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Preface

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Guest Editor

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The current issue of *Academica Turistica – Tourism and Innovation Journal* contains a collection of articles presented at the 2nd International Conference organized by the International Association of Cultural and Digital Tourism (IACUDiT) in Athens, May 21–24, 2015 (http://iacudit.org/Conference2015/). The theme of the conference was 'Forms and Norms of Tourism and Culture in the Age of Innovation.' The Conference was chaired by the International Association of Cultural and Digital Tourism (IACUDiT) and co-chaired by University of Greenwich, UK, Linnaeus University, Sweden, and the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA), Greece.

Founded in 2013, the International Association of Cultural and Digital Tourism (IACUDiT) is a global network of people, projects, and events that deal with a broad range of issues of concern and interest in cultural and digital tourism, in an era of major global changes. IACUDiT is an international non-profit association that values creative, ethical, and progressive action, aimed at the improvement of global hospitality and tourism research on cultural and digital issues. IACUDiT brings together a wide range of academics and industry practitioners from cultural, heritage, communication, and innovational tourism backgrounds and interests. It mainly promotes and sponsors discussion, knowledge sharing, and close cooperation among scholars, researchers, policy makers, and tourism professionals. It is based on the notion that: 'Technological changes do not influence the missions of cultural tourism actors in the areas of promotion and product development, but rather the manner of carrying them out.' It provides its members with a timely, interactive, and international platform to meet, discuss, and debate cultural, heritage, and other tourism issues that will affect the future direction of hospitality and tourism research and practice in a digital and innovational era.

The scope of the conference was to gather the latest developments around several key themes, placing the prominent goal of sustainable tourism at the heart of the discussion, as a sector cross-cutting and interacting with cultural, environmental, economic and social dimensions of our society. Towards this end, efforts were carried out for establishing a fruitful and challenging dialogue, understanding, and interaction among academic researchers and scholars, tourism industry professionals and key practitioners as well as decision makers, to enable knowledge and experiences to be creatively shared and synergies to be created. Athens, with its long history of democratic debate, was an ideal setting for this conference, and we do think that it provided a fitting opportunity for an open and productive discussion. In a globalized, digital era, nations seek to retain a sense of identity through their unique cultures and history.

The valuable contributions to the 2nd IACUDiT Conference have formed the content of a section in the current issue. Based on scientific quality, relevance, and rigor, enforced by a double-blind review process, three papers were selected and are published herein. The papers offer a representative sample of the broad array of research presented at the two events. The following is a summary of the papers published.

In the first article, a joint work of Susana Silva and Dora Martins is presented, dealing with the role of 'Human Resources Management (HRM) Function on Portuguese Hotel Units,' as a tool for managing their staff. It is mainly based on qualitative case studies. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 human resource managers from twelve hotel units located in Portugal. The results show that although there is not an effective HRM, current HRM practices are enough to encourage pro-environmental behaviour in their staff, and they have a direct effect on customer satisfaction and competitiveness of the sector. However, managers recognize the need to introduce certain short-term changes for improving staff performance and increasing customers' satisfaction as well as the competitiveness of the hotel sector in Portugal. According to these results, the significant theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

In the second article 'Marketing the VFR Segment through a Consumer Behavioral Approach,' Vicky Katsoni contributes to the understanding of the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) travel segment, as it focuses on the use of information sources for travel consumer behaviour, discussing the implications of distribution channels. Demographics and trip characteristics of the VFR travel segment were also analysed, according to trip organization (package holiday/self-guided holiday), time used to make the trip decision, type of accommodation, travel companion, and booking, where the findings justify the important and profitable role of VFR in commercial accommodation. The data are representative of the province of Arcadia, Greece, serving as a research field of a longitudinal study. The findings underscore the important role that VFR travel holds in commercial accommodation, confirming the 'hybrid' nature of VFR travel and highlights the importance of social identity issues involved in VFR travel, as well as pointing to an emerging role of the diasporas in their return visit(s) to the homeland. As such, the findings would seem to promote a marketing strategy of organized governance that takes into account identification and focuses on a 'sense of belonging' and community, tailored to the characteristics of this particular target market and aligned with the distribution channels they use, as evidenced in the research findings.

In the last article 'Forecasting Tourism Demand using Linear and Nonlinear Prediction Models,' prepared by Athanasios Koutras, Alkiviadis Panagopoulos, and Ioannis A. Nikas, the authors propose and evaluate linear and nonlinear prediction models based on Artificial Neural Networks (ANN) for tourism demand in the accommodation industry. For efficient forecasting, the Multilayer Perceptron (MLP), Support Vector Regression (SVR) and Linear Regression (LR) have been used that utilize two different feature sets for training. The major contribution of the proposed models is focused mainly on better forecasting accuracy and lower cost effort. The relative accuracy of the Multilayer Perceptron (MLP) and Support Vector Regression (SVR) in tourism occupancy data is investigated and compared to Simple Linear Regression (LR) models. The relative performance of the MLP and SVR models is also compared to each other. Data collected for a period of eight years (2005–2012) showing tourism occupancy and the number of overnight stays in the hotels of the Western Region of Greece is used. Extensive experiments have shown that for time series describing the number of overnight stays the SVR regressor with the RBF kernel (SVR-RBF), as well as simple RL models, and the MLP regressor for occupancy time series, respectively, outperforms the other forecasting models, when tested for a broad range of forecast horizons (1–24 months) presenting very small and stable prediction error in comparison to the other models.

This collection of articles brings together different aspects of tourism marketing and tourism management and contributes to our understanding of the growing set of issues relevant to tourism and hospitality science. This section has been made possible by the dedicated and competent work of the contributing authors and the reviewers. For this, we express our sincere appreciation to the distinguished group of reviewers who provided valuable judgments and recommendations to the authors, thereby contributing significantly to the quality of this section.

Lastly, we would like to thank the editorial team of Academica Turistica, namely Dejan Križaj, Gorazd Sedmak, Doris Gomezelj Omerzel, Aleksandra Brezovec and Peter Kopić, for giving us the opportunity to edit and publish this section and for patiently working with us to ensure a high-quality result.

Human Resource Management in Hotel Units: The Portuguese Case

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This paper presents the main Human Resources Management (HRM) distinctives for Portuguese hotel units. We attempt to understand the role of various HRM practices promoted on organizational performance and their effect on the behaviour of co-workers and quality service in hotel units; some reflections on the future trends in this field are offered. This phenomenon has a particular relevance in the Portuguese context, because this country is known to have had a growing tourism industry in recent years. However, little is known about HRM departments' contributions to their human capital management and development. This paper is one of the first to focus specifically on Portuguese hotel units and it also seeks to present findings that stem from the Human Resources Managers' perspective. This paper is based on qualitative case studies; the data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 human resource managers from 12 hotel units located in Portugal. The results show that although there is not effective HRM, current HRM practices are sufficient to encourage pro-environmental behaviour in their staff, and they have a direct effect on customer satisfaction and competitiveness of the sector. However, managers recognize there is a need introduce some change in the short-term to promote the better performance of staff with effects on customer satisfaction and competitiveness of the sector in Portugal. According to these results, the paper discusses the major theoretical and practical implications for future research in the HRM field.

Keywords: human resources management practices, human capital, tourism, hotel industry, Portugal, exploratory study

Introduction

This paper examines the role of human resource management (HRM) practices in the Portuguese tourism context. We investigate HRM practices because tourism organizations' success largely depends on the attitudes and skills of employees. In particular, and as stated by Ottenbacher and Harrington (2007, p. 446) 'hospitality success is strongly related to excellent HRM practices.' Furthermore, we focus on HRM practices because they are vital in the tourism industry, which is characterized by low skill levels among employees and a high turnover rate (Chang, Gong, & Shum, 2011).

Tourism has been recognized as a strategic sector for economic growth in many countries and recognized as one of the most important industries in the world. In the last five years, this sector has registered positive growth, a trend that is projected to continue over the next decade. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (2014), the arrival of international tourists increased from 528 million in 1995 to 1087 million in 2013 and is expected to reach 1762 million in 2024. Additionally, Eurostat (the statistics office of the European Union), confirms that the number of nights spent in hotel units in 2014 in the EU reached a record number of 2.7 billion, 1.7% more in comparison to 2013. Portugal contributes to an increase of 7.1% in the number of overnight stays for a total of 53.4 million and is one of the three countries with the highest growth in tourism in the EU (see http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Tourism_statistics).

Specifically, Portugal experienced a growth of 11.9% (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2014). The tourism sector is a particularly attractive option to stimulate development in rural and low-income countries and regions that previously relied heavily on agriculture and natural resource extraction. Tourism development often provides the dual advantages of generating employment and income while promoting cultural heritage and traditions (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2012).

In Portugal, in 2013, tourism had strong competitive advantages, with attractiveness factors, including geographic location, climate, historical and cultural heritage, gastronomy and wine, hospitality, diversity of supply (beach, city, golf, casinos, rurality, etc.), and security (Turismo de Portugal, n. d.), while being chosen as one of the best destinations in 2014 by the publisher of Lonely Planet travel guides, appearing in the list of 'best value' countries considering the best quality/price ratio.

Many researchers have underscored the importance of customer-contact employees in creating and providing excellent service quality (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Kelley & Hoffman, 1997; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985; Tsaur & Lin, 2004). Furthermore, increased service quality through increased employee performance is a viable way for hotels to remain competitive (Tsaur & Lin, 2004).

According to previous literature, HRM practices contribute to improving organizational performance including turnover rate (Huselid, 1995), labour productivity (Datta, Guthrie, & Wright, 2003; Huselid, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; Youndt, Snell, Dean Jr., & Lepak, 1996), return on assets and return on equity (Delery & Doty, 1996), and profit margin (Kalleberg & Moody, 1994). Thus, HRM seems to gain strength in the hotel industry because, as asserted by Cho, Woods, Jang, and Erdem (2006), the emphasis of human resources as a factor to improve organizational performance has become stronger, not only because they cannot be easily imitated by competitors, but because they provide an effective and rapid response to market demands (Huselid & Becker, 1996; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Stalk, Evans, & Shulman, 1992). However, they are still few studies that attempt to understand the impact of HRM practices on organizational performance, more precisely the role of the HRM function on quality service and customer satisfaction through decreased turnover rates, increased labour productivity, and increased profit margin within the industry. Therefore, this study explores how various HRM practices could influence organizational performance in Portuguese hotel units.

Important questions unanswered and motivated this study: (1) Is there a relationship between HRM practices and customer service quality in hotel units? (2) Which HRM practices are most important for organizational performance? (3) What will the future tendency of the human capital profile on Portuguese hotel units be? (4) What with the change in HRM function for the management of their staff be in the short term?

The purpose of this article is to present the results of an empirical study with Portuguese hotel units, presented by outlining HR professionals' perceptions of the extent to which HRM practices are used and will be used in the short term, coupled with appropriate theoretical discussion, designed to answer these questions.

Finally, the first reason for focusing on this issue is because there is no known study that relates HRM and organizational performance for Portuguese hotel units. The second reason is the fact that the number of hotel units in Portugal has been growing in recent years (see www.turismodeportugal.pt). Although tourism is a significant driver of economic, social, and cultural development in both developed and developing countries, there are few hotel units listed among the best organizations to work. In 2013 and 2014, a mere four hotel units were identified as being among the best places to work ('100 Melhores empresas para trabalhar,' 2015). To understand why this number improved (either by the number of places or the ranking) is the third reason for this study. Finally, we attempt to explore what the main problems related to HR in this specific industry are (e.g. low qualification of HR and high seasonality).

The paper has the following structure. In the literature review section, we will present the concepts of HRM and Portuguese tourism characteristics, and will expose some theories about the use of HRM in the tourism industry. In Section 3, we will summarize the methodology. In Section 4, we will present the results and will discuss them in Section 5. In Section 6, we will present the conclusions, limitations, and implications of the paper.

Literature Review

The National Cultural Influence in the Role of HRM

The broad literature on HRM evaluates the linkages between national contexts and predominant modes of people management and seeks to compare these between themselves (Brewster, Mayrhofer & Morley, 2004; Dibben et al., 2016). Furthermore, the 1990s brought significant changes in the labour market, involving new roles for people in organizations. In this context, the HRM function is viewed from a new perspective, with the primary responsibility to manage the most strategic resource of organizations, differentiating it from other resources (Bilhim, 2009). The HRM gains, therefore, an important role of strategy implementation in organizations and to the achievement of organizational goals (Barbosa, 2005). However, it cannot be said that this development was uniform. A recent literature review of HRM (e.g. Davis & Luiz, 2015; Tüselmann, Allen, & McDonald, 2014; Vaiman & Brewster, 2014) shows different specificities in this development according to the country or global region.

In a comparative analysis of multinational European and Indian firms located in Southern African Development Community countries, Gomes, Sahadev, Glaister, and Demirbag (2014) found that the Indian HRM function was shifting from an emphasis on personnel towards a more strategic HR role but with a greater emphasis on HR development (Budhwar & Varma, 2010). However, HRM functions remain less formal and less structured than in European organizations (Budhwar, 2009). Some researchers (e.g. Rao, 2007; Saini & Budhwar, 2008; Som, 2007) emphasize the fact that there are strong influences of sociocultural, political and economic factors on HRM policies and practices in Indian firms. Furthermore, Indian firms are influenced by high collectivism and high power distance that favour personal and familial relationships over work outcomes (Budhwar & Khatri, 2001; Tymon, Stumpf, & Doh, 2010). Consequently, Indian firms appear to have high turnover rates, accompanied by problems with management, development, and retention of talent (Bhatnagar, 2007; Cooke & Saini, 2010; Stumpf, Doh, & Tymon, 2010). In contrast, several authors (e.g. Gomes Sahadev, Glaister, & Demirbag, 2014; Sparrow & Hiltrop, 1997; Yan, 2003) consider the HRM of European firms to be a homogenous function, which has policies and practices influenced by a relatively long-term approach to business, resulting in long-term relations with employees moderated by trust and loyalty. Finally, Gomes et al. (2014) also show that the African-style HRM practices favour collectivist and paternalistic practices over individualist and instrumentalist practices characteristic of MNEs from more developed countries (Horwitz, 2012, 2013; Horwitz & Smith, 1998; Newenham-Kahindi, 2013).

Culture is defined as acquired knowledge that shapes values, originates attitudes and affects behaviour, and which members of a society (or a social group) use to interpret experience and generate social behaviour (Luthans and Doh, 2009; Vaiman & Brewster, 2014). Portugal has some distinct cultural idiosyncrasies in comparison to the contexts that have been most widely studied (e.g. Asia, USA, Scandinavia, Spain, France, Holland, Germany, England, Russia). In Portugal, there is a strong penchant for gender equality, collectivism of in-group/family, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance but less institutional collectivism, assertiveness, future orientation, performance orientation and human orientation (House et al., 1999; Jesuino, 2002). Some researchers (e.g. Bennett & Brewster, 2002; Brewster & Bennett, 2010) argue that the national culture can influence the organizational culture of Portuguese companies and their HRM function. Another important aspect that results from the study of Brewster and Bennett (2010) is the incomparability between the organizational cultures of different countries (e.g. each country has specific rules that determine the performance of their companies). Brewster and Bennett (2010) emphasize the lack of planning and organization in the organizational culture of Portuguese companies. In a contrasting position, under the influence of German organizational management traits, the organizational culture of companies in the Czech Republic is marked by prevailing good planning and organization. The same applies to Poland, where Brewster and Bennett (2010) note that Polish organizations are evaluated more positively than the Portuguese organizations are in the various analytical dimensions of organizational culture (i.e. transparency, hierarchy and teams, market orientation and customer organization, and planning, energy, creativity, and adaptability; cross-cultural orientation and relational orientation). Specifically, the link with hierarchy is more formal in Poland than in Portugal. This evidence led Bennet and Brewster (2002) and Brewster and Bennett (2010) to suggest that the greater informality found in the organizational culture of Portuguese companies can explain the evidence of less planning and organization, and less transparency in its management in comparison to the sample in countries of central and eastern Europe. The lack of clear leadership strategy results in short-term decisions and lack of planning of Portuguese companies. Top managers are more individualistic than cooperating in thinking and work, characterized the Portuguese managers as predominantly autocratic.

Following this argument, Portuguese literature (Cunha & Rego, 2008; House et al., 1999; Hofstede, 2001; Jesuino, 2002) suggests that organizational management practices, specifically HRM practices, are influenced by national culture.

The Portuguese organizational model seems to be anchored:

1. in a female culture, i.e. a culture that places greater value on personal relations, quality of life and caring for others and on that is more likely to stress the value of social rewards and less so assertiveness and competition (Hofstede, 1980);
2. with high power distance, i.e. members of organizations of high power distance cultures tend to accept that power should be shared differently as there are inequalities between people in the same organization on the basis of the hierarchical levels occupied. The relationships with superiors are formal. This trend in Portuguese culture explains the low participation of people in decision-making processes (Jesuino, 2002);
3. with high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980), and the unpredictability limited by a set of social norms and rules, and;
4. with strong collectivism in the group (Cunha & Rego, 2008; Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 1999), i.e. collectivist cultures there is likely to be a greater preference to work with others or in groups.

Furthermore, the loyalty of individuals to organizations is unquestionable. From the point of view of work, leaders tend to promote institutional practices that encourage and reward workers' loyalty to the organization rather than develop the achievement of individual goals. According to Rego and Cunha (2009), the employment relationship tends to develop in the framework of mutual obligations (i.e. protection in exchange for loyalty).

Hotel Industry and HRM

As stated by Cho et al. (2006), human resource management departments of hotel companies are often criticized for being cost centres. This criticism is raised because results of employee management and outcomes of HRM efforts are difficult to measure. More recently, some researchers (Cristiani & Peiro, 2015; Davis & Luiz, 2015; Nickson, 2013) have emphasized that some HRM practices have a positive impact on organizational performance (e.g. decreased turnover rates, increased labour productivity, and increased profit margins within the industry).

The hotel industry has become one of the most important service industries in Portugal, where there is a sharply increasing growth in recent years. Furthermore, there is increased competition within this industry in Portugal. This increased competition has forced hotel units to create strategies to retain current clients and to attract new clients.

In line with these arguments, improving quality service through increased employee performance is the solution for this industry to remain competitive (Tsaur & Lin, 2004). Many researchers (e.g. Clark, 2005; Siebern-Thomas, 2005) say that job quality affects employees' job satisfaction and well-being and, consequently, affects organizational performance. Considering that job quality is related to pay, job security, career opportunities, job variety, job autonomy, stress, physical effort, co-worker relationships (Adler & Adler, 2004; Green, Kler, & Leeves, 2010; Handel, 2005; Knox, Warhurst, Nickson, & Dutton, 2014), the HRM function has an important role in hotel unit industry because there are low paying, low-skilled, and poor training and career opportunities (Baum, 2007; Knox, 2010; Vanselow, Warhurst, Bernhardt, & Dresser, 2010). Nevertheless, HR scholars and practitioners (Khatri, 2000; Mourison, 1996; Tsaur & Lin, 2004) suggest that HRM practices may create more job satisfaction among employees. This satisfaction may have a positive impact on service quality (Tsaur & Lin, 2004). For example, at the four hotel units identified among the 100 Portuguese best places to work in 2014, all the reasons for this classification are related to HRM practices ('100 Melhores empresas para trabalhar,' 2015): good benefits packages, work-life balance practices, training and development, and rewarding the best performance.

As concluded by Cho et al. (2006), the emphasis of human resources on improving organizational performance has become stronger, not only because human resources cannot be easily imitated by competitors, but because they provide an effective and rapid response to market demands. Thus, organizations and managers in the hotel industry face real challenges in recruiting, developing, and maintaining a committed, competent, well-managed, and well-motivated workforce that is focused on offering high quality (Nickson, 2013). Furthermore, human potential is increasingly recognized as an essential asset for organizations. For this reason, current and future organizations must assign an essential role to HR managers (Alis, Horts, Chevalier, Fabi, & Peretti, 2012), in particular those where employees are to be mobilized to ensure cooperation, dynamism and personal commitment in order to handle the new demands of an increasingly competitive market. As referred to by Nickson (2013), organizations and managers in the tourism and hospitality industry face real challenges in recruiting, developing and maintaining a committed, competent, well-managed and well-motivated workforce that is focused on offering a high-quality 'product' to the increasingly demanding and discerning customer. In contrast, having briefly considered the nature of the hospitality and tourism industry and the characteristics of its workforce, attention now turns to understanding HRM and the increasingly important role it is felt to play in organizational success (e.g. more quality service and more competitive advantage). Thus, the HRM role will be aimed at securing high-quality service; for example, HRM practices have an important role to play in developing capabilities that enable change toward achieving sustainability and environment-related goals, ultimately helping organizations achieve long-term competitive advantage (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2012). Particularly, some HRM practices may be effective at encouraging pro-environmental behaviour in their staff (Zibarras & Coan, 2015). Low pay and a lack of career structure and benefits are identified as the main reasons for changing employment (Nickson, 2013).

Underlying this debate, the connection between HRM practices and quality service motivates this study. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the importance of various HRM practices on organizational performance in the Portuguese hotel industry from the HR managers' perspective.

Given the great importance of HRM on organizational performance identified in the reviewed literature, the main focus of this study is to explore the role of this function at present and the future of the Portuguese hotel industry, from the point of view of the HR managers of the hotel units included in our study. Bearing in mind the specifics of the organizational culture and the management practices of Portuguese hotel units, we think that there are some idiosyncrasies, which are examined in our study as described below.

Methodology

Participants

All the participants in our study were human resource managers in hotels in Portugal. Twelve participants were interviewed during December 2014. The interview inquired about their experiences in human resources management departments in hotels in order to understand the future trend of human capital in the tourism industry. The questionnaire asked for information to characterize the sample: age, gender, marital status, function and number of years working in the function.

The participants' mean age was 41.34 years (SD = 9.23), six (50%) were female and six (50%) were male. Regarding their marital status, eight (66.7%) were married, and four (33.3%) were single. All the participants were human resource directors in their hotel units; they were undergraduates in tourism and have worked there for a mean of 8.9 years (SD = 4.3).

Procedure

The participants signed their informed consent forms for inclusion in the study and for the audiotaping of the interviews. The questionnaires were completed before the interview. The interviews took place at the hotel units. All interviews, which lasted between 20 to 70 min, were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The interview schedule included several open-ended questions:

- What will the ideal profile of the future employee in the tourism industry be?
- Which competencies should an employee in hotel units have?
- What technical competencies are valued in this area?
- What social/behavioural competencies are valued?
- Can you analyse the skills required today and those that will be expected in the near future?
- What changes do you think will occur in the recruitment and selection of candidates for the tourism sector?
- What is the importance of training?
- How do you characterize career management?
- How do you define the career plans?
- What are the challenges to career management in this sector?
- Which training areas do you promote?
- How will the influence of human resources practices in the management of Portuguese hotels units be, specifically in career management and in the retention of employees?
- What will the role of Human Resources Management in Portuguese hotels unit be in the future?

Data Interpretation and Analysis

Interview data were analysed using the thematic analysis method, the basic premise of which is that the comprehension of phenomena must emerge from the data rather than from preconceived notions formulated by the researcher. This must go beyond a purely descriptive account to a theoretical formulation of the phenomenon under research. The data collection and analysis were deliberately interweaved, i.e. theoretical sampling, so that subsequent questions could be revised to reflect and check the emergent categories. Theoretical saturation was used to compose the sampling.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed with NVivo 10.0 software according to the constant comparative method. Following these guidelines, the first step of the analysis was open coding. Data were examined to identify the participants' descriptions of thought patterns, feelings, and actions related to the themes mentioned in the interviews.

The codes were formulated in words closely resembling those used by the participants. This was an attempt to maintain the semantics of the data. Codes were compared to verify their descriptive content and confirm that they were grounded in the data. In the second step, the codes were sorted into categories. This was done by constant comparisons between categories, and between categories, codes, and interview protocols. Data collected at later stages in the study were used to add, elaborate, and saturate the codes and categories. The steps of analysis were not strictly sequential; rather, we moved forward and backward, constantly re-examining data, codes, and categories.

Core categories were identified, allowing the connecting of all concepts together and unifying them, thus enabling understanding of the phenomena. To ensure the validity of the analysis and the coding process, a second researcher was consulted as an auditor (an independent researcher to discuss and validate the categories) throughout the entire data analysis process to assist the primary author by challenging ideas and assisting in the construction of the categories.

Results

In order to understand the perceptions of the HRM directors of the hotel units on the future trends of human capital management in tourism, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The main results are presented in Table 1. The analysis of these interviews revealed the following integrative categories: Future Professional Profile for hotel units; Role of HRM Practices in hotel units; and the Future Role of HRM in the tourism industry. A more elaborate description of the results is presented in the rest of this section with participants' transcriptions to illustrate and facilitate understanding.

The ideal profile of the future collaborator in hotel units includes the requirements and skills for the professional activity in this industry. Concerning the category requirements, several qualities that aim to develop human ability as well as its customer orientation emerge: specifically, the professional ability of storytelling and creating memories for the client. Regarding the behavioural dimension, features such as being professional, friendly, humble, affable, available, organized, punctual, diligent, a good communicator, sociable, adaptable, helpful, and flexible emerge. In contrast, the language domain is presented as a prerequisite and transculturality as a valuable dimension. As an example, the following statements were made: 'It is essential that the professional has the ability to tell stories, to create memories. In our days the customers are demanding and prefer places that create good feelings, remember it in a positive and enjoyable way' (L), and 'We value customer orientation, always focus on the customer, anticipate their needs, be friendly, sociable, adapt to situations' (C).

Table 1 Core Categories and Subcategories

Core categories	Subcategories
Future Professional Profile	Ideal Profile (Requirements & Skills)
Role of HRM practices	Recruitment & Selection
	Compensation & Benefits
	Training
	Career Development
Future role of HRM	Paper
	Retention of Workers
	Sector's competitiveness

The skills displayed by these professionals are defined by the area in which the employee exercises his activity. However, in order to analyse them comprehensively, skills such as initiative, proactivity, responsibility, dynamism, suitability and seriousness of the employee emerge, as evidenced by the statement, 'In this area, professionals need to be serious people, they have to be able to propose [actions], take responsibility and – very important – it has to be a dynamic person who does and who is not waiting' (A).

Within the skills, naturally, more technical and social-behavioural issues emerge. In the technical dimension, professional qualifications are valued, with special emphasis on the importance of having a bachelor's or master's degree in the field, as well as the perceived prestige of the school where the training was acquired. As an illustration: 'It is very important to have technical skills, know-how. In this area, the requirements of each activity are completely different. The professionals have to know about their professional area and in Portugal there are already good schools in tourism' (I), and 'Nowadays there is an increasing value for people who have a bachelor's or master's degree in the area, a good school that is, the certification has to be proven in this area' (F). At the same time, foreign languages and computer skills are described as essential for this area.

In turn, the social-behavioural dimension emerges from the value given to education, communication skills, and the adaptability, dynamism, and description of the professional. This can be reinforced by statements such as 'The English needs to be as fluent as the Portuguese – the knowledge of more languages is valued' (B), 'The proficiency of languages is very important, sometimes we do interviews in English' (G), and 'In our group, we value communication skills, our client is looking for a discreet professional and a professional that knows how to behave in the situation' (D).

Regarding the role of HRM practices, this emerging category of recruitment and selection, compensation and benefits, training, and career development are cited as major practices in the field of hospitality.

Recruitment and selection are conceptualized in a way similar to what currently happens; major changes are not expected in most situations. However, with the need for globalization, new tools for the application of this practice, in particular with the use of new technologies are emerging, namely interviews by videoconference. Therefore, this scenario requires some changes in the procedures; previously the recruiters used newspapers, according to the function to recruit; currently, the hotel units are beginning to make use of social networks and blogs of various technical specialties as prime locations to find certain professionals: 'The process of recruitment and selection will not change much, much depends on the function for which we intend to recruit [...] we have to look for people in places where they are' (H). 'Now it is beginning to be a more digital time than before; when we intended to recruit we put ads in certain newspapers, now we have to rely on the various social networks, but this also depends on the function' (B).

The category compensation and benefits are characterized by an absence of change with regard to salaries and benefits being established in parallel with other areas of activity due to the economic and financial crisis. However, it is recognized that, particularly in this area, other benefits in addition to the base salary have a major role. These benefits integrate financial dimensions, which are described as being more important. For example, some strategies are presented as prizes for achieving goals and social responsibility measures: these prizes include health insurance, Christmas gifts, free stays/discounts. In contrast, several hotel units recognize the importance of setting goals for the different activities and establish the awards according to customer satisfaction. This could be illustrated with the following quotes: 'The financial rewards from the customers in our hotel unit are very substantial, and this turns out to be a great benefit to all, because in terms of wages there are no major changes' (K); 'In addition to the salary question, there are many other incentives that are important; Christmas parties, discounts for stays, a set of protocols with other entities and which employees can benefit from [...] We do not give more money, but we help people spend less' (J).

Vocational training emerges as a central area in the role of HRM practices in hotel units. This category recognizes the necessity of having employees with basic technical training to be an ongoing practice, technical and behavioural training, contributing to the quality of services. Vocational training is understood as an investment in the future with rapid and high returns. In this sense, it is very important to maintain all technical training as well as the internal communication areas, commitment, shared responsibility, team building, languages, computers, in addition to other obligatory themes according to Portuguese law. For example, 'Vocational training is very important, in addition to those required by law, always bet on the actions that enable the improvement of the soft skills such as languages and more behavioural issues' (A); 'greatly appreciate the technical update, focus on training is essential and gives a great return' (E).

Career development emerges from career management and retention of talent in this area of activity. The career development is mostly zigzag and vertical, recognizing the need to be a solid process, based on individual merit. Thus, the participants recognize the importance of defining career paths. They allow, mould, and create professionals for the real needs of hotel units depending on whether the will of the employees or the employer's will. However, despite the constraints of the sector try to mitigate the sector's seasonality effect by maintaining the active psychological contract establishing promise contracts, investing in the continuous training of people even when they are not working with the hotel units and maintaining the various forms of communication (newspaper, newsletter, etc.).

Although it is recognized that career development is not a controversial matter in this sector, HR managers identify it as a huge challenge that must be improved. For example, 'Career management is very difficult given the enormous seasonality of this professional activity' (J), 'It is not a priority, does not mean that people cannot get in a function and then move to another, that had already happened, but this concern we do not have' (C). In turn, talent retention is not a practice of great importance in hotel units and appears linked to security, peace, and recognition awarded by the organization and the fact that employees are focused on awards for goals and thus remain in organizations. Moreover, this difficulty is due to the huge turnover in the sector or seasonality issues, low commitment to the organizations, and the constant need to seek a more attractive and safe professional situation for employees. For example, 'Turnover in this field of activity is very large, sometimes people want to work here just to have in their curriculum vitae that they have worked on X but here the pressure is too high, and then they cannot stand it' (G).

Finally, the category Future Paper of HRM in the hotel industry emerges from the characterization of this paper, retention of workers, and the sector's competitiveness.

Therefore, in the majority of hotel units participating in this study, HRM is characterized as a central dimension being associated with an operating activity of day-to-day or an area of investment in the development and retention of employees to the extent that operational issues are fundamental to the proper functioning of the organization complemented by investment and recognition of people as a differentiating factor. Thus, we recognize the importance of contributing to employee motivation and HR as a differentiating element of the organization. As an example, 'It is very important to invest in employees, keep them motivated and committed, this is what is expected of the HR function' (E).

In contrast, the most strategic dimension is presented as the future challenge, following future trends, to respond to the constant needs and maintain the internal customer compromised are key elements. Thus, we recognize the need for HRM reconcile the more operational dimension with a more strategic line and facing the business. As an illustration, 'too much time spent on operational tasks, but in the future, it is important to increase the relationship with the business, the HR department has to have a more strategic role in the organization' (F), or 'work is very operational, shifts, vacation, wages but we have begun to value the strategic dimension, we have more meetings with the directors and management, this is the future [...] and I also find it more attractive' (K).

Finally, the competitiveness in the hotel units where people are presented is a key element. On the one hand, competition from other hotels, and requirement of customers, the establishment of partnerships and the need to adopt a global perspective are the most mentioned elements. On the other, the need to meet some specifics of the tourism industry related to shifts, seasonality, investment in technological improvement as well as the weight of the strategic role of HRM. Thus, it is concluded that, in the future, only the more prepared and proactive will survive, 'given the industry characteristics is very important to follow the future trends' (D interview), 'next year we will invest in improving our technology, we partner with a university so we can be more prepared [...] the market will begin to be increasingly selective and in this area there is a huge competition' (B).

Conclusion

Main Findings

The results of this study showed that the competencies and skills required for hotels professionals are changing as a result of the emergence of new functions for this sector in Portugal (e.g. spa/wellness manager, e-commerce manager, revenue/yield manager, guest relations) and the importance that information technologies are assuming in boosting the sector's economy, and making it more competitive and innovative. HR managers in this study recognize the importance of betting on more qualified HR, with higher education and knowledge of foreign languages (e.g. English, French, German and Spanish), which are the more highly valued requirements and skills.

HRM practices that are being developed seem to be sufficient for the current management of HR. However, these managers are aware of their need to invest in another way to develop these practices. It is important to enjoy the benefits of IT for their development, reducing the time devoted to administrative management in this function. Vocational training is valued, especially for the benefits which give the permanent development of the necessary skills and better performance of its professionals. The focus on career development plans is identified as one of the main challenges for the HR function in helping to minimize the adverse effects of seasonality that are still very present in the sector. Given the constraints of the remuneration policy which characterizes the sector, HR managers are aware of the need to rely more on incentives and productivity bonuses as wage supplements to enhance the satisfaction and the consequent desire to stay in the hotel units. Finally, our results show that, according to HR managers, employees are recognized as key elements of the competitiveness of the hotel unit, not only in response to increasing customer challenges but also to ensure competitiveness to face massive competition. Both are reasons that strategic HR management should be promoted in the future.

Theoretical Implications

This study provides empirical evidence regarding what HRM practices are currently being employed by hotel units to support the professional behaviour of coworkers and quality service in hotel units. However, our findings also show that Portuguese hotel units are not using HRM practices to a great extent as considered by Zibarras and Coan (2015). Thus, the findings appear to highlight a gap between research and practice. Furthermore, the changing role of HR practitioners from an administrative to a more strategic role could in the future, most probably, explain a major growth of the importance of this field of hotel units as we found on previous literature in other countries (e.g. Bartram & Rimmer, 2011; Gillon, Braganza, Williams, & McCauley-Smith, 2014; Mamman & Kulaiby, 2014). Like Tsaur and Lin (2004), we propose that when employees perceive their organization as one that has invested in HRM functions and activities such as recruitment and selection, training and career development, compensation, performance appraisal, and so on, they are then enabled to do the organization's main work of serving customers, and they stay more satisfaction and increase their desire to remain. This underscores the importance of HRM researchers gives more attention for results obtained on the development of HRM practices in this sector. For example, our findings are consistent with the study by Cho et al. (2006) that showed that when the hotels develop HRM practices, the hotel will experience high profit and low turnover rate of their employees. As referred to Cristiani and Peiró (2015), the HR function or department increases their organizational value and status when it recognizes HRM practices as sources of competitive advantage.

Another finding in our study seems to be related to the high retention of workers within this industry. This differs with studies in others countries, perhaps because the HRM function is influenced by Portuguese society and organizational culture.

In Portuguese hotel units, a 'paternalistic' organizational culture prevails (Hofstede, 2001), one that guarantees job security by promoting, in turn, an adversarial attitude to risk. It is possible that the adoption of this type of culture can help to understand the greater tendency of the employees of the Portuguese tourism industry to remain in their function in comparison to the turnover rates found in this sector in the US, where the high turnover rate is one of the most important issues in the tourism industry, which may range from 35% to 115% (Cho et al., 2006). In contrast, we believe that the differences found in the Portuguese hotel industry may be explained by the economic-financial situation affecting the local economy during the previous three years, which may also explain this need for reduced investment in HR, particularly in this sector, which is needed to rationalize all cost to guarantee national and international competitiveness.

Practical Implications

Our data suggest that there is not a great deal of concern regarding human resources management within Portuguese hotel units. This evidence can be explained because at the majority of hotels in our sample there is not an HR manager with specific qualification in human resource management. As suggested by Martins, Silva, and Costa (2014), for becoming a business partner, the HR responsible will need to make his abilities wider and cross-functional (Coetzer & Sitlington, 2014). The elevation of these HRM competences, in order to become better people managers, and the development of excellence of those talents that compose the HR teams will allow the HRM role as a business partner to be unquestionable (Reilly & Williams, 2012). Particularly in the Portuguese context, the lack of specific qualification in HRM accentuates the reactive and administrative role of the HR function, coping with an under-valued status inside the company until the mid-1990s (Cunha et al., 2010); previously, such functions had been handled by professionals with qualifications in Psychology, Sociology and Law. With the beginning of the first degrees in HRM in Portugal, the HR function seems to be gradually growing in importance in the Portuguese organisations since the beginnings of the 21st century (Martins et al., 2014). Furthermore, this study is expected to be helpful to the managers of the hotel organizations in planning and executing HRM practices as well as knowing the importance of HRM for the satisfaction of workers or their desire to remain within the organization. Additionally, this study might encourage other hotel organizations to introduce similar practices.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Those limitations, in turn, result in possibilities for further studies.

Firstly, the approach adopted (case study and in-depth interviews) precludes the generalization of the findings. Future studies should include more Portuguese hotel units.

Secondly, the human resource management role and the dimension of the hotel can help to explain some of the specific aspects found in these Portuguese hotels compared to other countries. For example, the fact that there is not any multinational hotel in our sample can help to explain the important role of HRM found in previous studies (e.g. Bartram & Rimmer, 2011; Gillon et al., 2014; Mamman & Kulaiby, 2014) that was not replicated in the hotel units involved in this research.

Thirdly, the co-workers' perspective about HRM has not been exploited, so future studies could analyse how the HRM role influences the behaviour, performance, satisfaction and, consequently, his/her wish to remain with or leave the hotel.

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An Investigation of the Tourism Distribution Channels in the VFR Segment

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This study contributes to the understanding of the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) travel segment, as it focuses on the use of tourism distribution channels as information sources for consumer travel behaviour in the VFR segment. Demographics and trip characteristics of the VFR travel segment were also analysed, according to trip organization (package holiday/self-guided holiday), time used to decide about the trip, type of accommodation, travel companion, and booking; the findings justify the significant and profitable role of VFR in commercial accommodation. The data are representative of the province of Arcadia, Greece, serving as the research field of a longitudinal study. The findings underscore the important role that VFR travel holds in commercial accommodation, confirming the 'hybrid' nature of VFR travel, and highlight the importance of social identity issues involved in VFR travel, as well as indicating an emerging role of the diasporas in their return visit(s) to the homeland. As such, the findings would seem to promote a marketing strategy of organized governance that takes into account identification and focuses on a 'sense of belonging' and community, tailored to the characteristics of this particular target market and aligned with the distribution channels they use, as evidenced in the research findings.

Keywords: VFR travel, consumer behaviour, distribution channels, tourism marketing, tourism segmentation

Introduction

This study contributes to the understanding of VFR travellers' behaviour in a 'during the trip' context. The use of the term 'travel' was deliberately chosen, as according to Backer (2012):

> [...] a person travelling to a destination to: attend a wedding, assist a daughter to care for a newborn baby, or visit an ailing relative could not be included as a tourist – under Leiper's (2004, p. 35) definition of tourism as a search for leisure experiences from interactions with features or characteristics of places they choose to visit – but rather they would identify themselves as travelling for the purpose of visiting friends and relatives and fall under the official data as VFR travelers.

It is clear that VFR travel may not always involve a leisure experience and VFR travel is motivated by a range of reasons according to which specific obligations are fulfilled through host-guest social interactions (Capistrano, 2013).

The whole analysis is through a consumer behaviour framework, because consumer behaviour has been used to explain the decision-making processes of consumers facing several alternatives or choices, thus making consumer research on tourism the cornerstone of marketing strategy (Van Raaij, 1986; Katsoni, Giaoutzi, & Nijkamp, 2013). Demographics and trip characteristics of the VFR travel segment were then analysed, according to trip organization (package holiday/self-guided holiday), time used to decide about the trip, type of accommodation, travel companion, and booking, where the findings highlight the differences between VFR travelers and other tourists and justify the important and profitable role of VFR in commercial accommodation.

The study also focuses on the use of information sources for travel consumer behaviour, discussing the implications of tourism distribution channels. While the tourism literature evidences that several factors influence travelers' behavior in consuming tourism products (Lepp & Gibson, 2008; Hsu, Tsai, & Wu, 2009), to date, investigation into the determinants of tourism consumption remains inadequate in the literature; for example, the relative importance of the various information sources (ICT sources included) used by travelers has not yet been systematically analysed (Katsoni et al., 2013). Distribution channels are the paths by which tourism organizations execute the communication and sale of their products and services and as Buhalis (2000, p. 113) argues: 'The primary distribution functions for tourism are information, combination and travel arrangement services.' To varying degrees, all tourism product suppliers depend on these channels for the distribution of their products. While the importance of understanding and managing the structure and behaviour of such channels has been clearly identified in many mainstream academic and trade publications, relatively little tourism research has focused on VFR travel. The data of this study are representative of the province of Arcadia, Greece, serving as the research field of a longitudinal study. The results of the research give the industry the possibility of improving information distribution systems and an understanding of VFR travellers' consumer behaviour in order to make adequate marketing decisions.

Literature Review

Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) Tourism Defined

The Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) form of travel is recognized as a substantial form of tourism worldwide, and it is also likely to be the oldest form of travel (Backer, 2011) as travelling to visit friends and relatives has always been socially significant. VFR is defined as 'a form of travel that is about being co-present with significant "faces," being their guests, receiving their hospitality and perhaps enjoying their knowledge of local culture' (Larsen, Urry, and Axhausen (2007, p. 247). Moscardo, Pearce, Morrison, Green, and O'Leary (2000) provide five defining features of the VFR travel: sector (VFR as a major motive/trip type or as an activity); scope (international and/or domestic); effort (short- and/or long-haul); accommodation used (accommodated by friends/relatives, commercial accommodation, or a combination); and the focus of the visit.

It is evident then that there is a definitional issue in VFR travel, as recognized by Backer (2010), who highlighted an inconsistency in tourism literature: VFR is commonly categorized by the purpose of visit (Yuan, Fridgen, Hsieh, & O'Leary, 1995; McKercher, 1995), but it can also be categorized by accommodation type (Boyne, 2001; King, 1994; Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2006; Boyne, Carswell, & Hall, 2002). Backer (2012) then developed a definitional model of VFR travel as a form of travel involving a visit whereby either (or both) the purpose of the trip or the type of accommodation involves visiting friends and/or relatives. Thus, in tourism literature, VFR travel is recognized as having a multifaceted nature and might be a kind of hybrid travel, i.e. travel which comprises a mix of pleasure, business and VFR travel experiences.

As a consequence, difficulties arise in synthesizing existing research on VFR travel and many authors argue that a basic step in formulating a typology of VFR travel is distinguishing VFR as the prime travel motivation or trip type from VFR as one activity among several in which the travellers participate (Morrison, Hsieh, & O'Leary, 1995; King 1996). However, the purpose of visit definitions may capture different people than accommodation definitions will. Nor do all VFR travellers who stay with friends and relatives state a VFR travel purpose (Jackson, 1990; 2003), and neither do all people who travel for VFR purposes stay with friends and relatives (Backer, 2010). Therefore, a more inclusive definition is that 'VFR travel is a form of travel involving a visit whereby either (or both) the purpose of the trip or the type of accommodation involves visiting friends and/or relatives' (Backer, 2007, p. 369).

This misconception about the VFR market in general, based on its assumed non-commercial accommodation usage and assumed within-group homogeneity, has led to the notion that VFR travel is underestimated (Backer, 2012; Griffin, 2013) and that official data fail to measure it appropriately, as many people who are VFR travellers may not actually identify themselves as such and simply state that they are on holiday. Some empirical research on this topic shows that while VFR travellers are commonly considered to spend less than other types of tourists, more detailed comparative analysis indicates that this market should not be disregarded, as they find that VFR travellers tend to participate in a wide variety of local and regional leisure activities (Moscardo et al., 2000) and have a significant economic impact on commercial tourism operations, such as travel services and retail (Backer, 2012; Griffin, 2013; Lee, Morrison, Lheto, Webb, & Reid, 2005; Seaton & Palmer, 1997). Another strong indication that VFR can be a lucrative market for destinations is the link between repeat visits and VFR travel (Tiefenbacher, Day, & Walton, 2000), as the segment of repeat visitors appears to include a high rate of VFRS and VFR travel is less susceptible to seasonality, as tourist arrivals tend to be dispersed more evenly throughout the year (Hu & Morrison, 2002; Seaton & Palmer, 1997).

Moreover, VFR travel was found to be distributed more equally throughout the destination, benefiting areas beyond typical tourism hubs (Asiedu, 2008; Jackson, 1990). Asiedu (2008) mentioned other reasons for the attractiveness of the VFR market segment, such as the fact that VFRS are less influenced by image and political instability concerns. VFR was also found to be one of the primary motivations for both domestic and international traveling (Paci, 1994; Pennington-Gray, 2003; Yuan et al., 1995), and to have close association with immigration patterns (Bywater, 1995; Jackson, 1990), which generate two-way movements of 'ethnic' tourism: emigrants who return to their homeland out of senses of belonging and identification with its way of life, and their friends and families who travel to visit them in their current country (King, 1994).

For all the reasons mentioned above, VFR travel is now considered to be a legitimate market segment with significant relevance to the tourism-related economy as well as to the hospitality industry (Lehto, Morrison, & O'Leary, 2001). The contribution of VFR travel to the tourism benefits for the development of the tourism destination of Arcadia, Greece, made this research relevant.

Tourism Distribution Channels, Information Sources, and Tourist Segmentation

Travel products are mostly intangible personal service products, involving personal interactions between customers and service providers (Lovelock & Wright, 1999; Normann, 1996; Teare, 1992) and the consumption and production of tourism products always coincide, creating high personal involvement (Bieger & Laesser, 2002). According to the economics of information, these characteristics often lead to great personal investments of time, effort, and financial resources for customer decision making (Lambert, 1998). With increasing frequency, tourists have been directly segmented based on their search behaviour (Katsoni et al., 2013; Bieger & Laesser, 2004). Market segmentation is a technique used to subdivide a heterogeneous market into homogeneous subgroups that can be distinguished by different variables, such as consumer needs, characteristics, or behaviour (Kotler, 1998; Middleton, 1994). Because people have individualized needs, tastes, and attitudes, as well as different life stages and lifestyles, no single variable can be used to segment travel markets (Andereck & Caldwell, 1994), and the use of 'multistage segmentation' (Middleton, 1994; Havitz and Dimanche, 1990; Morrison, 1996) or a 'combination' (Kotler et al., 2006) of multiple variables rather than just one has been recommended. A review of the literature indicates that there is no one correct way to segment a market.

Although information seeking is often coupled with a cultural (and therefore regionally different) background resulting in different patterns of behavior (Dawar, 1993), a number of common travel-specific denominators regarding information collection have been identified, such as length of trip, previous experience and/or visits to the destination, and travel party characteristics, e.g. composition of the vacation group, the presence of family and friends at the destination (Bieger & Laesser, 2002, 2004; Fodness & Murray, 1997). Understanding how customers acquire information is necessary for marketing management decisions (Katsoni et al., 2013; Moutinho, 1987).

The 'purpose of trip' is recognized as one of the non-traditional segmentation bases closely associated with travel motivation, and has been approached from different perspectives. Examples of such studies include the interaction of trip purposes with activities (Hsieh, O'Leary, & Morrison, 1992; Jeffrey & Xie, 1995; Morrison, Hsieh, & O'Leary, 1994; Moscardo, Morrison, Pearce, Lang, & O'Leary, 1996), interest (Sorensen, 1993; Wight, 1996), motivation (Cha, McCleary and Uysal, 1995; Wight, 1996), opinion (Cohen & Richardson, 1995), and value (Madrigal & Kahle, 1994). In using trip type as a key variable to segment the travel market, the inclusion of more trip-related characteristics in the analysis is highly recommended for the comprehensive understanding of the target segment from a consumer behaviour perspective, such as length of stay and size of the travel party (Sung, Morrison, Hong, & O'Leary, 2001).

Information search behavior and tourism distribution channels usage are closely related; the Internet has also intensified the complexity of the travel decision-making process, and it has become an important channel for travellers' information search (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, & O'Leary, 2006; Gursoy & McLeary, 2003; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2003; Xiang, Weber, & Fesenmaier, 2008; Jun, Vogt, & Mackay, 2007), creating an environment whereby online information providers, such as tourist boards, hotel and resort websites, travel agents, bloggers, and magazines, actively compete for attention to attract searchers and, ultimately, bookers. The application of ICT in the tourism sector provides an opportunity for travel and tourism service providers to intermix traditional marketing channels (i.e. distribution, transaction, and communication) that were previously considered independent processes (Peterson & Merino, 2003; Zins, 2009). A single interaction on the Internet can provide product information, a means for payment and product exchange, and distribution, whereas more traditional interaction approaches frequently separate these functions (Jun et al., 2007; Stratigea, Papadopoulou, & Panagiotopoulou, 2015) and recent studies have considered the use of online information sources relative to more conventional ones (Katsoni et al., 2013).

Implications of the Literature Review

The literature review offers a number of options to analyse the profile of VFR travellers: firstly, an analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics. Secondly, an analysis of their trip characteristics: trip organization (package holiday/self-guided holiday), time used to decide about the trip, type of accommodation, travel companion, and booking. Thirdly, an analysis of their information sourcing behaviour, based on internal and external information sources, and ICT use in particular: the Internet, the use of Global Positioning System (GPS) and smartphones.

Method

This investigation was designed to further understand the tourism market in the province of Arcadia, Greece, in 2012. To eliminate seasonality, the survey included a convenience sample of Greek and foreign tourists in the region over a period of 12 months. Questionnaires were distributed to various survey sites from people working in the prefecture of Arcadia. Data were collected by using a four-page self-administered questionnaire, in Greek and English, primarily designed to gather information on the subjects' general motivations for travel. A total of 3500 questionnaires were distributed to the sites, and 766 usable questionnaires were collected, which leads to the response rate of 21.88%. Their participation in VFR travel was identified through the question: 'As part of your vacation how likely are you to be interested in visiting friends and relatives?' The survey data were coded and analysed using R, an open-source statistical package. Descriptive statistical analysis was applied to the collected data to explore the overall sample profile. In order to identify individual characteristics of the subpopulation of tourists that had replied positively to the question on how likely they were to be interested in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation, the VFR travellers' group was separated from the rest of the respondents, and the following sub-groups for subsequent analysis were constructed:

- Group A or 'VFR travellers' ($n = 312$): 'Very likely' to be interested in visiting friends and relatives.
- Group B ($n = 454$): 'Very unlikely' to be interested in visiting friends and relatives.

Then, the individual characteristics of the two sub-groups were analysed. Chi-square tests were conducted to verify whether differences between the two sub-groups, as regards particular characteristics of the population of tourists, were due to chance variation or revealed some statistically significant trend. Chi-squared tests were chosen for use in this exploratory investigation to aid in making inference about the uniform distribution (or not) of the two sub-groups in relation to demographic, trip characteristics, selection of information sources for their journey and degree of satisfaction from the use of these information sources.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

The initial chi-square analyses were conducted to determine differences in the Group A and Group B tourists' gender, age, education, occupation and nationality. Amongst VFR travellers (Group A) the number of female participants was greater than the number of male participants: females at 60.6% and males at 37.8%. Results in Table 1 reveal a significant chi-square for the variables: Occupation ($\chi^2_{9df} = 36.03$, $p < 0.0001$). Table 1 also reveals that there is a tendency for unemployed/people looking for a job to visit friends and relatives in their vacation. Visiting friends and relatives is also less popular for scientific, free professional, technical and related workers, as well as for trade and sales workers; Nationality/Origin ($\chi^2_{1df} = 4.3$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that it is more likely for Greek than foreign travellers to show preference in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation.

Trip Characteristics

Trip characteristics were analysed according to trip organization (package holiday/self-guided holiday), time used to decide about the trip, type of accommodation, travel companion, and booking.

The majority of VFR travellers (79.5%) organize their holidays on their own and make the final decision of their trip in a period of less than one month before their departure. They prefer to stay in upgraded hotels: first choice (27.2%) is hotel/club of 4- and 5-star categories. Only 2.9% prefer camping facilities. Bookings are made by phone, directly from the producer (55.4%). The tests on the trip characteristics of travellers in Group A and Group B, as displayed in Table 2, reveal that it is more likely for travellers of Group A compared to travellers of Group B to travel on their own or with their family but less commonly so with friends ($\chi^2_{2df} = 10.07$, $p < 0.005$). It is also evident that travellers of Group A are not only interested in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation, but also choose to stay with friends and relatives ($\chi^2_{6df} = 23.5$, $p < 0.001$). B&B is also more popular for Group A, while living in 2- and 3-star hotels and camping is less popular.

Selection of Information Sources

The aim of this part of the analysis is to explore the tourists' habits with regards to the preference they show in the selection of information sources for their journey. Comparisons between the two sub-groups (Group A and Group B) have been conducted using the chi-squared test in Table 3, and a significant chi-square has been derived from the sources: Personal experience/knowledge ($\chi^2_{1df} = 4.07$, $p < 0.05$) and GPS ($\chi^2_{1df} = 6.49$, $p < 0.05$). Figures in Table 3 reveal that it is more likely for travellers in Group A to use their personal experience and knowledge than tourists in Group B. It is also more common for tourists in Group A to get information on the place that they visit using a GPS device.

Information sources are displayed in the same Table 4, in descending order of preference for travellers in Group A. Thus, travellers interested in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation seek information on the place that they visit from recommendations from friends and family and secondly from the Internet. Third in their preference are travel guidebooks and travel magazines, while personal experi-

Table 1 Chi-Square Analysis of Demographic Characteristics of Travelers Who Are Interested in Visiting Friends and Relatives in Their Vacation

Category	Subcategory	Group A		Group B		χ^2	*df*	*p*
		n	%	*n*	%			
Gender	Male	118	37.8	200	44.1	3.461	1	0.0628
	Female	189	60.6	239	52.6			
Age	15-25	54	17.3	58	12.8	8.225	5	0.1443
	25-35	102	32.7	135	29.7			
	35-45	59	18.9	119	26.2			
	45-55	56	17.9	75	16.5			
	55-65	23	7.4	40	8.8			
	Over 65	13	4.2	16	3.5			
Higher level of education	Primary	10	3.2	16	3.5	6.8458	4	0.1443
	Secondary/high school	85	27.2	105	23.1			
	Tertiary	117	37.5	193	42.5			
	Postgraduate Studies	59	18.9	102	22.5			
	Other	29	9.3	26	5.7			
Occupation	Scientific, free professional, technical and related worker	71	22.8	141	31.1	36.0325	9	$3.912e^{-5}$
	Administrative and managerial worker	45	14.4	62	13.7			
	Clerical worker	54	17.3	88	19.4			
	Trade and sales worker	17	5.4	37	8.1			
	Farmer, fisherman, and related worker	8	2.6	8	1.8			
	Craftsman, worker, operator	24	7.7	16	3.5			
	Pensioner	16	5.1	24	5.3			
	Housework	18	5.8	20	4.4			
	Unemployed, looking for job	27	8.7	7	1.5			
	Student	28	9	48	10.6			
Nationality/origin	Foreign tourists	37	11.9	80	17.6	4.3096	1	0.0379
	Native (Greek) tourists	275	88.1	374	82.4			

Notes Group A: Very likely to be interested (n = 312). Group B: Unlikely to be interested (n = 454).

ence/knowledge, radio & TV broadcasts, and information brochures also rank high in their choices. The last two in their choice are the hotel listings and oral information provided by tourist information at the destination or from local tourist offices.

Degree of Satisfaction

Overall, travellers interested in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation (Group A) are satisfied with the information sources that they use, but not at a significantly greater or lesser extent than other tourists are (Group B), as shown in Table 4.

Discussion

The preceding analysis has revealed significant differences between VFR travellers and travellers with other trip interests. Firstly, in terms of demographics, the research suggests that occupation and nationality are not independent of the tourists' reported preference/interest in visiting friends and relatives on their

Table 2 Chi-Square Analysis of Trip Characteristics of Travelers who are Interested in Visiting Friends and Relatives in Their Vacation

Category	Subcategory	Group A		Group B		χ^2	*df*	*p*
		n	%	*n*	%			
Trip organization	Package tour/holiday	20	6.4	22	4.8	1.7297	2	0.4211
	Partial package tour/holiday	40	12.8	49	10.8			
	Self-guided tour/holiday	248	79.5	376	82.8			
Final decision for the trip was taken	Less than 1 month before departure	203	65.1	289	63.7	5.2688	2	0.0718
	1 to 6 months before the departure	74	23.7	130	28.6			
	More than 6 months before the dep.	33	10.6	30	6.6			
Type of accommodation	Hotel/club (4*/5*)	85	27.2	124	27.3	23.5107	6	0.0006
	B&B	61	19.6	78	17.2			
	Friends & Relatives	35	11.2	16	3.5			
	Hotel/club (2*/3*)	63	20.2	119	26.2			
	Holiday Home	27	8.7	37	8.1			
	Camping (tent, trainer, mobile home)	9	2.9	27	5.9			
	Combination of the above	22	7.1	33	7.3			
Travel with	On your own	29	9.3	20	4.4	10.6707	2	0.0048
	With one or more friends	137	43.9	242	53.3			
	With your family	138	44.2	186	41			
Book accommodation through	Travel agent	29	9.3	46	10.1	7.0214	3	0.0712
	By yourself directly from the producer via the telephone	173	55.4	289	63.7			
	By yourself directly from the producer via the Internet	39	12.5	50	11			
	By other person	63	20.2	63	13.9			

Notes Group A: Very likely to be interested ($n = 312$). Group B: Unlikely to be interested ($n = 454$).

vacation. As might be expected, it is more likely for Greek than foreign travellers to show preferences in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation; however, it is noteworthy that foreign travellers accounted for 12% of the VFR group. There is also a tendency for unemployed/people looking for a job to visit friends and relatives on their vacation. Visiting friends and relatives is less popular for scientific, free professional, technical and related workers, as well as for trade and sales workers.

This study also provides evidence for the importance of VFR travel in the contribution of the hosts themselves to the tourism and hospitality industry, as it agrees with other researchers who found that '[...]countering the popular image of VFR travellers as irrelevant to the hotel industry because VFR travellers do not purchase hotel rooms, VFR travellers are, in fact, significant purchasers of hotel room nights' (Braunlich & Nadkarni, 1995, p. 46); Backer, 2010; Lee et al., 2005; Pennington-Gray, 2003). Moreover, in this study we found that they prefer to stay in upgraded hotels: hotels/clubs of 4- and 5-star categories being their first choice (27.2%), while only 2.9% prefer camping facilities.

The research implies that a segmentation based on the information search behaviour is an appropriate way to develop marketing strategies and to target marketing communications. It also supports the position that trip-related (situational) descriptors have a strong influence on travel information search behaviour. VFR

Table 3 Chi-Square Analysis of Booking Characteristics of Travelers Who Are Interested in Visiting Friends and Relatives in Their Vacation

Booking characteristics	Group A		Group B		χ^2	*df*	*p*
	n	%	*n*	%			
Recommendations from friends and relatives	175	56.1	245	54	0.2568	1	0.6123
Internet	156	50	249	54.8	1.5536	1	0.2126
Travel guidebooks and travel magazines	114	36.5	151	33.3	0.7395	1	0.3898
Personal experience/knowledge	82	26.3	90	19.8	4.0664	1	0.04375
Radio and TV broadcasts (documentary and news)	68	21.8	97	21.4	0.0028	1	0.9581
Information brochures	58	18.6	66	14.5	1.9494	1	0.1626
Advertisements and articles in newspapers/magazines	51	16.3	70	15.4	0.0601	1	0.8064
Information from using a Global Positioning System	24	7.7	15	3.3	6.4894	1	0.01085
Video/CD-ROM/DVD/videotext	24	7.7	19	4.2	3.6567	1	0.05584
Oral information provided by retailer/agency	22	7.1	17	3.7	3.5282	1	0.06033
Information from using a smartphone	21	6.7	17	3.7	2.893	1	0.08897
Hotel listings	19	6.1	28	6.2	0.0119	1	0.913
Oral information provided by tourist information at destination or from local tourist offices	4	1.3	10	2.2	0.4357	1	0.5092

Notes Group A: Very likely to be interested ($n = 312$). Group B: Unlikely to be interested ($n = 454$).

Table 4 Chi-Square Analysis of the Degree of Satisfaction with Information Sources for Travellers Who Are Interested in Visiting Friends and Relatives in Their Vacation

Booking characteristics	Group A		Group B		χ^2	*df*	*p*
	n	%	*n*	%			
Satisfied	219	70.2	314	69.2	4.2298	2	0.1206
Somewhat satisfied	76	24.4	129	28.4			
Not satisfied	13	4.2	9	2			

Notes Group A: Very likely to be interested ($n = 312$). Group B: Unlikely to be interested ($n = 454$).

travellers in Arcadia are independent visitors, as 79.5% organize their holidays on their own. A significant finding of this research indicates that VFR travel consumers tend to prefer strongly internal information sources: recommendations from friends and relatives account for 55.1% of the respondents' choices. After a definite trip decision, information from friends and relatives is very important and travel behaviour adapts to their recommendations. The second source of information is the Internet (50%). This increased use of the Internet shows its enormous importance, as a single interaction on the Internet can provide product information, a means for payment and product exchange, and distribution, whereas a more traditional interaction frequently separates these functions (Jun et al., 2007). It is noteworthy, however, that the use of the Internet was quite limited for booking purposes in Arcadia (8%), a fact that needs to be investigated in future studies.

Third in their preference was the use of travel guidebooks and travel magazines, while personal experience/knowledge, radio & TV broadcasts, and information brochures also rank high in their choices. The last two in their choice are hotel listings and oral information provided by tourist information at the destination or from local tourist offices.

While information from a Global Positioning System (GPS) device and information from smartphones was used by a very low percentage of VFR travellers use (7.7% and 6.7% respectively) in this Arcadia study, it was still quite a bit higher than among the non-VFR travellers, suggesting that an initial level of familiarity might be a contributing factor. There is no doubt that in the future, mobile technology will increasingly provide opportunities for real-time travel information. Even today, mobile technology can bring the latest up-to-date information anytime and anywhere to customers. Developments in smartphones provide real-time web links; select automobiles offer telematics (web access in a vehicle), and the new generation of mobile broadband networks provide wireless communication spurring the development of location-based services using Global Positioning Systems (Jun et al., 2007). Indeed, travellers have already begun to use other Web 2.0 websites, which enable them to share their views and opinions about products and services (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). All these developments will influence both information search and provision (Katsoni, 2011, 2014). Future studies should be conducted to understand how to connect customers' Internet use to mobile use.

Conclusions and Implications of the Study

This paper aims to assess the magnitude and significance of VFR travel in the tourism destination of Arcadia, Greece. The findings underscore the important role that VFR travel holds in commercial accommodation, since only 11.2% of VFR travelers actually stay with their friends and relatives, thus confirming the hybrid nature of VFR travel – and this despite the fact that most of the VFR travelers in this study were Greek and in the middle of a severe economic recession. Although VFR travel is a form of travel that provides its participants with feelings of 'home' (evaluated in terms of familiarity), it also seems that VFR travelers in Arcadia enjoy the privacy provided by a paid hotel room and do not want the disadvantages of social obligations and behavioral constraints that emerge when staying with their friends and relatives. Indeed, except for the 'staying with friends and relatives' category, there were no other significant differences in accommodation preferences between the two groups of travellers.

Furthermore, the fact that 88.1% of the VFR travellers in this study are Greek highlights the importance of social identity issues involved in VFR travel, as well as pointing to an emerging role of the diaspora in their return visit(s) to the homeland. As such, the findings seem to promote a marketing strategy of organized governance that takes into account identification and focuses on a 'sense of belonging' and community, tailored to the characteristics of this particular target market and aligned with the distribution channels they use, as evidenced in the research findings.

One limitation of the study is that Internet use was treated in its general term in order to find ICT competence in the VFR travel segment, so research was limited to tourists' general perception of broad and generic Internet use. Further research on the tourism stakeholders themselves and more analysis of Internet use could improve the relevance of the research.

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Quality Systems for Tourism in Protected Areas and Their Application to the Pastures of Pohorje

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The systematic integration of agricultural and tourism products and services from the pastures of Pohorje under the 'From Pohorje' brand ensures consistent quality in both a bottom-up and top-down manner. The stakeholders were involved in (i) three regional workshops, which involved analysis of the supply and demand for general products and services, as well as tourism products, in conjunction with Pohorje's environmentally protected area; (ii) a fourth workshop for establishing supply chains and a marketing approach, and (iii) a fifth workshop for designing action plans for product providers in conjunction with Pohorje pastures. Guidelines have been developed within the ALPA project for ensuring quality and establishing supply chains and marketing for products, tourism services and tourism products in addition to 20 action plans for providers in conjunction with the Pohorje pastures. The pastures represent an excellent starting point for an eco-destination on Pohorje that offers unique experiences. The quality of all products and services must be comprehensively planned, implemented and evaluated. Promoting networking for integration and establishing organized supply chains can provide a critical mass of quality products from and experiences of the Pohorje pastures. Systematic, strategic and operative marketing of the destination ensures that products have a certain 'homey' feel, and are targeted at specific groups. Pohorje Vision 2030 offers an opportunity for developing sustainable management, in which the Pohorje destination acts in concert with the protected area. The public communication system and an efficient point-of-sale network under the 'From Pohorje' trademark can convince stakeholders that investments in the pastures and activities related to them not only pay off but also have a significant multiplier effect.

Keywords: pastures, tourism products, quality system, Vision Pohorje 2030

Introduction

Examples of established green destinations (New Forest National Park, Biosphärenpark Großes Walsertal, Naturpark Almenland, Bohinj, Sečovlje Salina Nature Park, Strunjan Landscape Park, Green Karst, etc.) indicate that in addition to the development and marketing of a destination brand, it is crucial to establish a system for the development, marketing and sales of high quality products, services and tourism products under a collective brand which guarantees the quality and origin of materials and ingredients, as well as added value in the product and service design (Jurinčič & Popič, 2009; Sovinc, 2012; Jurinčič, Renčelj, Gačnik, & Kerma, 2015; Lešnik Štuhec, Gulič, & Štuhec, 2016). Integration under a common brand, joint promotion and marketing, and a network of established sales outlets, both promise and provide high-quality experiences.

Quality[1] is a very broadly analysed concept (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988; Potočnik, 1998, 2002; Šostar, 2000; Snoj & Gabrijan, 2000; Pregrad & Musil, 2001; Kreže, 2008). Authors usually define quality from (i) the technical-technological perspective, (ii) the economic and market perspective, and (iii) the organizational perspective. Quality is the optimum fulfilment of market demand with regard to six criteria (Šostar, 2000, p. 7): (i) functionality, (ii) reliability, (iii) environmental friendliness, (iv) time of delivery, (v) price, (vi) consulting and maintenance. Snoj & Gabrijan (2000, p. 160) define quality from the marketing point of view as: (i) an objective quality – rational and mechanical and therefore measurable and comparable to established standards; and (ii) a subjective quality – the perceived quality that represents client assessment of excellence in service, that is, as a human subjective reaction that cannot be objectively measured.

A common brand is a special kind of brand intended for use exclusively by various associations, that is, users of the same brand. One of the conditions for the registration of such a brand is a valid policy that establishes the conditions and obligations arising from the use of such a trademark.

The development of Pohorje[2] has been closely linked to the exploitation of forests for centuries, as well as to agriculture and tourism. The impact of early medieval colonization led to deforestation and ultimately transformed the Pohorje region into extensive pastures. The industrial revolution, with its ironworks, coal mining, and deforestation management, changed the entire image of the landscape. This led to the development of a particular type of cultural landscape with typically individual farms (celki), clustered villages, grasslands, and pastures at high altitudes (Gulič, Lešnik Štuhec, Bedjanič, & Rojs, 2013, p. 29). The Natura 2000 network occupies 33% of the total land at the top of Pohorje, and is home to pastures, raised bogs and other habitats, along with numerous rare animal and plant species.

Pohorje Vision 2030 (Lešnik Štuhec, 2011a), which was created as part of the project NATREG (see http://www.natreg.eu), offers opportunities for the sustainable management of Pohorje, in which the Pohorje Regional Park and the wider area (the destination Pohorje) speak with one voice. The story of the unspoiled nature of the alpine pastures and wetlands (Agencija Republike Slovenije za okolje, 2013), raised bogs, excellent views, pastoral farming, and the richness of the local environment, enables a focused solicitation of identified target groups that respect the traditional and sophisticated production and processing of pasture products and want to enjoy indigenous experiences. Pohorje has great potential to make use of the 'From Pohorje' brand to develop into a recognized green destination, which would ensure high-quality culinary products, enjoyed in catering establishments by visitors, who would also receive training by providers in production and processing, and would thus experience the destination with all the senses at every turn, and then be able to take the products home to relive the experience.

Quality of Products, Goods, and Services

Quality management of individual companies, and even of destinations themselves, requires the establishment of quality policies and guidelines, often set forth as quality concepts. The products are of suitable quality once they fulfil the defined requirements, needs, and expectations of consumers (Crosby, 1989; Marolt & Gomišček 2005, p. 2), which is why companies strive to produce products or deliver services better, cheaper, faster and thus make a better impression than their competitors.

[1] The word 'quality' comes from the Latin word 'qualitas,' which means a good attribute, value, excellence, characteristic, competence (Potočnik, 2002).

[2] Pohorje is a 840 km² area in northeastern Slovenia that reaches up to 1,543 m asl. The mountain range extends from the Drava to the Dravinja and Mislinja Valley and includes 16 municipalities with a total population of around 221,500 (Lešnik Štuhec, 2010, p. 8).

In the context of quality policy, it is necessary to achieve certain objectives, the fulfilment of which has to be checked promptly and deviations should be remedied immediately (Lebe, 2012, p. 222).

'Quality management is described as a coordinated set of activities for the leading and directing of an organization in terms of quality.' When an organization implements comprehensive quality management (Total Quality Management (TQM)), it is required to identify and coordinate other systems of partial management or leadership, such as marketing, production, and financial management in order to avoid conflicts in objectives and handling (Lebe, 2012, p. 223).

The approach to improvement is based on three principles: customer focus, continuous improvement process, and teamwork (Dean & Bowen, 1994, p. 394).

The successful management and functioning of a company require quality direction and management in a systematic and transparent manner. The ISO 9000:2002 standard (Slovenski inštitut za standardizacijo, 2002, p. 6) highlights eight principles of quality, namely: (i) customer focus (understanding current and future needs and striving to exceed expectations) (ii) leadership and constancy of purpose (values, ethics, culture, and management structure of the company), (iii) results orientation (satisfaction and balancing of the needs of customers, suppliers, employees, shareholders and society as a whole), (iv) management by processes and facts (recognized, effective and comprehensive system of enterprise management, decision-making based on reliable information), (v) staff development and employee integration (building intellectual capital – personal development, career development of employees), (vi) continuous learning, innovation and improvement (providing the necessary resources, tools, time and opportunities for continuous improvement), (vii) development of partnerships (building mutually beneficial relationships with other organizations based on trust, knowledge sharing and integration), (viii) social responsibility (ethical behavior – concern for stakeholders inside and outside the company).

Models of quality management are usually based on six elements: (i) management – determines the quality policy and objectives, provides resources and long-term business plans based on observed data; (ii) funds: tangible and intangible funds have to be guaranteed for quality performance; (iii) processes: the necessary basic, leading, and supporting processes have to be identified and the quality of these processes determined; (iv) improvements: continuous striving for success, preventing wastefulness; (v) customers: Quality Management has to be built on the expectations and requirements of customers and others; (vi) employees: train staff so that they will be able to develop appropriate quality awareness and customer relations (Lebe, 2012, p. 223).

Quality techniques (Zollondz, 2001) have to be divided into five groups that correspond to the five phases of the problem cycle: (i) elementary techniques of quality, (ii) qualitative techniques of quality design, (iii) qualitative techniques of quality realization or quality targeting, (iv) qualitative techniques of checking quality; (v) qualitative techniques of quality improvement. Quality techniques for services should assist service providers in determining customer needs, and in avoiding and analysing mistakes. Quality techniques are therefore resources and knowledge – know-how applied in various stages of development to solve specific problems in the field of quality management (Lebe, 2012, p. 226).

The SERVQUAL scale for measuring service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1993, 1997) covers five dimensions: (i) tangibles (buildings, premises, equipment, location, appearance, staff), (ii) reliability (ability to maintain services carefully, accurately and in accordance with promises), (iii) responsiveness (readiness to assist customers), (iv) assurance (expertise, courtesy of employees, and the ability to evoke feelings of trust and security), and (v) empathy (caring attention given to each client).

Measuring the quality of products/services requires regular and sophisticated monitoring of customer behaviour (Snoj, 1997, 1998). Successful companies focus on the following factors: (i) team design of company structure; (ii) satisfaction of the client's needs and wants, (iii) continuous processes for improvement, (iv) effective leadership, (v) cooperation and staff training, (vi) the broad use of statistical and non-statistical tools (Kreže, 2008, p. 84).

Alpine Pastures – The Plains of Pohorje

Pastures on the ridge of Pohorje emerged in the 17th century due to the residents' need to graze livestock. According to the available data (Hiltl, 1893), more than 700 ha were deforested on the ridge of Pohorje for the needs of agriculture.

The grubbed areas were used by forest workers and farmers for grazing and growing feed for their livestock. The overgrowing of Pohorje pastures began after the Second World War. Due to the deterioration of mountain farms and the migration of the local population in the valley, the need for grazing areas declined. According to legend, the last intensive period of massive grazing lasted from 1980–1986, when up to 800 head of cattle could be found grazing on Pohorje (Beškovnik, 2012). On Kope and Črni Vrh, grazing was also very intensive between 1954 and 1962. Under the auspices of the Agricultural Cooperatives of Slovenj Gradec, up to 500 head of sheep[3] and 150 head of cattle could be found grazing here during this period. At that time, the highest areas were used for pasturing, whereas mainly the spatially separated forest clearings were mowed. On the slopes of Kope and Črni Vrh, there were two stables and two shepherd's houses. In 1962 grazing on the plains ended (Hriberšek, 2012).

The use of seasonal pastures for grazing animals in Slovenia is disappearing as the number of animals per farmer is decreasing, and farming is being abandoned in many cases. Therefore, there is enough pasture land in the valleys and around the farms.

As a consequence, the trend in recent years has been toward further overgrowing of the Alpine pastures. Due to current guidelines in agriculture, many pastures are now being grazed by breeds that are economically more profitable than the traditional ones. The way of grazing on the mountains is otherwise determined by the so-called grazing order, which, however, is not always sustainable and can cause degradation of important conservational grasslands.

Another trend is increased tourism: the one-time pastoral huts are being renovated without taking into account the ethnological characteristics of the area and minimal environmental standards (Zavod RS za varstvo narave, 2013).

Within the pilot area, grazing is limited to the Rogla grazing community (14 farmers)[4] who graze livestock on 53 ha near the Rogla tourist center and within the ALPA pilot area (Ostruščica), along with four individual farmers who graze livestock in the Kope and Črni Vrh project units (Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave, 2013b, p. 12).

Despite the relatively heavy burden brought about by major recreational activities (hiking, gathering, driving), one can find here valuable graze lands, quiet zones, winter shelters and areas where some rare and endangered species, such as the wood grouse and black grouse, come to reproduce (Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave, 2013b, p. 30).

Pastures or open grasslands within the dense forest areas represent important foraging habitats for wildlife. Grazing livestock, therefore, compete with wildlife in these areas to some extent (Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave, 2013b, p. 31).

Recreation and Tourism on Pohorje Pastures

The Pohorje pastures, together with the wetlands, represent a major factor in the development of tourism at Pohorje's summit. Open plains attract many hikers; cyclists come for the Pohorje Cycling Route, and gatherers of mushrooms and medicinal plants visit in

[3] Shephards were circularly grazing their individual sheep herds on separate pastures. They were using the so-called system of Torrs. A Torr is an approximately 30 × 30 m large area enclosed by a wooden fence, where a herd of 100 sheep was grazing for ca. three days, and then the fence was moved to a fresh area (Hriberšek, 2012).

[4] The shepherds are present on the mountain throughout the grazing season, using a smaller facility in the immediate vicinity of the tourist center Rogla (outside the pilot area). They take the cattle to the pastures between the 15th of May and the 15th of June, and back to the valley between the 15th of September and the 15th of November. The time of the grazing season depends on the presence of snow, air temperature and growing conditions on the grasslands where grazing is being carried out. On average, a grazing season lasts for 127 days (Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave, 2013b, pp. 15–18).

the summer time. In the winter Kope and Rogla offer ski slopes and cross-country trails for cross-country skiing, Nordic skiing, walking with snowshoes, and similar activities. (Lešnik Štuhec, 2015, p. 12). Due to the conservation of nature and the social value of the pastures, it is necessary to pay particular attention to how visitors interact with the environment. This role should be taken over by the park operator. With the planned establishment of informational and interpretive infrastructure, it is possible to redirect visitors from the most vulnerable areas to those that are already degraded and can withstand a higher degree of usage (Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave, 2013b, p. 34). Existing tourism on southern and eastern Pohorje presently includes tourist and excursion farms, organic farms, mountain huts and homes, hotels and other accommodation, restaurants and other gastronomy businesses, recreation and sports facilities (ski slopes, etc.), and hiking, tourism, and other societies. Most are concentrated in two centres: Rogla and Kope, along with Ribnica na Pohorju.

Project ALPA – Managing Pastures

In 2004, Slovenia's protected areas were registered in the Natura 2000 network. As part of the NATREG project, the Slovene Institute for Nature Conservation initiated measures to have the Pohorje area designated as a regional park (IUCN category V). Additional projects at Pohorje's summit addressed issues related to the pastures (ALPA, see http://www.projektalpa.si) and wetlands (WETMAN, see http://www.wetman.si) as well as to the conflicts among various stakeholders on Pohorje (SUPORT, see http://www.projektipohorja.si/en/project-suport/).

The development and marketing of nature tourism and cultural heritage is described in Lešnik Štuhec (2011a), based on the Protected Area Stakeholder Impact Management Model – PASIMM (Lešnik Štuhec, 2011b) and in Lešnik Štuhec (2010).

Pohorje Vision 2030 proposes the establishment of the Pohorje Regional Park with three, centers (Bolfenk, Rogla and Kope) and two park offices (Ribnica on Pohorje and Trije Kralji), concentrated around the cooperation among stakeholders in the associated organizations that subscribe to the vision (Pohorje Regional Park, Pohorje DMO, Pohorje Stakeholders Community). One of the operative objectives of the strategic goal Sustainable Green Tourism and Targeted Visitors strategy is the development of high quality local products and services. Achieving comprehensive quality requires networking and the cooperation of providers in the supply and value chains with the objective of building a critical mass of quality tourism and other products and services, all under the collective 'From Pohorje' trademark.

The Sustainable Management of Pastures in Protected Areas (ALPA) project is an extension of the NATREG project. In Slovenia, the alpine areas with a long agricultural tradition are in many cases becoming overgrown, a fact which, on the one hand, represents a changing cultural landscape, and on the other, means the loss of some native plant and animal species, some of them protected. At the same time, hikers have become increasingly numerous, meaning that the interests of tourism and agriculture interact in the affected areas.

The ALPA project focuses on the sustainable management of mountain grasslands. The pilot area of the Pohorje plains extends from Kope on the west to Ostruščica in the east. The core objectives of the project were: (i) to clean up overgrown areas and return them to extensive agricultural use, and (ii) to develop tourism products and services that would contribute to the development of additional activities on farms.

Aside from the challenges presented by contemporary trends in tourism, tourists themselves are becoming increasingly demanding, meaning that they appreciate the tradition, uniqueness, and authenticity that still exist in the mountains. The need to help residents, especially farmers, so they would find motivation and ways to survive in their environment as well as contribute to the short supply chains has been highlighted.

Therefore, the third of the five operative objectives of the ALPA project reads as follows: 'The development and establishment of quality and sustainable tourist services in the mountains, and the promotion of product development and marketing in/for the alpine pastures' (Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave, 2013a).

Quality Systems for Natural and Experiential Tourism Products and Services from Protected Areas

IUCN (1991) defines a protected area as one dedicated primarily to the protection and enjoyment of natural or cultural heritage, to the maintenance of biodiversity and/or ecological support services. The creation of such an area is now the most universally adopted means of conserving a natural ecosystem and/or relevant cultural heritage for a broad range of human values. International Union for Conservation of Nature (as cited in Butler, 1992) advocate nine characteristics of ecotourism:

1. It promotes positive environmental ethics and fosters 'preferred' behavior in its participants;
2. It does not degrade the resource (hunting and fishing for sport may be classified as wildland [green] tourism, but they are most aptly classified as experiential tourism, rather than ecotourism.);
3. It concentrates on intrinsic rather than extrinsic values;
4. It is centered around the environment in question, and not around man;
5. It must benefit the wildlife and environment. The question of whether or not the environment (not just people) has received 'benefits' can be measured socially, economically, scientifically, managerially, and politically; at a minimum, the environment must attain a net benefit, contributing to its sustainability and ecological integrity;
6. It provides a first-hand encounter with the natural environment (and with any accompanying cultural elements found in undeveloped areas). Visitor centers and on-site interpretive slide shows can be considered to form part of an ecotourism activity only if they direct people to a first-hand experience;
7. It actively involves local communities in the tourism process so that they may benefit from it, thereby contributing to a better valuation of the natural resources in that locality;
8. The level of gratification in experiential tourism is measured in terms of education and/or appreciation rather than in thrill-seeking or physical achievement;
9. It involves considerable preparation and demands in-depth knowledge on the part of both leaders and participants. The satisfaction derived from the experience is felt and expressed strongly in emotional and inspirational ways.

Following the guidelines of the ALPA project, experiences under the collective trademark 'From Pohorje' were developed to ensure the quality of experiential tourism in the alpine pastures. These were based on two objectives: (i) to develop and implement quality and sustainable tourism products and services in the mountains and encourage the development and marketing of pasture products, and (ii) to contribute to the development of supplementary activities on farms, making the conservation of pastures economically sustainable (Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave, 2013a). The document 'Expert Guidelines for the Creation of Action Plans for Quality Products, Tourism Services and Tourism Products in the Area of Pohorje' (Lešnik Štuhec, 2013) provides guidelines for the development, promotion, marketing, implementation and evaluation of quality, sustainable tourism and other products and services with local added value.

The Quality Assurance System for the 'From Pohorje' Collective Trademark

The matrix of criteria for products from the alpine pastures describes the following elements of quality: (i) ingredients are local; (ii) ingredients are processed locally; (iii) production is carried out according to traditional methods; (iv) legal regulations are taken into account (e.g. hygiene standards for food); (v) production is sustainable and based on two descriptive criteria: the product is (i) typical of the region, and (ii) an innovative regional product (Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave, 2013a). Table 1 presents the guidelines for the pasture product quality system.

The Quality Assurance System for Offering Services under the 'From Pohorje' Collective Trademark

Guidelines for the development and quality of tourism services and tourism products in the mountains, are

Table 1 Guidelines for Pasture Product Quality System

Guideline content	Findings
G1 Verify whether the product meets the conditions set out in the product criteria matrix.	Product is/is not suitable for marketing in the geographical area – must be at least 50% in compliance with certain quality and descriptive criteria.
G2 Create a description of the product manufacturing process, along with the required documentation.	Description of, for example, traditional recipes, certain methods of construction, and control mechanisms embedded in the manufacturing process to ensure the highest possible quality level.
G3 Description of product components.	Description of components serves as comprehensive quality assurance. If the ingredients of the product do not meet the guidelines, selling it under the brand name is not allowed.
G4 Description of applicable legal standards.	Legal quality assurance standards – applicable regulations (e.g. food hygiene) and certain additional criteria for individual products, which are required for selling in the protected area.
G5 Description of the marketing strategy based on the marketing mix and sales channels – established local networks.	Description of the marketing strategy, including possible cooperation with regional shops, craft enterprises, and representatives of protected areas. Steps: (i) identify major manufacturers and their products, services, and marketing channels in the region; (ii) delineate approximate conditions for the marketing of regional products in the context of tourism; (iii) provide an overview of legal requirements for the marketing of regional products to the target group; (iv) estimate hypothetical sales through customer surveys; (v) prepare informational materials for consumers; (vi) create a promotional sales network and logistics structure.
G6 Performance control – costing and price design.	The economic performance of the product in the market is measured by the income statement – the positive or negative difference between sales price and the cost (calculation of production costs and a premium for the coverage of marketing and sales).

Notes Adapted from Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave (2013a).

based on ten principles for sustainable tourism in protected areas (EUROPARC Federation, 2010), which dictate: (i) the creation of a strong partnership for the development and management of protected areas; (ii) development and implementation of a tourism strategy and action plan for protected areas; (iii) protection and enhancement of natural and cultural heritage for and through tourism, and their protection from excessive development; (iv) provision of excellent experiences for the tourist at all levels; (v) effective communication to visitors about the special value of the area; (vi) encouragement of the development of specific products, tourism services, and tourism products that promote discovery and understanding of the area; (vii) increase knowledge of protected areas and sustainable development among all key stakeholders; (viii) steps to ensure that tourism strengthens and does not undermine the quality of life of the local population; (ix) an increase in benefits from tourism for the local economy; (x) monitoring and influencing of the influx of tourists in order to reduce negative impacts on the environment.

For the proper functioning of the pasture areas, it is necessary to establish a strategy for the development and marketing of tourism in the protected area and an action plan for each service or tourism product tailored to the protection regime.

Elements of the development and marketing strategy for the protected area (the pastures) (adapted from Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave, 2013a):

1. Analysis of strengths and weaknesses of tourism in the protected area;
2. Analysis of opportunities and risks of tourism development in the protected area;
3. Creation of a tourism development and marketing strategy incorporating the guidelines for product and service quality as provided in the

Figure 1 The Quality System Development Model for the Alpine Pastures

European Charter for Sustainable Tourism Development in Protected Areas;

4. Creation of an action plan for the development and marketing of tourism for a limited period in accordance with the development strategy;
5. Implementation of the action plan;
6. Continuous monitoring, evaluating and adjusting of goals and activities.

Elements of the action plan for the development and marketing of individual providers and products (adapted from Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave, 2013a):

1. Summary of action plan content;
2. General description of company;
3. The vision of the company's future business in accordance with the development of new, quality tourism and other products and services;
4. Marketing strategy for new products and services related to Pohorje pastures and grasslands;
5. Definition of investment – development and marketing of new products/services/tourism products;
6. Development and marketing plan for new, quality products and services related to Pohorje pastures and grasslands: quality criteria; quality principles; marketing mix; establishment of a supply network;
7. Financing of investments;
8. Composition of the action plan development group;
9. List of references;
10. Annex 1: Guidelines for the development and marketing of products/tourism services/tourism products related to Pohorje pastures and grasslands;
11. Annex 2: Calculation of selling prices for products/tourism services/tourism products related to Pohorje pastures and grasslands;

Quality criteria for tourism and other products and services – experiential 'From Pohorje' programs ensure the sustainability necessary for any Natura 2000 protected area. Customers prefer to buy products, services, or experiential holistic tourism programs if the supply chain is short, i.e., local and from channels with recognized producers or providers of services and programs that encompass an extensive range of rural destinations. The matrix of quality criteria for services and tourism products in the pastures consists of nine steps and is presented in Table 2.

Quality guidelines for 'From Pohorje' experiential tourism programs constitute a starting point for specific products/tourism services/tourism programs, as they stem from guidelines that have been developed for protected rural alpine destinations.

The marketing mix develops 'From Pohorje' experiential programs in depth, determines the price based on quality, and defines the channels for bringing it to the customer (direct or indirect sales), as well as how to market it. It addresses the needs of employees, suppliers, and potential target groups, establishes manufacturing, marketing and sales standards, and determines what constitutes physical proof of the existence and visibility of the product.

The establishment of supply networks explains the networking strategy: integration to ensure comprehensive product and service quality and marketing for the Pohorje destination via the coordination of the 'From Pohorje Quality Center.'

Methodology

The quality system development model for the alpine pastures consists of three steps (Figure 1).

In the first step, an analysis of the existing supply and demand for tourism products and services in as-

Table 2 Quality System Guidelines for Pasture Tourism Services

	Step/guideline content	Findings
1	Positive effects on the natural and cultural heritage of the mountains	Service supports and ensures the preservation of cultural landscapes, habitats, and biocenoses, which developed from the traditional agricultural cultivation of the mountains; also supports maintenance of authentic mountain cultures. Activities requiring non-renewable energy sources and causing unnecessary waste and noise are limited. Service has no adverse effects on animal and plant life in the mountains.
2	Connection with the mountain area/region	Service builds on knowledge of visitors to the mountains with high-quality, accessible and comprehensible information on the management of the mountains and the particularities of natural conditions in the region. Information is made available to tourists, residents, and educational institutions (schools).
3	Innovative tourism products and services	Service is innovative and contributes to the identification and understanding of the natural and cultural heritage and economic development of mountain areas. Services involve activities, events, and programs related to natural and cultural heritage.
4	Recognition among the local population	Service improves the quality of life of the locals. Local (mountain) communities are involved in the preparation of tourism development plans. Communication is facilitated between and among the managers of protected areas, visitors, representatives of tourist facilities, and overseers of mountains and pastures. Disputes settled by agreement.
5	Added value for farms	Service supports selling domestic alpine products to tourists and tourism businesses, i.e. products manufactured on the mountain (e.g. milk, cheese, butter, etc.) or on farms in the valley (food, local crafts, services). Service promotes the creation of new green jobs for the locals.
6	Sustainability	Service does not destroy its resources. Negative effects of tourism are prevented by visitor management. Number of visitors (spatially and temporally) is taken into account in preparing the management plan. Service supports soft mobility (public transport, hiking, horseback riding, etc.).
7	Moderate/bearable number of visitors	Different categories of protected areas allow different types of tourism services with regard to visitation rate. In intensive forms of tourism on the mountains, visitation management is of particular importance during grazing season to prevent incidents between animals and visitors.
8	High investment costs	Estimated costs of investment depend on the category of the protected area and the chosen strategy for tourism development. The matrix contains financial (investment and maintenance), in addition to quality criteria.
9	High maintenance costs/large number of employees	Assessment of maintenance costs and the number of employees required for the new service.

Notes Adapted from from Zavod Republike Slovenije za varstvo narave (2013a).

sociation with the Pohorje alpine pastures was conducted based on:

1. The preliminary research defined in the document 'Vision of Sustainable Development of a "Green" Offer (nature and cultural heritage) in the Tourism (project) Area Pohorje 2030,' which was created as part of the NATREG project under the slogan 'Managing Natural Assets and Protected Areas as Sustainable Regional Development Opportunities' (Lešnik Štuhec, 2011a);
2. Workshops: three workshops with stakeholders of the Pohorje pastures project area in its three component regions: Rogla, Kope and Ribniško-Lovrenško Pohorje.

The second step consisted of:

1. 'Expertise-based guidelines for product and tourism service quality on the Alpine pastures,' and
2. the 7 Ps of the marketing mix.

In cooperation with the stakeholders, the following were developed in the fourth workshop:

3. supply networks;
4. possible marketing strategies for products, tourism services and tourism products from the Pohorje pastures, based on the 7 Ps of marketing mix (Kotler, 2004, pp. 406 661; Konečnik Ruzzier, 2010, pp. 90 133), which aid the stakeholders in creating their own business (action) plans for quality products, tourism services, and tourism products in conjunction with the Pohorje pastures and grasslands.

Examples were designed for five selected products, two tourism services, and three tourism products.

In the third step, action plans for the preceding were designed in association with the stakeholders.

The methodology used in the research included quantitative and qualitative research. The quantitative research provided information about the frequency of occurrence of products, tourism services, and tourism products in the area; the qualitative research analyzed the general characteristics of the products, tourism services and tourism products, as well as the demand for them, as determined in three workshops with Pohorje's stakeholders (Rogla, Kope, Ribniško-Lovrenško Pohorje).

This was followed up by the creation of a set of potential products, tourism services and tourism products in accordance with the relevant guidelines, whose existence was confirmed at the fourth joint workshop with the stakeholders of the Pohorje pastures region.

They were presented with a vision of the potential synergic effects that could be achieved through the creation of a Quality Center under the brand name 'From Pohorje.'

Based on all these findings, two documents were created: 'Professional Basis for the Creation of Action Plans for Quality Products, Tourism Services and Tourism Products in the Pohorje Region' and 'Template for the Creation of Action Plans.'

At the fifth workshop, stakeholders received guidance in developing their own action plans and thus upgraded existing quality products, tourism services, and tourism products and created new ones. Project activities culminated in the creation of 'Action Plans XY for Smaller Companies with a Focus on the Planning of Development and Marketing for Products/Tourism Services/Tourism Products in Conjunction with the Pohorje Pastures and Grasslands.'

Results

A Snapshot of Pohorje Pastures Products and Services

The existing goods produced in and around the pastures of Zreško Pohorje, Kope and Ribniško-Lovrenško Pohorje comprised: (i) natural resources (forests and plains woods, etc. vegetation, animals, clean air and pleasant climate, peace, landscape with grazing livestock, wild berries and fruits, herbs and grasses, etc.); (ii) harvests (grass, hay, herbs, berries and fruits, etc.); (iii) products (from: meat, milk, wild berries and fruits, herbs, grasses, wood, etc.); (iv) tourism services (recreation: walking, cycling, horseback riding, rest and relaxation, health, rehabilitation, welfare, education, awareness, cooking, etc.); (v) tourism products (camps, hiking trails, events, guided activities such as horseback riding, cycling tours, etc. and programs on such topics as orientation, survival, understanding of nature, bread-baking workshops, etc.). The positive and negative aspects of these have been revealed (Lešnik Štuhec, 2013, p. 16).

A snapshot of the products from raw materials produced in conjunction with the Pohorje pastures (Lešnik Štuhec, 2013, pp. 16–19):

- Meat from young cattle – Pohorje beef, Pohorje *bunka* and salami, venison salami;
- Dairy products – Pohorje cheese, cottage cheese, sour milk;
- Marmalades – strawberry, raspberry, other berries;
- Products from apples – apple juice, dried fruit, vinegar, apple cider;
- Herbs, spices, teas, syrups – for example from spruce tips, etc.;
- Spirits – blueberry, pear, fruit brandy, herb brandy, honey brandy, etc.;
- Sheaves, pillows, and cushions made from Pohorje grasses and herbs;
- Natural soaps made with herbs grown on Pohorje;

- Pohorje woods – spruce *šiklni* and other small wooden products – clogs, bird houses and hatcheries, bowls, trays and plates, toys;
- Knitted products – baskets, etc.

A snapshot of the tourism services and tourism products offered in conjunction with pastures on Pohorje (Lešnik Štuhec, 2013, pp. 20–21):

- Networks of relatively well-regulated Alpine, hiking, cycling, and horseback riding trails, which enable visitors to explore the area on their own or with a guide provided by Alpine, tourism, equestrian and other associations and tourism providers;
- The thematic and educational forest paths, maintained by the representatives of the Forestry Institute, along with Alpine, tourism and other associations, who also provide guided tours;
- Camps for young explorers;
- Workshops, especially culinary;
- Events, especially culinary at the peak and in the foothills of Pohorje;
- Farms with supplementary activities – tourist farms with accommodation and excursion farms with culinary products and on-site accommodation, occasionally also comprehensive thematic tourism packages and experiential programs at the foot of the mountain;
- Hospitality businesses – hotels, bed & breakfasts, camping sites, mountain chalets and hostels, all of which offer accommodation and meals as well as recreation (especially skiing), wellness services and cultural and sports entertainment;
- Catering and other culinary businesses – restaurants, pubs, snack bars, tourist farms and wineries offering a broad range of gastronomic products and services with a local flavour;
- Businesses for sport and recreation, which manage the infrastructure on the ski slopes and offer tickets for the gondola, chairlifts, and ski lifts in the winter and summer.

A Snapshot of the Demand in Conjunction with Pohorje Pastures

The existing demand for tourism and other products and services from the Pohorje pastures is presented below.

A snapshot of the demand for products connected with the Pohorje pastures (Lešnik Štuhec, 2013, pp. 22–23):

- Residents – locals who buy the products directly from farms or at farmers' markets and use them for consumption;
- Public institutions – homes for the elderly, schools, kindergartens, etc. that purchase food and beverages from nearby farms and processors for use in daily lunch programs for school children and the elderly;
- Tourism businesses that purchase food and beverages from nearby farms and processors for use in gastronomy and handcrafted products for tourists;
- Large and small specialized retail businesses that include agricultural and other products in their inventories;
- Other businesses which buy these products for use in producing their products with local added value;
- Hikers which buy the products as food or process them into food and consume them or take them home as a souvenir;
- Travellers which consume the products as food or beverages as part of a gastronomic tourism program or buy them as food or process them into food and consume them or take them home as a souvenir from the destination, etc.

A snapshot of the demand for services and tourism products connected with the Pohorje pastures (Lešnik Štuhec, 2013, pp. 23–25):

- Residents – locals who use the network of alpine, hiking, cycling and horseback riding trails for relaxation and recreation; attend workshops, hikes, camps and events; experience thematic trails with guides; visit wellness centers with programs that include products from the Pohorje pastures; or who enjoy the offerings of gastronomy businesses, etc.;

- Public institutions – homes for the elderly, schools, kindergartens, etc., in the Pohorje region and beyond which include tourism services such as organized hikes, camps, events, experiences on thematic trails with guides, etc. in (educational) programs for children, school children and the elderly;
- Tourism businesses with demand for tourism services from other providers (organized hikes, events, workshops, meetings for spiritual growth, cultural events, experiences on theme trails with guides, etc.) and involve them in own programs for their guests;
- Tourism information centers that present the tourism services on their websites to attract potential organized groups and individuals, as well as those already at the destination, who are looking for excursions and other short adventures/tourism products on Pohorje;
- Tourism agencies and other intermediaries that integrate tourism products and services and market them on their own or through other intermediaries on the tourism market;
- Hikers who buy tourism services as part of an excursion, giving them a comprehensive experience of the destination;
- Travelers who buy tourism products and/or services as a pleasant memory of the destination, etc.

SWOT Analysis of the Market Connected with the Pohorje Pastures

Three workshops were conducted with the stakeholders of Pohorje: one for the pasture area on Rogla in Zreče on the 15th of January, 2013 (41 participants), one for the pasture area on Kope in Mislinja on the 22nd of February, 2013 (43 participants), and one for the pasture area on Ribniško-Lovrenško Pohorje in Ribnica na Pohorju on the 15th of February, 2013 (23 participants). As part of these workshops, the stakeholders evaluated and ranked the elements of the SWOT analysis of Pohorje pastures and grasslands development and marketing.

Market strengths relevant to the Pohorje pastures (Lešnik Štuhec, 2013, pp. 26–27):

- Preserved nature, a healthy climate, and a distinctive cultural landscape with beautiful views.
- Rich history, cultural heritage and experiences of the economic production of previous eras (production of *šikli,* charcoal burning on pastures, glassworks, quarrying, skidding the wood with slides, rafting, herbalism, etc.) and traditional farming on Pohorje, kept alive by some societies and individuals.
- Favourable conditions (relatively well-established Alpine, hiking and cycling trails, accommodation capacities, and recreational infrastructure) for a diverse enjoyment of the area (hiking, cycling, life on the farm, experiential programs in nature, climate tourism).
- Availability of local raw materials (wood, hay, meat, stone, herbs, berries, etc.) and the great potential for future local products from the Pohorje pastures (herbs, meats from grazing livestock and game, thematic experiences, etc.).
- Traditional and recognized culinary products (Pohorje stew, Pohorje *bunka,* mushroom soup, *bogajca,* beef, blueberry brandy, the Pohorje omelette, etc.).
- Proximity to major cities, high potential for domestic and international markets, and relatively good accessibility.
- Year-round tourism linked to major tourism centres with a variety of types of accommodation, cuisine, sports and leisure, wellness, and other infrastructure. Smaller providers enrich the local services, which are suitable for different target groups.
- Friendly locals and employees in tourism and tourism-related activities attract even the most discerning guests.

Market weaknesses relevant to the Pohorje pastures (Lešnik Štuhec, 2013, pp. 27–28):

- Incoherent and decentralized operating of suppliers and consumers (self-sufficiency and individualism, no connecting link for the establishment of organized supply chains and integrated marketing activities.

- Low production (no market surpluses, no critical mass of organic production), no registered supplementary activities on farms (the gray economy represents unfair competition for those who produce and sell legally), poor diversification and specialization, few products with local added value.
- Unfavorable age structure on farms; poor self-image of young people who are not willing to take risks; little entrepreneurial initiative; no pride in the traditions; lack of innovation.
- Long and complicated procedures for obtaining permits, authorizations, approvals and document management for infrastructure projects in rural areas.
- No interest in deepening the range of products and services for tourists.
- Untapped potential for environmental and cultural heritage experiences in the Pohorje pastures for tourist purposes (no created experiential tourism products).
- Incompetence in marketing and selling; lack of knowledge, infrastructure, and/or funding; no systematic collective or destination branding.
- Few products certified or nationally recognized; round timber exported without local added value.
- Separation of the area into five micro-locations (Mariborsko Pohorje, Slovenjebistriško Pohorje, Rogla, Kope, Ribniško Pohorje); limitations due to regional (3 regions) and municipal borders (17 municipalities) and affecting professional services, LAS projects, and the acquisition of investment funds, etc.
- Lack of the basic infrastructure that would attract the young to the countryside.
- Low purchasing power of tourists; low level of spending and shorter stays; few individual tourists.

Market opportunities with implications for the Pohorje pastures (Lešnik Štuhec, 2013, pp. 28–29):

- Promotion of eco- and sustainable tourism on pastures and grasslands; experiences for specific target groups of tourists led by excellent guides, and tourist farms with in-depth programs: programs for experiencing pristine nature; Natura 2000, getting to know ecosystems and their geological composition, observation of the night sky and the stars; nature-focused educational programs – the barefoot hiking trail, sensory trail etc.; awareness programs, environmental education; experiential ethnology programs; agricultural activities (traditional grains, Pohorje cabbage, and other crops), grazing, milking, mowing, gathering mushrooms and berries, traditional economic activities (logging, glassworks, charcoal burning, making of *šiklni,* etc.); culinary programs, workshops, paths, events, etc.; outdoor recreational programs in nature (cross-country skiing, Nordic walking, snowshoeing, etc.); outdoor stress-reduction programs (yoga, meditation, relaxation, observing the nature, etc.); outdoor creativity programs (photography, painting and other workshops, etc.).
- Greater focus on farms on organic and integrated production (alpine grazing of cattle, sheep and goats, poultry and game; mowing hay, cultivation of herbs, wood, etc.) and the (related) processing of locally produced harvests into certified products (organic beef, lamb, poultry and game; dried meat products; milk and dairy products; eggs; marmalades, teas, products made of hay and herbs; timber, resonant wood, charcoal, etc.) with high local added value.
- Linking of farms and other providers and their products and services into an organized supply chain with a comprehensive marketing and sales strategy under a collective trademark which ensures the promised quality for the price.
- Upgrade of the existing tourism and basic infrastructure such that it lends itself to experiential and climate-friendly activities while ensuring accessibility to all target groups; cooperation among tourism centres in all seasons.
- Stakeholder training for working in supply chains,

creating comprehensive marketing and sales promotions, etc.

Market threats with implications for the Pohorje pastures (Lešnik Štuhec, 2013, p. 29):

- Damage to pasture ecosystem from restrictions to wildlife habitats and excessive exploitation of natural resources (intensive grazing, fertilizing, harvesting) and influence of people (damage to protected plants, disposal of waste in the wild) and their recreational activities (mass tourism, noise, snowmobiles, four-wheelers, hunting, and similar.).
- Lack of stakeholder interest in entrepreneurial innovation, integration, creation and innovation, and individual performance on the market in competition with well-connected and collectively marketed destinations that offer more value for the money.
- Inadequate legislation, the procedural complexity of fund allocation, high application costs, demanding documentation discourages young people from employment in agriculture.
- Lack of control/disorganized nature conservation department, inadequate monitoring, inadequate spatial planning, pollution of water resources and the environment.
- Intensification of the global economic crisis, with large retail chains and suppliers outside the region offering low prices via an organized supply chain that stifles the local self-sufficiency.
- Farms jeopardized by climate changes, natural disasters, etc. (green winters, hailstorms, animal diseases), accidents (poisoning, rooting of wild pigs), people not being informed about the importance of environmental preservation and the political crisis.
- Abandonment of farms and resulting overgrowing of landscapes, poor maintenance (inadequate mechanical logging and mowing) and cultural heritage preservation.
- The future disconnectedness of the regions within the Pohorje area and dissipation of resources that could otherwise be used for joint projects connecting the various regions into a competitive green destination.

The products, tourism services, and tourism products from the Pohorje pastures differ among the three micro destinations (Rogla, Kope, and Ribniško-Lovrenško Pohorje) with regard to the quality and diversity of infrastructure, as well as availability in different seasons. For tourism providers, winter is still the primary season (skiing, cross country skiing, snowboarding, and the more traditional recreational activities such as pležuharjenje, snowshoeing, and 'vintage' skiing). Rogla is the most developed of these areas, followed by Kope and Ribnica na Pohorju. Outside the winter season, utilization capacity is very low. Agricultural and other products connected with the Pohorje pastures are not yet widely recognized. The pastures certainly have great potential. Unfortunately, they have not yet been recognized as an opportunity for developing comprehensive and unique tourism services and tourism products, which, if properly marketed, could reach and attract those target groups that are prepared to pay more for the authenticity of experience and local added value. The fear is that similar destinations with more innovative, in-depth experiences at a comparable price would outstrip Pohorje providers in reaching the target groups.

Conclusions

Pastures and grasslands on Pohorje offer great potential for the development of individual and experiential products and tourism services for various target groups of consumers.

Among others, the following activities have been developed as part of the ALPA project: (i) a snapshot of the alpine pastures – pastures on Pohorje; (ii) supply and demand analysis for products, tourism services and tourism products connected with the Pohorje pastures; (iii) potential tourism and tourism-related products, tourism services and tourism products; (iv) a networking and marketing plan for the Pohorje pastures; (v) expert guidelines for the quality assurance, and (vi) specific guidelines for the development and marketing of five products, two tourism services, and three tourism products connected with the Pohorje pastures and grasslands. A special annex with the title: Action Plan XY for Smaller Companies with a Focus on the Development and Marketing of a Product/Tourism Services/Tourism Products connected with the Pohorje Pastures and Grasslands now offers assistance to every interested entrepreneur in the creation of a business plan for upgrading such own products, tourism services, and tourism products (Lešnik Štuhec, 2013, p. 9). From this, 20 new action plans have been developed by providers, all of which have been successful on the market for the past several years.

Local providers will only be able to cope with competition from similar destinations on the Slovenian and international tourism markets if they are organized into partnerships, i.e. growers and producers of goods, and providers of services and experiential tourism products. A unified Pohorje with protected environment and cultural heritage on its summit can raise awareness among local residents and the general public as to the importance of Pohorje as a green destination worth preserving, visiting, and experiencing in-depth under the collective 'From Pohorje' trademark that guarantees the expectations of even the most demanding visitors will be met.

Establishing the 'From Pohorje Quality Centre' is key for ensuring a comprehensively organized range of products, tourism services, and tourism products from Pohorje with a recognized collective and destination trademark. The activities of the center would: (i) aid providers in the development, marketing, and sales of agricultural and other products, tourism services, and experiential tourism; (ii) establish a system for managing the destination and the 'From Pohorje' trademark; (iii) establish quality evaluation and maintenance system; (iv) encourage providers to network and participate in local/regional supply chains; (v) encourage entrepreneurial innovation with high local added value; (vi) encourage providers to maintain a critical mass of the 'From Pohorje' products and services at the desired quality level, (vii) allow for the unified and organized use of the 'From Pohorje' trademark, thereby achieving recognition of the destination and, as a result of the synergic effects of cooperation, an easier networking process with supply chains in and beyond the Pohorje destination; (viii) encourage providers to proudly promote the 'From Pohorje' brand and build the trademark in accordance with the 'Comprehensive Communication "From Pohorje" Brand Image Policy;' (ix) make possible the planned and comprehensive exploitation of project funds for upgrading the activities of the 'From Pohorje Quality Center,' which, in turn, would lead to further development of the brand and its overall image, as well as of the logistical, marketing and sales systems; (x) enhance targeted acquisition of project funds for partnerships producing joint products, tourism services, and tourism products, along with marketing, employee training, research and development, etc.; (xi) preserve the pastures and activities related to them for the next generations while satisfying investors, producers and processors, tourism operators, intermediaries, and local residents and visitors to Pohorje.

These activities will require both a solid foundation of expertise and a consensus among various stakeholders. We must strive to ensure that the activities of multi-annual project operations on Pohorje will not be hindered by a lack of vision in development opportunities or the shared vision of the stakeholders in Pohorje's three regions or in the country as a whole.

As an integral part of the management plan for the pilot, the area developed as part of the transnational NATREG project, Pohorje Vision 2030 and all follow-up projects are competitive not just in Europe, but worldwide.

Over the next decade, green tourism should be based on a coordinated development of the three park centers (Bolfenk, Rogla and Kope) and a number of smaller areas on Pohorje, which will collectively work to create the nature-based experiences demanded by hikers, bikers, researchers, children and youth in research and experiential camps and workshops, families with children and couples, and other consumers.

Such experiences will be developed through interrelated programs, such as uniformly regulated recreational (hiking, biking, etc.) and adventure trails with both scientific (nature gardens network, network of natural values) and ethnological content (outdoor museum network for glassworks, smitheries, sawmills, etc.), a network of cultural heritage units (sacral heritage), network of museums and exhibitions, etc., as well as a network of adventure eco- and glamping camps with a focus on the ethnology and/or natural heritage of the area (e.g. in the 'treetop hotel,' in skorjanke, the forest railway wagons, stonecutting sheds, etc.). Also of great importance is the Pohorje Ecofarms network as one of the horizontal networks for the mutual communication, cooperation, and specialization of similar providers in order to raise their competitiveness and enhance production of the critical mass of farm products with the 'From Pohorje' label. Thus, the ecofarms will meet the needs of tourism businesses and ensure both the self-sufficiency of Pohorje and recognition of its Pohorje meat and dairy products, herbs, etc., which will be consumed by visitors and taken home as a memory of a unique experience which they will want to relive in the future.

The For Pohorje Group strives to ensure that these activities would be based on the networking of key stakeholders on Pohorje belonging to the four-party partnership comprised of the economy, local community, non-governmental organizations, and other supporting institutions. It further seeks to develop sustainable tourism services and products and green marketing activities, to ensure that stakeholders will identify the opportunities available at the Pohorje destination, including the protected area. Thus, even in the earliest stages of establishing the protected area and its hinterland, the 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches have already been met with a high degree of public involvement.

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Original Scientific Article

Human Capital and Organizational Climate in Travel Agencies

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Human capital and organizational climate play a crucial role in performance in travel agencies. Therefore, this research has given great importance to the constructs for variables of the human capital and the organizational climate, focusing on the sub-samples of owners/managers/leaders, and other employees. In-depth survey interviews were conducted in January 2015. The study was intended to determine the relationship between human capital and organizational climate in travel agencies in Slovenia. According to the Standard Classification of Activities 2008 (SKD, 2008) at the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, the principal activities of travel agencies are travel agency, tour operator, and other reservation service and related activities. The quantitative study is based on an analysis of questionnaires of 103 travel agencies and their offices: 336 respondents are categorized as owners/managers/leaders and other employees, which participated in the study. We concluded that a relationship exists between the human capital construct variables and the organizational climate construct. Amongst the variables of the human capital, the variable application of knowledge from personal experience is the most influential. It is in a relationship with all organizational climate variables except career development. In contrast, the most influenced variable amongst the organizational climate variables is leadership, which is in a relationship with six out of nine variables of human capital.

Keywords: human capital, organizational climate, travel agencies

Introduction

The aim of our study is to examine the thus far unexplored field of human capital and organizational climate in travel agencies; no study of this kind has been previously carried out. We want to establish, through empirical research, the links, and the importance of individual variables of human capital and organizational climate for employees in travel agencies. Travel agencies play a major role in the international travel and tourism markets, where competition is fierce, so human capital and organizational climate have become major drivers of the performance of travel agencies. More specifically, the aim of our study is to examine the impact of individual variables of human capital and the organizational climate on the successful performance of travel agencies and thus determine which factors need to be given even greater significance for performance.

The main thesis says: *There is a positive relationship between human capital and organizational climate in travel agencies.*

Correlation and regression analyses were used to determine a relationship between the human capital construct and the organizational climate construct. The verification model consisted of latent variables of both constructs that were selected on the basis of factor analysis.

Methods of Data Analysis and Testing the Main Hypothesis

The collected survey data were processed and analysed with SPSS and AMOS, using the following statistical methods: descriptive analysis, factor analysis, principal component analysis, multiple regression analysis, and structural equation methods.

The data were first partially evaluated. The main hypothesis was then tested with the methods above and followed by an overall analysis using the structural equation method.

Descriptive analysis was used to describe the basic characteristics of the sample data and the variables. Factor analysis was used to reduce variables in order to identify a small number of factors that explain the variance in the observed variables. Factor analysis is used to test how well-measured variables represent a smaller number of constructs (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009, p. 670). Similar to factor analysis, the goal of principal components analysis is to explain the variance of the observed variables with a lower number of principal components. The principal components from a larger number of variables were then used as additional explanatory variables in multiple regression analysis, which was conducted to analyze cause-and-effect relationships between the dependent and independent variables.

We then used AMOS for linear structural equation modeling. This method combines the analysis of causal relations between the tested hypotheses with the measurement of indirectly measurable latent variables. Our study required the examination of dependence relationships using structural equation modeling (SEM). This method is used to analyse multiple relationships simultaneously. SEM has two main characteristics: the estimation of multiple and interrelated dependence relationships and the ability to represent latent variables. SEM is usually a two-step approach. The first step relates measured variables to latent variables, while the second step relates latent variables to one another (Byrne, 2001).

Human Capital

Human capital is the soul of a company (Roos, Roos, Edvinsson, & Dragonetti, 2000). Investment in the quality of the workforce (education, training, and further training) to a large degree determines the future of the workforce (Bevc, 1991). From the standpoint of intellectual capital, not every employee is of equal value for the company, so employees have to be rewarded, directed, and led in different ways (Nemec Rudež, 2006). Tomšič (2015) stresses that a company's management or leadership has to be embedded in the process of innovation.

Noe, Clarke, and Klein (2014) have found that human capital is a key for companies to gain competitive advantage. Learning through formal training and development programmes, informal learning, and knowledge sharing affects the development of human capital. Stewart (1991) was the first to introduce the concept of intellectual capital. Company growth has become increasingly contingent on knowledge, i.e. patents, processes, knowledge management, technologies, customer and supplier information, and previous experience.

Ivanuša-Bezjak (1996) points out that time and competition are critical dimensions that have to be pursued by companies and employees, as the modern market constantly requires new knowledge. The capability of a company is not only reflected in knowledge. It consists of utilized knowledge in combination with know-how. It is in this sense that the abilities or capabilities of a company have a direct impact on company performance, while this direct impact on company performance is not found for knowledge, both tacit and explicit, without special operationalization (Schotter & Bontis, 2009).

Expert knowledge and intellectual skills are essential to company performance (Carnegie, 2012). Knowledge and experience are also necessary as well as knowing how to cooperate with people (Findeisen, 2004). Hudson (1993) emphasizes the need for understanding the essence of knowledge. Becker (1964) notes the importance of on-the-job training.

Investment in human capital can give competitive advantages in the market, and many companies have begun to recognize the worth of individuals whose knowledge, skills, and competences can bring added value to the company (Kaluža, 2013b). Stonehouse and Pemberton (1999) define cognition as the ability of an individual to learn and adapt to the environment, which, in the end, results in timely decisions.

Company performance can be measured in association with intellectual capital (Sveiby, 2001). The economic benefits of investment in education can also be seen in reducing the production costs of products by increasing productivity, i.e. by exceeding production norms, decreasing the number of rejected products, increasing quality, and reducing the number of work accidents, as well as by higher returns on education in the form of increased employee productivity (Černetič, 2006, p. 20). It is vital for companies that owners, managers, and leaders be involved in mentoring, which is a long-term process that includes counselling and improves the career development of individuals (Dimovski et al., 2013).

A study on knowledge sharing and innovation performance in the field of services (Meng-Lei et al., 2008) found that knowledge sharing and organizational culture have a significant influence on service innovation performance. Company performance and efficiency are more contingent, which are linked to successful human capital management (Lawler & Mohrman, 2003). The capability of a company is not only reflected in knowledge; it consists of utilized knowledge in combination with know-how. It is in this sense that the abilities or capabilities of a company have a direct impact on company performance, while this does not hold for knowledge, both tacit and explicit, without specific operationalization (Schotter & Bontis, 2009).

Organizational Climate

According to Mihalič (2007), the organizational climate has to do with the interconnection between procedures, processes, policies, the internal environment, and staffing. When a company finds itself in trouble, a change of climate is necessary. Changes in climate are also induced by the environment in which the company operates and wants to survive (Černetič, 2007, p. 306). It usually takes only one factor to encourage motivation (Wesinger, 2001). Motivation is, therefore, a state of increased excitement and engagement in which everyday activities are performed much more easily and in a more efficient manner. Volition is the absolute commitment of an individual to reaching a goal (Bruch, 2006). Employees expect the following from their workplace (Carnegie, 2013): affirmation and appreciation for their work, work that is encouraging and fulfilling, an open career path, opportunities for development, leaders who have respect for a balanced lifestyle, and adequate payment and compensation.

Studying motivation, beliefs, and goals, Eccles and Wigfield (2002) attach great importance to theories focused on expectancies for success, theories focused on task value, theories that incorporate expectancies and values, and theories that incorporate motivation and cognition.

Neal, West, and Patterson (2005) examined whether the effectiveness of human resource management depends on organizational climate and competitive strategy. They show that the positive relationship between human resource management and subsequent productivity is greater for companies that have a positive organizational climate and employ differentiation strategies.

Lumpkin and Dess (1996) recommend that factors such as overall satisfaction and nonfinancial goals of the owners can be taken into greater consideration when evaluating performance, particularly among privately owned companies.

Tourism and Travel Agencies

The tourism market is exposed to greater competition between tourist destinations. International competition between tourist destinations is growing with the emergence of new destinations and changing tastes and preferences among tourists, who are becoming increasingly better informed and have higher expectations. Increasing competition is also present on traditional tourist destinations (Nemec Rudež & Bojnec, 2007, p. 34). As many travel agencies are engaged not only in outgoing but also in ingoing tourism, which leads to an increase in domestic consumption, travel agencies play a major role in the process of tourism development (Kaluža, 2013a) The tourist market offers an increasing number of different travel arrangements; arrangements in faraway places, far from the tourist's home. At the same time, tourists' desires are growing and becoming increasingly diverse. The problem of market transparency is, in large part, being dealt with by specialized representatives (Planina, 1996, p. 175), i.e. travel agencies, which are increasingly transforming themselves into large travel organizers and tour operators who play a significant role in the tourist market.

Krašna (2006) defines the provision of tourist services (i.e. the sale and reservation of flat fees, hotel services, tickets, and fares) to be the core function of any tourist agency. Travel agencies also accept and transmit tourist service payments for the manufacturers they represent.

Internal communication is essential to Slovenian travel agencies (Bojnec & Kribel, 2006). Similar as in other developed countries, they use the Internet as a tool for information, communication, and marketing. Internal communication also comes in the form of internal newsletters, bulletins, in-house satisfaction surveys, e-mail, and video conferences.

Hypothesis Testing

The main thesis consisted of six hypotheses that examined the relationship between the human capital construct with the individual dependent variables of the organizational climate construct. Hypothesis testing consisted of two steps. The first step was to use correlation analysis to quantify the association between the human capital construct variables and the individual variables of the organizational climate construct. The second step was to apply regression models. They were then analysed using a multiple regression model. We evaluated the influence of individual variables (dimensions) of human capital on individual latent variables (dimensions) of the organizational climate.

H1 *A positive correlation exists between human capital and internal relations as a part of the organizational climate in travel agencies.*

In testing H1, we used *the independent variables of the human capital construct* and *the dependent variable 'internal relations'* as a part of the organizational climate. Table 1 lists the latent variables of the two constructs of human capital and organizational climate. The first were used as independent variables of the hypotheses and were compared with individual dependent variables of the organizational climate construct.

The correlations between the human capital variables and the 'internal relations' variable as part of 'organizational climate' are positive statistically significant in each case, except for the 'hc_1' variable ($p < 0.028$). The Pearson correlation coefficient values range between 0.18 and 0.51.

By examining the regression coefficients and the results of t-tests, from Table 2 it can be seen that only one statistically significant regression coefficient remains at a 5% significance level: the 'hc_9' variable ($X1$, $b = 0.229$, $p = 0.001$). Table 2 presents the regression model coefficients of the variables of human capital and internal relations as a part of the organizational climate and a summary of the regression model. The 'knowledge application' variable had a statistically significant effect on the 'internal relations as part of the organizational climate' variable, so we cannot partially reject H1.

H2 *A positive correlation exists between human capital and leadership as a part of the organizational climate in travel agencies.*

In testing H2, we used *the independent variables of the human capital construct and the dependent variable* 'leadership as a part of the organizational climate' (Table 1).

The correlations between human capital variables and the variable 'leadership as a part of the organizational climate' are positive, as well as statistically significant except for the 'hc_2' variable ($p < 0.036$), with coefficient values ranging between 0.18 and 0.57.

Examining the regression coefficients and the results of t-tests, from Table 3 we can see that at a 5% significance level the following regression coefficients are statistically significant: hc_2 ($X1$, $b = -0.164$, $p = 0.012$), hc_3 ($X2$, $b = 0.191$, $p = 0.005$), hc_4 ($X3$, $b = 0.377$, $p = 0.000$), hc_5 ($X4$, $b = -0.227$, $p = 0.016$);

Table 1 Independent Variables of the Human Capital Construct and the Dependent Variables of the Organizational Climate Construct

Human capital (hchc) construct variables used as independent variables	Organizational climate (ococ) construct variables used as dependent variables
hc_1 (non-stimulated knowledge transfer)	oc_1 (internal relations)
hc_2 (marketing training)	oc_2 (leadership)
hc_3 (communications training)	oc_3 (organizational loyalty)
hc_4 (application of knowledge from personal experience)	oc_4 (career development)
hc_5 (time and type of training)	oc_5 (employee satisfaction and rewards)
hc_6 (team knowledge transfer)	oc_6 (professional training and education).
hc_7 (knowledge storage)	
hc_8 (knowledge acquisition)	
hc_9 (knowledge application).	

Table 2 Regression Model of the Internal Relations as a Part of the Organizational Climate in Association with Human Capital Variables

Variables	Coefficients		
	b	*t*	*p*
Constant	2.633	8.123	0.000
hc_1	−0.053	−1.251	0.214
hc_2	0.034	0.759	0.450
hc_3	−0.015	−0.322	0.749
hc_4	0.137	1.916	0.058
hc_5	0.092	1.409	0.162
hc_6	0.071	1.043	0.299
hc_7	−0.072	−1.393	0.167
hc_8	0.027	0.612	0.542
hc_9	0.229	3.547	0.001

Model summary $R^2 = 0.371$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.311$, F-test = 6.163 ($p = 0.000$).

Notes Dependent variable is the internal relations as a part of the organizational climate. Independent variables are human capital variables. *b* – standardized regression coefficients, *t* – *t*-test, *p* – statistical significance.

Table 3 Regression Model of the Leadership as a Part of the Organizational Climate in Association with the Human Capital Variables

Variables	Coefficients		
	b	*t*	*p*
Constant	1.353	2.941	0.004
hc_1	0.068	1.122	0.265
hc_2	−0.164	−2.561	0.012
hc_3	0.191	2.870	0.005
hc_4	0.377	3.706	0.000
hc_5	−0.227	−2.453	0.016
hc_6	0.204	2.113	0.037
hc_7	0.008	0.105	0.917
hc_8	−0.050	−0.803	0.424
hc_9	0.313	3.418	0.001

Model summary $R^2 = 0.494$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.446$, F-test = 10.208 ($p = 0.000$).

Notes Dependent variable is the leadership as a part of the organizational climate. Independent variables are human capital variables. *b* – standardized regression coefficients, *t* – *t*-test, *p* – statistical significance.

hc_6 ($X5$, $b = 0.204$, $p = 0.37$) in hc_9 ($X6$, $b = 0.313$, $p = 0.001$). Table 3 presents the regression model of the leadership as a part of the organizational climate and the human capital variables.

Regression analysis showed that six out of nine human capital variables had a statistically significant effect on leadership as a part of the organizational climate. However, since two of the six statistically significant coefficients were negative, we have to reject the hypothesis as a whole. We found that the human capital variables 'communications training,' 'application of knowledge from personal experience,' 'knowledge transfer,' and 'knowledge application' have a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable 'leadership as a part of the organizational climate.' In contrast, the 'marketing training' and 'time and type

Table 4 Regression Model of the Organizational Loyalty as a Part of the Organizational Climate in Association with the Human Capital Variables

Variables	Coefficients		
	b	*t*	*p*
Constant	2.347	5.175	0.000
hc_1	−0.051	−0.852	0.396
hc_2	0.046	0.732	0.466
hc_3	0.070	1.071	0.287
hc_4	0.369	3.670	0.000
hc_5	−0.067	−0.735	0.464
hc_6	0.011	0.113	0.910
hc_7	0.091	1.262	0.210
hc_8	−0.097	−1.597	0.114
hc_9	0.124	1.370	0.174

Model summary $R^2 = 0.297$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.230$, F-test = 4.414 ($p = 0.000$).

Notes Dependent variable is the organizational loyalty as a part of the organizational climate. Independent variables are human capital variables. *b* – standardized regression coefficients, *t* – *t*-test, *p* – statistical significance.

Table 5 Regression Model of the Career Development as a Part of the Organizational Climate in Association with the Human Capital Variables

Variables	Coefficients		
	b	*t*	*p*
(Constant)	1.483	2.328	0.022
hc_1	0.018	0.217	0.829
hc_2	0.154	1.733	0.086
hc_3	0.013	0.146	0.884
hc_4	0.148	1.047	0.298
hc_5	0.010	0.077	0.939
hc_6	0.035	0.262	0.794
hc_7	0.103	1.010	0.315
hc_8	−0.157	−1.839	0.069
hc_9	0.326	2.571	0.012

Model summary $R^2 = 0.302$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.235$, F-test = 4.522 ($p = 0.000$).

Notes Dependent variable is the career development as a part of the organizational climate. Independent variables are human capital variables. *b* – standardized regression coefficients, *t* – *t*-test, *p* – statistical significance.

of training' variables have a statistically negative effect on 'leadership as a part of the organizational climate' as the dependent variable. H2 cannot be partially rejected.

H3 *A positive correlation exists between human capital and organizational loyalty as a part of the organizational climate in travel agencies.*

The correlation analysis shows that the correlation coefficients between the human capital variables and the 'organizational loyalty as a part of the organizational climate' variable are positive, as well as statistically significant, with the exception of the 'hc_1' and 'hc_8' variables ($p < 0.013$). The coefficient values range between 0.21 and 0.46.

By looking at the regression coefficients and the results of t-tests, from Table 4 we can see that only one statistically significant regression coefficient remains at a 5% significance level: the 'hc_4' variable ($X1$, $b = 0.369$, $p = 0.000$). Table 4 shows the regression model of the organizational loyalty as a part of the organizational climate and the human capital variables.

We found that out of all independent variables, only the 'using personal knowledge' variable had a statistically significant effect on the 'organizational loyalty as a part of the organizational climate' variable. The H3 hypothesis as a whole can be rejected.

H4 *A positive correlation exists between human capital and career development as a part of the organizational climate in travel agencies.*

The correlation coefficients between human capital variables and the variable 'career development as a part of the organizational climate' are positive and statistically significant, except for the 'hc_8' variable ($p < 0.004$), with coefficient values ranging between 0.260 and 0.474.

By looking at the regression coefficients and the results of t-tests, from Table 5 it can be seen that at 5% significance level only one statistically significant regression coefficient remains: the 'hc_9' variable ($X1$, $b = 0.326$, $p = 0.012$).

We found that only the 'knowledge application' variable had a statistically significant effect on the 'ca-

Table 6 Regression Model of the Employee Satisfaction and Rewards as a Part of the Organizational Climate in Association with the Human Capital Variables

Variables	Coefficients		
	b	*t*	*p*
Constant	0.944	1.796	0.076
hc_1	−0.018	−0.257	0.797
hc_2	0.016	0.220	0.826
hc_3	0.212	2.790	0.006
hc_4	0.245	2.104	0.038
hc_5	−0.003	−0.027	0.979
hc_6	0.155	1.402	0.164
hc_7	0.169	2.007	0.048
hc_8	−0.033	−0.470	0.640
hc_9	0.018	0.176	0.861

Model summary $R^2 = 0.383$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.324$, F-test = 6.494 ($p = 0.000$).

Notes Dependent variable is the employee satisfaction and rewards as a part of the organizational climate. Independent variables are human capital variables. b – standardized regression coefficients, t – t-test, p – statistical significance.

Table 7 Regression Model of the Professional Training and Education as a Part of the Organizational Climate in Association with the Human Capital Variables

Variables	Coefficients		
	b	*t*	*p*
Constant	0.848	1.735	0.086
hc_1	0.026	0.409	0.684
hc_2	−0.057	−0.837	0.405
hc_3	0.175	2.485	0.015
hc_4	0.424	3.923	0.000
hc_5	0.281	2.851	0.005
hc_6	−0.109	−1.061	0.292
hc_7	−0.051	−0.653	0.515
hc_8	0.004	0.063	0.950
hc_9	0.134	1.375	0.172

Model summary $R^2 = 0.465$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.415$, F-test = 9.107 ($p = 0.000$).

Notes Dependent variable is the professional training and education as a part of the organizational climate. Independent variables are human capital variables. b – standardized regression coefficients, t – t-test, p – statistical significance.

reer development as a part of the organizational climate' variable. The H4 hypothesis as a whole can be rejected.

H5 *A positive correlation exists between human capital and employee satisfaction and rewards as a part of the organizational climate in travel agencies.*

The correlation coefficients between the human capital variables and the 'employee satisfaction and rewards' variable are positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.015$). The coefficient values range between 0.213 and 0.482. Examining the regression coefficients and the results of t-tests, from Table 6 we can see that the following variables are statistically significant at a 5% significance level: hc_3 ($X1$, $b = 0.212$, $p = 0.006$), hc_4 ($X2$, $b = 0.245$, $p = 0.038$) and hc_7 ($X3$, $b = 0.169$, $p = 0.048$).

We found that only three human capital variables ('marketing training,' 'application of knowledge from personal experience,' and 'knowledge storage') had a statistically significant effect on the variable 'employee satisfaction and rewards as a part of the organizational climate.' The H5 hypothesis as a whole can be rejected.

H6 *A positive correlation exists between human capital and professional training and education as a part of the organizational climate in travel agencies.*

The correlation coefficients between the human capital variables and the 'professional training and education as a part of the organizational climate' variable are positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.007$). The coefficient values range between 0.241 and 0.492.

Examining the regression coefficients and the results of t-tests, from Table 7 we can see that the following variables are statistically significant at a 5% significance level: hc_3 B ($X1$, $b = 0.175$, $p = 0.015$), hc_4 ($X2$, $b = 0.424$, $p = 0.000$) and hc_5 ($X3$, $b = 0.281$, $p = 0.005$).

We found that only the following human capital variables had a statistically significant effect on the de-

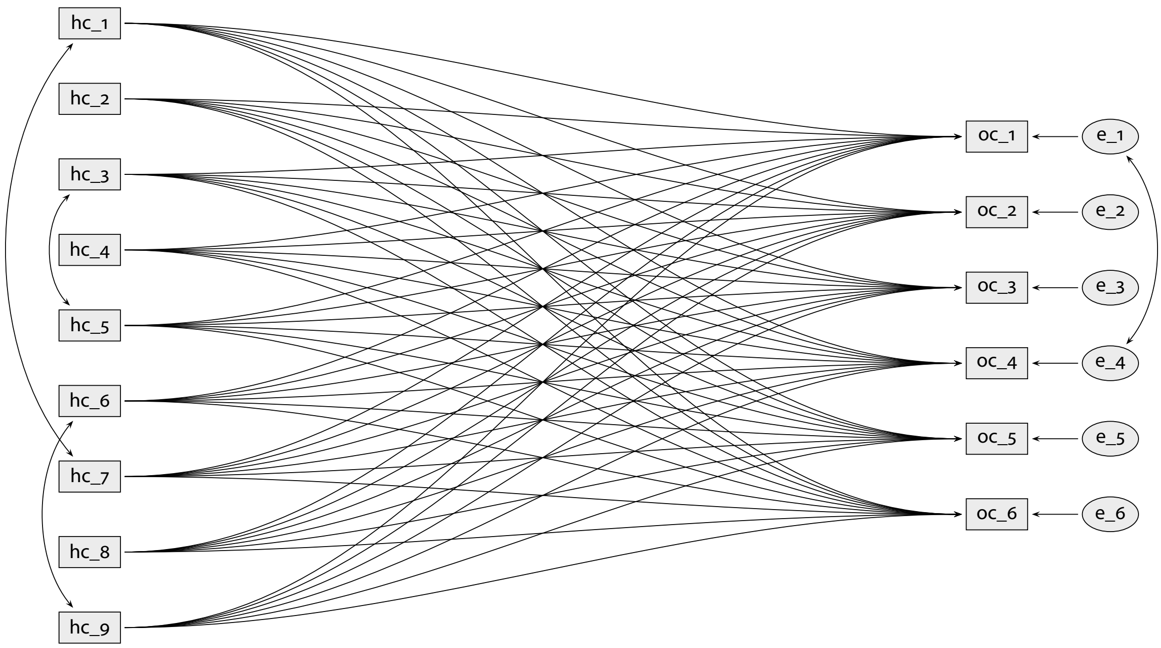

Figure 1 Structural Model of Human Capital and Organizational Climate

Notes CFI = 0.648, NFI = 0.634, RFI = 0.182, RMSEA = 0.209, PCLOSE = 0.000. hc_1 - non-stimulative knowledge transfer, hc_2 - marketing training, hc_3 - communications training, hc_4 - application of knowledge from personal experience, hc_5 - time and type of training, hc_6 - team knowledge transfer, hc_7 - knowledge storage, hc_8 - knowledge acquisition, hc_9 - knowledge application, oc_1 - internal relations, oc_2 - leadership, oc_3 - organizational loyalty, oc_4 - career development, oc_5 - customer satisfaction and rewards, oc_6 - professional training and education, e1 … e6 = factors of error.

pendent variable 'professional training and education as a part of the organizational climate:' 'communications training,' 'application of knowledge from personal experience,' and 'time and type of training.' The H6 hypothesis as a whole can be rejected.

The testing of the hypotheses, from H1 to H6, has shown that the main thesis *(there is a positive relationship between human capital and organizational climate in travel agencies)* can be partially supported, as all the tested hypotheses cannot be partially rejected and thus have been partially supported.

Structural Model of Human Capital and Organizational Climate

The model of two constructs, which are the subject of analysis in the chapter above, is shown in the structural model in Figure 1. As stated at the beginning of that chapter (Table 1), the model consists of nine observed human capital variables (non-stimulative knowledge transfer, marketing training, communications training, application of knowledge from personal experience, time and type of training, team knowledge transfer, knowledge storage, knowledge acquisition, and knowledge application) and six observed variables of organizational climate (internal relations, leadership, organizational loyalty, career development, employee satisfaction and rewards, and professional training and education). The structural model thus comprises fifteen observed variables.

The relationship between the human capital variables and the organizational climate variables is one-tailed and in the direction of organizational climate. By examining the structural model of human capital and organizational climate, we can observe that it is an acceptable fit for the data, as the chi-square value is 257.672, and it is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

RMSEA was 0.209, which means that the model fit is good, because lower RMSEA values indicate better fit. The other indices (CFI = 0.648, NFI = 0.634, RFI = 0.182) are relatively low. We can, therefore, conclude that the model fit is acceptable (Figure 1).

Table 8 shows the standardized regression coefficients and their statistical significance for the structural model of human capital and organizational climate. The results tell the same story that the multiple regression analysis results presented in the tables of hypothesis testing do (Table 2 through Table 7).

The standardized regression coefficients of the observed variables are rather low, ranging from −0.003 to 0.425, and they are statistically significant for 17 out of 54 relationships (Table 8). All of this means that we can state with certainty that these effects do not exist only in the sample of travel agencies, for almost one third of all relationships (31.5%).

Conclusion and Implications

The aim of our study was to confirm the positive correlation between human capital and organizational climate in travel agencies. We were encouraged in our research by the fact that no similar study on the subject had been done in Slovenia or abroad.

We used a written questionnaire to conduct an online survey of owners, managers, leaders, and other employees of travel agencies. With the help of factor analysis, the constructs of human capital and organisational climate, comprising nine and six latent variables, respectively, were developed.

The hypothesis: *'There is a positive relationship between human capital and organizational climate in travel agencies'* was tested using the regression analysis. The result of testing showed that the hypothesis could be at least partially supported. To present the whole picture of the relationships among several variables a verification model was developed using a linear structural equation modelling approach.

The main contribution of the research is the conceptual model of the constructs of human capital and organisational climate, which has been confirmed empirically. In this context, it is important that there be a positive relationship between the human capital and organizational climate variables of travel agencies,

Table 8 Standardized Regression Coefficients and Their Statistical Significance for the Structural Model of Human Capital and Organizational Climate

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
oc_1	←	hc_1	−0.145	0.132
oc_1	←	hc_2	0.073	0.346
oc_1	←	hc_3	−0.033	0.704
oc_1	←	hc_4	0.184	0.017
oc_1	←	hc_5	0.160	0.068
oc_1	←	hc_6	0.112	0.237
oc_1	←	hc_7	−0.164	0.088
oc_1	←	hc_8	0.056	0.467
oc_2	←	hc_2	−0.220	0.001
oc_2	←	hc_3	0.267	***
oc_2	←	hc_1	0.117	0.177
oc_2	←	hc_4	0.320	***
oc_2	←	hc_5	−0.250	0.002
oc_2	←	hc_6	0.203	0.017
oc_2	←	hc_7	0.011	0.898
oc_2	←	hc_8	−0.066	0.339
oc_2	←	hc_9	0.369	***
oc_3	←	hc_1	−0.109	0.305
oc_3	←	hc_2	0.077	0.364
oc_3	←	hc_3	0.123	0.206
oc_3	←	hc_4	0.390	***
oc_3	←	hc_5	−0.092	0.342
oc_3	←	hc_6	0.013	0.898
oc_3	←	hc_7	0.165	0.122
oc_3	←	hc_8	−0.162	0.058
oc_3	←	hc_9	0.182	0.082
oc_4	←	hc_1	0.028	0.794
oc_4	←	hc_2	0.185	0.032
oc_4	←	hc_3	0.017	0.863
oc_4	←	hc_4	0.112	0.192
oc_4	←	hc_5	0.010	0.921
oc_4	←	hc_6	0.031	0.766
oc_4	←	hc_7	0.133	0.216
oc_4	←	hc_8	−0.188	0.029
oc_4	←	hc_9	0.344	0.001

Continued on the next page

Table 8 Continued from the previous page

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
oc_1	←	hc_9	0.425	***
oc_5	←	hc_1	−0.033	0.757
oc_5	←	hc_2	0.023	0.785
oc_5	←	hc_3	0.320	***
oc_5	←	hc_4	0.224	0.009
oc_5	←	hc_5	−0.003	0.973
oc_5	←	hc_6	0.166	0.113
oc_5	←	hc_7	0.262	0.014
oc_5	←	hc_8	−0.048	0.577
oc_5	←	hc_9	0.023	0.823
oc_6	←	hc_1	0.047	0.623
oc_6	←	hc_2	−0.079	0.299
oc_6	←	hc_3	0.253	0.003
oc_6	←	hc_4	0.371	***
oc_6	←	hc_5	0.318	***
oc_6	←	hc_6	−0.112	0.230
oc_6	←	hc_7	−0.076	0.423
oc_6	←	hc_8	0.006	0.940
oc_6	←	hc_9	0.162	0.081

Notes Column headings are as follows: (1) organizational climate variables, (2) path direction, (3) human capital variables, (4) standardized regression coefficient, (5) statistical significance (p). *** $p < 0.001$, fixed – significance level is not computed, as one of the measured variable loadings in the measurement part of the structural model is always fixed to 1.

in fact partially supported by the tested hypotheses.

From the data, we could conclude that the most influential variables of human capital are the application of knowledge from personal experience, which are statistically significant and influence five out of six dependent variables of the organisational climate construct. The two variables with statistical significance influences each other, communications training for leadership, employee satisfaction and rewards and professional training and education, and knowledge application for internal relations, leadership and career development. In contrast, the variable leadership of organisational climate is influenced by six out of nine variables of the construct, with the influence from marketing training, communications training, application of knowledge from personal experience, time, and type of training, team knowledge transfer, and knowledge application.

Regarding the human capital construct and its influence on organisational climate, the findings show that the following human capital variables are the most important and have to be taken into consideration by owners, managers, leaders, and other employees: communications training, application of knowledge from personal experience, time and type of training, and knowledge application. We recommend that the owners, managers, leaders, and other employees of travel agencies acquire, in addition to formal education, different skills through non-formal education. In this context, they can pay attention to workshops, seminars, and training on various subjects offered, sometimes for free, by consulting firms, employment agencies, and other institutions, which can help individuals to gain human capital. Travel agencies also need to – and this is the task of owners, managers, and leaders – take care that their employees renew their knowledge and develop the skills needed to perform their work, as well as the type of work that is expected to be required for future development.

Regarding the organizational climate construct impacted by human capital, the findings show that the most influenced variables in the organizational climate construct are leadership, employee satisfaction, and rewards, professional training, and education. As claimed in the literature, these variables could have a positive impact on the performance of travel agencies. It needs to be realized that owners, managers, leaders, and other employees can contribute to the performance of travel agencies with their knowledge, skills, competences and their desire for a favourable organizational climate.

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Original Scientific Article

Tourists' Attitudes towards Ecologically-Produced Food

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The purchase and consumption of ecologically-produced food is on the rise in the food markets of Europe. Consumers are becoming more aware of their health and well-being and, therefore, consuming ecologically-produced foods and drinks is a reflection of becoming more conscious about one's health and a lifestyle statement. The consumption of ecologically-produced food fosters healthier eating habits and a higher quality of life in comparison to consuming conventionally-produced food. Furthermore, such consumption relies on attitudes of responsibility towards 'Mother Nature,' connection to nature, saving the planet and protection of the environment. Therefore, such consumers are more socially responsible and conscious about the future of planet Earth. Regarding economic tourism, ecologically-produced food is seen as a part of what is on offer in terms of gastronomy. The availability and range of products from ecological production differs from destination to destination. In the Croatian case, ecologically-produced foods and beverages are quite a new trend. Istria as a destination leads these trends in terms of what is available, whereas they are scarce elsewhere. Therefore, in our research, we have attempted to validate the potential of ecologically-produced food on offer in tourist facilities in accordance with tourists' preferences. With respect to the scientific project, 'Valorisation of selective forms of tourism in the sustainable development of rural spaces,' a survey was conducted with a sample of tourists with the intention of determining their interest in ecologically-produced food during their stay in Istria. We examined 1,028 questionnaires and determined that tourists have different attitudes toward ecologically-produced food depending on the land of its origin and certain sociodemographic features.

Keywords: tourists, ecologically-produced food, Istria

Introduction

There are many motives for why people travel: holiday, business, health, education, among others. These motives are connected to different needs that long to be satisfied. Every tourist is different, and so are the factors that motivate them. It is not likely that one is influenced by only one motivation, such as personality, lifestyle, past experiences, self-perception and similar. Usually, it is a set of motivations and needs that require satisfaction. From the tourist point of view, they seek to satisfy a wide number of needs simultaneously (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2007). For many people, food and drink consumption is one of the central components of their leisure/tourist experiences as well as being an experience in its own right (Beer, 2008, p. 153). To consume interesting food in a pleasant environment is one of the key aims of tourists according to Hjaleger and Antonoioli-Corigliano (2000). The gastronomy of a particular tourism destination may become one of the most cherished travelling memories, so it is crucial how it is presented to tourists. In this way, food has a significant role in destination presentation (such as in tourism catalogues), it is an attractive factor, it is connected to regional activities, and, finally, it raises the income of destination facilities (e.g., hotels). As a point of tourists' interest, food is a part of the heritage and tradition of a destination but also an inventive part of the future, such as in terms of food festivals, where food as a part of the local culture is presented in a lodging place or in rural surroundings (Hjaleger & Antonoioli-Corigliano, 2000). At its root, eating is a physiological need that should be satisfied daily, and satisfaction with local gastronomy should be considered as a crucial segment of the tourism services of a destination. As a novel trend in gastronomy, the use of ecologically-produced food was introduced a decade ago in Croatia. Based on the fact that tourists were requesting it, various boarding facilities introduced this type of food. The range of products and the possibility of purchasing them outside boarding facilities remain difficult and depends on farmers' capabilities in marketing such food.

Ureňa, Bernabén, and Olmeda (2008) have stated that consumers' see ecologically-produced food as healthier and of a higher quality with the means of its production respecting the environment. A survey conducted by experts at the AC Nielsen agency (2005) demonstrated that in a global sample of consumers, two thirds of those questioned considered ecologically-produced food healthier for them and their children. Hartman and Wright (as cited in Lockie, Lyons, Lawrence, & Mummery, 2002) identified two groups of consumers of ecologically-produced food; the first is ready to pay the higher prices and actively gives priority to ecologically-produced food purchasing, while the other is concerned about the environment but considers the price of ecologically-produced food to be a limitation. Lockie et al. (2002) mentioned that in the decision process, consumers allocate importance to environment, their own health, food quality and taste. Based on the aforementioned research, it is plausible to extrapolate a certain segment of consumers of ecologically-produced food and suppose that this segment would be interested in this kind of food being provided on their travels. Based on the fact that ecologically-produced food is more expensive versus conventional food, and this segment of consumers is willing to pay premium prices, one might suppose that interested tourists would also be willing to accept the price premium.

In the market segmentation of tourists, the findings from the research are usually connected to specific destinations or products (Rudež Nemec, 2012, p. 20); it divides heterogeneous groups of consumers into more homogenous segments. Our work included both market segmentations of destination and product. In this way, we furthered our research by segmenting tourists that would like to buy and consume ecologicaly-produced food within Istria as a destination.

Moreover, segmentation of tourists can be achieved using different criteria: geographical, socioeconomic, demographic, psychographic, behaviouristic, price, purpose of travel, among others (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2007; Middleton & Clarke, 2001; Kotler, 2001). In our research presented in this paper, tourism market segmentation was based upon geographical segmentation (land of arrival), socioeconomic, demographic and behaviouristic segmentation.

Materials and Methods

To strengthen comparative concurrent possibilities of Istria County as a tourist destination, a long-term scientific project, 'Valorisation of selective forms of tourism in sustainable development of rural spaces,' was commenced (the project was financed by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports nr. 147-1470497-3034 from 2007 to 2013). During the project, a survey was conducted on a sample of tourists with the intention of determining their interest for selective forms of tourism (farm tourism, wine tourism, golf tourism, sport tourism, event tourism) and specific types of tourist offerings. The survey focused on tourists that visited the coastal area of Istria County. The part of the survey utilized for this paper considered the issue of attitudes toward ecologically-produced food. A total of 1,028 properly-filled questionnaires were collected (with a confidence level of 95%, distribution 50% and margin of error 3.05%).

Tourists were provided with questionnaires and asked to fill them out. Convenience sampling was employed. The questionnaire contained 16 questions that were divided into three groups. The first group of questions related to the purchase of ecological food by tourists in their home country. Through these questions, we attempted to identify the pleasure involved in tourists' daily food purchases (tourists were offered five options: very unsatisfied, unsatisfied, satisfied, very satisfied and do not know). The question of whether tourists buy ecologically-produced food in their origin country had two options (yes or no). In the question regarding where they purchased ecologically-produced food, tourists had six options with several response options. With regards to the question inquiring as to how much more tourists were willing to pay for ecologically produced food over conventional food, there were six options (in rates: up to 10%, 11 to 20%, 21 to 30%, 31 to 60%, 61 to 100% and more than 100%). There was also a question on how much tourists were informed about ecologically-produced food and ecological production in general, and we enquired about this through four questions in which their subjective grade was required. Their answers were rated as three options: not informed, partly informed and totally informed. The importance of these elements in the decision process for purchasing ecologically-produced food was rated from one to five.

The second group of questions concentrated on the stay of tourists in Istria County and tourists' interest in buying and consuming ecologically-produced food. They were asked specifically about their interest in buying and consuming ecologically-produced food during their stay in Istria (options being yes or no). Those who responded with positive interest had four options in ratings of willingness to pay premium prices (in rates: up to 10%, 11 to 20%, 21 to 30%, 31 to 60%, 61 to 100% and more than 100%). Those who responded as not being interested had five options for explaining their lack of interest.

The third section was about boarding facilities with seven options (along with several response options) and about tourists' willingness to stay in rural Istria during their holidays (options: yes, no, and do not know).

The group of questions related to demographics covered country of origin, age, gender, education, profession, income and media used in gathering information about Istria County.

Demographic data were categorized as follows: land of arrival (six options), age (five categories 16–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, and 55+), gender (male/female), occupation (eight options: entrepreneur, manager, officer, worker, student/pupil, retired, unemployed and other), monthly income (five categories: up to €500, €501 to 1000, €1001 to 2000, €2001 to 5000, and more than €5000). Education level was gauged in five levels: lower (basic education), middle (secondary education), higher education (college), university education and master and doctorate level.

From our previous research (Ilak Peršurić & Težak, 2011), it was known that organic food is, in general, more expensive in comparison to conventionally-produced food so the sample was stratified based on accommodation category. High-category facilities (i.e., three-star hotels and higher and four-star villas) were selected. The research was conducted in 18 facilities and a structure pattern was followed: three-star hotels 35%; four-star hotels 63%; and high-category villas 2%. Hotels were visited on dates previously agreed upon with the hotel's management. In order to prepare adequate numbers of questionnaires per national structure of the examinees, data on tourist arrivals were received from the contacted hotels. The questionnaire was provided in English, German, Italian, Russian, Slovenian and Croatian.

This work was conducted in six Istrian towns with following patterns: Umag 51.00%, Poreč – 12.31%, Rovinj 17.62%, Pula/Medulin 8.92%, and Rabac 10.15%.

According to country of arrival, the national structure of the examinees was as follows: Austrian 13.54%,

Table 1 Socio Demographic Indicators of Tourists by Country of Arrival Independent Variables (%)

Sociodemographic indicator		Austria	UK	Italy	Germany	Russia	Other
Age group	16–24	9.52	4.11	13.92	10.73	10.58	5.42
	25–34	18.45	6.16	17.01	5.65	24.23	28.92
	35–44	26.79	9.59	26.29	28.25	23.96	29.52
	45–54	23.81	27.40	22.68	34.46	26.46	18.07
	55+	21.43	52.74	20.10	20.90	14.76	18.07
Gender	Male	48.00	43.80	45.40	50.68	29.29	48.73
	Female	52.00	56.20	54.60	49.32	70.71	51.27
Education level	Basic education	35.85	0.75	3.23	19.76	0.83	4.38
	Secondary education	40.88	34.33	39.25	55.09	14.17	16.88
	Higher/university education	7.55	55.22	44.62	17.96	75.83	49.38
	Master/doctorate level	15.72	9.70	12.90	7.19	9.17	29.38
Occupation	Private entrepreneur	11.80	4.73	22.40	14.72	13.84	14.65
	Manager	5.59	27.70	5.46	5.52	27.12	25.48
	Civil servant	37.89	14.19	30.60	47.24	24.58	23.57
	Worker	8.07	9.46	6.01	9.82	1.69	14.01
	Student/pupil	5.59	2.03	8.74	4.29	6.21	1.91
	Retired	14.91	27.03	8.20	7.36	4.80	6.37
	Unemployed	0.62	0.00	1.64	1.23	1.41	1.27
	Other	15.53	14.86	16.94	9.82	20.34	12.74
Monthly Income	Up to €500	2.50	5.80	1.27	3.45	10.78	2.67
	€500–1000€	23.75	13.04	10.13	15.52	29.74	14.67
	€1000–2000	37.50	17.39	37.97	25.86	37.07	36.00
	€2000–5000	33.75	44.93	31.65	44.83	20.26	29.33
	Over €5000	2.50	18.84	18.99	10.34	2.16	17.33

British 12.00%, Italian 15.54%, German 14.46%, Russian 28.92%, and 13.08% of tourists were from other countries.

When the questionnaires were distributed to the tourists, the researchers explained their purpose and the tourists were told that the questionnaires were anonymous. Minors under 16 years of age were excluded from the research. As mentioned earlier, convenience sampling was employed.

Data were processed using statistical methods (i.e. univariate and bivariate statistics available in SPSS). Univariate statistics was used for the general description of the samples while bivariate statistics was used to determine the relationship between sociodemographic variables and variables related to the consumption of ecologically-produced food.

Results and Discussion

Following data entry, five countries of arrival having a minimum share of 10% of the total sample were identified, and six groups were formed. A general description of the data (in Table 1) shows that in the sample according to the land of arrival, we reached mostly Russian tourists. According to age groups, the majority of the tourists were between the ages of 25 and 55, whereas the British segment had the most tourists aged greater than 55. The Russian and British tourists outnumbered the other groups with university education. Austrians and Germans had almost equal numbers of tourists with secondary and primary/basic education. The segment of Russian and British tourists also had the largest group employed as managers and along with German tourists, were in the highest income brackets.

Through data processing, we had determined the statistically significant levels of the influence of certain general attitudes of tourists towards interest in ecologically-produced food. The responses on levels of interest in purchasing ecologically-produced food are listed in Table 2. It was evident that in general terms tourists had positive attitudes and on average were quite equal in interest regarding the purchase of ecologically-produced food during their stay in Istria. Most responses were related to purchasing for health reasons and environmental protection. Tourists had a positive attitude toward paying premium prices for ecologically-produced food during their stay in Istria. The only issue that had a negative aspect was related to the availability of such products in the market and range of products offered.

The majority of tourists were satisfied with the items that they purchased during their stay in Istria. The average grade for purchased ecological food was 4 (grades possible from 1 to 5; 5 was excellent). The offering of such food was graded also with 4 expressing a positive attitude. The positive health benefits of ecological food were rated highest by the Russian tourists (4.68) and lowest by the Austrian tourists (4.18). The positive impact of ecological production on the environment was graded highly by Italians (4.11) and less so by British tourists (3.95). Availability on the market was graded around 3, with the most importance being to it by Russian tourists (3.72) and less to Austrians (3.24). The price of ecological products was graded less important to British (3.91) and Italian tourists (3.80) and most important to German tourists (3.49). The variability and range of ecological food offerings was most important for Russian (3.60) and Austrian (3.50) tourists and less important to Italian ones (3.48). These variables were chosen for further statistical (bivariate) analysis in order to determine their correlation with sociodemographic indicators.

The bivariate analysis suggested several statistically significant correlations to satisfaction with ecologically-produced food. The socioeconomic and demographic variables of age and gender had a slightly lower influence on the level of satisfaction with ecologically-produced food, while occupation and income level had statistically significant higher correlation levels (Table 3).

When considering age, the analyses revealed that tourists in the age group 16 to 24 showed the least satisfaction with ecologically-produced food, while other age groups were overall equally pleased with ecologically-produced food items.

Occupation and income had a statistically sig-

Table 2 Description of Dependent Variables

Variable	*n*	%
Health benefits	1137	87.46
Environmental protection	1050	80.77
Availability on the market	1002	77.08
Selling price	1023	78.69
Wide offerings	1002	77.08
Interest in purchasing of ecologically-produced food in Istria	1289	99.15
Readiness to pay premium prices for ecologically-produced food	852	95.41*
In hotels as part of gastronomy offerings	551	61.70*
In camp shops	89	9.97*
In restaurants on menus	259	29.00*
In specialized restaurants	90	10.08*
Within green markets	259	29.00*
In local shops	294	32.92*
Other	10	1.12*
Small number of selling points	96	24.24**
Premium prices too high	130	32.83**
Ecological products better than conventional	90	22.73**
Unsuitable range of price and quality	42	10.61**
No need for such products	62	15.66**

Notes * Only respondents that declared their interest for ecologically produced food during their stay in Istria. ** Only respondents that were not interested in ecologically produced food during their stay in Istria.

Table 3 Correlation of Sociodemographic Features to Satisfaction with ecologically-produced Food and with Willingness to Pay Premium Prices for ecologically-produced Food

Dependent variable	Independent variable	χ^2	*df*	*Cc*
Satisfaction with ecologically-produced food	Age	15.6	12	0.206
	Gender	5.6	3	0.132
	Occupation	21.2	21	0.443
	Income	12.8	12	0.382
Willingness to pay premium prices for ecologically-produced food	Age	15.7	20	0.734
	Education level	14.0	15	0.519
	Occupation	37.0	35	0.373

nificant influence on the satisfaction with ecological products in a manner such that tourists with higher incomes were more satisfied than those with lower incomes. Additionally, managers, entrepreneurs and civil servants were more satisfied with ecological products than students, pupils, unemployed and other persons.

In the decision process for purchasing ecologically-produced food, the highest grade was responsive to health benefits (average grade of 4.29), followed by environmental protection (average grade of 3.97) and selling price (average grade of 3.64).

In the whole sample, tourists responded with positive attitudes regarding premium prices and were on average willing to pay up to 30 percent more for ecologically-produced food versus conventionally produced food. A certain number of tourists were willing to pay 31 to 50 percent more, while few tourists were willing to pay 100 percent more for ecologically-produced food.

Taking into consideration the differences between prices for ecologically-produced food and conventionally-produced food with a range from 30 to 100 percent premiums, we can state that each group of tourists could identify a comfortable range for market food prices during their stay in Istria.

The age of tourists in our sample was statistically significantly connected to the premium price in ways such that tourists were willing to pay more for ecologically-produced food. Tourists aged 25 to 34 were willing to pay 20 percent more, tourists aged 35 to 54 were willing to pay 30 percent more while each fifth tourist was willing to pay 60 percent more for ecologically-produced food, though in the age group above 55 years, this willingness dropped to paying twenty percent.

The criteria for decision making showed that wide ranges of products were most important to persons above 45 years of age and important only for each third respondent younger than 24.

The type of occupation had the strongest impact of all sociodemographic features and could be related to the fact that the higher income levels of managers and company owners rendered them more often willing and able to pay premium prices for ecologically-produced food. Also, according to occupation, entrepreneurs and managers were most concerned about environmental protection as a criterion for purchasing ecologically-produced food, while this was of least importance to workers.

Education was strongly statistically related to the willingness to pay premium prices for ecologically-produced food. According to education level, those willing to pay premium prices were the most educated, whereas tourists with primary education were least likely to pay premium prices for ecologically-produced food.

Education level was significantly correlated to selling price such that the range of food offered was more important to older tourists in comparison younger ones (under 25). The criteria for choosing ecologically-produced food, such as availability on the market, wide range of products and number of selling points, were not statistically significantly related to age.

Table 4 Correlation of Sociodemographic Features with Decision Criteria in Purchasing of ecologically-produced Food

Independent variable	Dependent variable	χ^2	*df*	*Cc*
Age	Wide offerings	13.7	16	0.615
Education level	Selling price	8.2	12	0.766
	Environmental protection	10.9	12	0.532
Boarding category	Availability on market	17.7	12	0.465
	Selling price	11.4	12	0.490
Occupation	Environmental protection	30.5	28	0.333

The price of ecological products was more important to respondents with lower levels of education; it may be speculated that they had lower incomes and therefore, ecologically-produced food was less available to them. Tourists with less education were also not as concerned about environmental protection in comparison to those tourists with university and higher levels of education. Tourists with university or higher education were more willing to pay the highest premium prices for ecologically-produced food, while the least willing were those with primary education.

Although they expressed the most interest in ecologically produced food, the stereotype that consumers with highest income levels were the most frequent buyers of ecologically-produced food was not demonstrated to be valid in our research. Tourists with lower income levels were also interested in buying such products and were purchasing them, but because of limited income, they were not able to purchase larger amounts of such food.

Regarding sensitivity to price, the consumers of ecologically-produced food were equally sensitive to price, quality, taste and availability to food markets in comparison to tourists that purchase conventionally produced food. The price and availability of ecologically-produced food were most important to tourists at three- and four-star hotels, creating the most in-demand segment, while for tourists at two- and five-star facilities, these criteria were not as important and therefore not strongly statistically significantly correlated.

The gender of tourists was not statistically correlated to satisfaction with ecological food, the willingness to pay premium prices and decision criteria (Table 4). In these categories, women and men responded with the same sensitivity, but gender had a statistically significant correlation with choosing and consuming ecologically-produced food, especially while purchasing food in camps and green markets as well as in local shops (Table 5). This fact can be related to the overall purchasing habits in families, in which women buy most of the groceries and usually purchase most food products for the family. We can hypothesize that tourists in camps are more prone to buying ecological products at camp sites because they usually prepare their own meals; therefore, women are the primary cooks and most involved shoppers (showing correlation $Cc = 0.753$).

In our sample, most tourists consumed ecologically-produced food in non-specialized restaurants. In the literature, similar findings were reported by Hjalager and Antonioli-Corigliano (2000); ecologically-produced food can be an attractive factor of a tourism destination, but in the long-term, for a consumer group, such an offer is highly unstable as a factor in destination management.

In our sample, occupation had the highest correlation among all other independent variables with ecological food in gastronomy service. Along with higher education, higher occupation status would refer to greater purchasing and consumption potential. This could guide hotel managers when making future decisions about gastronomy services.

As not all tourists were ready to purchase ecologically-produced food, we wanted to determine the reasons for such negative attitudes. Such attitudes may provide insights to hotel managers with respect to making changes in gastronomy offerings. Further, our

Table 5 Correlation of Sociodemographic Features and Place of Purchasing ecologically-produced Food

Independent variable	Dependent variable	χ^2	*df*	*Cc*
Age	Part of gastronomy offerings	6.1	4	0.189
	In camp shops	2.7	4	0.601
	In restaurant menus	6.4	2	0.170
	In specialized restaurants	4.8	4	0.307
	Within green markets	10.6	4	0.031
	In local shops	8.9	4	0.062
Gender	Part of gastronomy offerings	3.3	3	0.340
	In camp shops	1.1	3	0.753
	In restaurant menus	6.5	3	0.086
	In specialized restaurants	3.2	3	0.356
	Within green markets	1.3	3	0.720
	In local shops	3.4	3	0.642
Occupation	Part of gastronomy offerings	1.4	7	0.983
	In camp shops	13.6	7	0.058
	In restaurant menus	8.3	7	0.303
	In specialized restaurants	10.7	7	0.149
	Within green markets	9.8	7	0.197
	In local shops	20.1	7	0.005
Education	Part of gastronomy offerings	2.8	3	0.421
	In camp shops	7.4	3	0.059
	In restaurant menus	6.6	3	0.084
	In specialized restaurants	11.0	3	0.012
	Within green markets	9.8	3	0.020
	In local shops	5.3	3	0.146

findings put forth explanations, such as excessively high premium pricing for such food and unclear quality definitions. A very strong correlation with age, gender and occupation was detected and could be understood based on the fact that there is no need for such kinds of food on the market and that the price and quality relationships are not connected. Similar observations of AC Nielsen (2005) indicated that in general terms, consumers have doubts about the fairness of premium pricing versus other food prices.

Negative attitudes toward ecologically-produced food were statistically significantly correlated with the socio demographic features of tourists. Therefore, according to age, the oldest tourists, being greater than 55 years of age, considered price to be most important. Price and quality were most important to tourists between the ages of 25 to 34, while for other age categories, this relationship was important for half of the respondents, while for the other half, it had no influence.

Less interest and more negative attitudes were seen in women, who were responsible for food purchases due to a small number of selling points, disproportionate relationship between price and quality and no perceived need for such products. The segment of workers not buying ecologically-produced food primarily did not do so because of the relationship between price and quality.

Table 6 Correlation of Sociodemographic Features and Negative Attitudes towards the Purchase and Consumption of ecologically-produced Food

Independent variable	Dependent variable	χ^2	*df*	*Cc*
Age	Small number of selling points	14.3	4	0.006
	Premium price too high	3.6	4	0.457
	Ecological food is not better than conventional food	3.6	4	0.456
	Disproportionate relationship between price and quality	1.9	4	0.749
	No need for ecological products	1.4	4	0.829
Gender	Small number of selling points	2.1	3	0.543
	Premium price too high	8.0	3	0.046
	Ecological food isnot better than conventional food	6.6	3	0.084
	Disproportionate relationship between price and quality	0.6	3	0.866
	No need for ecological products	2.7	3	0.437
Occupation	Small number of selling points	10.7	7	0.151
	Premium price too high	18.2	7	0.011
	Ecological food isnot better than conventional	11.6	7	0.112
	Disproportionate relationship between price and quality	3.0	7	0.877
	No need for ecological products	7.7	7	0.356
Education	Small number of selling points	2.4	3	0.485
	Premium price too high	2.7	3	0.433
	Ecological food is not better than conventional food	2.7	3	0.436
	Disproportionate relationship between price and quality	7.1	3	0.068
	No need for ecological products	0.7	3	0.864
Income	Small number of selling points	0.4	4	0.975
	Premium price too high	4.1	4	0.391
	Ecological food is not better than conventional food	0.7	4	0.950
	Disproportionate relationship between price and quality	3.7	4	0.437
	No need for ecological products	0.4	4	0.974
Land of arrival	Small number of selling points	4.8	5	0.440
	Premium price too high	11.4	5	0.043
	Ecological food isnot better than conventional food	10.0	5	0.075
	Disproportionate relationship between price and quality	23.3	5	0.000
	No need for ecological products	1.8	5	0.868

The negative attitudes of tourists with primary education were connected to the small number of selling points, the selling price, and the comparison to conventional food prices. in contrast, these reasons were not important for university-(or higher-) educated tourists.

Regarding income, for tourists with monthly income above one thousand euro, the least important criteria was the number of selling points, the selling price and the price difference between ecological and conventional food, while for tourists with the lowest incomes, these three criteria were important because they could afford fewer ecological food items with their income.

The strongest statistical correlations were established for British tourists with regards to their occupations (managers) that influenced their interest in ecologically-produced food and its consumption during their tourist stay in Istria (value of connection $Cc = 0.436$). Moreover, their occupation was related to the volume of consumption of ecologically-produced food ($Cc = 0.333$). In relation to the average Croatian income, the British had one that is much higher and with the pound being a strong currency, much stronger than the Croatian kuna (in relation 1 : 10); we presumed that these features enhanced their ability to purchase and consume ecologically-produced food even though it has a relatively higher price than conventionally-produced food. In comparison to tourists from other countries, British tourists were the most prepared to pay premium prices for ecologically-produced food and among them, middle-aged tourists were the keenest to consume it. British tourists demand better organization of offerings and more information about prices, points of sales and availability of products. The information on food prices was most related to age ($Cc = 0.351$) and occupation ($Cc = 0.358$).

Gastronomy featuring ecologically-produced food is important to Italians as long as it is presented in restaurants as a menu offering. Italian general interest in ecologically-produced food offerings was related to occupation ($Cc = 0.313$) and education ($Cc = 0.296$). The education of Italians was also connected to consumption in specialized restaurants ($Cc = 0.313$): more highly-educated Italians were more keen to choose specialized restaurants and consume ecologically-produced food. The type of occupation of Italians was connected to consumption in non-specialized restaurants ($Cc = 0.449$). Regarding the offer of ecologically-produced food outside restaurants, the most important was the availability in camp shops ($Cc = 0.449$).

Russian tourists were the most indifferent to the purchase and consumption of ecologically-produced food during their stay in Istria. A low-grade statistical relationship was found when taking into account occupation ($Cc = 0.204$) and age ($Cc = 0.229$). Furthermore, the potential of enhancing consumption was also low because of weak statistical links found in relationships between ecologically-produced food prices and age ($Cc = 0.223$) and occupation ($Cc = 0.275$).

As consumers, Germans did not show a great interest in the consumption of ecologically-produced food in restaurants. They were more interested in what was offered in shops and at green markets, and, in general, they were more interested in expanding the existing offerings. Middle-aged Germans saw the strongest limitations in the small number of selling points ($Cc = 0.379$). They were most eager to purchase ecologically-produced food at green markets ($Cc = 0.270$).

Austrian tourists were most enthusiastic to consume ecologically-produced food as a part of gastronomy offerings in hotels, and this was connected to age ($Cc = 0.361$). Occupation was linked to consumption in specialized restaurants ($Cc = 0.352$). For enlargement of offerings, the availability in local shops was important to Austrians when considering age ($Cc = 0.293$) while in specialized shops, it was related to income ($Cc = 0.359$). Austrian tourists demanded a larger number of sales points ($Cc = 0.352$) and were more willing to pay premium prices for ecologically-produced food, most strongly connected to occupation ($Cc = 0.549$). Austrian tourists were demanding guests with regard to the information and organization of offerings, income ($Cc = 0.469$) and occupation ($Cc = 0.289$). Moreover, their occupation was strongly related to sales point information ($Cc = 0.492$).

Conclusions

As a conclusion, we can state that the survey of a sample of 1.028 tourists yielded valuable data about tourists' attitudes toward ecological food during their stay in Istria. Tourists had, in general, a positive approach to ecologically-produced food. Those who usually consumed such food at home were willing to purchase and consume it at their vacation destination, in this case in Istria. They were prone to consume such food as part of gastronomic offerings in Istria and purchase it at specialized shops and green markets. The possibilities of direct on farm purchase were very scarce and were related to lack of information. Regarding the socioeconomic and demographic features of tourists, occupation, age and education were statistically highly related to positive attitudes towards the purchase and consumption of ecologically-produced food.

Geographical segmentation (land of residence) also demonstrated important relationships, such as how Italians believed that ecologically-produced food was interesting if offered on restaurant menus while Russian tourists were most indifferent to purchases of such food. German tourists were the most interested in enlarging the ecologically-produced food offerings in shops, green markets, and other places, while Austrians were most interested in consumption of it in hotels and purchasing it in local and specialized shops.

Behavioural segmentation suggested there was a positive attitude regarding willingness to pay premium prices for ecologically-produced food and there were positive aspects of the purchase and consumption of it for own health and environmental reasons.

Future recommendations for additional inquiry into this topic would best involve better marketability, visibility and wider offerings of ecologically-produced food.

The future marketing of ecologically-produced food should move toward certain segments of tourists; employed persons (managers, entrepreneurs and civil servants), middle aged (35–54) and highly educated persons who are more prone to pay premium prices and are more aware of environment protection and eco-quality.

Overall stronger promotion should reach more British tourists in all tourist facilities offering ecologically-produced food, while for Italians promotion should be forwarded in specialized restaurants. The availability of ecologically-produced food and number of selling points was most important to Austrian tourists; therefore, their number should be enlarged in the future.

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Original Scientific Article

Enhancing Graduate Employability

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The purpose of this paper is to deepen the understanding of the development of student employability competences and indicate possible solutions to improve the employability potentials of graduates in the case of a faculty of tourism. We carried out a cohort study on the competitiveness of students entering the labour market and desk research on the activities of the institution in this field. The research yielded areas of limited students' competences and some deficiencies or challenges within the institution.

Keywords: employability, labour market, graduate, higher education, case study

Introduction

Graduate employability has become increasingly important during the recent and current economic crisis; high youth unemployment rates are exacerbated by an increased number of graduates from higher education institutions (HEIS). It appears that the era of job security from post-graduation to pension is over. Moreover, many graduates have to settle for jobs for which they are formally overqualified or with precarious and intermittent employment without job security or predictability.

Therefore, HEIS have to pay particular attention to graduate employability-related issues and adopt a strategic approach to the employability development of students. Additionally, new employability skills are required due to changing labour markets, organizational and technological advances, intense global competition, as well as sound anticipation of likely future workplaces.

Employability is not a contemporary phenomenon; it (re)appeared on agendas with human capital theories (Becker, 1975) emphasizing the obligations of governments to stimulate conditions for the development of human capital as a key competitive priority of a knowledge-based society and economy. Therefore, the development of employability in graduates has become a significant expectation that the state governments have imposed on higher education systems (Knight & Yorke, 2002).

This paper provides in-depth insights into the subject of graduate employability in the case of a faculty of tourism. Tourism continually generates new enterprises, new workplaces, and occupations; it is an industry of high potential. Nevertheless, regular employment after graduation is not so easy to obtain. The global economic downturn combined with a grave crisis in the Slovene tourism (hospitality subsector) has resulted in a decline in demand for skilled workers. Close cooperation between HEIS, students, and employers is necessary regarding the transition from the university to working life. Understanding the range and type of skills required by the tourism sector is important to both students and education providers (Harkison, Poulston, & Kim, 2011). Thus, this survey provides data on students' preparedness to enter the labour market combined with data on faculty guidance and measures to serve students anticipating employment.

Theoretical Background

Professionals and other experts have provided several definitions for employability that can be divided into two general groups. One relates to the capability of the student to obtain and maintain a job after graduation and develop within that job. The other set is concerned with enhancing the student's attributes (skills, knowledge, attitudes and abilities) and ultimately with empowering the student as a critical life-long learner (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Harvey, 2001). These definitions provide different ways of discussing the concept of employability. For the purpose of the Bologna reform (The European Higher Education Area, 2012), employability is defined as the ability to gain initial employment, to maintain employment, and to be able to move within the labour market. Additionally, Allison, Harvey, and Nixon (2002) stress the capacity to move self-sufficiently into and within the labour market, to fulfil potential through sustainable employment. Thus, we believe that the term employability includes not only the ability to get a job but also longer-term employment, indicating that one can manage a career and continue professional development. We agree that employment must be qualitative: fulfilling, rewarded in accordance with the study choice and level through promotion and learning prospects.

Harvey (2003) notes that employability is not just about getting a job. Conversely, simply because a student is on a vocational course does not mean that somehow employability is automatic. Employability is more than about developing attributes, techniques, or experience solely to enable a student to get a job, or to progress within a certain career. It is about learning, and the emphasis is less on 'employment' and more on 'ability.' In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the qualities of the learner. Employability is the relevance of knowledge, skills, and competences acquired through training to what the labour market/profession requires. Thus, Kramberger (Kramberger & Pavlin, 2007) ascertains that employability is a prerequisite for employment.

Employability is also an important outcome of higher education, although measures of employability with recent graduate employment rates (usually six months after graduation) are crude measures (Harvey, 2001) and subject to pragmatic pressures from governments to 'keep employability simple.' Nevertheless, there is a global tendency for the employability of graduates to be used as a benchmark to measure the quality of higher education (Cai & Shumilova, 2012). Thus, high graduate employment rates help HEIs market their study programmes, create their image and enhance their prestige.

Employability, therefore, is not a product but a process of learning. For HEIs, the employability of graduates is of paramount importance; the development of employability skills must be embedded in their intra-, co-, and extra-curricular activities. The preparedness of students to enter the labour market includes equipping them for professional practice with relevant knowledge, skills and other attributes, helping them recognize the value of all forms of learning, and teaching them how to articulate the impacts of learning and promote themselves in the labour market. Finally, the world of work evaluates the students' achievements and the HEI activities that enhance employability. Lindberg (2007) argues that the greatest change that has taken place in the research of the relationship between education and working life is probably related to the adoption of the concept of the 'education-to-work transition.' Clearly, the quality relationships between education and the world of work depend highly on the active involvement of both partners in curricula development, evaluation, study processes, placement, career services, and recruitment.

Employability Components

As shown in Figure 1, there are three key factors involved in graduate employability:

- Students' individual capabilities, achievements, investments, and endeavours;
- HEI activities (intra-, co- and extra-curricular, career service, research);
- Labour market conditions.

Primary prerequisites for employability are knowledge, skills, personal characteristics and other attributes of an individual, mobility, career planning, as well as the willingness to change occupations/vocations and

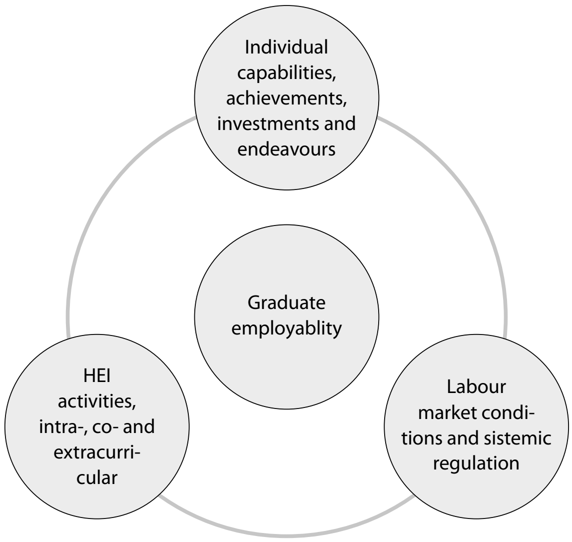

Figure 1 Factors of Graduate Employability

to follow trends within professions. Students need to maintain their desire for lifelong learning (LLL) and raise awareness of the need to improve and upgrade their competences, particularly work experience, engagement in non-formal learning, and international mobility.

Employers need flexible staff to be able to adapt to constantly changing and dynamic market conditions, and their consumers' requirements and habits. Job search patterns are also significant: students have to be proactive and diversify their ways of searching for employment, for instance by making use of networking. Finally, students have to develop their self-presentation and self-promotion skills to market their competences.

HEIs provide opportunities to develop competences needed to obtain, maintain, and develop employment and a career. Following Harvey (2002, p. 6), activities of HEIs can be categorized into four broad areas:

- Enhanced or revised central support (usually, via the agency of career services) for undergraduate and graduates in their search for work;
- Embedded attribute development in the programme of study often as the result of modifications to curricula to make attribute development explicit or to accommodate employer input;
- Innovative provision of work experience opportunities within, or external to, programmes of study;
- Embedded reflection on and recording of experience, attribute development and achievement alongside academic abilities, not least through the use of progress files.

The third component comprises labour market conditions, an external factor influencing graduate employability through social reforms, educational reforms, and labour legislation.

We claim that the responsibility for students' employability rests with both the students and the HEI. Thus, in this paper, we survey and discuss the students' role in employability development as well as the role of the HEI in providing opportunities for students to develop their skills and experience.

Conditions in the labour market are out of the control of students and the HEI and thus our focus as well, though they may play a major role in the processes of searching for employment.

Research Methodology

The single case study research method was used. As Merriam (2002) illustrates, a case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. Our first survey was a cohort study that started in the 2012/2013 academic year, was repeated in 2013/2014 and in 2014/2015. Each year, we surveyed qualitative data obtained from the students in their second or third year of study concerning their formal qualifications, skills, participation in non-formal learning, certificates, licences and other records, their work experiences, their participation in international mobility, personal traits, and their promotion capabilities. We present results regarding the quantity and quality of obtained student competences and their job marketability skills in order to identify areas of limited competences. As we observed no specific differences among the cohorts, we present the results for all three cohorts in one.

The second survey examined the attempts in the

Table 1 Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample

Category		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Undergraduates	2nd year	–	77	–	77
	3rd year	116	–	65	181
Type of study	Full-time	72	74	65	211
	Part-time	44	3	–	47
Gender	Female	85	48	51	184
	Male	31	29	14	74

Notes Undergraduate professional programmes: (1) Tourism Destination Management, (2) Tourism Enterprises Management, (3) Cross-Cultural Mediation in Tourism, (4) total.

field of employability-enhancing activities within the HEI. A desk study was conducted analysing the implementation of employability competences development in the curricula, strategic documents, and internal acts. Additionally, we surveyed data about international mobility, central career services, LLL programmes, and cooperation with the industry; thus, we aimed to identify the areas of the institution's weaknesses and challenges and form a basis for strategic planning regarding the issue of employability development.

Participants

The analysis included three cohorts of undergraduate (second and third year) students of professional study programmes for a three-year bachelor's degree, thus using a non-probability sampling technique and purposive sampling.

The whole population consisted of 313 students; 258 produced data that were useable ($N = 258$), yielding a response rate of 82%; 55 students did not participate. Table 1 shows descriptive characteristics of the sample. Out of the total sample, 29.8% were second-year students, 70.2% third-year students, 81% of them were full-time students; 71% were females; 2.1% were international students.

All data regarding one's employability competences are recorded in the curriculum vitae (CV) and a cover/motivation letter. Thus, each respondent completed a CV and enclosed a motivation letter for an employer chosen as a target for the purpose of placement or a future workplace. These documents were prepared both in Slovene and in one foreign language. Beforehand students were taught how to communicate with potential employers in a short session, prepared to write CVs and cover letters for an internship/job. Students uploaded these documents in the e-classroom. A CV had to follow the Europass CV structure and template, concentrating on essential information that would bring added value to the application. We chose the Europass CV because it provides a clear, systematic picture of the candidate, is popular among employers in the tourism sector and is utilized in other countries. Exceptions to this rule were allowed in case of work settings where an innovative and creative approach was desired or even required. Motivation letters had to follow the usual correspondence structure and rules; students were encouraged to show originality and innovative approaches to adapt the text to suit the post applied for and the employer's specifics. Furthermore, it was suggested that they stress their assets that were not included in the CV.

Results and Discussion

Graduate employability is a multifaceted phenomenon, and a match between the graduate and the employer depends on many variables. We drew up a framework for a strategic approach to the development of graduate employability, as shown in Figure 2.

Next, we arranged and analysed the obtained data following their relevance as follows:

Generic Competences

Generic skills are those that apply across a variety of jobs and life contexts. They are also known by several other names (Table 2), including soft skills, key skills, core skills, essential skills, key competences, necessary skills, transferable skills and employability skills. The tourist industry's preferred term is employability skills (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2003). In Slovenia, the most common terms are generic, soft and transferable skills.

Experts from the International Labour Organization (2001) observed that although the diversity of the

Figure 2 Conceptual Framework of Graduate Employability Components

industry and its subsectors provide working opportunities for a wide array of skills, in recent years there has been a shift within Europe from specific skills towards more generic competences. Similarly, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) indicated that 'employers are not looking for oven-ready graduates' (in Harvey, 2002). Training has a short shelf life, and it is far more important for employers that graduates have a range of attributes that empower them as lifelong learners (Harvey, Moon, & Geall, 1997).

Therefore, students should pay more attention to exposing their (eventual) team-working skills, communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, ability to work under pressure, self-man-

Table 2 Terms Used in Various Countries to Describe Generic Skills

Country	Terms used
Australia	Key competences, employability skills, generic skills
Canada	Employability skills
Denmark	Process independent qualifications
France	Transferable skills
Germany	Key qualifications
New Zealand	Essential skills
Singapore	Critical enabling skills
Switzerland	Trans-disciplinary goals
United Kingdom	Core skills, key skills, common skills
United States	Basic skills, necessary skills, workplace know-how

Notes Adapted from National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2003).

agement, and other skills. The faculty should attach more importance to entrepreneurial skills, abilities to identify opportunities in business, to planning, exploring, and evaluating opportunities. Weligamage (2009) emphasizes such skills as time management, diversity management, leadership skills, risk assessment management, analytical, critical and reflective abilities, as well as stress management. Atkins (1999) noticed that it is difficult to maintain that academic progress is not enhanced by high standards of literacy and numeracy, by a range of communication skills and the ability to work in groups or teams, and by learning how to learn. In short, descriptions of generic competences vary from one author to another.

Our survey revealed that although respondents defined several *generic competences* they possess, more information about the source of these skills was expected:

- 'When working in catering I had to practice conflict management skills; I can be empathetic, am a good observer and have team-management skills.'
- 'I am persistent in stressful situations, flexible, and a good organizer. If things turn bad, I adapt and improvise.'

- 'I performed mentoring tasks with novices and also as a dancing teacher. I organized several events for our relatives from abroad.'
- 'I gained good organizational skills as an assistant in managing events, as a tourist information clerk and receptionist; during my studies, I organized various events for students and the local community.'

As for *communication skills,* they are believed to be vital for success in the service (Andrews & Russell, 2002; Kátay & Rátz, 2007) sector. Our respondents were aware of their importance but did not go into detail. We expected information on mediating skills, presentation skills, intercultural understanding, report making, and similar.

- 'My advantages are fluent communication in foreign languages, ability to critically present and argue my views, and constructively accept critiques; I am open-minded.'
- 'I gained communication skills when I worked in an insurance and estate company where I faced various problems and was in direct communication with partners and customers; I could practice negotiating skills as well.'
- '[...] public speaking and performance skills: gained while participating in various competitions and through my experience as a musician in front of an audience.'

Surprisingly, no one mentioned generic skills that we found in syllabuses (e.g. entrepreneurial skills, preparation for self-employment, project planning, business plans or development of ideas into innovations. We presume that students were not sufficiently empowered.

Regarding entrepreneurial skills, the institution organizes workshops and regularly encourages students to join the activities of the university incubator. Students also are advised to test and realize their business ideas through other projects. Their self-employment competences should thus advance, especially organizational skills, creativity, skills in making business plans, initiative taking, and similar. Unfortunately, students show very limited interest in entrepreneurship. This remains an underutilized potential for a career in the tourism sector and a challenge for the institution.

Regarding *linguistic competences,* the results were not encouraging: all students can communicate in English, but other languages are far less common (only those with perceived levels B1/B2 (independent user) and C1/C2 (proficient user) were considered): German 24%, Italian 15%, Croatian 13%, and Russian 3%. We assert that they should possess more foreign language competences as candidates for careers in the tourism sector.

Concerning *computer skills* students listed mostly competences with the World Wide Web, Microsoft Office programmes (Word, Excel, PowerPoint), Gantt-project, Photoshop, Publisher, Wordpress, Video Maker, Corel Draw, and Windows Moviemaker. Some students reported that they had mastered computer systems in travel agencies or hotel reception areas.

These results indicate that the HEIS should do more to prepare the students to be able to reflect on learning content, interpret competences correctly, and record their attribute development and achievements.

Work Experience

Employability is not only about generic competences since it also includes work experience. Several authors (e.g. Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; Riley, Ladkin, & Szivas, 2002) reveal that the majority of employers in the tourism sector consider only work experience to add value to an individual's competitiveness. Harvey (2001) reminds us that there is a growing tendency to recruit from students who have had some work experience with the organization. Trbanc (2007) claims that a deficit in work experience can be recognized as the main competitive disadvantage of young people.

Thus, we analysed students' work experiences and found that they reported work experience in various areas: food and beverages (28%), front office (46%), event management (5%), travel agencies (19%), tourist information centres (4%) and casinos (4%); 46% of them fulfilled a mandatory placement in the tourism sector prior to faculty enrolment. The data show that 13% of students had no work experience in the tourism sector, 19% worked three months or less, 36% from three to six months, 10% from six to nine months and 19% more than nine months. Other work experience was from students' work in shopping centres, administration, manual labour, and similar; 4% of students reported work experience in voluntary organizations.

Unfortunately, 3% of students had no work experience at all; the question arises as to how they plan to obtain employment with this deficit. Students with prior vocational education in tourism and hospitality have a major advantage over others. Not only because they possess several work-related skills, but they are also well-acquainted with the industry; moreover, there is the importance of the development of networking relationships. Research among Slovene employers in the tourism sector showed that they place a high value only on those candidates with professional experience in the field (Rok, 2013). In the case of experience outside the sector, work in other service jobs is also appreciated. Even performing manual, routine work can be a signal to employers that students possess good working habits, and a willingness to work.

Other authors (Šušteršič, Nastav, & Kosi, 2011) warn that students are not selective when they look for work. Thus, only one third of their work experience contributes to their professional growth. We assume they choose work that is well-paid regardless of opportunities to broaden and upgrade their competences.

Work-Specific Competences

Experts (Pavlin, 2012) indicate that the responsibility for the development of professional competences rests as much on the HEI as on the employer. Although students listed several work experiences in the tourism sector, they were not so deft when they had to articulate what competences they had gained. They, surprisingly, listed a poor selection of these skills, e.g. 'experience in working at the front desk,' 'reception tasks,' 'administration tasks,' 'competences in organizing events,' 'marketing skills,' 'I am acquainted with travel agency work.' Given the considerable amount of their practical experience in the tourism sector, students could learn to reveal more skills related to their posts and tasks.

Non-Formal Learning

The analysis reveals that very few students participate in non-formal training. We found that several of these opportunities were organized by the faculty, most of them were free, and for some of them students could get ECTS (e.g. interviewing skills seminar, tour guiding seminar, entrepreneur workshop). The interest on the part of students was surprisingly poor. If workshops, seminars, and training are not obligatory, students tend not to participate. Although students assert that they are willing to learn, the evidence does not comport with that. Only 9% of them obtained licences for local tour guiding. Furthermore, according to the data bases of the national reference point (see http://www.nrpslo.org/index.aspx), they do not possess any of the NVQS (national vocational qualifications) although there are 22 of them for the tourism sector in Slovenia.

Obviously, the students' awareness of the need for LLL has not been developed yet. While the OECD (Stacey, 2015) points out that introducing a culture of lifelong learning can both help to raise skill levels and to enhance career development opportunities, some of the students who are about to search for jobs, ignore the help provided by the institution.

International Mobility

The study shows that some students were internationally mobile; 20% of them studied abroad or/and 15% fulfilled an internship, most of them with a grant from the Erasmus or NFM funds. Our research reveals that since the year 2000, the faculty's international office has recorded an annual 3–5% increase in the student and staff mobility. These data are encouraging since other research (Allen, Pavlin, & van der Velden, 2011) reveals that Slovene students are not as keen to participate in exchanges as other EU members' students are. Only 12% of Slovene students participate in these exchanges, while in Finland, Austria and Poland one third of them undergo this kind of study or internship.

Undoubtedly, the lack of such experiences does not contribute to the student's flexibility and competitiveness in the labour market. However, international mobility has to be interpreted appropriately; we found that students do not know how to interpret the impacts of such exchanges so that the employers see the benefits.

Furthermore, the research of Flander (2011) suggests that the key point is in preparation for mobility (counselling, guidance, linguistic and culture workshops). Indeed, stereotypes, prejudices and culture shock may have a very negative influence on the students' experiences in a foreign country. However, our research reveals that the international office applied very few organizational measures to prepare students for international mobility.

Personal Traits

Respondents listed their virtues, character traits and other personal advantages in their motivation letters. These should be linked to the identified philosophy and visions of the employer. Candidates have to present themselves as potential contributors to the company. Thus, they need to attract the attention of personnel clerks who select the promising applicants. Authors (Scottish Centre for Employment Research [SCER], 2004; Harkison et al., 2011) reveal that employers are interested in personality, aesthetics, and self-presenting skills, in particular for the staff in front-line positions. Our respondents emphasized features such as 'positive energy,' 'loyalty,' 'sense of humour,' 'tolerance,' 'enthusiasm,' 'tidiness,' or 'reliability.' We concluded that they are too humble, lack self-promotional skills and competitive spirit; but firstly, most of them have not made an analysis of their strengths and weaknesses.

Career Centre

A career centre is not a faculty-based activity; it operates within the university administration offices and far from the faculty. This is a serious disadvantage; students need the permanent presence of such a service; if a career centre is not a stable part of the faculty but a counsellor is present only once a month, the centre services are not effectively recognizable or particularly useful.

We found that the career centre organized several workshops with employability purposes (about stress management, motivation, job interviews, etc.), visits to some significant employers and career days during which some major employers in the region presented their companies and recruited interns. Unfortunately, the interest of students was poor. It is obvious students do not consider co- and extra-curricular contents if they are not obligatory. Students are not motivated to take advantage of the centre's guidance and counselling. The need to plan their career is not their priority until they graduate.

We posit that the implementation of this service into the study process is necessary; closer cooperation between teachers, career counsellors, and other faculty service staff is recommended to inform and encourage students to make use of the career centre and training for the benefit of their career development.

Other HEI Activities and Regulations

Furthermore, we explored whether graduate employability is embedded in the institution's strategy and other internal documents. Graduate employability is subject to the quality assessment of the institution and study programmes. When they are re-accredited, graduate employment rates are examined closely.

Graduate employment and employability analyses were performed in 2011 and 2012 at the university level and repeated in 2014 at the faculty level. They yielded results about graduates on the labour market, positions they held, the usefulness of the knowledge gained at the HEI and skill shortages. Job search patterns were investigated, waiting times for their first employment, and data about eventual job searches abroad. Data revealed that the situation of graduates in 2014 worsened in comparison to previous surveys (rates of unemployed graduates, their satisfaction with their employment, appropriateness of their jobs, rates of those employed outside the tourism sector, etc.). Mekinc, Mušič, and Sedmak (2015) reveal that weaknesses identified in 2011 and 2012 were not improved.

During this survey, we came across a persistent problem concerning the availability of industry representatives to participate in surveys about their satisfaction with study programmes and competences of graduates. Similarly, their interest in cooperation with academics in curricula creation and modification is limited. As Zgaga (in Komljenovič, 2010, 13) mentioned: '[...] Employability is not equal to employment

– it seems that employers are fairly uninterested in participating in discussions about study programmes and their execution.'

In accordance with the national quality assurance agency's (NAKVIS) recommendations, the institution has to prepare a new strategic plan. We checked the draft and found that graduate employability and employment are included (declaratively); evaluation of graduate positions in the labour market, enhancement of international mobility, activities for strengthening links to industry, and similar. These activities must be systematic, and interventions must be prompt.

We also surveyed the curricula and syllabuses in order to find data about the development of the employability competences of students. We were interested in generic competences, links with the industry, practical training and innovative teaching methods and techniques. There were hardly any mentions of them. It seems certain, however, that some teachers implement them in their lectures, seminar work, and training. We suggest that future studies could go into details about these implicit contents in a survey among teachers.

Conclusion

The analyses reveal that the transition of graduates from the university to employment calls for further steps to make the necessary improvements. Both analyses pose enormous challenges, offering both threats and opportunities to the institution for the benefits of the graduates. The results call for an intensification of current measures and additional measures in the development of the students' employability competences.

The aim of the study was to identify deficiencies in students' employability competences. These are:

- Students' awareness of the need to broaden and upgrade their competences;
- Students' motivation for lifelong learning;
- The contribution of student work toward their employability;
- Interpretation of the impacts of mobility and work experiences on employability;
- The value of international mobility and preparation of students for exchanges;
- Development of self-presentational and self-promotional skills of students;
- Entrepreneurship as an alternative career choice.

First and foremost, we agree with Redmond (in Reichwald, 2012): 'Employability cannot be done to people, students have to engage and take responsibility.' Students need to improve their competitive edge by striving to compile greater competences both in quality and number and to increase their competitive spirit so as to enhance their future opportunities in the job market.

As to the HEI, we identified several weaknesses (or challenges) to be considered:

- Embedding employability competences development in syllabuses;
- Soft skills development (intra-, co-, and extracurricular);
- Transfer of knowledge into practice;
- Work experience provision, sourcing work placements and volunteering opportunities;
- Enhancement of international mobility;
- Implementation and promotion of the career centre services into the HEI activities;
- Strengthening links with industry.

On the organizational level, activities on the development of employability are sporadic, left to individual teachers and other staff, their initiative and inspiration. Their attempts and those of other stakeholders should be integrated within the overall long-term employability strategy, combining curricular, cocurricular and extra-curricular cooperation. However, we suggest further research focusing on organizational measures and exploring (explicit and implicit) employability competencies development in syllabuses that would provide additional valuable information about the flexibility and innovation potentials of the higher education institution.

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Forecasting Tourism Demand Using Linear and Nonlinear Prediction Models

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In this paper, we propose and evaluate linear and nonlinear prediction models based on Artificial Neural Networks (ANN) for tourism demand in the accommodation industry. For efficient forecasting, the Multilayer Perceptron (MLP), Support Vector Regression (SVR) and Linear Regression (LR) methods that utilize two different feature sets for training have been used. The major contribution of the proposed models is focused mainly on better forecasting accuracy and lower cost effort. The relative accuracy of the Multilayer Perceptron (MLP) and Support Vector Regression (SVR) in tourism occupancy data is investigated and compared to simple Linear Regression (LR) models. The relative performance of the MLP and SVR models are also compared to each other. Data collected over a period of eight years (2005–2012) showing tourism occupancy and the number of overnight stays in the hotels of the Western Region of Greece is used. Extensive experiments have shown that for time series describing a subset of the number of overnight stays, the SVR regressor with the RBF kernel (SVR-RBF), as well as simple LR models, and the MLP regressor for occupancy time series respectively, outperform other forecasting models, when tested for a wide range of forecast horizons (1–24 months) and present very small and stable prediction errors.

Keywords: support vector regression, multilayer perceptron, artificial neural networks, tourism demand forecasting, forecasting model, time-series

Introduction

An essential factor in the tourist industry is travellers, which in short can be defined as consumers of tourist product. Travelers, usually, spend money on products such as air services, food and beverage services, overnight stays, visits to various places of interest, and similar. This consumption is the result of travelling the world for business, educational and entertainment reasons. In addition, travellers, the consumers of tourism products, seem to develop a more perceptive personality in choosing their destinations; their consumption decisions become less predictable and more spontaneous, motivated mostly by their need and desire for new experiences (Burger, Dohnal, Kathrada, & Law, 2001).

The above are only some of the many characteristics of the tourism industry. The tourism phenomenon is a dynamic system which depends strongly on many untenable and uncertain characteristics and delivers a changeable and perishable product. More now than ever, the important role that the tourism industry plays in the global economy is clear. This has become a great necessity for small countries with a significant percentage of their revenue coming from tourism, such as Greece. Especially with the development and exploitation of new technologies, everyone has the opportunity, especially many local economies, to promote their products globally, with low cost, expecting a bigger share not only from the local but also from the global tourist market. One of the key factors in expanding the tourist market is, somehow, to define the future tourism consumers of the tourist product.

So, how can the present experience be exploited to obtain better decisions for tomorrow? In the tourism industry, this question is a crucial step for success. Obviously, any indisposed tourist 'merchandise' cannot be stocked to be offered again in the next season in the tourist market. For example, empty rooms or unsold airplane tickets consist of lost revenue and probably are a strong indication of bad planning. Hence, it is of great necessity for the tourist industry to have an *a priori* knowledge of the expected tourist arrivals so as to be able to schedule the flights, the hotel and room availability, the necessary employees, and other factors. Although we are not able to know the future, we can adapt forecasting processes to predict the behaviour of future events (Makridakis & Hibon, 1979; Frees, 1996; Franses, 2004).

The developing of reliable and accurate forecasting models is an essential step for decision makers. What matters are the knowledge of the size, directions, and characteristics of future international tourist flows (Shahrabi, Hadavandi, & Asadi, 2013). Accurate forecasting models in both short- and long-term periods are essential for the effective formulation and implementation of tourism strategies (Song, Gao, & Lin, 2013) in various tourist organizations and business, in both the public and private sectors. Accurate and reliable forecasting models are the key to the success of the whole tourism industry (Gunter & Önder, 2015).

Generally, for the problem of forecasting time-series, different methods and techniques have been proposed, covering a broad range of different countries and locations, as well as diverse time intervals. The most widely used models (especially using monthly data) are univariate or time-series models (Gunter & Önder, 2015) and, in this framework, the developing of such models is usually based on the (Seasonal) Autoregressive (Integrated) Moving Average models (Box & Jenkins, 1976). Recently, some new, well performed, time-series models have been proposed such as the Exponential Smoothing models (Hyndman, Koehler, Snyder, & Grose 2002; Hyndman, Koehler, Ord & Snyder 2008), and a low cost inferential model (Psillakis, Panagopoulos, & Kanellopoulos, 2009); multivariate or Econometric models are also employed, such as Autoregressive Distributed Lag Models (Dritsakis & Athanasiadis, 2000; Ismail, Iverson, & Cai, 2000), Error Correction Models (Kulendran & Witt, 2003; Roselló, Font & Roselló, 2004), Vector Autoregressive models (Shan & Wilson, 2001; Witt, Song & Wanhill, 2004) and Time-Varying Parameter models (Li, Song & Witt, 2006; Song & Witt, 2006); some artificial intelligence methods were, also, used (Claveria & Torra, 2014; Palmer, Montaño & Sesé, 2006; Kon & Turner, 2005; Hernández-López & Cáceres-Hernández, 2007; Chena & Wang, 2007). An exhaustive review on forecasting time series can be found in the work of Song and Li (2008); according to their work on tourism demand modelling and forecasting, no single model that can be used in all situations in terms of performance and forecasting accuracy exists.

Furthermore, Coshall and Charlesworth (2010) report that forecasting tourism demand can be achieved with causal econometric models (ECM models, VAR models, LAIDS models, etc.), and non-casual time series models (Goh & Law, 2002; Cho, 2003). However, in recent years, Artificial Neural Networks (ANN) have made their appearance in solving the tourism forecasting problem (Kon & Turner, 2005; Palmer et al., 2006).

The increasing interest in more advanced prediction models, together with the fact that tourism is a leading industry worldwide, contributing to a significant proportion of world production and employment, has led us to evaluate the forecasting performance of the most significant ANNs. Thus, in this work, forecasting models for the tourist occupancy are presented, using different forecasting horizons and compare the performance of the different ANNs architectures on the prediction problem of tourism demand as it is described by the occupancy of hotels in the Region of Western Greece.

The region consists of three dissimilar prefectures (Achaia, Ilia, and Etoloakarnania) regarding the type of the visiting tourists, the available resources and infrastructure, and the level of development and employment (Panagopoulos & Panagopoulos, 2005). However, despite the heterogeneous geographic morphology and economic activity, the overall region retains the same characteristics of a tourist destination, that is, the suggestibility in various exogenous factors as well as the considerable contribution to the local and country economy.

The main reason for choosing the region of Western Greece is the financial crisis in Greece and a question about the viability of the local tourist industry, as well as the lack of research made in this area concerning the future and potentials of tourism. The only known work in the literature concerning the area of Western Greece (Panagopoulos & Panagopoulos, 2005) proposes a forecasting model for predicting the tourist occupancy in the Western Greece region using the Box-Jenkins Method (Box & Jenkins, 1976) and monthly data from January 1990 to December 1999. Hence, the study of the Western Greece region constitutes a strong research motivation and any suggestions in the direction of modelling the overall local tourist product circulation remains a well-timed issue for both researchers and local authorities.

The purpose of the paper is twofold: Firstly, we evaluate the forecasting performance of linear and non-linear prediction methods using the Multilayer Perceptron Regressor (MLP), the Support Vector Regressor with polynomial kernels (SVR-POLY), and the Support Vector Regressor with Radial Basis Functions Kernels (SVR-RBF), three of the most widely known neural network architectures in the literature, as forecasting models for tourism demand. In addition, two different feature sets are proposed to train the networks, based on the extraction of the essential characteristics of a time series, such as trend and seasonality.

The Support Vector Regressor network uses a structural risk minimization principle that attempts to minimize the upper bounds of the generalization error rather than minimizing the training error as conventional neural networks do (Vapnik, Golowitch, & Smola, 1996). The generalization error is defined as the expected value of the square of the difference between the learned function and the exact target (mean square error), while the training error is calculated as the average loss over the training data. In this work, we have used official statistical monthly data of the hotel occupancy in the Western Greece Region from January 2005 until December 2012, taken from the official records of the Hellenic Statistical Authority. Next, the most commonly used metric based on the Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) is computed for different forecast horizons, ranging from 1 to 24 months (2-year prediction).

The structure of the paper is as follows: in the next section, we briefly present the theoretical background of the utilized neural network forecast models. The experimental setup, as well as the data set, is described in Section 3. In Section 4, the results of the forecasting are presented and discussed, and in Section 5 some conclusions and remarks are given.

Methodology

Multilayer Perceptron Regressor

An Artificial Neural Network (ANN) is a non-linear black box statistical approach. The most commonly used ANN structure is the feed-forward multilayer perceptron (MLP). This structure is composed of at least three layers: an input layer, one or more hidden layers, and an output layer. The network consists of a set of neurons connected by links and normally organized in a number of layers. The number of neurons in the input and output layer is equal to the number of input and output variables, respectively. The number of neurons in the hidden layer(s) is usually selected by trial-and-error. The output of this network can be calculated using the following equation:

$$Y_j = f\left(\sum_i w_{ij} X_i\right), \tag{1}$$

where Y_j is the output of node j, $f(\cdot)$ is the transfer function of the network, w_{ij} are the connection weights of the network that need to be estimated between nodes j and i and X_i is the input.

The MLP uses the well-known Back Propagation learning algorithm to estimate adaptively the values of the network's weights. In order to do this, it minimizes the square error between the calculated Y_j and the desired network's output O_j based on the steepest descend technique with the addition of a momentum weight/bias function, which calculates the weight change for any given neuron at each iteration step.

By considering that the prediction error is given by the following equation

$$E = \frac{1}{2}\sum_p \sum_j \left[O_j^p - Y_j^p\right]^2, \tag{2}$$

the adaptation rule for estimating the values of the weights is given by:

$$\Delta w_{ij}^p(n) = -n\frac{\partial E(n)}{\partial w_{ij}^p}. \tag{3}$$

The above equation after applying the chain rule of differentiation leads to the following rule

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta w_{ij}^p(n) &= \mu e_j^p(n) X_i^{p-1}(n) + m\Delta w_{ij}^p(n-1),\\ \Delta w_{ij}^p(n+1) &= w_{ij}^p(n) + \Delta w_{ij}^p(n),\end{aligned} \tag{4}$$

where $e_j^p(n)$ is the nth error signal at the jth neuron in the pth layer, $X_i^{p-1}(n)$ is the output signal of neuron i at the layer below, μ is the learning rate, and m is the momentum factor. The last two parameters are specified at the start of the training procedure and affect the speed and stability of the convergence of the steepest descend algorithm.

In brief, the procedure to set up an MLP neural network to solve the regression problem is:

1. Select the number of the input data points and define the input layer.
2. Select the number of the output points and define the output layer.
3. Determine the number of the hidden layers as well as the number of the nodes in each layer. There is no rule for this task; this may depend on trial and error.
4. Perform learning from a set of known data. This step results in estimating the weights of the connections between the nodes of all layers of the network.
5. Test the neural network using known data that were not presented to the network in Step (4). In this way, we can measure the accuracy as well as the efficacy of the network using various metrics (mean square error, mean absolute percentage error, etc.).

Support Vector Regression

The support vector regression (SVR) is a recent adaptation of the classification scheme based on support vector machines. The general regression problem can be formulated as follows: Consider a set of data points $D = \{(\boldsymbol{x}_i, q_i)\}_{i=1}^n$, where $\boldsymbol{x}_i$ is a vector of model inputs, q_i is the actual value that is a scalar and n the total number of data patterns. The purpose of the regressor is to estimate a function $f(\boldsymbol{x})$ that can predict the desired values q_i given a set of input samples.

A regression function is given in the form of $q_i = f(\boldsymbol{x}_i) + \delta$, where δ is the error that follows the normal distribution. Support Vector regression deals with the most general and difficult non-linear regression problem. In order to solve the non-linear regression problem, the SVR maps non-linearly the inputs into a high dimensional space where they are linearly correlated with the outputs. This is described by:

$$f(\boldsymbol{x}) = (\boldsymbol{v}\cdot\phi(\boldsymbol{x})) + b, \tag{5}$$

where $\boldsymbol{v}$ is a weight vector, b is a constant, $\phi(\boldsymbol{x})$ denotes the non-linear function. So, in SVR, the problem of nonlinear regression in the lower dimension space is transformed into an easier linear regression problem in a higher dimension feature space.

For solving this problem, the most commonly used cost function is:

$$L_\varepsilon(f(\boldsymbol{x}), q) = \\ = \begin{cases} |f(\boldsymbol{x}) - q| - \varepsilon, \text{ if } |f(\boldsymbol{x}) - q| \geq \varepsilon \\ 0, \text{ otherwise} \end{cases}, \tag{6}$$

where ε is the precision parameter that represents the radius of the tube located around the regression function $f(\boldsymbol{x})$ and q is the target value.

The weight vector $\boldsymbol{v}$ as well as the constant b can be estimated by minimizing the following risk function:

$$R(C) = C\frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n} L_e(f(\boldsymbol{x}_i), q_i) + \frac{1}{2}|\boldsymbol{w}|^2, \tag{7}$$

where $L_e(f(\boldsymbol{x}), q_i)$ is the loss function, $1/2|\boldsymbol{w}|^2$ is the regularization term which controls the trade-off between the complexity and the approximation accuracy of the model, C is the regularization constant. Both C and ε are determined by the user by trial-and-error.

By using slack variable ξ_i and ξ_i^*, the previous equation is transformed into the constrained form, minimize:

$$R_{reg}(f) = \frac{1}{2}|\boldsymbol{w}|^2 + C\sum_{\iota=1}^{n}(\xi_i + \xi_i^*), \tag{8}$$

subject to:

$$\begin{cases} q_i - (\boldsymbol{w} \cdot \phi(\boldsymbol{x}_i)) - b \leq \varepsilon + \xi_i \\ (\boldsymbol{w} \cdot \phi(\boldsymbol{x}_i)) + b - q_i \leq \varepsilon + \xi_i^* \\ \xi_i \xi_i^* \geq 0, i = 1, \ldots, n \end{cases}. \tag{9}$$

By using Laplace multipliers and the Karush-Kuhn-Tucker conditions to the equation, it results to the following dual Lagrangian form, maximize:

$$\begin{aligned} L_d(\alpha, \alpha^*) = -\varepsilon \sum_{i=1}^{n}(a_i^* + a_i) + \sum_{i=1}^{n}(a_i^* - a_i)q_i \\ -\frac{1}{2}\sum_{i=1}^{n}(a_i^* - a_i)(a_j^* - a_j) \\ \cdot \boldsymbol{K}(\boldsymbol{x}_i, \boldsymbol{x}_j), \end{aligned} \tag{10}$$

subject to the constraints,

$$\begin{cases} \sum_{i=1}^{n}(a_i^* - a_1) = 0 \\ 0 \leq a_i \leq C, i = 1, \ldots, n \\ 0 \leq a_i^* \leq C, i = 1, \ldots, n \end{cases}, \tag{11}$$

where $\boldsymbol{K}(\boldsymbol{x}_i, \boldsymbol{x}_j)$ is the kernel function.

The Lagrange multipliers satisfy the equality $a_i^* a_i = 0$. The Lagrange multipliers, a_i^*, a_i are calculated and an optimal desired weight vector of the regression hyperplane is

$$\boldsymbol{v}^* = \sum_{i=1}^{n}(a_i - a_i^*)\boldsymbol{K}(\boldsymbol{x}_i, \boldsymbol{x}_j). \tag{12}$$

Hence, the general form of the regression function can be written as

$$\begin{aligned} f(x, v) &= f(x, a_i, a_i^*) \\ &= \sum_{i=1}^{n}(a_i - a_i^*)\boldsymbol{K}(\boldsymbol{x}_i, \boldsymbol{x}_j) + b. \end{aligned} \tag{13}$$

The values of the kernel function equal the inner product of the vectors $\boldsymbol{x}_i$, $\boldsymbol{x}_j$ in the feature space $\phi(\boldsymbol{x}_i)$, $\phi(x_j)$.

Several choices for the kernel function exist; the two most widely known and used in the literature are the radial basis function (SVR-RBF) defined as

$$\boldsymbol{K}(\boldsymbol{x}_i, \boldsymbol{x}_j) = \exp\left(\frac{-\|\boldsymbol{x}_i - \boldsymbol{x}_j\|^2}{2\sigma^2}\right)$$

and the polynomial kernel (SVR-POLY) function defined as $\boldsymbol{K}(\boldsymbol{x}_i, \boldsymbol{x}_j) = (\boldsymbol{x}_i^T \cdot \boldsymbol{x}_j + c)^d$, with d the degree of the polynomial and $c \geq 0$ is a free parameter trading off the influence of higher-order versus lower-order terms in the polynomial.

Experimental Setup

Multilayer Perceptron Regressor

The main objective in designing the MLP model's architecture is to find the optimal architecture that will model the relationship between input and output (forecasted) values. The number of neurons in the input layer equals the number of the dimensionality of the input data, while the number of neurons in the output layer is equal to the number of the output data. In forecasting the tourism occupancy and overnights stays of the hotels in the Region of Western Greece, we have used two Feature Sets (FS) with different dimensionality in order to assist the predictor. The number of the neurons in the hidden layer is selected using the trial-and-error procedure. In this paper, we have tested the efficacy of the MLP network using a wide range of neurons in the only hidden layer from 1 to 50. Extensive experiments were performed for each different case in order to find the optimal number of neurons in the hidden layer that result in the best performance (smaller error) of the predictor. For training, this type of neural network we have used the Levenberg-Marquardt optimization algorithm.

Support Vector Regressor

The first step in using the SVR is the selection of the Kernel function. In this paper, we have tested the forecasting performance of the polynomial (SVR-POLY) as well as the RBF (SVR-RBF) kernel function presented in the previous section. The performance of the proposed RBF regressors depends on the values of the kernel function parameters. Thus, the selection of three parameters, regularization constant C, loss function ε and σ (the width of the RBF) of a SVR-RBF regressor, as well as the selection of the regularization constant C, loss function ε and d (the degree of the polynomial) of a SVR-POLY regressor is crucial for accurate forecasting. As no general rule for selecting these parameters exists, this is usually based on the grid search method proposed by Lin, Hsu and Chang (2003). The grid search method is a straightforward method that uses exponentially growing sequences of C and ε to estimate the best parameter values. The parameter set C, ε that generates the minimum forecasting RMSE error is considered as the best parameter set and used throughout the experiments.

Experimental Dataset

For evaluating the performance of the utilized forecasting methods, (a) the occupancy of all tourist accommodations (except from camping sites) and (b) the number of overnight stays in the Region of Western Greece that includes data from the Prefectures of Etoloakarnania, Achaia, and Hlia from January of 2005 to December 2012 were used. All data employed in this study were obtained from the official records of the Hellenic Statistical Authority. It must be emphasized that the Hellenic Statistical Authority has not released any similar data for the period 2013 until now.

There is a total of 96 data points in the dataset, and the monthly occupancy series and the number of overnight stays are plotted in Figures 1 and 2. Both plots exhibit a long-term downward trend as well as a strong seasonality of 12 months with the maxima of the occupancy occurring during the high touristic summer season (maximum in August for every year).

In order to test the performance of the proposed regressors, the collected data is divided into two sets, training data, and testing data set. In order to further test the efficacy of the linear and non-linear prediction methods, we have calculated the prediction accuracy with a prediction step ranging from 1 to 24 months (forecasting horizon of 2 years).

Performance criteria

According to Tay and Cao (2001) and Thomason (1999), the prediction performance of our method is evaluated using measures of the root mean square error (RMSE). RMSE is used to measure the correctness of the prediction in terms of levels and the deviation between the actual and predicted values. The smaller the values, the closer the predicted values (P_i) are to the actual values (A_i).

$$\sqrt{\frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n}(P_i - A_i)^2}. \tag{14}$$

Experimental Results

The proposed method's performance was tested by using the first 72 data points (72 months; 6 years from 2005–2010) for training purposes and the remaining 24 data points (24 months; 2 years, 2011 and 2012) were forecasted using four different types of regressors: SVR-POLY, SVR-RBF, MLP as well as the LP forecasting networks. The performance of these methods was compared using the prediction error measurements (RMSE).

Occupancy Prediction

The performance error of the occupancy prediction was estimated using different values of prediction

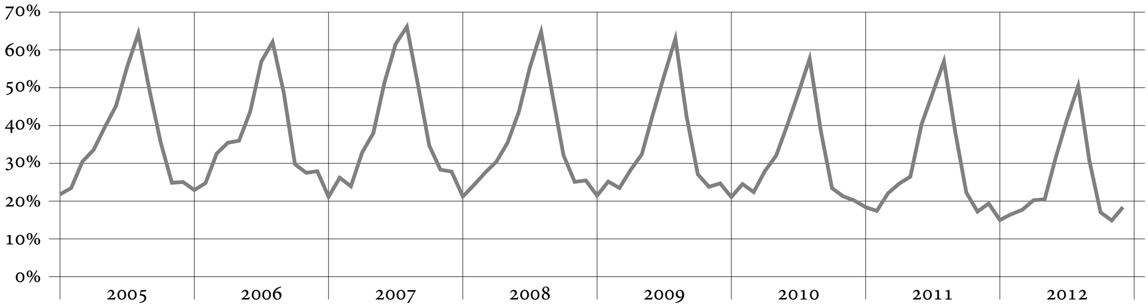

Figure 1 Monthly Occupancies of All Tourist Accommodations (Except Camping Sites) from 2005 (1) to 2012 (12)

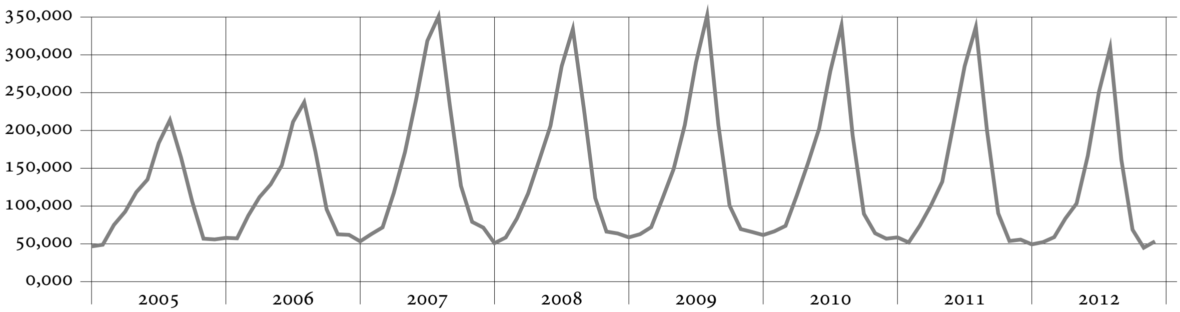

Figure 2 Monthly Overnight Stays of All Tourist Accommodations (Except Camping Sites) from 2005 (1) to 2012 (12)

horizon ranging from 1 to 24 months for all four types of the tested regressors, using two different Feature Sets as inputs:

- Feature Set 1 (FS1): This set was used to capture the pattern of the tourism data as it changes in the last 12 months (one year), and thus takes into consideration 12 previous monthly occupancy time-series values $X_{t-1}, X_{t-2}, \ldots, X_{t-12}$ in order to predict X_t.
- Feature Set 2 (FS2): The selection of this set is based on the fact that business and economic cycles usually last five years and all seasonal data are typically related to their predecessor and successor ones. Therefore, it is adequate to use only seven time series values from the past 60 ones (Psillakis, Panagopoulos & Kanellopoulos, 2009). FS2 takes into consideration $X_{t-11}, X_{t-12}, X_{t-13}, X_{t-24}, X_{t-36}, X_{t-48}, X_{t-60}$ occupancy time-series values, in order to predict X_t.

The prediction results for both feature sets are presented in a comparative plot in Figure 3. From this figure, it is clear that FS2 presents the smallest prediction error for all used predictors with a stable behaviour regardless of the forecast's time horizon (1–24 months). In Figure 4, we present a comparison of the four regressors' prediction accuracy for FS2. It is clear that the MLP performs the best, with the LR and the SVR-RBF performing worse after 15 months of prediction.

Overnight Stays Prediction

The prediction errors of the overnight stays were also estimated for different values of prediction horizon that range from 1 to 24 months and all four different types of regressors using the aforementioned two Feature Sets as inputs. The results are presented in Figure 5. From this figure, it is shown that also in this prediction task, FS2 shows the smallest error for all predictors, with the only exception of the SVR-RBF. In Figure 6, we present a comparison of the four regressors' prediction accuracy for FS2. It is clear that the SVR-RBF, as well as the LR, performs the best, showing great robustness regardless of the length of the forecasting horizon.

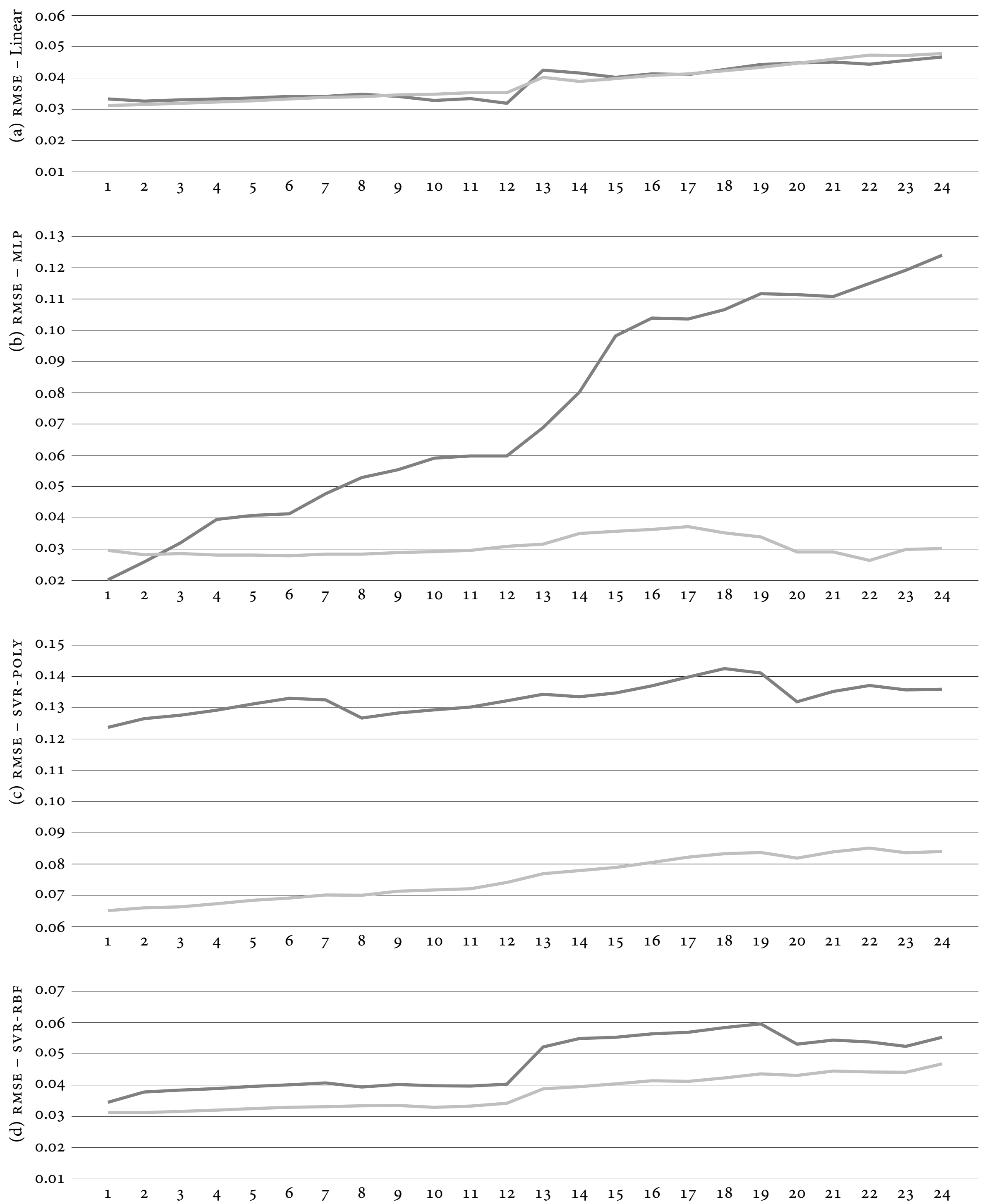

Figure 3 Monthly occupancy prediction performance (2011–2012) for FS1, FS2 and (a) Linear Regressor, (b) Multilayer Perceptron Regressor, (c) Support Vector Regressor (Polynomial Kernel), and (d) Support Vector Regressor (RBF Kernel) (gray – FS1, light gray – FS2)

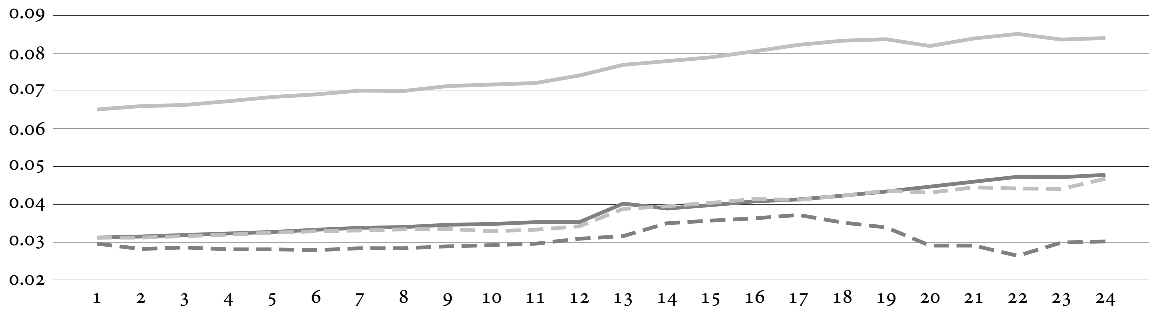

Figure 4 Comparison of the Proposed Four Models Occupancy Prediction Performance Using FS2 (gray – LINEAR, gray dashed – MLP, light gray – SVR-POLY, light gray dashed – SVR-RBF)

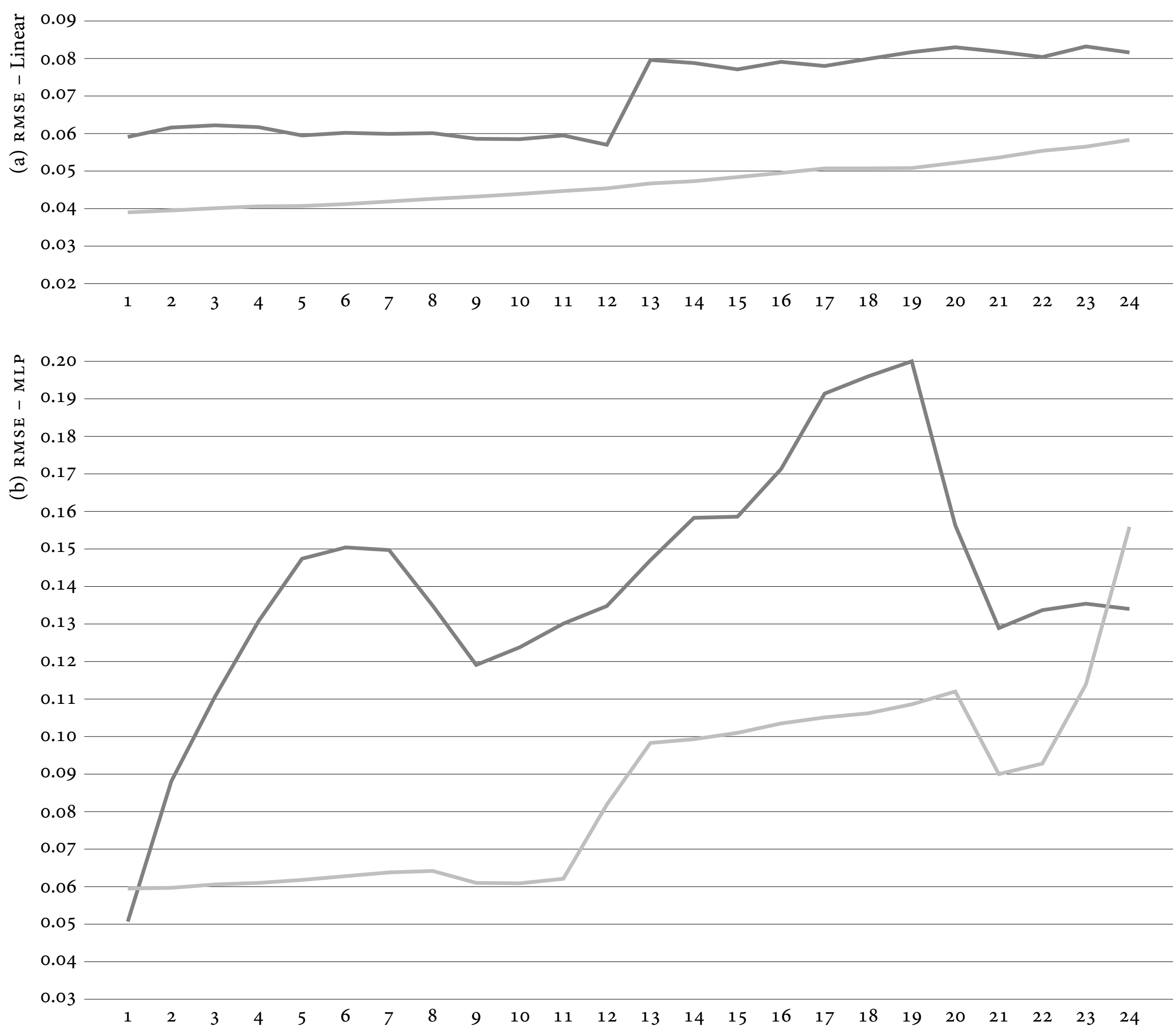

Figure 5 Monthly Overnight Stay Prediction Performance (2011–2012) for FS1, FS2 and (a) Linear Regressor, (b) Multilayer Perceptron Regressor, (c) Support Vector Regressor (Polynomial Kernel), and (d) Support Vector Regressor (RBF Kernel) (gray – FS1, light gray – FS2) *Continued on the next page*

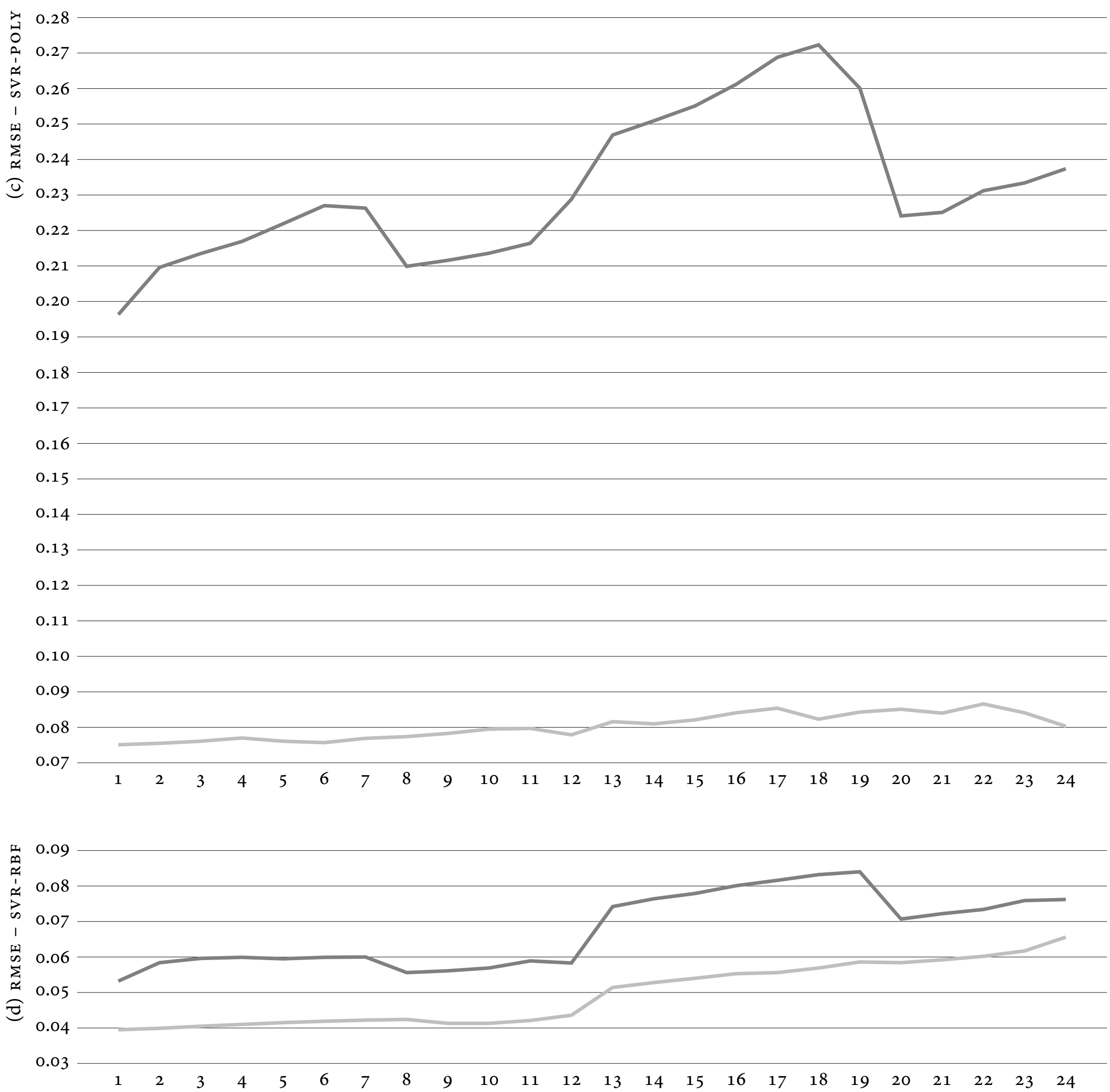

Figure 5 Continued from the previous page

Additionally, for comparison reasons, in Tables 1 and 2, we present analytically the forecasted occupancy and the overnight stays values for the years 2011 and 2012 estimated by the SVR-RBF, SVR-POLY, MLP, LR, together with the real values for this period.

Finally, Figures 7 and 8 make point-to-point comparisons of actual and predicted values of the best models presented in this (overnight stays) and the previous section (occupancy), respectively. As shown in these Figures, the MLP Regressor for the occupancy and the SVR-RBF for the overnight stays forecasting, work efficiently and manage to capture the trend of data extremely well, especially in the high-demand seasons (June–September).

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented an evaluation of the forecasting performance of four of the most widely

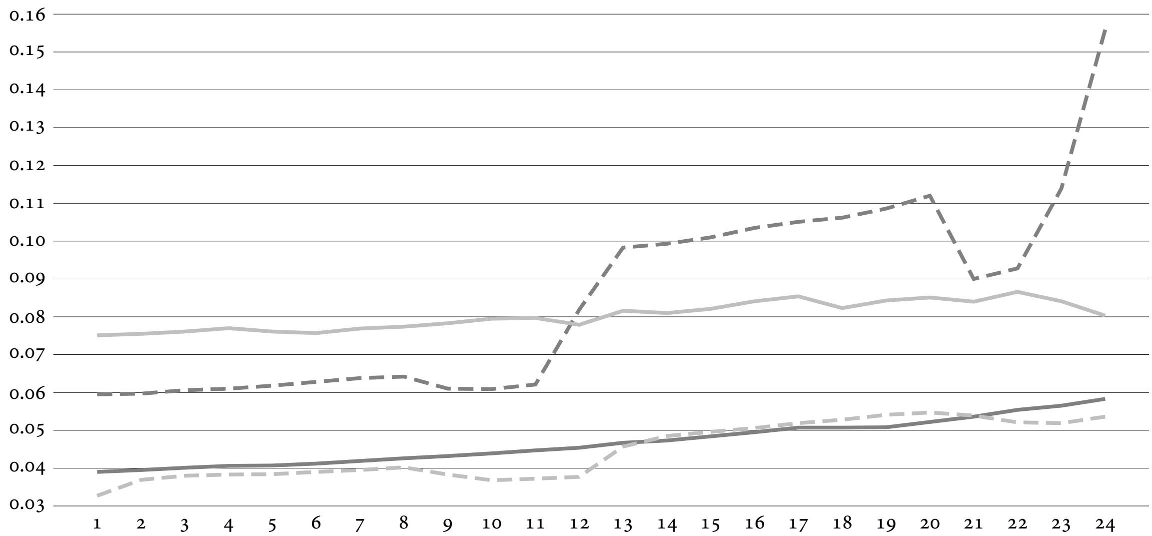

Figure 6 Comparison of the Prediction Performance of the Proposed Four Models Overnight Stays Using FS2 (gray – LINEAR, gray dashed – MLP, light gray – SVR-POLY, light gray dashed – SVR-RBF)

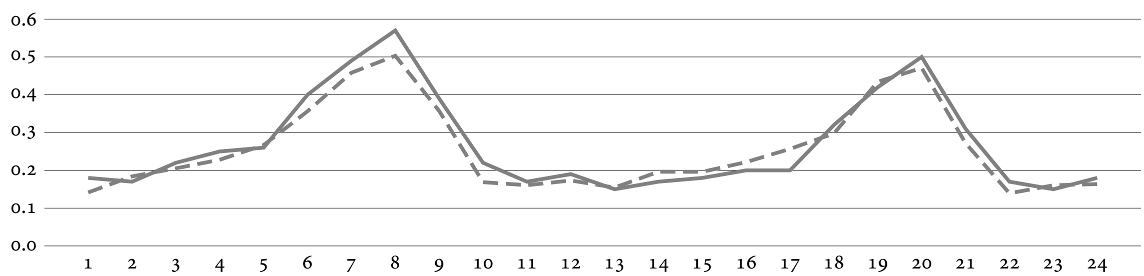

Figure 7 Illustration of Actual and Forecasting Values of Occupancy Using the Best Model (MLP Regressor – FS2; gray – actual, gray dashed – MLP)

known linear and non-linear regressors based on Artificial Neural Networks, the Multilayer Perceptron (MLP), and the Support Vector Regressor based on polynomial (SVR-POLY) as well as Radial Basis Functions Kernels (SVR-RBF) as forecasting models for tourism demand. For our experiments, we have used official statistical monthly data of the hotel occupancy and overnight stays in the Western Greece Region from 2005 to 2012 taken from the official records of the Hellenic Statistical Authority. Then the RMSE is computed for different forecast horizons, ranging from 1 to 24 months (2-year prediction, 2011 and 2012).

Extensive experiments have shown that forecasting tourism demand in the Western Greece Region can be accomplished with a small error when using features sets that take into account the trend the seasonality of the data, even if a small number (7) of observations are used. Furthermore, the difference in the behaviour of the data between the occupancy and the overnight stays was also highlighted as different regressors must be used in different forecasting problems.

In the tourism industry, tourism service providers should assess the costs and benefits of each model before choosing one for forecasting. This has significant managerial implications when it comes to constructing a strategic plan for marketing. With the accurate forecasted trends and patterns that indicate the sizes of tourism demand, the government, and private sec-

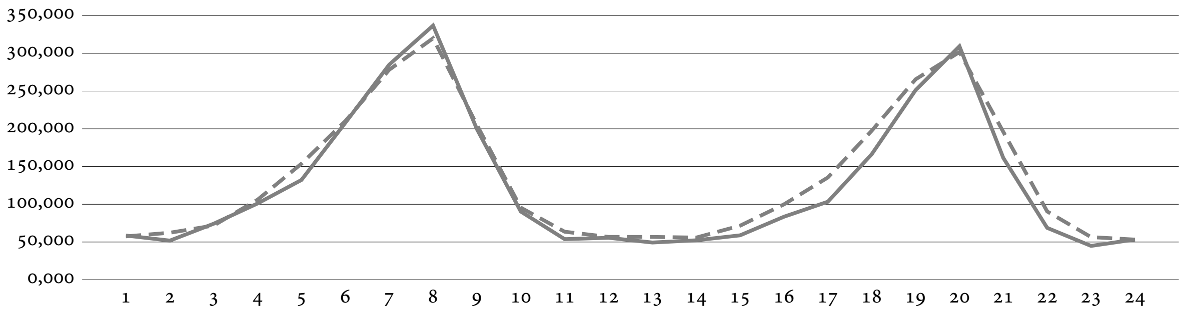

Figure 8 Illustration of Actual and Forecasting Values of Occupancy Using the Best Model (SVR-RBF – FS2; gray – actual, gray dashed – SVR-RBF)

tors can have a well-organized tourism strategy and provide better infrastructure to serve the visitors and develop a suitable marketing strategy to gain benefit from the growing tourism (Shahrabi et al., 2013). Moreover, armed with accurate estimates of demand for tourism, tourism authorities and decision makers in the hospitality industries would be better able to perform strategic planning.

Acknowledgements

The data that involves the monthly occupancy of all tourist accommodations of both foreign and domestic tourists came from the official records of the Hellenic Statistical Authority (EL.STAT., www.statistics.gr).

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Table 1 Predicted Occupancy Values for the Years 2011 and 2012 (24-Month Prediction)

Months	Actual	FS1				FS2			
		LINEAR	NLP	SVR-POLY	SVR-RFB	LINEAR	NLP	SVR-POLY	SVR-RFB
01-11	0.1800	0.2030	0.1701	0.2078	0.2031	0.2036	0.1415	0.2006	0.1997
02-11	0.1700	0.2074	0.1927	0.2294	0.2192	0.2441	0.1841	0.2310	0.2202
03-11	0.2200	0.2141	0.2420	0.2048	0.2170	0.2035	0.2053	0.2020	0.2144
04-11	0.2500	0.2616	0.2618	0.2449	0.2609	0.2669	0.2281	0.2573	0.2545
05-11	0.2600	0.3042	0.2654	0.2797	0.3159	0.3033	0.2669	0.3046	0.3088
06-11	0.4000	0.3911	0.3710	0.3681	0.3891	0.3860	0.3563	0.3914	0.3946
07-11	0.4900	0.4710	0.4351	0.4714	0.4484	0.4712	0.4582	0.4775	0.4747
08-11	0.5700	0.5296	0.4451	0.5372	0.4820	0.5584	0.5031	0.5347	0.5256
09-11	0.3900	0.4046	0.1995	0.3743	0.3727	0.3662	0.3571	0.3664	0.3851
10-11	0.2200	0.2366	0.1357	0.2171	0.2521	0.2147	0.1687	0.2209	0.2464
11-11	0.1700	0.1796	0.1622	0.1809	0.2096	0.2031	0.1607	0.1974	0.2042
12-11	0.1900	0.1802	0.1498	0.1715	0.1920	0.1966	0.1732	0.1897	0.1961
01-12	0.1500	0.1650	0.1564	0.1623	0.1772	0.1763	0.1544	0.1757	0.1826
02-12	0.1700	0.1350	0.1709	0.1390	0.1684	0.1693	0.1964	0.1672	0.1840
03-12	0.1800	0.1915	0.2532	0.1803	0.2037	0.2111	0.1961	0.2007	0.2016
04-12	0.2000	0.2303	0.2273	0.2022	0.2390	0.2437	0.2218	0.2413	0.2404
05-12	0.2000	0.2460	0.2639	0.2053	0.2707	0.2549	0.2568	0.2664	0.2736
06-12	0.3200	0.3639	0.3609	0.3411	0.3707	0.3804	0.2976	0.3743	0.3663
07-12	0.4200	0.4575	0.4308	0.4475	0.4386	0.4650	0.4344	0.4632	0.4548
08-12	0.5000	0.5230	0.4551	0.5146	0.4694	0.5405	0.4709	0.5090	0.4997
09-12	0.3100	0.3843	0.2503	0.3556	0.3637	0.3707	0.2719	0.3633	0.3648
10-12	0.1700	0.2216	0.1440	0.1927	0.2396	0.2055	0.1394	0.2086	0.2229
11-12	0.1500	0.1443	0.1579	0.1340	0.1776	0.1610	0.1604	0.1570	0.1752
12-12	0.1800	0.1484	0.1403	0.1433	0.1715	0.1746	0.1636	0.1567	0.1710

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Table 2 Predicted Overnight Stay Values for the Years 2011 and 2012 (24-Month Prediction)

Months	Actual	FS1				FS2			
		LINEAR	NLP	SVR-POLY	SVR-RFB	LINEAR	NLP	SVR-POLY	SVR-RFB
01-11	57481	43059	65609	51636	45204	62254	33998	87536	56409
02-11	50910	67096	65332	58554	53850	66197	49112	87917	61148
03-11	72907	76296	71662	70071	71454	70071	67684	89473	70555
04-11	99226	92205	79685	95768	101959	108668	95560	96425	104103
05-11	129766	129731	89715	130630	144188	148027	148926	116450	150932
06-11	204090	199940	170715	181748	201081	193749	163832	174312	206304
07-11	279660	278138	243414	246181	254136	266068	273331	275613	273020
08-11	330536	326420	205716	298232	271117	325694	361351	312724	314004
09-11	195859	231551	74013	241789	193369	180607	117522	169920	201220
10-11	88712	111919	69379	144949	107527	85219	105141	99434	93762
11-11	52812	40569	59972	76331	63569	63534	43578	89024	62462
12-11	54576	29778	68238	54749	49008	56478	34032	87882	55718
01-12	48420	50011	64364	55441	46587	58346	31162	87363	55683
02-12	51325	72803	66543	61113	54922	52051	59245	87606	54853
03-12	57793	76988	72768	72250	72319	72976	61251	88989	70313
04-12	81968	91306	81657	97808	103273	98604	103031	95768	98050
05-12	101474	134538	94315	135196	148511	128520	129731	113026	132982
06-12	163245	201565	181540	182578	202949	197934	223043	171753	193749
07-12	246527	270771	258701	240405	249605	269353	262609	286093	260638
08-12	303593	311444	173378	286024	261053	317843	297437	317912	296054
09-12	158368	217094	74048	228923	183581	188285	125477	167602	192262
10-12	67477	102132	69621	134642	100783	85807	101924	98915	88816
11-12	44028	36765	59591	69898	60387	52190	46933	88574	55475
12-12	52328	25697	67650	49112	46725	53331	20717	87467	52224

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Upravljanje s človeškimi viri v hotelih: primer Portugalske
Susana Silva in Dora Martins

Članek predstavlja posebnosti upravljanja s človeškimi viri (UČV) v portugalskih hotelih. Osredotoča se na razumevanje vlog različnih praks UČV, tega, kako spodbujajo organizacijsko uspešnost in kakšen je njihov vpliv na vedenje sodelavcev ter na kakovost storitev v hotelih. V portugalskem kontekstu ima ta pojav še poseben pomen, saj je država v zadnjih letih priča hitremu razvoj hotelske industrije. Zelo malo je znanega o učinku UČV, upravljanju s človeškim kapitalom in razvojem. Ta raziskava je ena izmed prvih na Portugalskem in želi predstaviti ugotovitve z vidika menedžerjev, ki se ukvarjajo z upravljanjem človeških virov. Članek temelji na kvalitativni študiji primerov, podatki pa so bili zbrani s pomočjo polstrukturiranih intervjujev z 12 menedžerji UČV iz dvanajstih hotelov na Portugalskem. Rezultati kažejo, da kljub temu, da ni učinkovitega upravljanja s človeškimi viri, sedanje prakse ravnanja med zaposlenimi spodbujajo okolju prijazno naravnano vedenje ter imajo direkten učinek na zadovoljstvo strank in na konkurenčnost znotraj sektorja. Vseeno menedžerji priznavajo, da je potrebno uvesti spremembe, ki bodo pripomogle k boljšemu delovanju zaposlenih, kar bo imelo vpliv na zadovoljstvo strank in na konkurenčnost sektorja v državi. V skladu s temi ugotovitvami članek obravnava glavne teoretične in praktične smernice za nadaljnje raziskave na področju upravljanja s človeškimi viri.

Ključne besede: prakse upravljanja s človeškimi viri, človeški kapital, turizem, hotelska industrija, Portugalska, raziskovalna študija
Academica Turistica, 9(1), 5–18

Raziskava o distribucijskih kanalih v turizmu na področju obiskovanja sorodnikov in prijateljev
Vicky Katsoni

Prispevek se ukvarja s področjem obiskovanja sorodnikov in prijateljev (OSP) ter se osredotoča na uporabo turističnih distribucijskih kanalov kot virov informacij o vedenju potrošnikov v segmentu OSP. Demografija in značilnosti potovanj OSP so bile analizirane glede na: organizacijo potovanja (preko agencije ali v lastni režiji), čas, potreben za odločitev o potovanju, vrsto namestitve, sopotnike in tip rezervacije namestitve ter ugotovitve, kje področje OSP upravičuje pomembno in donosno vlogo v nastanitvenih obratih. Podatki se nanašajo na grško regijo Arkadija, kjer se je raziskava izvajala longitudinalno. Rezultati izpostavljajo pomembno vlogo, ki jo ima segment OSP v nastanitvenih obratih, kar potrjuje »hibridno« naravo potovanj OSP in poudarja vprašanje pomena socialne identitete, povezane s potovanji OSP, kažejo pa tudi na nastajajočo vlogo diaspor pri njihovih obiskih domovine. Rezultati prispevka lahko spodbudijo razvoj marketinške strategije, ki sloni na identiteti in se osredotoča na »občutek pripadnosti« in skupnost, prirejena je značilnostim tega ciljnega trga in povezana z distribucijskimi kanali, ki jih uporabljajo in so kot taki dokazani v pričujoči raziskavi.

Ključne besede: obiskovanje sorodnikov in prijateljev, vedenje potrošnikov, distribucijski kanali, marketing v turizmu, segmentacija v turizmu
Academica Turistica, 9(1), 19–29

Sistem kakovosti ponudbe doživetij v zavarovanih območjih na primeru planj na Pohorju

Tanja Lešnik Štuhec in Vid Štuhec

Vzpostavljen sistem povezane ponudbe pridelkov, izdelkov, storitev in turističnih produktov s pohorskih planj pod kolektivno tržno znamko »S Pohorja« zagotavlja celovito kakovost iz zavarovanega območja Pohorje – »od spodaj navzgor« in »od zgoraj navzdol«. Vključevanje deležnikov je obsegalo: (i) tri regijske delavnice – analiza ponudbe in povpraševanja po izdelkih, storitvah in turističnih produktih v navezi s pohorskimi planjami na Pohorju; (ii) četrto delavnico za vzpostavitev oskrbnih mrež in sistema trženja; (iii) peto delavnico za oblikovanje akcijskih načrtov ponudnikov produktov v navezi s pohorskimi planjami. V sklopu projekta Alpa so bile vzpostavljene smernice za zagotavljanje kakovosti, oskrbne mreže in sistem trženja za izdelke (5), turistične storitve (2) in turistične produkte (3) ter 20 akcijskih načrtov ponudnikov v navezi s pohorskimi planjami. Planje predstavljajo odlično izhodišče za ekološko in po unikatnih doživetjih prepoznano destinacijo Pohorje. Kakovost prehranskih in rokodelskih izdelkov ter storitev in turističnih produktov mora biti celovito načrtovana, implementirana in evalvirana. Spodbujanje mreženja z namenom povezovanja ponudbe na ovršju Pohorja ter vzpostavljanje organiziranih oskrbnih verig lahko zagotavlja kritično maso kakovostnih produktov – doživetij s pohorskih planj. Sistematično strateško in operativno trženje ponudbe destinacije zagotavlja ciljno usmerjenost in všečnost produktov izbranim ciljnim skupinam potrošnikov. »Vizija Pohorje 2030« ponuja možnosti sonaravnega upravljanja Pohorja, kjer destinacija Pohorje nastopa usklajeno z zavarovanim območjem Pohorje. Vzpostavljen sistem komuniciranja z javnostmi ter učinkovita mreža prodajnih mest s tržno znamko »S Pohorja« lahko prepričata deležnike, da se investicije v povezavi s planjami in z njimi povezanimi dejavnostmi ne le izidejo, temveč imajo tudi velik multiplikativen učinek.

Ključne besede: planje, turistični produkt, sistem kakovosti, Vizija Pohorje 2030
Academica Turistica, 9(1), 31–47

Človeški kapital in organizacijska klima v turističnih agencijah

Vojko Kaluža in Štefan Bojnec

Človeški kapital in organizacijska klima imata za turistične agencije in njihove poslovalnice velik pomen, zato je v raziskavi preučevanim spremenljivkam konstrukta človeškega kapitala in konstrukta organizacijske klime potrebno nameniti velik pomen, tako s strani lastnikov/managerjev/vodij kot tudi drugih zaposlenih. Z raziskavo januarja 2015 smo želeli ugotoviti povezavo med človeškim kapitalom in organizacijsko klimo v turističnih agencijah in njihovih poslovalnicah v Sloveniji. Glede na slovensko klasifikacijo dejavnosti je njihova glavna dejavnost organiziranje potovanj, potovalnih agencij ali rezervacij in drugih s potovanji povezanih dejavnosti. Kvantitativna raziskava temelji na analizi pisnih vprašalnikov na osnovi vzorca 103 turističnih agencij in njihovih poslovalnic, kjer je sodelovalo 336 anketirancev, ki so bili glede na funkcijo zaposlitve lastniki/managerji/vodje in drugi zaposleni. Ugotavljamo, da obstaja povezanost med vključenimi spremenljivkami konstrukta človeškega kapitala in konstrukta organizacijske klime.

Ključne besede: človeški kapital, organizacijska klima, turistične agencije
Academica Turistica, 9(1), 49–59

Odnos turistov do ekološko pridelane hrane

Anita Silvana Ilak Peršurić in Ana Težak Damijanić

Na evropskih trgih sta tako nakup kot potrošnja ekološko pridelane hrane v porastu. Uživanje ekološko pridelane hrane in pijač je posledica zavedanja pomena dobrega počutja in zdravja, hkrati pa tudi izkazovanje življenjskega sloga. Odločitev za ekološko pridelano hrano omogoča višjo kakovost življenja, je pa tudi povezana z odgovornim odnosom do narave in varovanjem okolja. Lahko rečemo, da so potrošniki ekološko pridelane hrane družbeno odgovornejši. V okviru turističnega gospodarstva ekološko pridelana hrana predstavlja del gastronomske ponudbe. Dostopnost in širina njene ponudbe se med destinacijami zelo razlikujeta. Na Hrvaškem, kjer je ekološko pridelana hrana relativno nov trend, je Istra glede tega daleč pred ostalimi destinacijami. Namen naše raziskave je bil s pomočjo merjenja preferenc turistov ovrednotiti potenciale ekološko pridelane hrane v gostinski ponudbi. V sklopu projekta »Valorizacija selektivnih oblik turizma za trajnostni razvoj ruralnih prostorov« smo opravili anketiranje turistov glede njihovega zanimanja za ekološko pridelano hrano v času bivanja v Istri. Analiziranih je bilo 1.028 vprašalnikov. Rezultati so pokazali, da na odnos oz. zanimanje za ekološko pridelano hrano vplivajo tako nekatere socio-demografske značilnosti kot država, iz katere prihajajo anketiranci.

Ključne besede: turisti, ekološko pridelana hrana, Istra
Academica Turistica, 9(1), 61–71

Izboljšanje zaposljivosti diplomantov

Marija Rok in Sonja Sibila Lebe

Cilj prispevka je poglobiti razumevanje pomena razvijanja zaposlitvenih kompetenc in nakazati rešitve za izboljšanje zaposlitvenih potencialov diplomantov na primeru fakultete za turizem. Izvedli smo kohortno raziskavo konkurenčnosti študentov pred vstopom na trg delovne sile in analizo sekundarnih podatkov o aktivnostih institucije na tem področju. Raziskavi sta identificirali področja omejenih kompetenc študentov ter izzive oziroma nekatere šibke točke v aktivnostih fakultete.

Ključne besede: zaposljivost, trg dela, diplomanti, višja izobrazba, študija primera
Academica Turistica, 9(1), 73–83

Napovedovanje povpraševanja v turizmu na podlagi linearnih in nelinearnih napovednih modelov

Athanasios Koutras, Alkiviadis Panagopoulos in Ioannis A. Nikas

V prispevku predlagamo in ocenjujemo linearne in nelinearne modele za napovedovanje turističnega povpraševanja v namestitveni industriji s pomočjo umetnih nevronskih mrež. Za učinkovito napovedovanje so bile uporabljene metode večnivojskega perceptrona, regresije s podpornimi vektorji in linearne regresije ter dve različni učni množici. Glavni prispevek predlaganih modelov se osredotoča na bolj natančno napovedovanje in poenostavljeno delovanje. Raziskali smo relativno natančnost metod večnivojskega perceptrona in regresije s podpornimi vektorji za podatke o zasedenosti turističnih namestitvenih kapacitet ter jih primerjali z rezultati enostavnega linearnega regresijskega modela. Medsebojno sta bili preverjeni tudi relativna zmogljivost večplastnega perceptrona in regresija s podpornimi vektorji. V analizah so bili uporabljeni podatki o turistični zasedenosti in nočitvah v hotelih regije Zahodne Grčije med leti 2005 in 2012. Obsežna analiza je pokazala, da so v temu obdobju vse tri analizirane metode prekosile druge modele napovedovanja, če se jih testira za daljša napovedna obdobja (1–24 mesecev), ter da se ob tem pojavljajo zelo majhne in stabilne napovedne napake.

Ključne besede: regresija s podpornimi vektorji, večnivojski perceptron, umetne nevronske mreže, napovedovanje turističnega povpraševanja, napovedni model, časovni razporedi
Academica Turistica, 9(1), 85–98

Instructions for Authors

Aim and Scope of the Journal

Academica Turistica – Tourism and Innovation Journal (AT-TIJ) is a peer-reviewed journal that provides a forum for the dissemination of knowledge on tourism and innovation from a social sciences perspective. It especially welcomes contributions focusing on innovation in tourism and adaptation of innovations from other fields in tourism settings.

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The referees are chosen by the Editorial Board. Assessments by the referees will be presented anonymously to the author and, in the case of substantial reservations, the article, with the list of corrections needed, will be returned to the author for correction. The corrected copy of the article with the list of corrections on a separate page should be returned to the Editorial Board.

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Language and style. The first author is fully responsible for the language and style in the context of the instructions. A good scientific standard command of grammar and style is expected.

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The title page should include the title of the article (no more than 85 characters, including spaces), full name of the author(s), affiliation (institution name and address) of each author clearly identified; linked to each author by use of superscript numbers, corresponding author's full name, telephone, and e-mail address.

Abstract. The authors are obliged to prepare two abstracts – one in English and one (translated) in Slovene language. For foreign authors translation of the abstract into Slovene will be provided.

The content of the abstract should be structured into the following sections: purpose, methods, results, and conclusion. It should only contain the information that appears in the text as well. It should contain no reference to figures, tables and citations published in the main text, and should not exceed 250 words.

Beneath the abstract, the authors should supply appropriate keywords (3–6) in English and in Slovene. For foreign authors the translation of the abstract into Slovene will be provided.

The main text should contain a coherent and logical structure preferably following the IMRAD format (Introduction, Methods, Research [and] Discussion). However, other structures are also welcome (e.g. Introduction, Development and Conclusions) as long as the text maintains its logical structure and focus. Acknowledgments are optional.

The length of the articles should not exceed 9,000 words (including tables, figures, and references), double spaced, using Times New Roman font sized 12.

Tables. Each table should be submitted on a separate page in a Word document after References. Each table shall have a brief caption; explanatory matter should be in the footnotes below the table. The table shall contain means and the units of variation (SD, SE, etc.) and must be free of nonsignificant decimal places. Abbreviations used in the tables must be consistent with those used in the text and figures. Definition symbols should be listed in the order of appearance, determined by reading horizontally across the table and should be identified by standard symbols. All tables should be numbered consecutively (Table 1, Table 2, etc.).

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One author. Tourism innovation specific is mentioned (Brooks, 2010). Thomas (1992) had concluded ...

Two authors. This result was later contradicted (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). Price and Murphy (2000) pointed out ...

Three to five authors, first citation. Laroche, Bergeron, and Barbaro-Forleo (2001) had found ... It was also discovered (Salamon, Sokolowski, Haddock, & Tice, 2013) ...

Three to five authors, subsequent citations. Laroche et al. (2009) or (Salamon et al., 2011).

Six or more authors. Wolchik et al. (1999) or (Wolchik et al., 1999).

If two references with six or more authors shorten to the same form, cite the surnames of the first author and of as many of the subsequent authors as necessary to distinguish the two references, followed by a coma and et al.

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Books

American Psychological Association. (2009). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

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