highlights various models and approaches that have been used to explain tourism destination competitiveness, relying on subjective and objective indicators as well as qualitative and quantitative data. In this abundance of literature, several studies have already considered tourist opinions and perceptions to explain destination competitiveness (Javalgi, Thomas, & Rao, 2008; Kozak & Rimmington, 1999; Matias & Nijkamp, n.d.). Considering the weaknesses of these studies, this research utilises the opportunity arising from growing reliance on ICS in everyday life and while travelling. Thus, instead of the

traditional, potentially biased way of gathering data on visitors' opinions, we utilise UGC, i.e. online reviews, to reach our conclusions. It should be noted that this study does not aim to provide a new model of tourism destination competitiveness but rather to explore the impact of unique variables, specifically the online reputation construct, on specific pillars and sub-indexes within TTCI. We focus on collecting information on restaurants' online reputations for this analysis. In general, gastronomy is becoming a growing travel motive (Skift, 2016), attracting higher cultural and income consumers (López-Guzmán, Uribe Lotero, Pérez Gálvez, y Ríos Rivera, 2017); thus, we believe that this research topic merits more scholars' attention. Furthermore, the concept of online reputation is gaining increasing attention from both travellers and researchers. Despite the valuable contributions of most recent studies (De Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2013; Marchiori & Cantoni, 2012; Mariani et al., 2019; Yen & Tang, 2019) to the understanding of this phenomenon, there are still significant gaps that should be addressed. With this research, in particular, we aim to validate the reputation elements presented online. To do so, we have analysed the data on restaurants' online reputation for five leading Mediterranean destinations as published on TripAdvisor, which is one of the significant specialised websites. Additionally, de Matos and Rossi (2008) concluded that most of the studies analysing the predictors of WOM and eWOM treat them as the outcome variables of other constructs (e.g. satisfaction, service, quality and price) rather than the central construct in the research. This study utilises both approaches.

The PCA has revealed that the predictors of restaurants' online reputation could be grouped into two factors, which we named *Core elements* (encompassing the predictors: cooking, service and price-quality ratio), and *Price*. The subsequent analysis has revealed that these factors do influence online reputation significantly and positively. In general, these results supplement the findings of the previously conducted research on this subject (Carolyn & Xiaowen, 2017; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014; Kwok & Xie, 2016; Litvin et al., 2008). Furthermore, we additionally highlight the importance of core aspects of the restaurant as a product, i.e. cooking, price, service and value for money, in the overall tourism destinations amalgam. It should be noted that the analysis has revealed that *Price* as a factor influences the online reputation in two destinations, namely, Italy and Spain, while in Croatia, Greece and France, the primary factor was *Core elements*. Finally, the estimates of different specifications of the regression model at the NUTS2 level have revealed, based on a sample of leading destinations, that *Service*, as a critical aspect of the factor named *Core elements*, influences both Prioritisation of T&T and Price Competitiveness, while *Price* as predictor influences overall TTCI of sampled destinations. Additionally, the research results have demonstrated that the restaurants' online reputation, represented by the average TripAdvisor rating, does not influence overall destination competitiveness. Moreover, the link between them is indirect through the influence of service and price, i.e. the constituting dimensions of online reputation.

The comprehensive study on tourism destination competitiveness (Knežević et al., 2016) has demonstrated that the destination competitiveness in developed countries, such as those in the sample, depends on the destination management as

well as on broader economic conditions including the general infrastructure, macro-environment and business environment. The results obtained in this study concerning the interrelation between constituting factors of online reputation and competitiveness are not surprising for several reasons. (1) Having a positive reputation is one of the most valuable intangible assets for a destination and a significant reason for repeat traveller visits (Darwish & Burns, 2019). In a broader sense, eWOM and UGC are interrelated with consumer behaviour, decision-making (Del Chiappa, 2011; Litvin et al., 2008) and destination image (Dickinger & Ktringer, 2012), all of which have significant repercussions on destination management, which predicts destination competitiveness. (2) Service is the core dimension of tourism experience that transfers value directly to tourists. The provision of reliable service enhances the competitive advantage of both destinations (Dwyer & Kim, 2003) and tourism enterprises (Buhalis, 2000). In their analysis of factors influencing destination competitiveness, Cucculelli and Goffi (2016) specifically highlight the importance of gastronomy, food services quality and local supply of goods. Recent studies on the subject identify destination gastronomy and the quality of gastronomy-related services among the most critical elements affecting the authenticity of a tourism destination (Le, Arcodia, Novais, & Kralj, 2019; Özdemir & Seyitoğlu, 2017; Sedmak & Mihalič, 2008) and the preservation of its local identity (Hillel, Belhassen, & Shani, 2013; Oktay & Sadıkoğlu, 2018). (3) Finally, it is widely accepted that international travellers are price sensitive (Dwyer et al., 2000). Thus, in some studies, *Price* is used as a factor that affects destination competitiveness (Kova et al., 2017). According to Abreu Novais et al. (2018), the distinctiveness, a similarity across individual conceptions of competitiveness, becomes even more critical when the elements of price and distance play a role. In general, the conclusion is that the destination needs to be financially accessible if it does not otherwise have a very unique factor. On the other hand, attractive destinations may be far and expensive, but still remain competitive. Tourism destination ground cost, i.e. cost of tourism services, food and beverage, etc., relates to the Price Competitiveness of the tourism destination (Dwyer et al., 2000). Thus, any tourism destination that aims to prosper from tourism development should pay attention to these predictors across all aspects of the tourism experience, including gastronomic offer.

To summarise, we do consider destination competitiveness as a broad construct that is influenced by numerous, currently, unobserved predictors. The current comprehensive models provide a valuable, however, potentially biased outlook of destination competitiveness. The inclusion of big data-based social-media-related predictors might fill the gap regarding the supply-side stakeholders whose perspectives have long been recognised as necessary in any attempts to measure competitiveness.

Discussion on the Ranking of Balkan Countries in Sample

The second to fourth columns of Table 5 list the destination rankings based on aggregated NUTS3 level TripAdvisor data for 2017, while the remainder of the

Table 5. Destination Ranking Based on Aggregated TripAdvisor Data and TTCI, 2015 and 2017.

	TripAdvisor Rating	Price	Service	TTCI 2017			TTCI 2015		
				A	B	C	A	B	C
Greece	1	2	1	24	15	90	31	24	113
Croatia	2	1	4	32	77	100	33	74	101
Italy	3	5	2	8	75	124	8	65	133
France	5	4	5	2	27	118	2	31	139
Spain	4	3	3	1	5	98	1	6	105

Notes: For each destination, the average value of the indicator has been calculated based on NUTS3 data. The ranking of the destination has been computed using the average (NUTS1) values of the indicators. A: TTCI. B: Prioritisation of T&T. C: Price competitiveness.

Source: Own research.

table lists the TTCI scores for 2015 and 2017 (Schwab, 2018; World Economic Forum-WEF, 2017). Based on online reputation, the leading destination is Greece. The analysis of the covariances of the main constituent dimensions, i.e. price and service, suggests that variables tend to move in the same direction, which means that a better ranking in terms of price and service implies a better overall TripAdvisor ranking. Within the sample of leading Mediterranean destinations, Balkan countries, i.e. Greece and Croatia, seem to perform very well in terms of their restaurants' online reputations. However, considering the overall TTCI rating, their competitive positions are substantially lower than those of Italy, France and Spain. The competitive position of Greece has substantially improved from 2015 to 2017, considering all three selected indicators (Table 5). Among others, the latter is a consequence of marketing activity (improved for 19 places) and improved Price Competitiveness, which has increased substantially (for 23 places). The Price Competitiveness has increased due to the decrease in the cost of accommodation, fuel and reduced ticket taxes and airport charges to incentivise tourism directly (World Economic Forum-WEF, 2017). These policies have boosted overall Greece tourism development. The other Balkan country, i.e. Croatia, has slightly improved its overall tourism competitive position in 2017 in comparison to 2015. Its position in terms of the Prioritisation of T&T has fallen slightly potentially due to relatively low governmental spending on T&T (rank 116 of 136) and poor brand strategy rating (rank 105 of 136). Although tourism development has a long history in this destination and accounts for a substantial share of Croatian GDP, somehow Croatia has failed to build a recognisable and robust brand. Croatian Price Competitiveness is relatively low (rank 100 of 136). In general, the indicators of ticket taxes and airport charges and hotel price index tend to move in a positive direction and thus, contribute to the overall destination Price Competitiveness. However, the negative impacts of purchasing power parity and fuel price levels severely negatively influence the score of this pillar (World Economic Forum-WEF, 2017).

Conclusions

As online reputation is gaining more attention from both scholars and practitioners, there is a greater need for better understanding of this construct. In particular, there is an obvious need to validate the reputational elements presented online and their potential role within tourism destination marketing and management. This study focuses on the predictors of restaurants' online reputations, and analyses their interrelation with the overall TTCI score, and two pillars, namely, Prioritisation of T&T and Price Competitiveness. The research builds on TripAdvisor user-generated content and encompasses leading Mediterranean tourism destinations, namely, Greece, Croatia, Italy, France and Spain.

The analysis has revealed that restaurants' online reputation is influenced by two factors: *Core elements*, i.e. cooking, service and price-quality ratio, and *Price*. All these factors have a positive influence on online reputation. Furthermore, restaurants' online reputation does not influence destination competitiveness directly, but indirectly, through its main constituting dimensions, i.e. service and price.

The study emphasises the importance of restaurants and gastronomy in the overall destination product amalgam and for achieving competitive advantage in the global tourism market. The conclusions provide valuable insights for policymakers and thus, supplement the interpretation of the official TTCI rating. In other words, we conclude that governments might influence destination competitiveness by influencing the restaurant service quality and Price Competitiveness. Today, gastronomy plays a pivotal role in the marketing of some tourist destinations; thus, many travel organisations regularly offer gourmet or culinary holiday. For example, there are more than 30 different food and culinary trips through Balkans currently offered on TripAdvisor. Most of these tours last more than a week and include a visit to Balkans' famous gastronomy spots like Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro and Croatia. It is clear that as the regional gastronomy tourism market intensifies, so more professionals will begin to understand its role within tourism development and will start to offer more gastronomy tours, festivals, etc. Thus in some countries or regions (e.g. Istria in Croatia, and Attica in Greece), gastronomy as a supporting activity may turn to be a peak experience. For tourists, this means that the destination's restaurants ambience and cuisine are legitimate sources of pleasure which generates emotions and experiences which they are supposed to have while on holiday (Kivela, 2006). Some of the Western Balkan destinations have recognised this, thus on Croatian national tourist board website (<https://croatia.hr/en-GB/experiences/gastronomy-and-enology>, 2019), gastronomy is highlighted as one of the essential experiences, while in Greece (<http://visitgreece.gr/en/gastronomy>, 2019) as one of 'things to do and to see'. Unfortunately, other Western Balkan countries with massive potential for gastronomy tourism development, e.g. Bosnia and Hercegovina and Macedonia, failed to do so.

Despite its valuable contribution to the understanding of this phenomenon, there are specific limitations that should be indicated and addressed in future research. (1) We focus on restaurants' online reputation. TripAdvisor, like other

respectable platforms, also provides reputation data for other aspects of tourism experience, e.g. accommodation and tours. The aggregated data on all aspects of online reputation could be used to build composite online reputation indexes. Such a construct could be used to benchmark tourism destinations as well as to design and improve destination marketing and management strategies and policies. (2) TripAdvisor provides the data at the NUTS3 level, which is impressive if these data are used for destination management and marketing purposes. However, if we wish to compare or interrelate these data with major global indexes, they have to be aggregated, which potentially bias their actual values. (3) In this study, we have not analysed the effects of the traveller type, purpose of visit and season on online reputation. All of these should be addressed in future research, especially when building composite reputation indexes.

Notes

- i. Millennials refer to generations born in the early-1980s to mid-1990s; Generation Z refers to generations born in the late-1990s to early-2010s.
- ii. 'ShapeTourism - New shape and drives for the tourism sector: supporting decisions, integrating plans, and ensuring sustainability' is a project co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund.
- iii. The Observatory is a smart integrated tourism data system and a part of a participative decision support system that offers information, scenarios and indicators of competitiveness, attractiveness and sustainability. The Observatory integrates traditional data with the broad mass of data, using new methods for collecting and processing big data and generating open data for the benefit of all destination stakeholders.
- iv. [World Economic Forum \(2017\)](https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-travel-tourism-competitiveness-report-2017). Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-travel-tourism-competitiveness-report-2017>. Accessed on July 2019.
- v. [Mooi and Sarstedt \(2011\)](#) suggest that the number of valid observations should be at least 10 times the number of items used for analysis.
- vi. [Mooi and Sarstedt \(2011\)](#) suggest that a factor score characterises the relation between observations and factors. Considering the objective of our study was not only to analyse interrelations but also to reduce the number of variables, we have decided to base our subsequent analysis on factor scores.

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