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Title

Cyprus' image- a sun and sea destination- as a detrimental factor to seasonal fluctuations. Exploration into motivational factors for holidaying in Cyprus.

Running Head: Cyprus' image- a sun and sea destination- as a detrimental factor

Abstract

Cyprus is established as a summer destination. To aid the destination in developing its winter season as well, this research uses a qualitative inductive approach to explore the tourists' current image of the island and their motivations of visiting it. The research indicates that the current image, which essentially portrays Cyprus as a sun-and-sea destination is thought to dissuade tourists from perceiving the island as a year-round destination. Nonetheless, increasing the pull factors of the destination through the development of unique special interest products can help in extending the tourism season as well as broaden its narrow image.

Introduction

Extreme seasonality is a challenge that most mass mature destinations are facing, due to their highly seasonal product of sun-and-sea as well as their 'could be anywhere' sun-and-sea image that is highly substitutable (Sastre & Benito, 2001; Ioannides, 2002, p.80). It can create a number of economic, socio-cultural and environmental problems, such as low profitability during the off-peak season, seasonal employment and the overstretching of the natural and built resources of the islands (Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2005; Andriotis, 2005; Kastenholz & Lopes de Almeida, 2008). However, seasonality can have some positive impacts, such as creating the opportunity to carry out maintenance on infrastructure and offering the time to recover from the strain of the high-

season period (Kastenholz & Lopes de Almeida, 2008; Andriotis, 2005).

Nevertheless, seasonality is considered as a problem by most destinations, resulting in most mature Mediterranean islands exhibiting characteristics which are indicative of having reached the consolidation or even stagnation stage in their lifecycle (Ioannides, 2002). Consequently, these mass tourism destinations need to restructure in order to delay or preclude their imminent decline (Claver-Córtes, Molina-Azorin, & Pereira-Moliner, 2007). The diversity that special interest tourism (SIT) and alternative tourism offer have been identified as key in overcoming the current challenges, and seasonality in particular, as they promote the feel of the area and place value on the local uniqueness (Bramwell, 2004; Garau-Vadell & de Borja-Sole, 2008).

There have been many studies on seasonality, particularly on its causes, on how destinations have and should manage it (Cuzzia & Rizzo, 2010; Garau-Vadell & de Borja-Sole, 2008; Getz & Nilsson, 2004; Kastenholz & Lopes de Almeida, 2008; Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2010). As well as on travel motives, and especially on the benefits sought by the tourists in coastal destinations (Rude?, Sedmak & Bojnec, 2011; Saayman, Slabbert & *Van der Merwe*, 2009; Van der Merwe, Slabbert & Saayman, 2011). However, these studies do not examine the motivations and activities sought by high season tourists in order to attract them during the low season, through special interest products. As Spencer and Holecek (2007) stress due to the diversity of tourist characteristics that exist within a season it is more beneficial to place attention on attracting the specific market segments rather than the market in general.

Therefore, this article's main aim is to explore the key motivations of tourists visiting a mature sun-and-sea destination, Cyprus, in order to inform present knowledge on the motivations of special interest tourists that could aid to tackle seasonality. This is achieved through three objectives. Firstly, to briefly examine the current corporate image of Cyprus, in order to determine its effect on the tourists' motivation. Secondly, to identify the push and pull motivational factors of tourists visiting Cyprus in order to ascertain the current factors that appeal to tourists. Thirdly, to discover special interest products that could attract tourists during the winter season in Cyprus, in order to establish market segments that the island could target.

The paper reviews literature on tourist behaviour and coastal tourism development, followed by a discussion on the Cypriot tourism industry. The methodological and analytical procedures are then described. The article continues with a summary of the findings and analysis regarding the challenges and opportunities faced by Cyprus in targeting the most appropriate market segments in an effort to assist the island to tackle seasonality. The conclusion section follows and lastly the implications and suggestions for future research are presented.

The diversity of coastal tourism development

Mediterranean islands' coastal tourism development can be summed up in one phrase, 'planning is following development rather than preceding it' (Peterson & Peterson, 1990, cited in Andriotis, 2003, p.69), since tourism on these islands started as an unplanned activity. This was due to the rapid and uncontrollable growth of tourism that lacked regulation on environmental protection and zoning (Andriotis, 2003; Brown & Cave, 2010).

Tourism-related expansion usually occurs in areas near the capital and urban centres (Andriotis, 2006). This is due to the better accessibility that usually exists owing to the

international airports, hence, coastal areas receive continuous investments in infrastructure (Andriotis, 2006). However, the purpose of these resorts will determine their features. For instance, in Italy, the Rimini region is overdeveloped, with mass tourism surroundings, whereas, the Sardinian Costa Smeralda is 'an exclusive carefully managed, low density development in traditional building styles' (Bramwell, 2004, p.11). This is because the resorts are marketed to different segments, and aim to address particular needs.

Papatheodorou (2002) demonstrates that the diversification that different resorts have is based on their image and status. Categorizing the resorts into core (larger resorts) and peripheral (smaller resorts), he argues that a strong brand name, the built environment and the feel of sophistication make a difference for core resorts. The built environment can derive from the traditional culture or, where this is not possible, marinas or theme parks may be developed (Papatheodorou, 2002). He continues, arguing that by attracting well known high quality national chains and providing quality establishments in core resorts, the image of luxury can be improved. Regarding peripheral resorts Papatheodorou (2002) notes that their tourists do not link sophistication to the existence of well-known industry players; in the peripheral resorts industrial organisation is less important.

Bramwell (2004) argues that resorts attract residential or other amenities that complement their tourism related facilities based on different criteria. Tourist resorts are usually developed near a capital or a large urban centre, offering great accessibility to the city as well as an appealing environment (Andriotis, 2006; Bramwell, 2004). Consequently, the tourism development occurring in an area should always be planned by taking into consideration the image and type of holidaymakers that the tourism organisations want to attract.

Tourism Demand and Special Interest Tourism

Following, Spilanis and Vayanni (2004) forms of tourism can be categorized as conventional tourism and new forms of tourism (NFT). Conventional tourism such as sun, sea and sand (3Ss) and mountain/winter highlights the significance of the market, the influence that it has on prices of the destination resources and the disregard for its impact on the environment, society and culture (Spilanis & Vayanni, 2004).

NFT are classified as alternative forms of tourism for example, cultural, and trekking and special interest tourism (SIT) for example, maritime, and sport (Spilanis & Vayanni, 2004). Alternative tourism refers to the 'way the travel is organised (relative autonomy) and to the tourists' willingness to learn about the host area and to consume environmentally friendly products', whereas SIT forms are defined by the particular motives that stimulate travelling (Spilanis & Vayanni, 2004, p.272).

Nowadays, a shift has been observed in tourism demand towards the NFT (Aguilo, Alegre, & Sard, 2005). In particular, tourists are now more experienced, more impulsive and more volatile, demanding more flexibility and independence (Aguilo et al., 2005). Additionally, owing to the experience that new tourists have, they are extremely diverse, demanding a variety of products, searching for cultural and heritage experiences, less spatially concentrated and do not rely on the cost of packaged products (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2005). They are 'place specific' and 'experience specific' in that the distinctive narrative advantage of a 'unique value proposition'

is based on the specific resources and characteristics of the region, creating circumstances to have a 'unique experience', searching more of an emotional stimuli (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2005, p.46; Marzo-Navarro & Pedraja-Iglesias, 2010). However, Bramwell (2004) argues there are still holidaymakers who prefer mass resorts due to convenience and guaranteed quality. For instance, Aguilo et al. (2005) in a study of the Balearics note that if the mass model changes towards sustainability, it is likely to avoid deterioration.

Nevertheless, many researchers agree that SIT, active and alternative vacations appeal to a greater number of tourists, and are thought to be key in aiding destinations to lengthen their tourism season (Bartolome, Ramos & Rey-Maqueira, 2009; Agarwal, 2002; Spilanis & Vayanni 2004; Garau-Vadell & de Borja-Sole, 2008). Therefore, following on from Spilanis and Vayannis' (2004) definition of SIT where special motives stimulate travel, Douglas, Douglas, and Derret (2001, p.3) define SIT 'as the provision of customised leisure and recreational experiences driven by the specific expressed interest of individuals and groups'.

Read (1980 cited in McKercher & Chan, 2005, p. 21) believes that SIT is 'the hub around which the total travel experience is planned and developed'. In particular, the purpose of travel is based on the special interest that a tourist has in a specific activity, essentially motivating him/her to travel to a certain destination, and all activities in which he/she participates will be associated with the special interest activity. It is argued that SIT can be expressed through four factors – rewarding, enriching, adventure and learning experiences (Douglas et al., 2001).

It is crucial to examine tourists' behaviour through motivation, as motivation is thought to be the primary driver when a person wants to fulfil a need (Lee, 2009; Mak, Wong, & Chang, 2009). The needs that travel is thought to satisfy are psychological (such as internal, intrinsic and individual rewards) and physiological (such as security, food, shelter and so on) (Mak et al., 2009). In general, the internal motives of an individual determine his/her behaviour, and direct them towards their goals, and the motivations of the tourist affects destination choice (Kim, Goh, & Yuan, 2010; Park & Yoon 2009). Therefore, these inner motivations, that can be physiological, egoistical or social, have been characterised as internal stimuli or individual needs (Kim et al., 2010). In contrast, external stimuli are associated to the physical or social factors of the surroundings, such as destinations' attributes and characteristics (Mak et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2010).

A well accepted typology in the literature in order to understand motivation is the push and pull model designed by Crompton in 1979 (Lam & Hsu, 2006). The push and pull concept maintains that decisions on travel are taken, due to a person being *pushed* by motivational factors and being *pulled* by the features of the destination (Kim et al., 2010; Lam & Hsu, 2006).

Specifically, the concept behind the push and pull model is the decomposition of a tourist's choice of destination to two forces; push and pull (Lam & Hsu, 2004). The push factor is the force that pushes the tourist away from home and attempts to create a general desire to go somewhere else, but without stipulating where that may be (Lam & Hsu, 2004). On the other hand, the pull factor is the force that pulls a tourist 'towards a destination due to a region-specific lure, or perceived attractiveness of a destination' (Lam & Hsu, 2004, p. 589). In other words, push factors are associated with internal or emotional factors, whereas pull factors are linked with external, situational or cognitive factors.

People take part in tourism activities in order to satisfy their needs for 'relaxation, knowledge and escape and to develop social relationships' (Lee, 2009, p.218). More specifically, push factors can be perceived as the need for relaxation and escape, fitness and health, adventure and social contact, prestige, family togetherness and excitement (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). In contrast, pull factors are related to the ones that are instigated by the attractiveness of the destination, for instance the beaches, the recreational activities, cultural features, entertainment, the natural environment, and retail shops and parks (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). The characteristics of the destination can inspire and strengthen inherent push factors, given that, the activity provided or characteristics of the destination can create particular intrinsic rewards; for instance, picturesque surroundings can intensify the feeling of escape from daily life.

Travellers' motivations are thought to consist of 'cultural exploration, novelty regression, equilibrium, recovery, known group socialization, external interaction and gregariousness at festival events' (Lee, 2009, p.219). Lam and Hsu (2006) highlight that empirical research on motivations can aid in recognizing the appropriate attributes to be promoted in order to match travellers' motivations; or to recognize segments where the attributes of the destination can match the travellers' motivations.

Tourism in Cyprus

Cyprus is one of the two independent island microstates and the third largest island in the Mediterranean basin. It is an economically developed, mature destination in the Mediterranean region. This research will refer to southern Cyprus (the Greek-Cypriot part). Cyprus is a service-based economy, where the tourism industry is essentially the source of economic growth of the island. Since the late 1970's, it has seen a climatic economic growth, mainly from tourism. Cyprus experienced a tremendously rapid growth in the tourism industry, by exploiting the beaches and favourable climatic conditions Cyprus established itself as a conventional mass, summer destination, focusing on the 3Ss product.

Seasonal fluctuation of demand is a major challenge; in 2009 the months of July until September accounted for 52.9% of total arrivals (Sharpley, 2002; CTO, 2009). In June 2011, the president of the Association of Cyprus Tourist Enterprises (ACTE), Mr. Vavlitis pointed out that seasonality is steadily increasing for a number of years, and has not only resulted but still contributes in the closure of a number of tourism businesses (Sofroniou, 2011). Additionally the lack of labour and arrival of foreign workers has decreased tourist satisfaction as the service offered has become more 'mechanical and formal', thus, losing the traditional Cypriot spirit that visitors seek (Ayres, 2000, p.125; Saveriades, 2000; Adamou & Clerides, 2009).

One major source of seasonality that Cyprus experiences is the one-dimensional tourism product that it offers, thus the island is characterised by the *one-peak* seasonality form (Clerides & Pashourtidou, 2007; Clerides, Filippou, Pashardes, & Pashourtidou, 2009; Fernández-Morales, 2003). Another crucial reason for seasonality is the power that tour operators have within the industry, which allows them to control the characteristics, tourist flows and prices in Cyprus (Sharpley, 2004).

Cypriot tourism organisations have desperately tried to promote Cyprus as a cultural high quality destination (CTO, 2003). However, Sharpley (2001) investigated 40 brochures from

mainstream and package UK based tour operators. He discovered that Cyprus was portrayed as ‘a safe, welcoming summer sun-sea-sand destination, with an emphasis on fun, relaxation and, given its mythical association with Aphrodite, a hint of romance’ (Sharpley, 2001, p.72). Almost no attention was given to the culture and history of Cyprus, which would essentially differentiate it from other Mediterranean destinations. It is clear that the island is not considered as a cultural destination, even though it has a cultural legacy and political/nationalistic history as a foundation for identity-building, which could be utilized as a key attraction (Selanniemi, 2001). Hence, the image of Cyprus as a sun-lust destination can be deemed a critical cause of seasonality.

A study by Clerides and Pashourtidou (2007) reveals that tourists are more likely to be dissatisfied during the low-season, than during the high season -July and November (when the main product of the 3Ss is at its best). During the off-peak season, several tourism businesses are closed, such as water parks, beach bars and some restaurants by the sea. Although, there are many recreational activities taking place, such as sports, the low-season is somewhat quieter than the high-season.

CTO is a semi-governmental organisation in charge of the planning, promotion and marketing of Cyprus as a whole. A strategic plan for the years 2003–2010 was constructed, to tackle the challenges of the tourism industry. The primary target of the plan was to establish a sustainable tourism industry, by diversifying the product, managing seasonality and concentrating on quality and the value for money proposition. However, with its main focus on marketing it can be deduced that the CTO does not have the autonomy and necessary power or resources to influence the tourism development (Cyprus Hotel Association, 2008). Equally, a number of trade unions, such as the Association of Cyprus Travel Agents, are fairly powerful and very influential within the market (Sharpley, 2004). Therefore, although, steps have been taken to achieve the targets of the plan, many strategies have not been achieved, mostly due to the non-interference attitude that characterises the island.

Methodology

A qualitative, interpretive, and inductive research methodology was adopted for this study. This was in an effort to address the following aim: To explore the motivational factors of tourists holidaying in Cyprus in order to establish the way and/or whether these tourists could be motivated to visit the country during low season. The exploratory nature of the research assisted in acquiring new insights and pose questions to evaluate the phenomena in a new light (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). The research encompasses a more subjective nature to social research, by examining and understanding the perceptions and actions of the social actors, namely the tourists (Collis & Hussey, 2003).

The method used for the primary data collection process was semi-structured interviews due to the richness, flexibility and detail that they offer (Collis & Hussey, 2003; Bryman, 2004). The interviews were carried out during August 2009. Both primary and secondary data were used in order to augment the credibility and reliability of the results.

Eighteen holidaymakers were interviewed altogether using the convenience sampling technique meaning choosing interviewees that were available to participate. Therefore, the sample was easily obtained and also offered the researcher the freedom to choose participants who fitted the

respondent profile (Saunders et al., 2009). The principle of data saturation of the grounded theory stipulated the number of interviews. This principle specifies that the interview process is concluded when the themes in the data begin to repeat themselves.

Given that convenience sampling was employed to collect data, there was no strict respondent profile used, apart from them holidaying in Cyprus and having resided on the island for more than three days. This time frame was used in order to ensure that the holidaymakers had experienced Cyprus, hence guaranteeing more accurate insights, thoughts and opinions regarding the island.

Table 1 Profile of respondents (derived from convenience sampling method)

Profile of respondents		
Country of residence	United Kingdom	12
	Germany	5
	Malta	1
Age	25-34	4
	35-45	10
	Over 45	4
Holidaying with...	Family	12
	Couples	6
Location of interview	Larnaka :	Total participants: 7
	Agios Lazaros Church	3
	Phinikoudes beach	4
	Limassol:	Total Participants: 11
	Medieval Castle	8
	Molos beach	3

Source: Author's own

The profile of the respondents obtained consisted of couples and family members, over 25 years-old. All participants came from the European Union; twelve respondents from the UK, five from Germany, and one from Malta (table 1). This variability of the sample regarding their country of residence was due to the fact that the UK and Germany are two key markets for Cyprus; hence, a number of visitors originated from these countries. Additionally, the main sun-and-sea product of Cyprus is attractive to the biggest segment of the tourism market, since it can offer both “passive recreation” (e.g. lying on the beach) or a “more active past time” (e.g. water sports) (Holloway, 2006 p.189). Therefore, Cyprus targets tourists of various demographic groups. Hence the distribution of the sample includes various age groups as well as families and couples. Exploring the views and motivations of the main segment in Cyprus, in terms of the visiting period, could offer information on what products might influence this segment to visit during the low season, as well. In order to gain information from holidaymakers with different interests the sample was collected in the towns of Larnaka and Limassol at tourist frequented places such as the Medieval Castle of Limassol, a popular choice among tourists since it features in many tourist guides; Molos beach in Limassol, one of the busiest beaches in Limassol, the Agios Lazaros (Saint Lazaros) Church, one of the most momentous Byzantine monuments in Larnaka and Cyprus as a whole; and finally Phinikoudes beach, one of Larnaka's busiest beaches. The interviews were carried out in person and on a one-to-one basis. A voice recorder was used to record the interviewees' responses supported by handwritten notes in case the voice recorder broke down. Finally the data were transcribed and grounded theory was employed to analyse them.

Grounded theory facilitated disaggregation of the data in order to develop patterns and relationships for the creation development of a theoretical framework (Goulding, 2002). This is done through coding strategies (Goulding, 2002). Three types of coding are applied open, axial and selective. However, before continuing with open coding all interviews recorded were

transcribed as transcribing allows the researcher to examine the statements of the respondents more thoroughly (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Once transcribing was completed open coding was applied.

The open coding process entailed the identification, analysis and classification of the data collected. In other words all data was disaggregated and codes were detected (see figure 1). All data were coded together, as the questions asked to all respondents related to all objectives. All codes selected derived from their direct relevance to the research and they take the form of a word, a sentence or a small paragraph.

Figure 2: Illustration example of the coding process

As soon as codes were established, questions such as who, where, what, how and so on were asked, to aid in opening up the data and to prompt the identification of likely similarities or dissimilarities between phenomena (see figure 2). Afterwards, the codes identified were placed into individual units of information and a conceptual label was given for each unit. Thus, the data were more identifiable and easier to manage.

The conceptual units discovered were later organised into a pattern of concepts and categorized along with their characteristics and attributes. To accomplish this, distinct units of information were classified into specific ideas (concepts), and consecutively related concepts were organised together into a category. Subsequently, two categories were identified: *tourists' image of Cyprus* and *tourists' motivational factors*. Both categories identified are interconnected as it is important to take all issues into consideration to gain a holistic account of the tourists' motivations when visiting Cyprus. These categories were identified bearing in mind the literature reviewed, the content of the concepts and the researcher's scholarly knowledge (See appendix A for an example of a coded interview; See appendix B for an illustration of the coding process).

Following the identification of codes, concepts and categories, axial coding was applied. Axial coding involves the process of seeking relationships between the categories and its concepts by rearranging and rebuilding the data into various patterns. Additionally, the prepositions were derived by taking into account the number of times an issue was mentioned by the interviewees, its distinctiveness, and its relevance to the research and literature. Three prepositions were developed; for the *tourists' image of Cyprus* category the preposition *the image of Cyprus as a sun and sea destination is perceived as a hindrance in the diversification process* arose; and for the *tourists' motivational factors* category the prepositions developed were, firstly, *Special Interest Products (SIP) as a factor for choosing Cyprus as a winter destination* and secondly, *push and pull factors and their role in the holiday decision-making process*.

Lastly, selective coding was carried out which involved detecting the central category in order to link the other categories with it; the goal was to amalgamate the research and develop a grounded theory. Thus, during this stage a storyline was built that linked the categories and described all the key phenomena that were evident in the research.

The story revealed that Cyprus is a destination that does have the necessary characteristics to fulfil the external and internal motivations of tourists when visiting the island, both during the summer and winter season. Since, it can develop the essential special interest products that would attract tourists throughout the year, for sporting, cultural and maritime activities, thus fulfilling new tourists' demands. However, its current narrow image as a sun-and-sea destination, which essentially portrays the pull factors to the island, prevents tourists from seeing Cyprus as a year-round destination. The present image is based on common features such as climatic conditions, the sea and geographical location and not on unique characteristics of the island such as the culture and nature of the people or any exclusive special interest products which could assist in altering its image and extent the tourism season.

Consequently, discussed below are the issues that need to be considered in order to increase the motivational factors of holidaymakers and to assist in mitigating seasonal fluctuations of demand.

Findings and analysis

The image of Cyprus as a sun and sea destination is perceived as a hindrance in the diversification process

The corporate image of Cyprus - which refers to the perception people have of it as a destination - has been identified as a contributing factor to seasonality, hence, it is thought to be a barrier to the diversification process. Two tourists' state:

'I see Cyprus as long beaches, lots of sunshine, nice cafes and restaurants,'

'sunny with nice beaches, and picturesque'.

Sastre and Benito (2001) argue that the highly seasonal sun-and-sea product prevents the destination from lengthening its tourism season. Thus, the image that Cyprus is promoting contributes to seasonality.

Although all tourists associate Cyprus with sun-and-sea, five participants note that they associate it with culture as well. Indicative examples are:

‘I see Cyprus as friendly people, lovely climate, ancient sites’

‘I see Cyprus as a historic but progressive, thriving place with a friendly buzz’.

These five participants had visited over the winter season as well, thus, they had had more time to explore the island than those who were visiting over the summer season for the first time. Hence, the image that they have could be attributed to the greater knowledge that they had of Cyprus. This is also supported by Beerli and Martín (2004) who argue that tourists who are more familiar with a place have images that are more holistic, psychological, and unique. They further argue that people less familiar with the destination have images that are mostly based on characteristics, common attributes and functional features.

Bramwell (2004) identifies that the stereotypical image based on sun, coast and landscape is a threat that most mass mature Mediterranean islands face. The images that these destinations have are mostly based on common characteristics and functional features and do not create a unique attribute; therefore, they are easily replaced by other destinations (Ioannides, 2002).

In addition, the image that they have could be perceived as seasonal, since Cyprus is only associated with sun-and-sea (Sastre & Benito, 2001). This is also supported by the findings, as eight interviewees responded that it would not be a destination that they would consider for winter holidays; this indicates that they associate Cyprus with the summer season and hot weather. As a respondent states he would not visit over the winter as:

‘I see Cyprus as a sun-and-sea destination’,

while another notes

‘no, I don’t think that Cyprus is offered as a winter destination...I would prefer to go to Tenerife or something similar as you have guaranteed sun during the winter’.

These responses indicate that tourists do not associate Cyprus with activities that they could pursue during the winter. However, there are special interest activities that they could pursue at that time of year, such as spas and wellness products, sports, wildlife activities, and cultural events, among others. Yet, they perceive that Cyprus can only offer summer pursuits.

However, ten respondents do claim that they would visit Cyprus over the winter, with two emphasizing:

‘yes, because of the weather; weather is very important for me’

‘once I am retired I would like to come over the winter...the weather is pretty good over the winter as well’.

The favourable climatic conditions are still the major motivational factor for tourists, rather than any other, and Cyprus has built its image as a destination around this. The mild climate over the winter is of course a great advantage; however, this is a factor that is similar for most Mediterranean destinations and it does not differentiate Cyprus from other places. As Ioannides (2002) maintains the ‘could be anywhere’ sun-and-sea image is very easily substituted by that of another destination. Therefore, particularly during the winter season, when the main product of Cyprus (sun-and-sea) is not at its best, it does not offer a product that can distinguish the island from other destinations.

Additionally, Papatheodorou (2002) argues that the image and status of the resort influence its diversification in tourism amenities and activities. Therefore, since Cyprus has a sun-lust image it is difficult to attract into the area other types of visitors or investment which would aid the diversification process. This demonstrates the important role that the image of Cyprus plays in developing winter tourism. Based on Papatheodorou’s argument, given a more diverse image, Cyprus might attract different types of investment that could facilitate the development of various activities and infrastructure.

Moreover, ten of the research participants would visit Cyprus over the winter season due to the mild climate; hence, holidaymakers are unaware of any unique experiences offered by the island. As the findings demonstrate, the image that Cyprus has could be perceived as a hindrance in addressing seasonality. Consequently, it should concentrate on altering its conventional image, and promote more unique characteristics, thus, preventing the continuation of the declining trend that the industry is experiencing.

SIP as a factor for choosing Cyprus as a winter destination

As, Jang (2004) argues, tourists have different motivations across seasons, therefore, it is imperative to identify the products that could influence the high season tourists to visit Cyprus during the low season. The data analysis indicates that SIP could be a stimulus and an influencing factor in the decision-making process, given that the special interest activity is the hub where the whole travel experience is arranged and developed (Read, 1980 cited in McKercher & Chan, 2005). The analysis demonstrates that all respondents would be willing to travel to Cyprus during the winter season as long as the product offered was of interest to them. As one interviewee states:

‘if the activity would appeal to me personally it would definitely influence my decision in travelling to Cyprus’.

Therefore, the analysis shows that tourists visiting during the low season are more likely to pursue other forms of pastime as well, rather than focus on the sun-and-sea product. As a holidaymaker that visited during the winter points out,

‘we walked around the Troodos mountains on the trails, it was really nice, and visited the old town of Larnaka’.

As Kastenholz and Lopes de Almeida (2008) identify, tourists visiting during the low season are more interested in the cultural attributes of the destination, the closeness to nature, the existence of a certain level of isolation, picturesque scenery, peace and quiet and an unpolluted environment; whereas tourists visiting over the summer are more concerned about the climate, nightlife, and usually prefer the coastal areas. Therefore, it could be observed that winter tourists prefer to explore the destination, and seek unique experiences. Hence, the diversification of the current product and promotion of SIP could encourage tourists to choose Cyprus as a winter destination (Bartolome et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the findings reveal special interest activities that holidaymakers would like to pursue in Cyprus, products that would be appealing to them, and would thus assist in lengthening the tourism season. Cultural events are identified as the most appealing pursuits that would attract tourists to visit Cyprus. Equally, Aksu and Silva (2009) highlighted the cultural and architectural heritage of the destination as a key pursuit for the winter tourist. As two of the interviewees note:

‘Cyprus does have a certain history and therefore some cultural and historical events or activities would be good’,

‘I would visit because of the historical aspects of Cyprus, and I would focus more on the cultural aspects’.

Other popular magnets that the data analysis highlights are SIP concerning the sea, in particular maritime activities or events, as well as sporting and eco-friendly attractions such as trekking, climbing, and agrotourism. As three respondents say,

‘I would love activities to do with the sea, such as diving and snorkelling. I love ports and marinas so activities to do with that would be great [...]. Cyprus should take advantage of the beautiful sea that it has’,

‘specific events for sports would definitely make me visit Cyprus during the winter months’,

‘I am very big into environmentally friendly things. So yes, if they truly advertised such things, this would attract me’.

Cyprus could easily provide the maritime, sports, eco-friendly products that tourists demand, due to the geographical characteristics of the island. In particular, sporting calendars have been highlighted as a contributing factor to seasonality (Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2005). Moreover, tourists visiting over the winter want to be closer to nature, and seek an unpolluted environment (Kastenholz & Lopes de Almeida, 2008). For instance, a study participant who had visited over the winter states:

‘we went to Kykkos monastery and explored the Troodos mountains and other monasteries around the area’.

Therefore, organising, for example, maritime and sporting events, such as golf, as well as eco-

friendly attractions and improving access and activities in relation to the hinterland could influence visitors' choice of Cyprus as a winter destination.

SIP have been identified as a very important factor in fulfilling the motivations of holidaymakers during the off-peak season, thus mitigating seasonality. SIP are the hub of the travel experience and as long as the product offered is targeted at the correct market it could influence the decision of holidaymakers. As, Spencer and Holecek (2007) affirm, due to the diversity of the low season market, attention paid to attracting and serving specific segments of the market is more likely to succeed than efforts to attract and serve low season tourists in general.

Push and pull factors and their role in the holiday decision-making process

All respondents identify the climatic conditions of Cyprus as one of the most important pull factors, with two tourists stating:

‘you get guaranteed sunny weather in August’,

‘I came to Cyprus to escape the British weather for a hotter climate’.

Furthermore, the climatic conditions of Cyprus have been emphasized as an important factor by the ten respondents that would consider visiting Cyprus over the winter. Two state:

‘the weather is pretty good over the winter as well’,

‘summer weather even in autumn time’.

The climatic conditions in Cyprus are a great advantage as the 3Ss, which are its core product, are still thought to appeal to the largest segment of the market (Holloway, 2006). This finding may be attributed to the season in which the research took place. As, tourists visiting in the peak season may seek different benefits than and have different preferences, to the off-peak season tourist (Kastenholz & Lopes de Almeida, 2008). In other words, the research was undertaken in summer, the peak tourism season in Cyprus, where tourists are more interested in the climatic conditions of the destination (Kastenholz & Lopes de Almeida, 2008).

The geographical location of Cyprus was also highlighted by the interviewees as an important pull factor. A tourist from Malta and a tourist from the UK, which constitutes a key Cypriot target market, assert:

‘Cyprus was somewhere in the middle, as when we first met I travelled from Malta and my wife from Russia’,

‘I chose Cyprus due to the short flight time’.

Ioannides, Apostolopoulos, and Sonmez (2001) as well as Apostolopoulos, Loukissas, and Leontidou (2001) affirm that the proximity of the southern Mediterranean to the European market is an important attribute of the islands. Thus, the proximity of Cyprus to its main issuing markets, such as Germany and the UK, is a significant pull factor.

Furthermore, the analysis indicates that the Cypriot people in particular, are a complementary pull factor for tourists visiting the island. Two respondents comment:

‘an important factor was the friendly reputation of Cypriots’,

‘the friendliness of the Cypriot people’

Saveriades (2000) and Ayres (2002) identify the traditional warmth and friendliness of the people as a factor that tourists seek from Cyprus as a destination; a factor which adds to the satisfaction level of visitors. Three other interviewees note that Cyprus is *English friendly*, and one asserts that this is an important pull factor, with another saying:

‘Cyprus is an English speaking country and I thought it would be easier to communicate’.

Sharpley (2001) argues that due to the fact that English is widely spoken on the island, the appeal of Cyprus is increased for British nationals.

The pull factors that have been identified by the analysis are the external, situational and cognitive factors that influence the decision-making process of tourists. More specifically, these pull factors could attract holidaymakers to a specific destination due to that destinations’ attributes. It is important for Cyprus to be aware of the pull factors that attract its visitors, in order to promote these attributes to holidaymakers along with additional products that could attract tourists during the low season.

However, it could be argued that the cultural and historical pull factors transform to a push factor as tourists want to increase their knowledge and pursue a unique experience. Hence, the reasons that they chose Cyprus were more emotional and internal. In other words, tourists are pushed by internal factors; socio-psychological motivations that create the desire for people to travel such as the need for knowledge (Lam & Hsu, 2004). As one participant asserts:

‘I believed that Cyprus was a different place to visit’.

The analysis suggests that Cyprus is a destination that could fulfil the internal motivations that tourists have. The interviewees identify relaxation, enhancing their knowledge and having a unique experience as important psychological benefits that made them go on holiday, and choose Cyprus. Four respondents comment:

‘I came to Cyprus to relax and get some clarity of mind’,

‘this holiday is just for relaxation’,

‘was education and relaxation, just to see how different people live’,

‘relaxation plus cultural information, because I am really interested in the history and culture of different countries’.

The relaxation that Cyprus could offer to the tourists also fulfils the need to escape from the daily routine of one’s life, and relaxation and escape are two push factors that stimulate people to take part in tourism activities. Additionally, tourists chose Cyprus to experience the culture of the island and gain a unique experience, therefore, education was an important psychological benefit that visitors believed they could gain from the destination.

Both push and pull factors are crucial. However, pull factors exert a *pull* on the tourist towards a specific destination (Lam & Hsu, 2004). The above examination of the findings has shown that the two most important pull factors of Cyprus are not unique to the island. These are its climatic conditions and the location. However, it could be argued that the secondary factors identified, of traditional Cypriot hospitality, cultural aspects and historical ties with Britain, are to a certain extent unique to Cyprus. Therefore, Cyprus should focus on increasing the pull factors that would attract holidaymakers to the island.

Conclusion

The purpose of the research was to identify, explore and inform knowledge on the motivations of tourists visiting Cyprus, a mature, mass, sun-and-sea Mediterranean island. In particular, it examines the current corporate image that tourists have of the island and identifies the pull and push factors that would attract tourists during the winter season, thereby, offering the necessary provisions to mitigate the extreme seasonal fluctuations of demand that it suffers. The research follows a qualitative interpretive inductive approach which employed Cyprus as a case study. This aids in acquiring a better understanding of the interviewees’ decision-making processes and help to detect and elucidate the unique features that the island has, thus resulting in more interesting findings.

As a result the findings reveal that Cyprus does have the features required to fulfil the push and pull motivational factors of tourists visiting either during the low or the high season. However, its seasonal image as a sun-and-sea destination precludes visitors’ view of the island as a year-round destination. The image that holidaymakers have is based mostly on the characteristics of Cyprus, common attributes and functional features, such as the long beaches, sunny weather, restaurants and so on, but these can be found in many Mediterranean destinations. Furthermore, since, tourists only associate Cyprus with hot summer weather, they are unaware of activities that they could pursue during the winter months, or any unique experiences that they could seek out on the island. Therefore, Cyprus should focus on diversifying its product, as well as effectively communicate the new products to the market in order to successfully extend its tourism season.

This can aid in creating new and unique push and pull factors for tourists to visit Cyprus, since the primary pull factors that would essentially draw visitors towards a specific destination are not unique. Having a hot climate is essentially an advantage for the island, however promoting only the weather, not only does not differentiate Cyprus from its competitors, but also, in effect

only associates the island with the summer season. These issues augment current competition from new destinations. The push factors identified indicate that Cyprus does have the necessary attributes to create unique magnets, as people escape their everyday life to pursue authentic experiences. Hence, it is crucial that these factors are utilized to aid in the diversification process.

Although this study was carried out in Cyprus, the findings indicate broader relationships that could be beneficial for other similar sun-and-sea destinations, such as Malta, struggling with extreme seasonality. In particular, it is apparent that the image tourists hold of a destination is a strong barrier in extending its tourism season. This is because tourists to a large extent have a formulated seasonal image in their mind, which makes them associate the destination mostly with a sun-and-sea type, which in effect limits their ability to envisage any other products on offer during the winter.

Additionally, the development of SIT and alternative forms of tourism is perceived to be a vital factor for winter tourism development, due to their year-round appeal. Given that, the product is the primary goal of the travel, and the hub around which the whole travel is organized, the season is of not such a great significance. However, it should be noted that the product should not be aligned with the current sun-and-sea one, in order to aid the diversification of the destination's image. Visitors who are motivated by SIP could travel anytime of the year to enjoy the newly created product on offer. Cultural attractions, such as tours of religious or ancient sites, have been identified as the most appealing to holidaymakers, along with maritime and sporting activities and/or events, and eco-friendly attractions, such as trekking or agro tourism.

Implications and Future Research

Seasonality has been a long standing issue for many sun-and-sea Mediterranean destinations, since it impacted negatively on their economical and socio-cultural aspects. Accordingly, this research informs knowledge on the tourist demands, advising on the factors that need to be considered by mature sun-and-sea destinations to mitigate seasonality. It offers valuable information on opportunities Cyprus and other destinations with similar qualities and /or characteristics could use in order to successfully diversify their product. It specifically, presents information regarding special interest market segments that could be attracted during the low season. However, it is vital to note that caution should be used since the push and pull factors of tourists, may also be attached to specific attributes of the destination (Rude? et al., 2011). For instance, Rude? et al. (2011) in their study regarding the benefits sought by tourists in Portoro? identified that some of the benefits sought were destination-specific such as curiosity and seaside passivity. This is because these benefits were not evident in other related studies which examined destinations with similar attributes.

Nevertheless, the study has revealed that promoting successfully mature Mediterranean seaside destinations, through various special interest products, such as sport or cultural ones can increase low season tourism flow. In particular, utilising special interest products which are purposively promoted during the low season will not only increase tourist arrivals but will also aid in encouraging tourists to see that the destination offers more than just the sun-and-sea product. However, such information would bear more gravity if supported by both the private and public sector. Therefore, a more organised approach should be taken, with specific policies focusing on

an effective communication plan to promote the desired image and products, as well as the creation of the necessary infrastructure.

This exploratory research reveals special tourism products that could entice high season tourists to visit a destination during the low season. However, destination management organisations should initially explore whether their existing product is able to satisfy the demands of the winter tourists in order to establish the actions needed to be taken either to improve or to build upon it. Further research could investigate the special interest segments that may be evident in other seasons, such as winter or autumn. This is because such an examination could present an opportunity to compare and contrast the special interest segments prevalent in each season so as to identify similar incidents and patterns. Thus enabling the destination, to direct its efforts on specific segments that could be utilized for other seasons. Additionally, it would be beneficial to examine the profitability of each special interest segment, in essence to investigate whether it is beneficial for a destination to invest in these special interest markets.

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Figure 1 Example of a coded interview