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Perceptions of tourism students on thermal tourism in  
Afyonkarahisar

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**Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of thermal tourism through the opinions of tourism students. Students getting tourism education is the population of this study. A questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument, and 1135 students in various levels of tourism departments participated in this study. According to the results, students see the existence of a university as the strength and non-existence of an airport as the weakness of Afyonkarahisar. Besides, they think that thermal tourism's being done during the year is the opportunity and construction problems' negative effects on tourism are the threats.

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*Keywords:* Thermal tourism; tourism students, health tourism, SWOT analysis, Afyonkarahisar-Turkey

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**1. Introduction**

Turkey is among the top six countries in terms of tourist destinations, and among the top twelve countries in tourism income. (UNWTO, 2013). This shows the importance of tourism as a sector in Turkey. The importance of tourism takes place in government policies and strategic plans related to tourism. Using tourism sources efficiently,

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getting more shares from tourism market and increasing the economic support of tourism are among the strategic targets of Turkey tourism. Another one of these targets is to improve alternative tourism opportunities. Thermal tourism is a type of tourism which can be improved as an alternative to sea-sun-sand tourism, the traditional Turkey tourism, and can be done during 365 days of the year. Providing the expected benefits from thermal tourism is only possible by making situation analysis, managing the current situation and planning the future of this sector carefully. One of the ways to achieve this is to conduct regional SWOT analysis which identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats regarding tourism (Emir, 2011). It can be said that SWOT analysis is a subjective evaluation achieved by listing the data that are helpful in understanding, discussing and decision making process in a logical order (Gürlek, 2002). SWOT, which is an important method used to analyze weak sides of the rivals and form defending strategies against their strengths, is also a type of analysis helping managements to evaluate inner and outsider environment by determining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (Kotler et al., 1999; Cebecioğlu, 2006; Akgemici, 2007; Kreiner and Wall; Haines, 2009: 154).

When the literature is examined, it can be seen that there are numerous studies on thermal tourism. It can also be seen that these studies mainly focus on the reasons why the destination is visited by tourists or determining the tourists' satisfaction levels regarding the tourism services and touristic managements in the region. In their study which tried to determine the thermal tourism potential of Kızılıcahamam Sey thermals, Göyün and Akpınar (2003) focused on the fact that the socio-economic development of local people can be ensured by enhancing the current tourism facilities and promoting them. In their study investigating the determining features of destination image, İlban et. al. (2008) found that Gönen is a clean and modern destination with a high quality of life; transportation is convenient and prices are cheap there; recreation activities and information about them are enough; its people are kind and friendly; it has got some superior features in terms of dishes and handcraft compared to other regions. In the study conducted by Tunçsiper and Kaşlı (2008) on thermal tourism of Gönen, it was stated that tourism has a significant effect on transportation, entertainment, beverage retailers, dairies, petrol stations etc.. Besides, in their study which aimed to identify the factors influencing the improvement of tourism, İlban and Kaşlı (2009) determined that marketing, recreational facilities, entrepreneur of private sector, planning, tourism variety and educated work power are the factors that may prevent the improvement of tourism in Gönen. Another study to identify the image of thermal tourism was carried out by Emir and Durmaz (2009) in Afyonkarahisar. The results of their study showed that Afyonkarahisar was evaluated as a good destination and it was trendy to join thermal activities in the region. On the other hand, the participants stated that the region was not safe and marketing services were not enough. In the study conducted by Serpen et. al. (2009), it was emphasized that a big geothermal pipeline was being planned to carry hot water to the hotels in Afyonkarahisar and this city would have the most important balneology facilities of Central Anatolia.

Taş (2012) investigated how Afyonkarahisar developed in terms of thermal tourism and thermal sources of the city. Sandıkçı and Özgen (2013) conducted the tourism SWOT analysis of Afyonkarahisar through the opinions of staff working in hotels with tourism management document. According to this, the thermal tourism image of the region and the existence of rich natural sources regarding health tourism were found to be the strengths of Afyonkarahisar. However, the weaknesses of Afyonkarahisar were found to be as not benefiting from government incentives enough and travel agents' ineffectiveness in performing their duties. On the other hand, the results showed that the airport founded near the region and thermal tourism's being done during the whole year were found to be the opportunities, and customers' increasing bargain power and new thermal destination investments for this market were found to be the threats. In the study conducted by Çiçek et. al. (2013) to identify the places of inner Anatolian thermals waters and thermal services in Turkish health tourism, it was found that the hotels in the region were for domestic market but they were insufficient for foreign markets.

## **2. Method**

In this part, there will be a brief mention on data collection, participants, data analysis and results.

### *2.1. Data collection*

A questionnaire was used as the data collection method. The questionnaire developed by the researcher by examining previous studies (Crouch and Brent Ritchie 1999; Mueller and Kaufmann, 2000; Tabak, 2003; Gökçe, 2006; Durgun, 2006; Durgun, 2007; Çelik and Murat, 2008; İlban et. al., 2008; Çelik, 2009; Wickramashinghe and

Takano, 2009; Subramoniam et al., 2010; Türksoy and Türksoy, 2010) on this topic has two parts. The first part has four questions including several demographic features of the participants. The second part consists of 60 items regarding the identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of Afyonkarahisar. According to this, there were 19 items regarding strengths, 20 items regarding weaknesses, 12 items for opportunities and 9 items for threats in the questionnaire. The items in the questionnaire were 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree=1” to “strongly agree=5”.

## 2.2. Participants

Students getting tourism education in Afyonkarahisar is the population of this study. Due to the big amount of population, time limitation, costs etc., sampling from 1453 students 350 from high schools, 759 from vocational schools, 344 bachelors was employed. After excluding the incomplete and erroneous questionnaires, 190 students from high schools, 682 from vocational schools and 263 from university department were included in the study.

## 2.3. Data analysis

The obtained data were analyzed through SPSS program and individual features of the participants are presented with percentages and frequencies. Besides, the opinions of the participants regarding the SWOT of Afyonkarahisar were given with the mean and standard deviation scores for each item and factor. In addition to this, independent sample t-test was used for the groups (gender, internship) having two variables, and one way ANOVA for the groups (age, school) with three or more variables. At the end of the variance analysis, Tukey test was used for the comparison of groups with significant differences.

## 2.4. Results

The t-test and ANOVA results regarding the comparison of students' evaluation of the SWOT analysis according to demographic features are presented in Tables 1 and 2. When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that the evaluation of students regarding the weaknesses and threats does not differ significantly according to the gender ( $p>0.05$ ), whereas there is a significant difference between the evaluations regarding strengths and opportunities in terms of gender ( $p<0.05$ ). According to the mean scores, it can be seen that female students have more negative evaluations regarding the strengths and opportunities of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar. It is also seen in Table 1 that the evaluations regarding strengths, weaknesses and opportunities differ significantly according to students having done internship or not. The mean scores show that students who haven't done an internship have more negative evaluations on the strengths and opportunities of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar while they have more positive opinions on weaknesses compared to the students who have done their internship.

**Table 1**

*The Comparison of Students' Evaluation Regarding the SWOT Analysis in terms of Gender and Internship*

Variables	Groups	STRENGTH		WEAKNESS		OPPORTUNITY		THREAT	
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Gender	Male	3,30	0,70	3,40	0,78	3,18	0,72	3,17	0,77
	Female	3,15	0,66	3,34	0,79	3,00	0,71	3,13	0,77
	p (sig.)	<b>0,000***</b>		0,244		<b>0,000***</b>		0,356	
Internship	Yes	3,31	0,65	3,42	0,75	3,17	0,71	3,20	0,72
	No	3,17	0,72	3,32	0,82	3,04	0,73	3,11	0,82
	p (sig.)	<b>0,002**</b>		<b>0,028*</b>		<b>0,003**</b>		<b>0,066</b>	

\* $p<0,05$ ; \*\* $p<0,01$ ; \*\*\* $p<0,001$

According to the results of variance analysis in Table 2, there is a significant difference among the ages of students in terms of their evaluation regarding strengths, opportunities and threats of Afyonkarahisar in terms of thermal tourism. The mean scores of “19 and under” regarding the strengths of Afyonkarahisar are more significant

than the ones belonging to the other groups. However, it is seen that their mean scores on opportunities are positive, and they had negative evaluations on threats. According to the results in Table 2, it is seen that students' opinions regarding the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats do not change significantly according to their school of education. Based on this, it can be said that high school students' regarding the strengths and opportunities of Afyonkarahisar are more positive than other students. Briefly, it is clear that high school students paid more attention to the strengths and opportunities of Afyokarahisar. Besides, it was revealed that university students' opinions on the weaknesses and threats of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar were more negative than the opinions of high school and vocational school students. This finding shows that the perception levels of university students regarding the weaknesses and strengths of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar are very high.

**Table 2**

*The Comparison of Students' Evaluation Regarding the SWOT Analysis in terms of Age and School of Education*

Variables	Groups	STRENGTH		WEAKNESS		OPPORTUNITY		THREAT	
		Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Age	19 and under	3,38 a	0,66	3,44	0,75	3,29 a	0,72	3,32 a	0,67
	20-21	3,21 b	0,70	3,33	0,79	3,08 b	0,72	3,10 b	0,79
	22-23	3,20 b	0,67	3,46	0,78	3,08 b	0,71	3,24 ab	0,74
	24 and over	3,28 b	0,53	3,31	0,77	2,99 b	0,61	2,92 c	0,70
	p (sig.)	<b>0,016*</b>		0,130		<b>0,002**</b>		<b>0,000***</b>	
School	High school	3,62 a	0,62	3,20 a	0,72	3,55 a	0,59	3,07 a	0,78
	Vocational School	3,16 b	0,69	3,25 a	0,77	3,04 b	0,75	3,20 b	0,71
	University	3,18 b	0,61	3,82 b	0,69	2,98 b	0,63	3,35 c	0,73
	p (sig.)	<b>0,000***</b>		<b>0,000***</b>		<b>0,000***</b>		<b>0,000***</b>	

\* $p < 0,05$ ; \*\* $p < 0,01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0,001$  <sup>a,b,c</sup> denote difference in the groups.

### 3. Conclusions and discussions

The most important feature of this study is that it makes the SWOT of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar through the opinions of students getting tourism education. It is a distinct advantage for Afyonkarahisar to have variety of schools (high, vocational, university) giving tourism education. Especially, the existence of a university in the city was stated the strongest side of Afyonkarahisar in providing the required qualified staff. This situation is an important opportunity in the development of the cooperation of universities and the sector. The development of university-sector cooperation and benefiting from health experts from universities in cure treatment was also emphasized in Sandıkçı et.al. (2013). Besides, it was highlighted in Akbulut (2010) that related departments at universities, non-governmental organizations and local administrations should increase their studies in thermal tourism. Especially the inclusion of tourism schools in the studies related to the tourism planning and marketing of the region will affect the decisions positively. According to the participants of the study, the increasing popularity of the city and Afyonkarahisar's natural sources for health tourism are the most important strengths of the city. In the SWOT analysis of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar conducted by Sandıkçı and Özgen (2013), rich natural sources of the city, the image of it and the increasing popularity of Afyonkarahisar were found as the strengths of the city. It is emphasized in Taş (2012) that the features and the abundance of thermal water sources is not enough for the development of tourism on their own. In addition to this, it was expressed that available transportation facilities, promotion and marketing of thermal areas efficiently and the existence recreation activities supporting thermal tourism are also necessary. In recent years, Afyonkarahisar has been an important market in the region with the public incentives provided for tourism investments. There has been considerable increase in the bed capacity of the

city with these incentives. This situation attracted the attention of travel agencies to the region and increased the popularity of the city more. Besides, it is understood that strength of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar is the existence of rich natural sources appropriate for health tourism. The factors which were received the least scores by students in terms of the strengths were the rich cuisine of Afyonkarahisar, its being the junction point of Turkey in terms of transportation and Turkey's nomination of European Union. Afyonkarahisar's being a junction point in terms of tourism should be used more efficiently.

There is a significant difference between the gender of students in terms of their evaluation regarding the strengths and opportunities of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar. It is seen that female students had more negative opinions than males regarding the strengths and opportunities. In addition to this, it is revealed that students' opinions on strengths, weaknesses and opportunities differ significantly according to their internship. While students who haven't done their internship have more negative opinions on the strengths and opportunities of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar, the ones who have done an internship have more positive opinions on the weaknesses of the city. This situation can be explained through students' perception of tourism in their mind. It can be said that 3S (sea, sand, sun) is still effective in the minds of students. Besides, the inexperience of students without an internship in the field and the possibility that they may compare Afyonkarahisar with more popular destinations would be other reasons.

As the results and findings of this study suggest, the existence of schools giving tourism education in Afyonkarahisar is a distinct advantage for the city. It is possible to meet the any level of staff needed by hotel managements from these schools. In addition to this, since Afyonkarahisar is a junction point of Turkey, the completion of high-speed train projects will contribute to the attractiveness of the city. On the other hand, there is not an airport in Afyonkarahisar, Zafer airport, 60km to Afyonkarahisar, can be used more efficiently in transportation. Another important topic is that the current thermal sources should be used in a more balanced way which will not affect the life quality of future generations. Moreover, it would be beneficial tourism shareholders to form a mutual strategy for the promotion and marketing of the region. Especially, national mass media should be used, and public and private shareholders should benefit from social networks for the promotion marketing of the city. Recreational activities that would enrich thermal tourism services should be increased and especially cure treatments should be supported with diets. Although an average cure treatment lasts 21 days, it is seen that the staying period in the hotels of Afyonkarahisar is 2.2 days when the accommodation statistics are examined. The study conducted by Kervankıran and Özdemir (2013) shows that the staying periods of tourists in the hotels of Afyonkarahisar is below the standards of thermal centers. This situation may stem from the fact that the visitors of hotel managements in Afyonkarahisar include people who have less visiting periods with the purpose of relaxing, work or meeting but not cure treatment. For this reason, thermal hotel managements should develop their services on cure treatments and direct themselves to customers who need such treatments.

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