WHAT FACTORS DO TOURISTS CONSIDER MOST IMPORTANT WHEN EVALUATING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF TOURISM? THE FOCUS ON DEVELOPING ECONOMY

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Abstract: Tourism is a critical driver of economic growth in developing countries, where it often serves as a primary source of international revenue, job creation, and infrastructure development. Understanding the factors of tourism competitiveness is essential because it highlights the strengths and opportunities of a destination, helping it stand out in a competitive global market. By improving competitiveness, destinations can attract more visitors, promote sustainable economic development, and enhance the quality of life for local residents. Competitiveness in tourism also supports cultural preservation and environmental conservation, contributing to a balanced and resilient local economy. The objective of this study is to determine the main factors that impact the competitiveness of Serbia as a tourism destination, focusing specifically on tourists' viewpoints. Through a comprehensive methodology, the research develops a tailored model for evaluating tourism destination competitiveness (TDC) in a developing economy context. The results highlight the significance of Serbia's natural and cultural heritage, service quality, accessibility, technology, marketing, and sustainability as critical dimensions of its TDC. The study's originality lies in its tourist-centered approach to TDC, which offers valuable recommendations for policymakers and destination management organizations (DMOs) in Serbia. This research adds to the existing literature by introducing an innovative, tourist-focused model that provides practical insights for improving tourism competitiveness in emerging markets.

Keywords: tourism destination competitiveness; tourists' perspective; developing economy; Serbia

1. Introduction

In the contemporary tourism industry, a major challenge is how tourist destinations can remain competitive, or enhance their positions, in an increasingly globalized and competitive market. Competitiveness is mainly assessed through the lens of the tourist product developed by a destination and its unique resources. Since destinations have restricted resources, it is

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essential to identify which resources are vital for achieving competitiveness, enabling destinations to more effectively utilize and manage these resources (Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019). Another specificity of tourism destination competitiveness (TDC) is that the goals and interests of all participants are not always aligned, so on one hand, there can be a divergence between public and private interests in tourism development, and on the other hand, there are different expectations from tourists at the destination. A lot of research considers the views of tourism experts and stakeholders on competitiveness, as they have the most knowledge about management and competitiveness. However, it is equally important to approach defining competitiveness from the perspective of tourists, as they are the end-users of the services, and their satisfaction and tourism experience depends on the available resources (Reisinger et al., 2018).

Tourists have a vital role in shaping TDC through their economic contribution, influence on the destination's image, and demand for authentic and sustainable experiences (Goffi et al., 2019). Their spending on local services stimulates the local economy, supporting businesses and creating jobs, which enhances the economic well-being and competitive advantage of the destination (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). As sustainability becomes increasingly important, destinations that adopt eco-friendly practices attract environmentally conscious travelers, thereby enhancing their competitiveness (Goffi et al., 2019).

To monitor competitiveness, it is important to emphasize that in modern tourism, it is not enough to just manage changes, but to be ahead of them, i.e., to be ahead of the competition and tourists' demands. The focus should be on creating competitiveness models and identifying elements that secure competitive advantages for improved positioning in the market. The competitiveness and recognition of the tourism sector of Serbia among tourists are largely connected to the key tourism products listed in the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2016–2025 (Vlada Republike Srbije, Ministarstvo trgovine, turizma i telekomunikacija, 2016). In addition to urban and spa tourism, mountain tourism, events, cultural heritage, thematic routes, meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE), and rural tourism also stand out. Although according to the data from the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2024), it has the potential to enhance its capabilities and effectively compete with other destinations. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify the factors influencing the competitiveness of Serbia so that tourism policy-makers and stakeholders can develop more effective plans, identify disadvantages, in order to effectively integrate tourist attractions, improve tourist experiences, and contribute to enhancing competitiveness.

Research on TDC of Serbia has been relatively limited, with no single model specifically tailored to the characteristics and tourist attributes unique to Serbia. Previous studies have predominantly utilized established competitiveness models like Ritchie and Crouch (2003), and also Dwyer and Kim (2003) models. Moreover, recent studies on Serbia's TDC emphasize the need to evaluate competitiveness indicators not only from the perspective of tourism industry stakeholders, but also from other target groups, such as residents, foreign tourists, and international tour operators (Kovačić et al., 2023; Pavluković et al., 2024). To date, there has been no thorough model examining tourist attitudes towards TDC in Serbia. This research aims to bridge the knowledge gap by identifying the determinants that impact Serbia's competitiveness as an emerging country. In this way, the study provides practical implications for Serbian tourism decision-makers and industry stakeholders regarding the elements that enhance Serbia's competitiveness, as perceived by tourists.

2. Literature review

2.1. The involvement of tourists in evaluating a tourist destination's competitiveness

The multidimensionality of TDC, according to Streimikiene et al. (2020), includes economic, social, and environmental aspects, making it a broad and relative concept. A destination's competitiveness hinges on its capacity to balance tourist satisfaction with long-term environmental and social well-being (Goffi et al., 2019; Streimikiene et al., 2020). Several foundational models have been developed to evaluate TDC, including those by Ritchie and Crouch (2003), and also Dwyer and Kim (2003). These models focus on various determinants of competitiveness such as resources, infrastructure, and market conditions (Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019). Ritchie and Crouch's (2003) model is frequently applied in research on TDC, indicating its widespread acceptance and influence. It is noted for its comprehensive approach, incorporating both supply and demand perspectives (Cimbaljević et al., 2023). While Ritchie and Crouch's model is highly regarded, other models such as those by Dwyer and Kim (2003) are also commonly referenced, suggesting a competitive landscape of models. These models have played a pivotal role in changing how tourists are perceived in the context of destination competitiveness, particularly by highlighting that tourists are not passive consumers, but active participants. Their experiences, expectations, and feedback directly shape the competitive standing of destinations. However, from the tourist's perspective, there is still insufficient focus on real-time feedback between tourists and destinations. In today's digital world, tourists increasingly act as co-creators of value, instantly sharing their experiences through online platforms, which immediately impact the perception and competitiveness of destinations. Social media, blogs, and user-generated content give tourists a more direct role in shaping a destination's image and competitive edge than the current models suggest. The literature suggests the necessity for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of new models, as Crouch (2011) explains that different factors impact a destination's competitiveness across market groups, and Domínguez Vila et al. (2015) highlights that the lack of certain indicators in some destinations can impede comparisons.

Tourists, as primary consumers of tourism services, play a crucial role in evaluating these elements, thereby influencing the destination's competitive position. The tourists' experience is influenced by numerous factors that collectively shape their overall satisfaction. These factors include convenient destination accessibility, high-quality accommodation options, reliable healthcare services, and a diverse range of events and attractions (Wei et al., 2023). Moreover, tourists' interactions with locals and service providers also significantly impact their perception of the destination (Tabaeeian et al., 2022). Positive interactions often lead to higher satisfaction levels, while negative experiences can detract from the overall appeal. By addressing tourists' needs and preferences, destinations can enhance their attractiveness and retain a loyal visitor base. Positive resident-tourist interactions boost destination image, fostering loyalty and word-of-mouth, thereby enhancing TDC (Tse & Tung, 2021). Furthermore, a positive relationship exists between tourist satisfaction and TDC. Satisfied tourists demonstrate increased loyalty, thereby enhancing the destination's competitive advantage (Zeng et al., 2021). Additionally, leveraging tourists' feedback to make informed improvements can result in a more compelling and competitive tourism offering. Many authors agree and emphasize that key factors such as service quality, fairness of price, and managing distractions are crucial for enhancing the destination image and attracting more tourists (Tripathi & Wasan, 2021). The environmental awareness of each destination is also

one of the main concerns for tourists. Nguyen et al. (2022) emphasize that providing environmental feedback in accommodations can positively influence tourists' choices, promoting sustainable tourism practices. Also, do Rosário et al. (2022) add that feedback from multiple stakeholders, including tourists, highlights the need for technological and accessibility improvements to enhance the overall tourism experience.

In evaluating TDC, it is essential to consider tourists' perspectives on various factors, including the quality of attractions, accommodations, services, and overall experience (Pavković et al., 2023). Tourist satisfaction with these factors influences revisit rates and recommendations, affecting destination competitiveness (Tang et al., 2022). Thus, understanding tourists' evaluations can offer practical guidance for Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) aiming to enhance TDC (Kim et al., 2019). According to Zijing and Qiongxian (2023), tourists' feedback often highlights areas that require attention, such as inadequate facilities or poor service quality. By addressing these concerns, DMOs can implement targeted strategies to improve the destination's offerings. Evaluations of service quality are crucial for improving tourism services and making them more competitive (Ragimkhanov & Zhukovskaya, 2023). This proactive approach can result in a more dynamic and competitive tourism sector.

Several studies have emphasized the significance of tourists' perceptions in evaluating TDC, which helps to identify strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of tourists. These studies suggest that tourists' satisfaction with the destination experience, including aspects such as safety (Mwesiumo & Abdalla, 2022), cleanliness (Yasami et al., 2021), hospitality (Ghose & Johann, 2019), and value for money significantly contributes to their overall evaluation of the destination. Furthermore, tourists' perceptions of the destination's unique attributes, such as its cultural heritage, natural beauty, and recreational opportunities, also play an important role in shaping their assessment of its competitiveness. The perception of safety, for instance, can be a decisive factor in a tourist's decision to visit a destination (Ding & Wu, 2022). Cleanliness and hygiene standards are also important in shaping tourists' experiences. High standards of cleanliness, especially after COVID-19, can enhance the perceived value and attractiveness of the destination, influencing tourists' willingness to return (Zulkifli, 2023). Moreover, Nugroho et al. (2021) emphasize that hospitality, reflected in the friendliness and helpfulness of locals and service providers, can significantly boost tourists' satisfaction and the likelihood of return visits (Ngoc Su et al., 2020). Value for money, encompassing the trip's overall cost relative to the quality of experiences offered, is another critical consideration (Mwesiumo & Abdalla, 2022). Lastly, the availability of diverse tourism attractions and recreational opportunities, such as adventure sports, cultural tours, and nature excursions, can enhance the destination's appeal and competitive standing (Zhuk, 2022).

The competitive positioning of a destination is not static; it evolves with changes in tourists' preferences, emerging trends, and outer factors such as economic conditions and global events (Neto et al., 2020). Therefore, continuous monitoring of tourists' perceptions and satisfaction levels is crucial for maintaining and improving TDC (Guizzardi & Mariani, 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Zeng et al., 2021). Research on TDC in Serbia is scarce and has mainly focused on the perspectives of tourism professionals and stakeholders (Armenski et al., 2018; Dragićević et al., 2012; Dwyer et al., 2016; Milutinović et al., 2021; Pavluković et al., 2024). Additionally, some research has analyzed the competitiveness of Serbia compared to other similar destinations, but with varying tourist performances (Armenski et al., 2012; Petrović et al., 2017). While researchers have expressed interest in understanding the diverse perspectives of stakeholders,

a notable gap exists in exploring tourists' perceptions of TDC indicators. This study aims to address this gap by creating a customized competitiveness model that reflects the attitudes of tourists in Serbia, thereby aiding in the strategic development of the country's tourism sector.

3. Methodology

3.1. Content analysis

To evaluate the key dimensions of TDC from the tourists' perspective, the study began with a comprehensive literature review, followed by pilot testing and model validation. A total of 559 papers related to TDC from the SCOPUS, spanning the period from 2000 to 2020, were analyzed. An initial screening process identified 232 relevant papers for in-depth analysis, from which a total of 165 TDC indicators were extracted. In the second round, 12 tourism experts from Serbia, each possessing over a decade of experience in the tourism sector and academia, were asked to review these indicators, eliminating repetitive and irrelevant items and selecting those that could be evaluated by foreign tourists. A rigorous purification process resulted in a refined list of 63 indicators, which were incorporated into a questionnaire for pilot testing among tourists.

3.2. Pilot testing

Pilot testing took place from June to August 2022 using an English-language questionnaire in the most popular destinations in Serbia (the cities of Belgrade, Novi Sad, Subotica, Niš, and the mountains Tara, Zlatibor, and Kopaonik) at tourist accommodation facilities. Participants were asked to rate the relevance of 63 TDC indicators on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (*1 = not relevant at all, 5 = very relevant*). Also, they could select "6" for poorly worded questions or "0" if they lacked sufficient information. The pilot test included a sample of 63 foreign tourists. Bujang et al. (2018) recommended a minimum sample size of 30 for pilot testing. Consequently, 63 relevant TDC indicators were incorporated into the final stage of TDC model development.

3.3. Procedure and research instrument

To validate the proposed TDC model for Serbia, the field research with foreign tourists in Serbia was carried out in the second half of 2023. A total of 591 foreign tourists took part in the study. The majority of tourists were surveyed on-site at Serbia's most popular destinations. Ten trained researchers conducted the surveys on-site at key tourist attractions, shopping centers, and some questionnaires were collected with the assistance of employees at the accommodation facilities at these destinations. Participants rated 63 TDC indicators on a 5-point Likert scale (*1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree*). Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS 23 and AMOS statistical software.

3.4. Sampling

To validate the TDC model, Sample 1 (N = 185) was determined as sufficient for Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) based on recommended guidelines for factor analysis (Pearson & Mundform, 2010), while Sample 2 (N = 406) was used for Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to ensure robust model validation on a larger dataset. Exploratory Factor Analysis was used in the first case to uncover the underlying factor structure of the data and to identify

potential relationships and groupings among variables. Confirmatory Factor Analysis, on the other hand, was used to test and confirm the factor structure identified in the EFA. In this case, CFA evaluates how well the proposed model fits the data by specifying relationships between observed variables and their underlying latent factors. The sample included all age categories, ranging from 18 to 84 years. A slightly higher percentage of respondents were women. Most respondents had visited Serbia before, while about one third were first-time visitors. The surveyed tourists came from various countries, with the largest representations from Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia, and Romania.

Table 1. Basic characteristics of respondents (in %)

	Sample 1 (N = 185 respondents)	Sample 2 (N = 406 respondents)
Gender		
Male	48.6	46.8
Female	51.4	53.2
Average age and age range in years	39.05, SD 12.738 Range 18–73	35.7, SD 12.371 Range 18–84
Are you in Serbia for the first time?		
Yes	28.6	34.2
No, I have been once	22.2	23.2
No, I have been several times	49.2	42.6

Note. SD = Standard deviation.

4. Results

4.1. Exploratory factor analysis

To identify the underlying dimensions of Serbia's TDC, EFA produced a high Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.949, demonstrating excellent sampling adequacy, while Bartlett's test of sphericity was found to be statistically significant (χ^2 = 10498.4, *df* = 1953, *p* < .000). Additionally, a significant number of correlations above 0.3 further confirmed the data's suitability for EFA. Items with factor loadings below 0.3 (K5, K22, K35, K38, K14) were excluded from the analysis. Principal component analysis was used to extract the factors. Five key factors emerged, explaining 62.03% of the variance: 1) Natural and cultural heritage, 2) Quality of tourist services, 3) Accessibility and technology, 4) Pollution, and 5) Marketing and sustainability (Table 1a in the Appendix).

4.2 Confirmatory factor analysis

To validate the factors identified through EFA, CFA was implemented on Sample 2 (N = 406), using AMOS software. Given the significant multivariate kurtosis indicated by Mardia's test (value > 3), robust estimation methods were employed (Bentler, 2006). Model fit was evaluated using several indices, including the Satorra-Bentler chi-square (S-B χ^2), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), and Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI). Acceptable fit criteria were set at SRMR and RMSEA values below .08, and CFI, NFI, and NNFI values above .90 (Browne & Cudeck, 1992; Hoyle, 1995). Modification indices were used to refine the model as suggested by AMOS.

The initial CFA model based on the EFA factor structure did not exhibit satisfactory fit indices. It was suggested to exclude several items due to cross-loadings across multiple factors (K23, K34, and K54). Additionally, correlations between competitiveness model factors were introduced. The model was re-run, resulting in a noticeable improvement in the fit indices. However, the model still did not achieve a satisfactory fit. Removing items K10, K18, K19, K11, K33, and K59 would improve the model fit, according to the modification indices. After these modifications, fit indices were significantly improved, but modification indices suggested some significant changes: it was suggested that items K21, K61, and K63 should be moved from the Quality of Tourist Services factor to the Natural and Cultural Resources factor. Additionally, final modifications involved removing items that loaded on multiple factors simultaneously (K9, K16, K32, K49, K50, K62, K6, and K63).

Subsequent model modifications resulted in satisfactory fit indices, leading to the identification of a final four-factor competitiveness model from the perspective of foreign tourists: 1) Natural and cultural heritage, 2) Quality of tourist services, 3) Accessibility and technology, and 4) Marketing and sustainability. It's notable that the final model does not include the Pollution factor, as all its items were excluded from the model according to modification index suggestions. The final fit indices are presented in Table 2. The final competitiveness model, consisting of four factors and a total of 38 indicators, is detailed in Table 3.

Table 2. Fit indices of the tested model

Model	S–Bχ^2	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	NFI
1	1214.68	713	1.70	.042 (.038 – .046)	.456	.946	.935

Table 3. Structure of the final model of the tourist destination competitiveness – foreign tourists' perspective

Factors and Items	Factor loadings	Mean	SD
Factor 1: Natural and cultural resources (seven items), α = .871			
1. Serbia as a tourist destination possesses unique natural resources and scenic beauty.	.721	4.19	.960
2. Serbia as a tourist destination possesses unique cultural resources.	.761	4.23	.902
3. Serbia as a tourist destination possesses unique architectural characteristics (local architecture).	.738	3.94	1.014
4. The climate in Serbia is pleasant.	.591	4.15	.903
6. Serbia as a tourist destination possesses rich material cultural heritage.	.750	4.22	.864
7. Serbia as a tourist destination possesses rich intangible cultural heritage.	.727	4.25	.882
21. Local food and cuisine in Serbia are of high quality and authentic.	.698	4.41	.900
Factor 2: Quality of tourist services (seven items), α = .831			
8. Hotel accommodation facilities in Serbia are of high quality and diverse.	.666	3.92	1.012
12. There is a wide range of complementary accommodation options in Serbia (guesthouses, campsites, couchsurfing, etc.).	.596	3.78	1.077
13. Tourist activities in Serbia are of high quality and diverse.	.674	3.79	1.025
15. Serbia hosts frequent and high-quality events (special events/festivals excluding business tourism events).	.654	4.14	.973
20. The offerings of foreign tour operators for visiting Serbia are rich and diverse.	.567	3.74	1.079
36. There are adequate English signs and menus in restaurants in Serbia.	.637	3.80	1.129
37. Local residents and tourism employees in Serbia use foreign languages adequately in communication with tourists.	.662	3.96	1.091
Factor 3: Accessibility and technology (seven items) α = .878			
24. Wi-Fi, internet, and telecommunications infrastructure in Serbia are very accessible to tourists.	.656	3.98	1.078
25. There are applications (internet and mobile) available in Serbia that support the tourist experience in destinations.	.649	3.86	1.105

Table 3. Structure of the final model of competitiveness of the tourist destination – foreign tourists' perspective (*continued*)

Factors and Items	Factor loadings	Mean	SD
Factor 3: Accessibility and technology (seven items) α = .878 *(continued)*			
26. The implementation of modern information technologies and electronic business in Serbian tourism is in line with trends in the tourism market.	.683	3.79	1.080
27. Serbia as a tourist destination is accessible (proximity of the destination to major markets, transportation accessibility, etc.).	.733	3.91	.977
28. Locations and significant attractions for tourism are accessible to tourists.	.752	3.98	.938
29. Local tourist and traffic signage meets the needs of tourists.	.736	3.75	1.060
31. The air traffic infrastructure in Serbia is of high quality.	.700	3.68	1.120
Factor 4: Marketing and sustainability (16 items), α = .934			
39. Certified sustainability programs/green (eco) certificates exist / are implemented in Serbia as a tourist destination.	.673	3.43	1.132
40. Positioning Serbia as a tourist destination on the international market is effective.	.749	3.59	1.068
41. Social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) are effectively used to support marketing activities for Serbia as a tourist destination.	.691	3.78	1.094
43. Tourism companies monitor/research the satisfaction of their visitors/service users.	.689	3.77	1.023
44. Tourism companies in Serbia develop and promote innovative tourism products.	.691	3.71	1.016
45. Tourism products and services in Serbia are accessible to persons with disabilities.	.596	3.53	1.168
46. In Serbia, products, content, and activities in tourism create a quality tourist experience.	.743	3.98	.973
47. Political values, overall political situation, and stability in Serbia favor tourism development.	.584	3.39	1.222
48. Prices of tourist services offered at the destination (accommodation, transport prices, and other elements of service offerings at the destination) are favorable.	.584	3.99	0.968
51. There is clear awareness on the international market about Serbia as a tourist destination.	.672	3.67	1.114
52. Serbia is an attractive tourist destination.	.619	4.10	.993
53. The image and perception of Serbia in the market are positive.	.686	3.89	1.046
55. Tourist information is easily accessible to tourists during their stay in Serbia.	.714	4.03	.967
56. Booking travel services and online reservations of products and services are easy and reliable.	.661	4.17	.950
57. The brand of Serbia as a tourist destination is recognizable in the international tourist market.	.637	3.72	1.100
60. There is adequate care for environmental protection in Serbia.	.611	3.44	1.187

The key factors shaping Serbia's attractiveness as a tourist destination, each emphasizing essential aspects of its tourism potential, are outlined below:

- The first factor, Natural and cultural resources (consists of seven items), relates to the material and immaterial cultural heritage, as well as the natural values of Serbia as a tourist destination;
- The second factor, Quality of tourist services (consists of seven items), includes items related to the quality of accommodation capacities, event offerings, activities at the destination, overall offerings by foreign tour operators, and the availability of services in English;
- The third factor, Accessibility and technology, comprises seven items assessing destination and attraction accessibility. This factor also includes items concerning the availability of modern technologies at the destination and various applications that facilitate the tourist experience; and
- The fourth and most comprehensive factor, Marketing and sustainability, encompasses 16 items. These items assess eco-certification, environmental practices, quality of the provided experience, destination positioning, branding, and information availability. This

factor is particularly significant tourists as it includes items related to monitoring their satisfaction by service providers and offering innovative products and quality experiences at reasonable prices.

4.3. Descriptive statistics and measurement model validity

In line with previous surveys conducted among tourism industry stakeholders in Serbia, this research conducted among foreign tourists confirms that Natural and Cultural Resources are the most significant competitiveness factor for Serbia. Local food and cuisine were the highest-rated items, followed closely by Serbia's rich material cultural heritage. The factors of Quality of Tourist Services and Accessibility and Technology received identical ratings. Regarding the Quality of Tourist Services, diversity and quality of events were rated the highest, followed by hotel accommodation capacities and the use of foreign languages by local residents and tourism staff. Within the Accessibility and Technology factor, attractions accessibility and the availability of internet and telecommunication infrastructure were particularly highly rated. Within the last factor, Marketing and Sustainability, which received the lowest ratings from tourists, they expressed the highest concerns about political stability and safety, environmental stewardship, while they highly rated items related to destination attractiveness, availability of tourist information, and ease of service reservations.

Table 4. Assessment of individual TDC factors by tourists (mean values and SD) and model validation

Factors	Mean	SD	AVE	CR	Cronbach α
Factor 1: Natural and cultural resources	4.21	.692	.44	.87	.871
Factor 2: Quality of tourist services	3.90	.755	.40	.82	.831
Factor 3: Accessibility and technology	3.90	.787	.49	.87	.878
Factor 4: Marketing and sustainability	3.82	.770	.44	.92	.934

Note. Average Variance Extracted (AVE); Composite Reliability (CR).

Table 4 displays Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all variables, which surpass the recommended threshold of 0.7, thereby confirming the reliability of the measurement scales. Construct validity was assessed through both convergent and discriminant validity evaluations. Convergent validity was confirmed, with AVE values surpassing 0.40 and CR values exceeding 0.80 across all dimensions (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was established as AVE values exceeded the squared correlations between latent factors (see Table 5).

Table 5. Correlation estimates and average variances extracted

Factors	F1	F2	F3	F4
Factor 1: Natural and cultural Resources	.446			
Factor 2: Quality of tourist services	.431	.406		
Factor 3: Accessibility and technology	.388	.383	.493	
Factor 4: Marketing and sustainability	.382	.389	.472	.440

5. Discussion

This research significantly advances TDC knowledge by constructing a model tailored to developing economies and incorporating tourist perspective. Previous research on TDC has primarily focused on the perspectives of industry stakeholders, often neglecting the crucial viewpoint of tourists. While existing studies highlight the significance of tourist satisfaction

(Zeng et al., 2021) and unforgettable experiences in driving repeat visits and enhancing competitiveness, a broader understanding of tourists' perceptions is essential. One study also emphasizes the importance of destination attributes in crafting destination image and competitiveness (Nguyen et al., 2022), enabling the development of tailored offerings. Ultimately, tourists as consumers of services and experiences at a destination, play a crucial role in assessing TDC, as their satisfaction directly impacts revisit intentions and recommendations, subsequently influencing overall TDC.

Therefore, when evaluating TDC it is crucial to consider tourists' perspectives on destination attributes, especially in developing countries facing challenges, such as digital and green transitions, emerging tourism trends, regional disparities, or poor infrastructure quality. Evaluating competitiveness from tourists' perspectives requires specific elements that may be different in certain aspects from previously used and traditional TDC models, which are usually assessed by tourism stakeholders. To develop a tourist-centered model and advance the existing knowledge on TDC, the process involved selecting TDC indicators, evaluating them with input from tourists, and ultimately validating a model structure tailored to assess TDC from a tourists' perspective in a developing economy. The four key dimensions of TDC in Serbia from the tourists' perspective were identified: Natural and cultural heritage, Quality of tourist services, Accessibility and technology, and Marketing and sustainability.

Implementing this model in Serbia has offered meaningful insights. The results indicate that Serbia's unique natural and cultural resources are highly valued by tourists. This factor, which includes elements such as scenic beauty, cultural heritage, local architecture, and authentic local cuisine, received high mean scores, reflecting tourists' appreciation for Serbia's rich heritage and natural beauty. These factors not only increase tourist satisfaction, but also build loyalty, encouraging repeat visits and generating positive word-of-mouth. Therefore, it would be important to expand the range of tourism products and experiences, such as adventure tourism, cultural festivals, culinary tours, etc. The high factor loadings and reliability coefficient (α = .871) underscore the importance of these attributes in shaping tourists' positive perceptions and experiences. Previous research has highlighted the crucial role that tourists play in evaluating natural and cultural resources (Zhuk, 2022), whereby their positive perceptions including amenities and accessibility, enhance overall tourist satisfaction and play a critical role in shaping their assessment of its competitiveness (Ngoc Su et al., 2020).

Among essential factors that have an effect on the perceived value and attractiveness of a destination are the value tourists receive and the quality of tourist services in general which has been shown in numerous previous studies (Mwesiumo & Abdalla, 2022; Nugroho et al., 2021). This aligns with one of the factors in our model, the quality of tourist services. This factor emerged as another critical dimension, encompassing accommodation diversity, quality of tourist activities, and the ability of local residents and tourism employees to communicate in foreign languages. Despite receiving relatively high scores, there are areas for improvement, particularly in offering a broader range of complementary accommodation options and enhancing the quality of tourist activities. The reliability coefficient (α = .831) suggests a consistent evaluation of service quality among tourists.

While previous models recognize the importance of tourist satisfaction, they are largely destination-centric, focusing heavily on internal factors like destination policy, planning, and resources. This weakens its application in today's market, where tourists are no longer passive consumers, but active participants who shape the competitive identity of a destination

through their preferences, feedback, and online engagement. The swift advancement of technology and its impact on the tourism industry is another aspect that previous models have overlooked. The models do not adequately account for the impact of digital ecosystems where tourists' reviews, social media posts, and blogs significantly influence a destination's competitive positioning. This omission reduces the model's relevance in an increasingly digitalized tourism market. Therefore, a new and significant aspect of our model is that tourists recognize and value accessibility and technology as important factors. This dimension includes the availability of Wi-Fi, internet, and telecommunications infrastructure, as well as the accessibility of tourist locations and air traffic infrastructure. The emphasis on modern information technologies and electronic business highlights the need for continuous technological advancements to meet tourists' expectations. The reliability coefficient (α = .878) indicates strong internal consistency within this factor. Technological advancements have driven the development of smartness, which is a significant trend in competitiveness (Cimbaljević et al., 2019). This indicates that the technology indicator is recognized as important and should be prioritized in future research on TDC, as highlighted in previous studies (do Rosário et al., 2022; Reisinger et al., 2018). It enhances tourists' responses to the changing environment and serves as one of the methods to enhance competitiveness.

In addition, our model emphasizes the key role of tourists in evaluating Marketing activities and sustainability, which were identified as vital components of Serbia's TDC. This factor includes the effectiveness of positioning Serbia on the international market, the social media usage, and the implementation of sustainability programs. Given the growing recognition of sustainability across various business sectors and the increasing alignment of companies with Environmental, Social, Governance principles, emphasizing environmental quality and sustainable development can significantly enhance a country's image and competitiveness (Reisinger et al., 2018). The high reliability coefficient (α = .934) in our model suggests that these elements are consistently perceived by tourists as integral to Serbia's competitive standing. The focus on sustainability aligns with global trends towards more eco-conscious tourism practices. Additionally, it is important to promote hotel green initiatives, eco-friendly tours, and activities related to environmental conservation.

Like many developing countries, Serbia's TDC findings highlight the importance of robust infrastructure and high-quality tourism services. A previous study conducted by Gao & Tan (2022) emphasizes the necessity of improving transport, accommodation, and overall service quality to enhance competitiveness. In Serbia, similar patterns emerge, where infrastructure development is seen as a critical component of attracting and retaining tourists. On the other side, the importance of cultural heritage and natural attractions is a common theme across developing economies (Zhuk, 2022). The model reveals that Serbia's natural and cultural heritage is a key competitive advantage. This finding aligns with earlier research, which also identified similar competitive strengths (e.g., Armenski et al., 2012; Pavluković et al., 2024). Furthermore, this study shows that tourists consider sustainability as an important TDC indicator. This follows up the research of Dwyer et al. (2016) and Pavluković et al. (2024) which emphasizes the importance of placing a greater focus on sustainability-related activities. In this study, tourists also emphasize areas for improvement, particularly the quality of tourist services. A novel and significant aspect of our model is the acknowledgment of the importance of technological solutions and the availability of offerings at the destination. A comprehensive analysis of each TDC factor and its

components provides stakeholders with a thorough understanding of tourists' perceptions of the TDC current state. This analysis helps identify significant gaps and advantages, facilitating informed decision-making and strategic improvements.

6. Conclusion

Although a supply-side competitive research approach is important because stakeholders have a much better understanding of the entire spectrum of resources, on the other hand, the perception of tourists is particularly important because their preferences and profiles change over time. This tourist-centered model offers a new tool for developing countries to increase tourist involvement in TDC evaluation. This is particularly crucial for developing economies, as they are typically in the initial stages of tourism development where tourist opinions and understanding of the factors affecting TDC are vital.

From the tourists' perspective, a defined set of indicators within the model provides a good basis for the continuous evaluation of Serbia's TDC, which reflects the practical application of this model. What distinguishes this model from those previously applied in Serbia is that it expands existing models with new attributes that have proven important for enhancing the tourist experience and improving the image, which is directly related to competitiveness. In addition to key indicators, such as those in the domain of natural and cultural resources, service quality, and destination accessibility, elements related to two important issues, technology and sustainability, have particularly stood out. Considering that in these areas, according to WEF data (2024), Serbia is not at a favored level compared to the competitive set, it is very important to consider all the components of sustainable development and incorporate technological advancements in the tourism offer. From the tourists' perspective, it could be said that these two areas represent an important opportunity for the positive transformation of tourism, from efficient resource use to more effective visitor governance. According to the analysis of TDC in Serbia from the tourists' perspective, several policy recommendations can be made to enhance Serbia's TDC, increase overall tourist satisfaction, and drive sustainable development. Safeguard and promote natural and cultural resources through education and awareness building among residents and tourists:

- Improve the quality of tourist services—provide training programs for hospitality staff to enhance service quality and language proficiency;
- Invest in modern information and communication technologies—improve Wi-Fi and internet access in tourist areas and develop mobile applications to support tourists, partner with tech companies to create user-friendly apps that provide information on attractions, services, and navigation;
- Develop and implement sustainable tourism practices—promote eco-friendly practices and obtain international green certifications for tourism businesses, launch marketing campaigns that highlight Serbia's commitment to sustainability, and attract environmentally conscious tourists. These certifications not only promote environmental standards but also appeal to eco-conscious travelers, a growing segment in global tourism. Also, studies on how sustainability certifications impact consumer choices will provide deeper insights into how Serbia can attract a segment of tourists interested in responsible travel. For example, destinations in Europe, such as Slovenia, have

successfully branded themselves as sustainable tourism leaders through certification schemes and targeted marketing campaigns (Geršič et al., 2022);

- Focus on safety, cleanliness in tourist areas—implement cleanliness and hygiene protocols and ensure high safety standards;
- Utilize social media to boost destination image—improve the utilization of social media platforms for marketing and engaging with potential tourists, create engaging content, including virtual tours and testimonials from satisfied tourists, to share on social media channels;
- Tailor tourism offerings to diverse market segments—analyze feedback from tourists of different cultural backgrounds and develop targeted marketing strategies and specialized tourism products that cater to various segments; and
- Improve transportation infrastructure—including roads, public transport, and air traffic facilities, enhance transportation connectivity between major tourist attractions and lesser-visited destinations.

Several limitations were identified in the research. First of all, Serbia is the only destination where the model has been implemented. Given the shared historical, cultural, and economic characteristics between Serbia and its neighboring countries, future research could focus on those destinations. These countries face similar challenges related to brand recognition, infrastructure development, and sustainability. Applying the TDC model in these contexts would help identify regional strategies for improving competitiveness, while also allowing for comparative studies on how each destination approaches these challenges. Second, achieving a perfectly balanced sample in this study was challenging due to the dominating number of regional tourists. While the findings provide significant insights into perceptions of Serbia's competitiveness, they may not fully reflect the views of tourists from more distant or non-European markets. Therefore, future studies could aim to include a broader, more geographically diverse sample to address this limitation, through online surveys or partnerships with international tour operators. Future research should also explore how independent variables, such as sociodemographic traits and diverse cultural backgrounds, influence tourists' perceptions of tourism destination competitiveness.

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Appendix

Table 1a. The results of EFA – Factor structure and factor loadings

Indicators/Factors	ID	[1] $\alpha = .876$	[2] $\alpha = .955$	[3] $\alpha = .903$	[4] $\alpha = .862$	[5] $\alpha = .953$
Serbia as a tourist destination possesses unique natural resources and scenic beauty.	K1	.820				
Serbia as a tourist destination possesses unique cultural resources.	K2	.814				
Serbia as a tourist destination possesses unique architectural features.	K3	.670				
The climate in Serbia is pleasant.	K4	.741				
Serbia as a tourist destination possesses rich material cultural heritage.	K6	.783				
Serbia as a tourist destination possesses rich intangible cultural heritage.	K7	.736				
Hotel accommodation facilities in Serbia are of high quality and diverse.	K8		.755			
Tourist information centers are available and of good quality.	K9		.749			
The restaurant offerings are of high quality (quality of food and service).	K10		.652			
Serbia offers quality amusement and theme parks.	K11		.818			
Serbia offers a wide range of complementary accommodation options (family houses, campsites, couch surfing).	K12		.761			
Tourist activities in Serbia are of high quality and diverse.	K13		.815			
Serbia hosts frequent and high-quality events.	K15		.738			
Serbia's products as a tourist destination enable longer stays for tourists.	K16		.826			
Serbia offers a rich and high-quality selection of skiing and mountain tourism.	K17		.752			
Serbia has a rich and high-quality rural tourism offer (village tourism, agrotourism…).	K18		.741			
Serbia offers a rich and high-quality health, spa, and wellness tourism.	K19		.735			
The offerings of foreign tour operators for visiting Serbia are rich and diverse.	K20		.728			
Local food and cuisine in Serbia are of high quality and authentic.	K21		.743			
Serbia provides quality healthcare services to tourists.	K23		.700			
The local population in Serbia is hospitable.	K33		.673			
The atmosphere in Serbia as a tourist destination is pleasant/relaxing.	K34		.788			
There are adequate signs in English as well as menus in English in restaurants in Serbia.	K36		.683			
Local residents and tourism staff use foreign languages adequately in communication with tourists.	K37		.616			
Tourist information about Serbia as a destination is easily accessible.	K54		.726			

Table 1a. The results of EFA – Factor structure and factor loadings (*continued*)

Indicators/Factors	ID	[1] $\alpha = .876$	[2] $\alpha = .955$	[3] $\alpha = .903$	[4] $\alpha = .862$	[5] $\alpha = .953$
Tourist information is easily accessible to tourists during their stay in Serbia.	K55		.772			
Booking tourist services and online reservations of products and services are simple and reliable.	K56		.698			
In Serbia, Wi-Fi, internet, and telecommunication infrastructure are highly accessible to tourists.	K24			.655		
There are applications (internet and mobile) in Serbia that support the tourist experience in the destination.	K25			.754		
The use of the latest information technologies and e-commerce in tourism in Serbia aligns with trends in the contemporary tourism market.	K26			.748		
Serbia as a tourist destination is accessible (proximity to major markets, transportation accessibility, etc.).	K27			.697		
Locations and attractions significant for tourism are accessible to tourists.	K28			.601		
Local tourist and traffic signage meets the needs of tourism and tourists.	K29			.676		
The road traffic infrastructure in Serbia is of high quality.	K30			.735		
The air traffic infrastructure in Serbia is of high quality.	K31			.720		
Bicycle and pedestrian paths in Serbia are of high quality and adequately maintained.	K32			.727		
The air in Serbia is polluted.	K61				.881	
Noise in destinations in Serbia is pronounced.	K62				.918	
The waters in Serbia are polluted.	K63				.912	
Certified sustainability programs / green (eco) certificates exist/are implemented in Serbia as a tourist destination.	K39					.742
The positioning of Serbia as a tourist destination on the international market is effective.	K40					.792
Social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) are effectively used to support marketing activities for Serbia as a tourist destination.	K41					.796
The value for money in terms of tourist experience in Serbia is positive.	K42					.782
Tourism companies in Serbia monitor the satisfaction of their service users.	K43					.805
Tourism companies in Serbia develop and promote innovative tourism products.	K44					.797
Tourism products and services in Serbia are accessible to persons with disabilities.	K45					.702
In Serbia, products, content, and activities in tourism deliver a quality tourist experience.	K46					.800
Political values, overall political situation, and stability in Serbia are favorable for tourism development.	K47					.708

Table 1a. The results of EFA – Factor structure and factor loadings (*continued*)

Indicators/Factors	ID	[1] $\alpha = .876$	[2] $\alpha = .955$	[3] $\alpha = .903$	[4] $\alpha = .862$	[5] $\alpha = .953$
Prices of tourism services in Serbia (accommodation, transportation prices, and other elements of service offerings in destinations) are favorable.	K48					.757
Tourist destinations in Serbia are adequately supplied with electrical energy.	K49					.689
Quality drinking water supply is provided in destinations in Serbia.	K50					.610
There is a clear awareness in the international market about Serbia as a tourist destination.	K51					.637
Serbia is an attractive tourist destination.	K52					.658
The image and perception of Serbia in the market are positive.	K53					.649
The brand of Serbia as a tourist destination is recognizable in the international tourism market.	K57					.747
Experiences and offerings in Serbia as a tourist destination meet the needs and expectations of tourists.	K58					.701
I am willing to recommend Serbia as a destination to visit.	K59					.767
There is adequate environmental care in Serbia.	K60					.619

Note. [1] Natural and cultural heritage; [2] Quality of tourist services; [3] Accessibility and technology; [4] Pollution; [5] Marketing and sustainability.