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SEASONALITY IN TOURISM: A REVIEW

The aims of this study were to discuss negative effects of seasonality on tourism and its remedies, and also to find evidence for any positive effects of seasonality discussed in the literature. First, significant issues regarding seasonality in tourism were identified. Then, as a result of a literature review and case studies, remedies for negative effects of seasonality were included: measuring seasonal fluctuations accurately, extending peak-seasons by developing a tourism product irrelevant to seasonality, promoting pricing differentiation model, and multiple use schemes. It was also found that seasonality does not always have negative effects, and, conversely, some benefits could be obtained even during off-peak seasons. From an ecological perspective, an off-peak season could contribute to sustaining tourism, by introducing a state similar to turning off the switch for a while for preventing electronic machines from overheating.

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Introduction

Most tourism destinations experience seasonal patterns of tourist visitation (BarOn, 1973; Yacoumis, 1980; Higham and Hinch, 2002; Jang 2004). However, it is interesting that while seasonality is one of the most prominent characteristics of tourism, it is also one of the least examined (Allcock, 1989; Butler, 2000; Higham and Hinch, 2002; Hinch and Jackson, 2000; Jang, 2004). It has been generally recognized that seasonality may result in severe economic and social issues such as an unstable labor market caused by temporal employment in a destination (Sutcliffe and Sinclair, 1980; Goeldner and Ritchie, 2003). Conversely, a few studies found that seasonality does not always have negative effects on a destination or tourists (Murphy, 1985; Butler, 1994).

In this study, the discussion has three objectives. The first is to examine the definition and cause(s) of seasonality through a literature review. The second is to investigate negative effects of seasonality and remedies for seasonality discussed in the literature. Finally, positive effects of seasonality are discussed with some examples.

Seasonality and Tourism

Seasonality generally indicates the phenomenon of fluctuations of demand or supply in the tourism industry due to factors such as weather conditions and public and school holidays (BarOn, 1972; Allcock, 1989; Cooper *et al.*, 2005). In spite of the wide-ranging characteristics of tourism, the literature related to seasonality has focused on only limited topics: the relationship between seasonality in demand and visitation, regional consequences of seasonality, effects of seasonality on employment and investment, and policy issues (Butler, 1994). Only a few researchers have examined the concept from a theoretical perspective (e.g. Hartmann, 1986), looking at seasonal fluctuations in terms of visitors (e.g.

Bonn et al., 1992) and measurement of seasonality (e.g. BarOn, 1972; Sutcliffe and Sinclair, 1980). As a pioneer in seasonality, BarOn (1973, p.53) stated:

[Seasonality] implies an incomplete and unbalanced utilisation of the means at the disposal of the economy, and this is similar to the imbalance of the business cycle, where the economy is either overheated or running under full potential at different phases of the cycle.

Furthermore, BarOn (1975) defined seasonality as the effects occurring every year due to climate status, constraints of public holidays, special attractions (e.g. festivals), or personal lifestyle.

On the basis of BarOn's study, Butler (1994) argued that seasonality is associated with temporal imbalance in the phenomenon of tourism and also it can be explained in terms of diverse elements including numbers and expenditures of visitors, traffic of transportation, and employment. In other words, seasonality is a global tourism phenomenon caused by temporary movement of people. In terms of natural factors, temporary movement takes place because every country has different climatic patterns (BarOn, 1973). For example, some coastal resorts in Southern and Western Africa are popular with tourists from the cold winter of Northern and Eastern Europe. The climatic characteristics generate seasonal variations (e.g. peak, shoulder, and off-peak seasons) in the tourism industry of many countries (Kennedy, 1999).

Higham and Hinch (2002) argued that it is by systematic variations throughout the year that most tourism destinations are characterized. On the other hand, Holloway (1994) claimed that patterns of visitations might not only vary within a year but also within a month, a week, or even a single day. Lundberg *et al.* (1995) also agreed with Holloway's argument that seasonality shows respective variations within each year, week, month, or quarter.

Additionally, in terms of spatial dimensions, Butler (1994) emphasized that an urban area has less seasonal fluctuation than a remote location. This argument is supported by

Murphy's empirical findings that metropolitan cities like London are not likely to experience seasonal fluctuations as much as tourism-specialized sites (e.g. beach resorts) do (Murphy, 1985). This could be because some tourism destinations including coastal resorts and ski resorts focus on selling season-related products, while large cities tend to have plenty of non-seasonal attractions invulnerable to climatic changes (Butler, 2000).

Causes of Seasonality

According to BarOn's definition, seasonality has two distinctive origins; natural and institutional (BarOn, 1972; Hartman, 1986). Natural seasonality, as the name implies, is caused by natural phenomena including sunlight, snowfall, rainfall, extreme temperature, and daylight (Butler, 1994). For instance, a beach resort is preferred by a tourist who wants to enjoy sunlight and water sports, whereas a ski resort is favored by skiers or travelers who are eager to see beautiful snow scenery. Although each region has different climatic patterns, much of the traditional temporal patterns reflect seasons in the Northern Hemisphere because arguably most tourism developed countries are located there (Butler, 2000). In Europe, for example, while Southern Europe or the Mediterranean are popular for beach and water sports in the summer, Northern Europe or the Alps are destinations for skiing in winter (BarOn, 1999; Shaw and Williams, 1998).

Institutional seasonality, on the other hand, results from religious, social, cultural, and/or ethnic factors (BarOn, 1972; Butler, 1994; Janiskee, 1996). One of the most significant factors in institutional seasonality are big religious events like pilgrimages in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. For instance, due to the religious duty to visit Mecca, lots of Muslims go to Saudi Arabia at a certain period designated by the Muslim calendar. Jews also visit the Temple in Jerusalem three times a year for religious purposes (BarOn, 1993; Allcock, 1989). School holidays and public holidays are also one of the major features influencing institutional seasonality (BarOn, 1972; Butler, 1994). As school students generally have long

vacations in summer, a family with children is more likely to take a major trip in this season than other seasons. In some countries, public holidays and festivals can generate high volumes of tourism demand (BarOn, 1972). It is understandable that Easter in Europe, Thanksgiving Day in America, the Golden week in Japan, and the October national holiday in China generally make potential tourists interested in tourism products or services in a given period.

In addition to natural and institutional seasonality, some other causes could be considered: social pressure, a mega sporting event, and inertia of travelers (Butler, 1994). For example, sporting seasonality is a new phenomenon in the late twentieth century (Butler, 1994). All of the mega sports games (e.g. the Olympic Games, World Cup, and Commonwealth Games) obviously contribute to generating tourism demand at the given periods. Inertia is also one of the seasonality factors, which means that some travelers tend to take trips at a specific time of the year even though they no longer have to (Higham and Hinch, 2002).

Following the definitions given by Butler (1994), Frechtling (1996), and Baum and Hagan (1997), Lundtorp *et al.* (1999) summarized all causes of seasonality, and categorized them into pull and push factors. Institutional (school holiday, industrial holidays), calendar (Easter and public holidays), inertia and tradition, social pressure or fashion, and access (transport costs and time) belong to push factors of leisure travelers, while climate and sporting seasons (hunting, fishing, golfing, skiing) indicate pull factors.

Negative Effects of Seasonality

Not surprisingly, most researchers pointed out that a seasonal pattern is an uncontrolled situation resulting in a number of negative effects (Allcock, 1989; Edgell, 1990; Go, 1990; Jefferson and Lickorish, 1988; Laws, 1991; Lockwood and Guerrier, 1990; Robinson, 1979; Snepenger *et al.*, 1990; Whelihan and Chon, 1991). BarOn (1975) stated that

seasonality generates cost losses called “seasonal loss”. Baum (1999) also argued that seasonality seriously influences all kinds of tourism supply including employment, marketing, economics, and management. The negative effects of seasonality, therefore, can be divided into three categories: employment, investment, and environment (Butler, 1994).

Even though most hospitality and tourism workers are believed to prefer year-round employment (BarOn, 1993), it is difficult for a tourism employer to hire them as full-time employees and to retain them at a destination with seasonal patterns (Pearce, 1989; Yacoumis, 1980). As there is not as much job demand in an off-peak season, the employment rate decreases compared to the peak-season’s level. In this sense, prospective workers are likely to leave a destination in order to get a stable job so that the population of employees at the location becomes smaller. As a result, the level of payment at a specific job position will increase during a peak-season. This unstable labor market is mainly caused by fluctuation in tourism demand, and it eventually leads to difficulty of maintaining a certain economic status at a destination (Szivas *et al.*, 2003). From the perspective of cost and benefit, tourism-related facilities also could be negatively affected. If employees are recruited on a seasonal basis, companies repeatedly spend fixed costs for training the workers every peak season (Cooper *et al.*, 2005).

Another serious problem of seasonality is low annual returns on capital (Butler, 1994; Cooper *et al.*, 2005). Due to the instability of revenues year-around, tourism resources always have high risk of under-utilization (Sutcliffe and Sinclair, 1980; Butler, 1994; Jang, 2004). Especially, seasonality affects physical facilities which have a greater portion of fixed cost than other service providers. In a study about US cities, Soesilo and Mings (1986) found that accommodations and food service stores are most substantially affected by a temporal decrease of demand as these facilities spend fixed costs even during an off-peak season. For instance, if tangible products are not sold in one month, they could be kept in a storage room

for the next month, whereas, if hotel rooms, flight tickets, or festival tickets are not sold at a designated day, their economics value would be exactly zero (Cooper *et al.*, 2005; Goeldner and Ritchie, 2003).

Lastly, overcrowding or overuse during peak seasons may cause environmental problems (e.g. air pollution, sewage disposal problem, noises, and/or crime). It is also understandable that imbalanced tourism demand may have a negative impact on residents' traditional or cultural social activities (Machieson and Wall, 1982; Murphy, 1985; Pearce, 1989). Jafari (1974) argued that seasonal patterns in tourism demand could result in hostility of local people toward tourism with reference to the environmental issues. Residents tend to attribute these problems to excessive tourism. In addition, some researchers have studied the relationship between tourism and crime, yet, it is still not clear whether peak season is necessarily associated with higher crime rates, or if it is just coincidence in the sense that the greater the population, the higher the crime rates (Allcock, 1989).

Remedies for seasonality

There are some ways to tackle the problems related to seasonality: measuring seasonal fluctuations accurately, extending peak-seasons by developing a tourism product irrelevant to seasonality, promoting a pricing differentiation model, and multiple use schemes (BarOn, 1975; Sutcliffe and Sinclair, 1980; Witt *et al.*, 1991; Cooper *et al.*, 2005; Goeldner and Ritchie, 2003). To avoid the risk of investment, various measurement methodologies including the Gini coefficient, the Seasonality Indicator, the Maximal Utilization constrained by Seasonality (MUS), and the Seasonal Underutilization Factor (SUF) have been developed, and applied investment theory (e.g. financial portfolio theory) has been used in order to measure and analyze seasonal patterns (BarOn, 1999; Jang, 2004; Lundtorp, 2001; Nadal *et al.*, 2004).

Business travel including international meetings, conferences and exhibitions could be promoted to address the low volume of tourism demand during off-peak seasons since business travelers are usually not influenced by weather conditions. Lundtorp *et al.* (1999) found that business tourism has a non-seasonal pattern. They analyzed the pattern of the number of visitors to Bornholm island of Denmark in 1996. As a result, the number of leisure travelers showed explicit seasonal fluctuations during the year (Lundtorp *et al.*, 1999). Specifically, in July, there was the highest rate of visitors in Bornholm, whilst there were almost no tourists from November to February. On the other hand, the number of business travelers spread out over the year except July and November. As almost two-thirds (64%) of the visitors came to the island for holiday purpose, the pattern of visitors was considerably different in terms of trip purposes: leisure tourists vs. business travelers. However, it could be argued that business travel made up for seasonal loss by inducing visitors during the off-peak season (November to February).

From a marketing perspective, special price offers is one of the influential motivations to prospective tourists during an off-peak season (O'Driscoll, 1985). The pricing differentiation scheme is generally operated in two opposite directions. Discounted prices are offered during off-peak seasons, while high price in peak seasons (Allcock, 1989; BarOn, 1973). Both pricing strategies have their own target markets. For example, retired people are likely to be interested in special price in an off-peak season because they relatively have much free time in comparison to business persons or students. On the other hand, some people who have to spend their holiday during traditional peak-seasons are willing to buy tickets even if the price is relatively higher than in other seasons. Pricing differentiation thus helps increase demand during an off-peak season, and additionally, shifts a minimum demand from a peak-season into an off-peak season (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2003). The main purpose of pricing differentiation is to offset the traditional seasonal fluctuations, not to maximize

profits. By reducing seasonality, it is expected to maximize customer satisfaction over a year, and to raise the utilization level of facilities more efficiently during both off-peak and peak seasons (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2003). Therefore, it is important that the price differentiation strategy is somewhat different from a multiple-use strategy for which the purpose is to create demand during off seasons without affecting peak seasons.

Variation of the product mix including multiple use schemes is one of the most effective methods to address seasonality problems (Allcock, 1989; BarOn, 1973; Yacoumis, 1980; Goeldner and Ritchie, 2003). Uneven tourism demand may arise from promoting tourism products based on seasonal characteristics. Therefore, the balanced tourist visitation could be gained by offering alternatives in off-peak seasons. For instance, a ski resort can be a golf resort or provide a trekking course in the summer, or a coastal resort can run traditional culture experience programs or business related events in the winter (Allcock, 1989). Additionally, festivals, special celebrations, and sports events could be sponsored and promoted in order to boost demand during off-peak seasons. As a result of giving life to the “dead” period, it is expected that overall demand over a year will substantially grow (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2003).

Positive Effects of Seasonality

As noted earlier, only a few researchers have dealt with seasonality in terms of the balanced view point: both advantages and disadvantages (Flognfeldt, 1988; Butler, 1994; Murphy, 1985; Lundtorp *et al.*, 1999). According to their arguments, while seasonal patterns in demand cannot be eliminated, they can be reduced (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2003). Butler (1994) and Murphy (1985) also argued that seasonality does not always have negative effects, and conversely, some benefits could be gained. In particular, the positive effects of seasonality have been emphasized from the viewpoints of sociology and ecology. For

example, after heavy use of tourism resources during a peak season, a long rest period may be better than a continuous use without time to refresh (Butler, 1994).

Hartmann (1986) extended his initial argument to sociological and ecological dimensions, and emphasized the positive effects of seasonality. He argued that an off-peak season provides an opportunity for a social and ecological recovery (Hartmann, 1986; Grant *et al.*, 1997). Continuous use of natural resources without stopping could be harmful. For instance, while hiking is appropriate in a dry season, it could erode a road more severely in a wet season (Sinclair and Stabler, 1997).

An off-peak season also allows residents of a destination to have a normal life, and provides them with a time for preparing for the next peak season (Butler, 2000). Drakatos (1987) found that seasonality shows stable and well established fluctuations rather than irregularities. Accordingly, due to the nature of predictability, destinations are able to utilize seasonality (Lundtorp *et al.*, 1999). During an off-peak season, local people are able to get their normal life styles back. Furthermore, some individuals can enjoy travel in the off-peak season by avoiding the overcrowding in the peak-season (BarOn, 1973).

Conclusion

The objectives of this study were to discuss negative effects of seasonality on tourism, and to offer suggestions on ways to overcome the negative effects. In addition, positive effects of seasonality were examined from sociological and ecological perspectives. Consequently, it was found that seasonality does not always have negative effects on destinations, tourism facilities, and locals (Murphy, 1985; Butler, 1994). Some benefits could be obtained even during an off-peak season. From the ecological perspective, an off-peak season contributes to sustaining tourism, which is similar to turning off the switch for a while for preventing electronic machines from overheating.

Additionally, remedies for serious negative outcomes of seasonality need to be further considered. It has been shown that seasonality effects could be mitigated or aggravated depending on how well the issue is tackled by public and private sectors (Baum, 1999; Butler, 1994). Without any efforts made to solve the problems, seasonality may seriously affect economics or cultures in many countries. Therefore, as suggested earlier, strategic marketing activities (e.g. price differentiation, multiple use schemes) are essential to tackle seasonality if it causes severe problems. Furthermore, the relationship between seasonality and tourist motivation needs to be studied for a greater understanding of the phenomenon of imbalanced tourism demand (Butler, 1994). Research on tourists' behavioral and psychological characteristics such as destination image, visitor satisfaction, and motivation of re-visitation is also recommended to advance the study of seasonality and tourism.

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