

THE ROLE OF TOURIST INFORMATION CENTERS IN THE DECISION TO PURCHASE TOURIST SERVICES

IVANIC ALEXANDRU¹, CONTOR ROXANA DORINA², GENIG ANCA GABRIELA²,
FIRU-NEGOESCU GHEORGHE ADRIAN², CONSTANTINESCU SIMONA CRISTINA^{*2}

¹*University of Life Sciences „King Mihai I” from Timisoara,
Faculty of Food Engineering, Romania*

²*University of Life Sciences „King Mihai I” from Timisoara,
Faculty of Management and Rural Tourism, Romania*

*Corresponding author's e-mail: simona_constantinescu@usvt.ro

Abstract: *Information plays a fundamental role in tourism. The Tourist Information Centers complement and restructure this fact, at the national level. The activities that the Tourist Information Centers carry out contribute substantially to the promotion of local, regional and national potential, as well as to the improvement of the image both for the tourist destination in question and for Romania, as a whole, as an international destination. When a tourist arrives in an unknown city, the Tourist Information Center (CIT) should be the first place he visits in order to obtain information on the regional tourist offer, being an implicit tool for promoting the quality of tourism services.*

Key words: *information, promotion, image, sustainable development of tourism, local tourism product*

INTRODUCTION

Being located at the confluence of all sources of information, it is the place where tourists will receive relevant data. Both the first impression and the services offered in the center are decisive, as they will be associated with the rest of the stay spent in the area. Thus, for the sustainable development of tourism at the local and regional level, it is very important that the objectives set by CITs are achievable. When establishing the vision and development objectives, it is essential that civil society, the community, and all local actors participate, primarily targeting those directly involved in the field of tourism, because they are the ones who give content to the local tourism product. [5,11,13,14,19]

Local identity and the authenticity of the travel destination play an increasingly important role. In such a local tourism model, it can be established, for example, which forms of tourism should be promoted as a priority in an area. Thus, a locality or a tourist area can mainly address tourists who practice active tourism, while a neighboring locality can have as its point of attraction rest and recreation tourism in nature, health, culture and tradition, ecotourism, etc. [2,3,17,20,21]

The good management of the CIT is the responsibility of the Director of the Tourist Information Center. He is actively involved in supporting the views of the business community, establishing partnerships for promotion, improving the quality of services, encouraging investments, cooperating with similar centers in the country or abroad. He must be a specialized person (graduate of the Tourist Information Center Director professional training program), who must coordinate the activity of the center, ensure the provision of tourist information to visitors, and promote the entire heritage as a tourist.[18,20]

In 2020, 21 tourist information and promotion centers were accredited, which theoretically should help tourists with various information regarding accommodation options, transportation, and tourist attractions, but it often happened that these centers were not even open. [1,3,4,9,10,15]

In Romania, there are 106 tourist information and promotion centers subordinated to the local councils of various localities, according to data from the Ministry of Economy.

The role of these centers is to provide tourists with information on accommodation options, tourist attractions, transportation options, but also to offer visitors local, regional and national promotional materials. [6,7,8,12,17,18,20]

In addition to these duties, such centers can carry out "local and regional market research activities, analysis, planning, structuring and drafting proposals for local and regional tourism development and tourism marketing, in collaboration with local public administration authorities and the central public administration authority responsible for tourism", according to the Ministerial Order published in the Official Gazette on August 28, 2020 regarding the methodological norms regarding the organization, functioning, role, duties, accreditation and re-accreditation of national and local tourism information and promotion centers. [16,18,19,21]



Figure 1. Services offered by the National Tourist Information Center

Source: own creation

The CITs were not established at the same time, so the initial space and staffing conditions were completely different from one case to another. Local and regional target groups are not always comparable, which means that CITs should offer differentiated packages of information and tourist offers. In addition, new themes have emerged against the backdrop of new trends and new competitive conditions, which are constantly changing on the Romanian market and on various foreign markets. In short, the CITs cannot be easily compared with each other, although, in principle, the same general rules apply to all of them. [6,8,12,14,15]

CITs meet the customers' desire to be offered, in addition to information and recommendations, the possibility of purchasing the desired services. [10,12,16,17]

Regardless of whether they are organized at local or regional level, CITs must be integrated into a national network. This network must be organized based on a national standard for the organization and functioning of CITs, which should ensure the promotion of Romania on the international market, as a tourist country with a tradition. Such a standard represents the guarantee that the Romanian population (who wishes to travel to destinations in the country), Romanian or foreign travel agents and foreign tourists can request and obtain the desired information from any CIT in Romania. [16,19,20]

The information disseminated in CITs also contributes to the promotion of the destination "Romania", to the formation of an image about the country. Consequently, the management and transmission of information also implies political responsibility at the national level. [9,18,21]

From an administrative point of view, a CIT (regardless of whether it is representative at local or regional level) can be organized as an independent administrative

unit, which may or may not belong to the relevant ministry, county or local administration. There are other types of organization that will be presented in the next chapter. [18,19,21]

From a marketing point of view and considering the most modern information technologies, CIT can be a department of a destination management or marketing organization (DMO). These departments only have the role of taking on front-office tasks, namely providing information to tourists arriving at the destination. Back-office tasks (which usually include activities specific to destination marketing, for example: presence on the Internet, participation in tourism fairs, advertising, etc.) can be taken over by other departments of the destination management or marketing organizations (DMO). All efforts must lead to better promotion of the destination. [20,21]

The Tourist Information Center is an important tool in promoting tourist destinations. Here is the confluence of all information, coming from different sources. From here, tourists directly obtain their first dates for their vacation or through information posted on the websites of the destinations. The services offered by CIT and the first impression created are decisive, because many tourists associate it with the rest of the stay they will spend in the area. We all know that tourism is always influenced by the socio-economic and political situation. For this reason, it is very important for the sustainable development of local and regional tourism to have achievable and clear objectives. [17,20]

In such a local tourism model, it can be established, for example, which forms of tourism should be promoted in the locality and which should not. Thus, a destination can be oriented towards the needs of tourists who practice active tourism, while the neighboring destination has as its point of attraction the tourism of rest and recreation in nature. Such a model must establish the scope of services provided, the directions aimed at customer orientation and the place it occupies on the local and regional market. [19-21]

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In this paper, we aimed to find out what is the importance of Tourist Information Centers in the vision of the inhabitants, regardless of the role they play – as tourists or simple inhabitants of the respective locality.

The simplest way to have the expected results as quickly and easily as possible seemed to us to resort to the questionnaire method, a method that we applied on site, appealing to the kindness of the employees of such a center, the Tourist Information Center in Caransebeș, to whom we thank. The questionnaires were applied between November 2023 and April 2024 to 975 people who visited the respective center.

RESEARCH RESULTS

As seems logical and obvious, the vast majority of those who used the services of the tourist information center were those who had the status of tourists in that area.

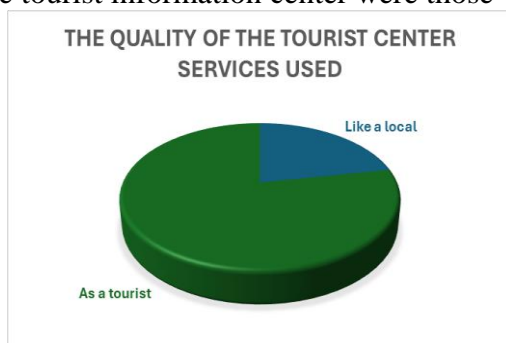


Figure 2. The quality of the tourist center services used

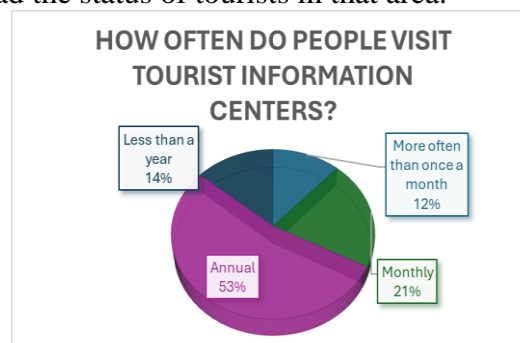


Figure 3. How often do people visit tourist information centers

Source: data interpretation after processing the questionnaire

The majority of the population uses the services and information obtained through tourist information centers once a year. A relatively small number visit or use such services on a monthly or even more frequent basis, and those who use this means of information less than once a year are relatively small in number.

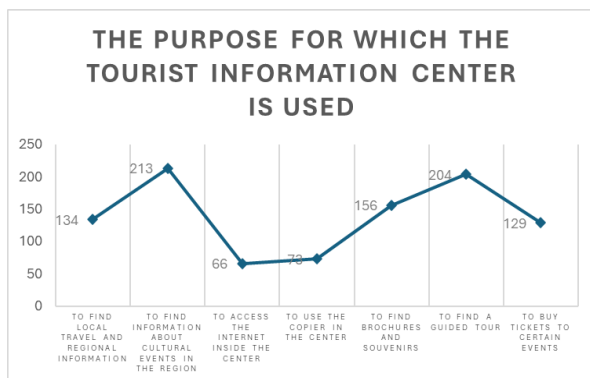


Figure 4. The purpose for which the tourist information center is used

Source: data interpretation after processing the questionnaire

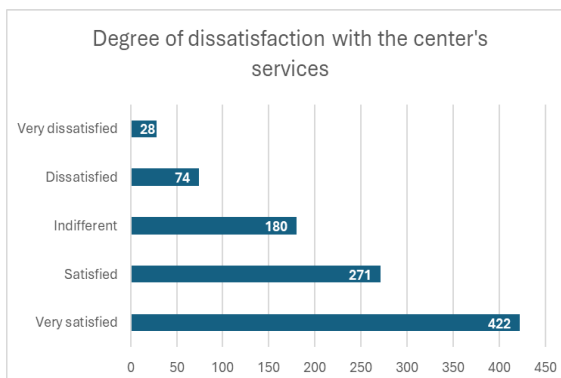


Figure 5. Degree of dissatisfaction with the center's services

Given that the majority of those who visit tourist information centers are tourists, it seems normal that the majority of responses are those like "To find information about local travel and the region", "To find information about cultural events in the region", "To find brochures and souvenirs", "To find a guided tour". The purpose of the locals, however, is completely different, as can be seen, they visit the center either to access the internet inside the center or to use the copier inside it.

We can note that the majority of those who used the services of the tourist information center declared themselves satisfied with these services, the number of those dissatisfied or very dissatisfied being small, and the number of people who declared themselves indifferent or preferred not to answer the question being quite small.

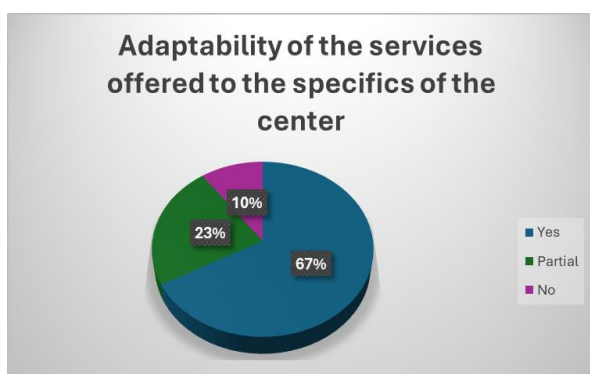


Figure 5. Adaptability of the services offered to the specifics of the center

Source: data interpretation after processing the questionnaire

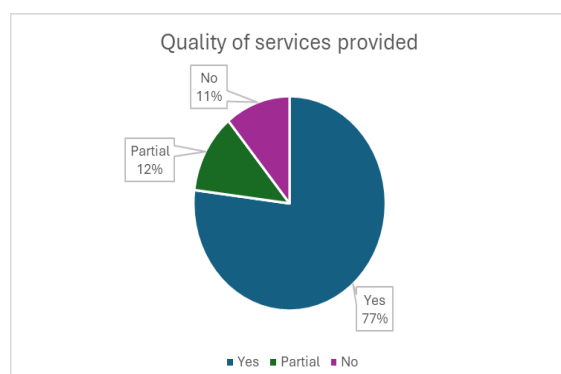


Figure 6. Quality of services provided

Quality of services offered When asked whether the type of services the center offers seems adapted to its specifics, 67% of those interviewed answered yes, 23% said partially and 10% said no, refusing to tell us the reasons for their statement.

A very small percentage of those who used the center's services declared themselves dissatisfied with the quality of the services it offers (11%), an equally small number declared themselves only partially satisfied (12%), while the majority declared themselves satisfied with the services provided during their visit to the center.

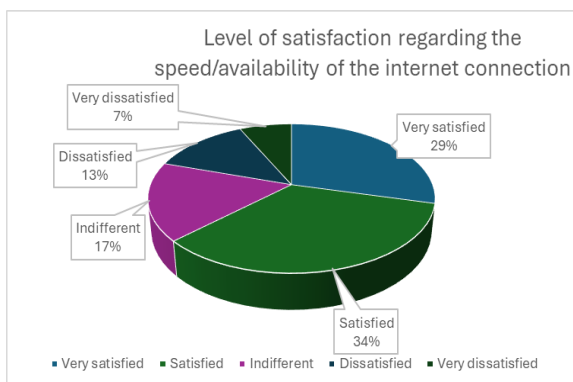


Figure 7. Level of satisfaction regarding the speed/availability of the internet connection

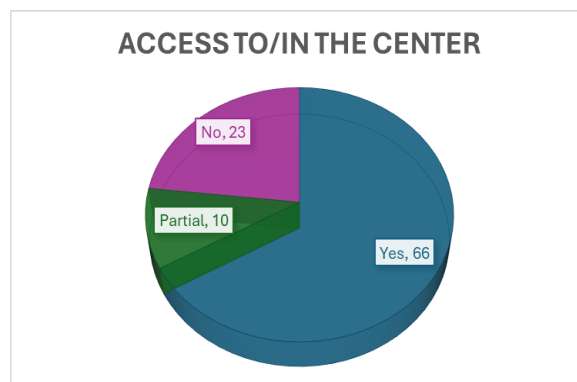


Figure 8. Access to/in the center

Source: data interpretation after processing the questionnaire

The speed, respectively the availability of the internet connection inside the center, was one of the questions asked to the people who took part in our interview. And from this point of view, we can note a high level of satisfaction regarding this service that the center offers to its visitors.

One of the questions that seemed to us of great importance for our study was the one regarding access to and in the tourist training center. Although the majority of those who answered our questions gave an affirmative answer, it seems that, nevertheless, some of the visitors to the center had some difficulties in identifying or finding it, possibly even in how to enter it (23% stated that access was partially difficult and 10% gave a negative answer).

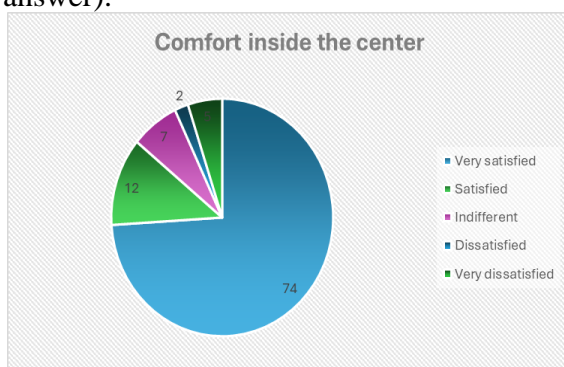


Figure 9. Comfort inside the center

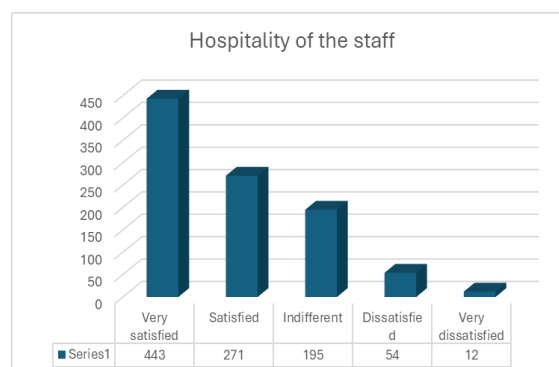


Figure 10. Hospitality of the staff

Source: data interpretation after processing the questionnaire

Considering the fact that there is the possibility of spending quite a lot of time inside the tourist information center in order to obtain all the information or services desired, we found it quite interesting to take into account the comfort that this center offers its customers.

We consider an aspect worth taking into account to be the hospitality of the staff serving this center, the way they welcome their visitors, the way they answer their questions and get involved in solving the problems they raise or in offering services adapted to all requested requirements.



Figure 11. The professionalism and level of training of the staff

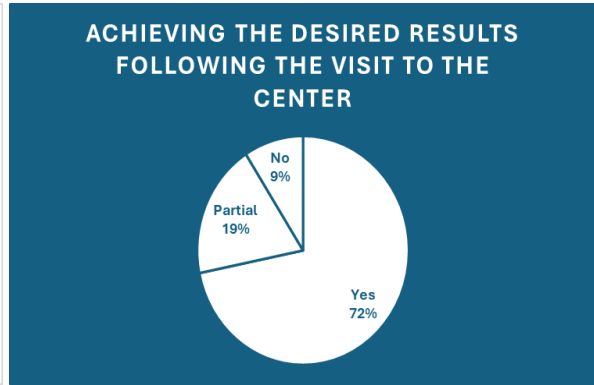


Figure 12. Achieving the desired results following the visit to the center

Source: data interpretation after processing the questionnaire

The quality of services offered by a tourist information center is closely correlated with the professionalism of its employees and their level of training. It is no use providing quality services if the level of training and culture of its employees, as well as their professionalism, leaves much to be desired.

The tourist information center that we turned to to achieve our objectives more than fulfills the purpose for which it was created, and those who cross its threshold obtain, following their visit, the desired and expected results.

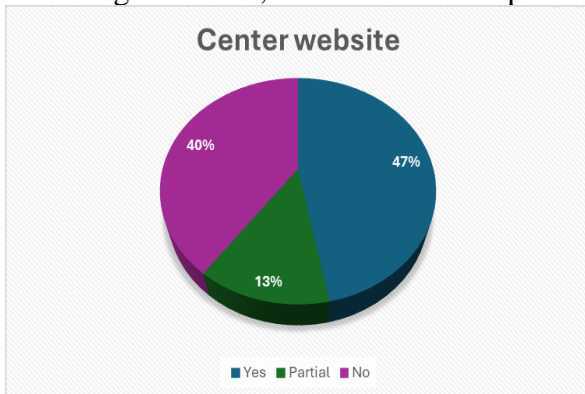


Figure 13. Center website

Source: data interpretation after processing the questionnaire

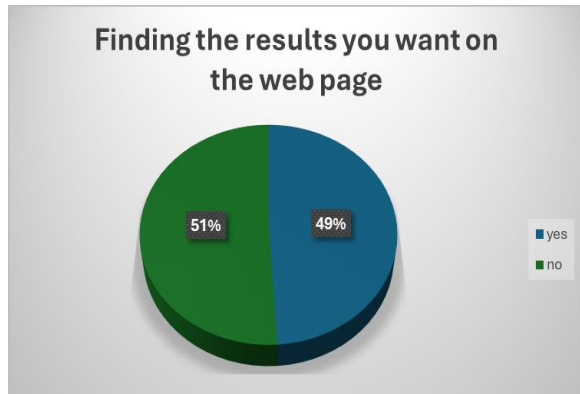


Figure 14. Finding the results you want on the web page

Although many confirmed their visit on the center's website, an almost equally large number stated that they did not do so, preferring to come to the center in person.

In terms of finding the answers they were looking for on the center's website, the situation is somewhat balanced, with the difference between those who found the answer to what they were looking for on the center's website being almost equal to those who were not satisfied with the information they found.

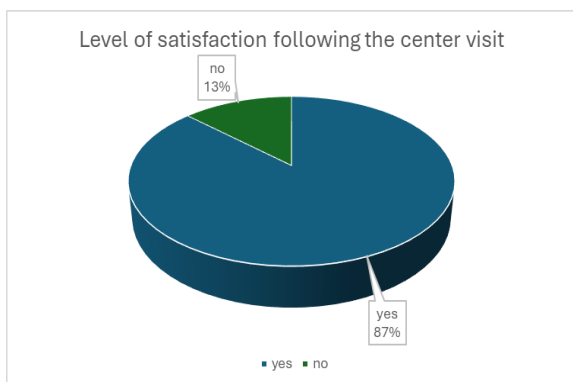


Figure 15. Level of satisfaction following the center visit

Source: data interpretation after processing the questionnaire

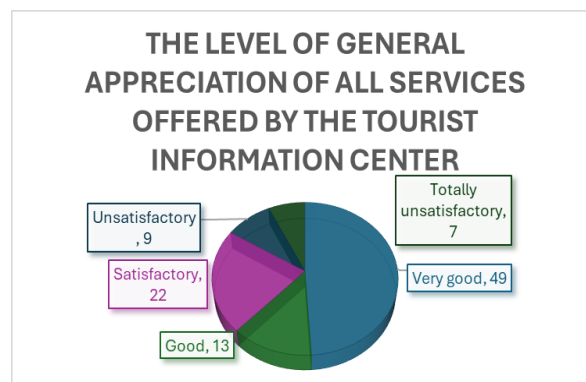


Figure 16. The level of general appreciation of all services offered by the tourist information center

The answer was completely different to the question of whether the visit to the tourist information center met expectations and requirements, with most declaring themselves satisfied following this visit.

Regarding the appreciation of all the services offered by the center, we can state that the tourist information center we chose is one that justifies its activity for which it was created, offering quality information and services to those who enter its interior and reasons for satisfaction to visitors.



Figure 17. The level of general appreciation of all services offered by the tourist information center

Source: data interpretation after processing the questionnaire

The answers to the question of whether the information received at the center was useful in making decisions to purchase tourist services further highlight the role that tourist information centers play in the decision to purchase certain tourist services.

The last questions asked to visitors were those corresponding to the status of those who chose to visit the tourist information center.

There is some balance between the gender of those who answered the questions asked through the questionnaire, the vast majority of interviewees have education and their background is predominantly urban.

CONCLUSIONS

The people employed in Tourist Information Centers can be considered part of the front line, considering all aspects related to tourism. These employees, together with those

at the hotel reception and the staff of travel agencies, constitute part of those on whom tourism and the promotion of tourist services depend to the greatest extent. Taking into account the fact that Tourist Promotion Centers are widely spread throughout our country, being distributed in all regions of the country, their employees must be able to provide information and services of exceptional quality, to know how to promote a particular tourist destination and to offer customers tourist services and trips that meet the needs and expectations of customers, at the best possible price/quality ratio. To the same extent, they must be capable of identifying and promoting the opportunities that tourism can offer to local communities through its existence.

The support of Tourist Information Centers is carried out at the local level, mostly by the city halls.

The main mission of a Tourist Information Center is to fulfill the following needs:

- Producing, distributing, managing information to tourists through local tourist offices in the chosen destination.
- Providing multiple services in terms of managing the tourist destination by constantly updating information at both regional and local levels. For this, it is necessary to use electronic platforms on which the necessary information will be permanently posted. This requires a database as complete as possible through which trends in the consumption of tourist services adapted to the needs of all consumers can be evaluated.

When potential visitors have little information about a tourist destination, are little familiar with the culture of an area, the information and services that Tourist Information Centers have become the most valuable, information provided both via the Internet and on site, at the destination, through the center's employees.

We can say that a Tourist Information Center truly represents the mirror of the destination. For this reason, the way in which the center is arranged, the location chosen for it, the space and the way in which it is arranged as well as the way in which the employee's welcome tourists and advise them must correspond and respond to at least minimal requirements. A tourist information center is considered to be the mirror of a destination. As a result, the layout, location, and appearance of the spaces where tourists are welcomed and advised must be appropriate and meet minimum standards, thus ensuring the mission of distributing informative material related to the destination and some activities related to destination management, as well as certain tasks regarding research on tourist motivation.

It was found that there are quite large differences between international standards and those applied at national level. Taking this into account, it is recommended to establish national networks that include all existing Tourist Information Centers in order to ensure the protection of the rights and interests of members and employees, to be able to provide assistance for promotional activities, to facilitate the coordination of activities for an efficient exchange of information, the control of basic information services and good cooperation with the state administration or international institutions.

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