

## CYPRUS AS A WINTER DESTINATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Seasonal fluctuations of demand are regular in the Mediterranean islands. This could be attributed to the distinct qualities of island destinations, their vulnerability, peripherality, and isolation. This article aims to determine whether Cyprus has the geographical and governance qualities needed to address seasonality, by diversifying its tourism product. An exploratory, interpretive, inductive approach to research was undertaken with key informers within the industry to investigate these issues. The findings indicate that Cyprus has the necessary geographical features to address seasonality. However, there is high dependency on small number of tour operators, air travel companies, the narrow sun-and-sea product, and governmental control, which prevents winter tourism development.

Key words: Cyprus; Seasonality; Mediterranean islands; Mature destinations

### Introduction

Seasonality, the high concentration of tourist flow in a destination in fairly short periods in the year, is an issue that plagues many Mediterranean destinations, and has attracted a lot of attention from scholars (Andriotis, 2005; Fernández-Morales, 2003; Garau-Vadel & de Borja Solé, 2008). Changing tourism trends, the dependency of the Mediterranean islands on the highly seasonal one-dimensional tourism product, and the mass tourism production model has left these island destinations with a small tourism season and an unsustainable product (Farsari, Butler, & Prastacos, 2007; Ioannides, 2002). This seasonality has created a number of economic, sociocultural, and environmental problems (such as

seasonal employment and overuse of resources over the peak season).

However, some arguments in favor of seasonality are evident in the literature as it is believed that it offers an opportunity to carry out maintenance on infrastructure and amenities and provides the time to recover, socially and environmentally, from the strain of the high-season period (Andriotis, 2005; Kastenholz & Lopes de Almeida, 2008). Nevertheless, seasonality is mostly viewed as a problem, prompting scholars to argue that these destinations need to restructure in order to impede or prevent their imminent decline, particularly through diversifying their tourism product (Garau-Vadell & de Borja-Solé, 2008).

Traditional destinations with an established tourism sector such as Cyprus are thought to be more

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capable to successfully lessen seasonality in their destination (Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2005). However, Cyprus, a well-established destination, with a dependency on the tourism sector has not been able to do so, despite tackling seasonality being a key objective of their strategic plan for a number of years. Thus, the negative effects on the sustainability of the island inherent to seasonality are continuing.

The article aims to explore the extent that Cyprus, a mature mass sun-and-sea island destination, in the Mediterranean, could develop its winter season to tackle seasonality. Two objectives are identified to fulfill this aim. Firstly, the extent that the policy-makers in Cyprus, are actively pursuing the extension of the tourism season in order to mitigate seasonality; and secondly, whether Cyprus has the necessary geographical characteristics to successfully diversify its product to target the off-season tourist and tackle seasonality.

A supply-side perspective was chosen, since, in the context of seasonality most studies focus on the tourism demand, particularly in terms of modeling it (Goulding, Baum, & Morrison, 2005; Parrilla et al., 2007). Yet to effectively utilize research on seasonal tourism demand the destination needs to understand its shortcomings in terms of tackling tourism issues in general and for this study seasonality in particular. Therefore, this study informs knowledge on the supply-side factors that a destination needs to consider and incorporate within the tourism planning, development, and policy-making process to effectively mitigate seasonality. Additionally, product diversification has been identified as a key strategy for tackling seasonality in the literature (Garau-Vadell & de Borja-Solé, 2008; Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2005). However, before attempting to attract tourists it is important to ensure that Cyprus has and could provide the necessary product for winter tourists, in order to avoid tourists' dissatisfaction.

These objectives are realized by exploring the opinions of key stakeholders, both from the public and private bodies on the challenging issue of seasonality, through a qualitative inductive approach using grounded theory to analyze the data. This in-depth analysis offers a rare opportunity to explore the perceptions of the respondents, and ascertain whether congruence exists between them

to successfully develop the winter tourism season. Given that, close coordination and identification of everyone's role within the public and private sector bodies at all levels is imperative in order to overcome some of the causes and impacts of seasonality (Baum & Hagen, 1999). For instance, improving accessibility, increasing services provided, diversifying the product, and so on.

This study focuses on one case, Cyprus, as it is important to understand the dynamics and interrelationships of a certain case in order to successfully develop the destination and increase its competitiveness, through bespoke strategies and policies (Kozak & Martin, 2012). However, similar characteristics might be evident in other destinations as well. Thus, the article first examines literature on the supply-side influences on seasonality. An investigation of the Cypriot tourism industry follows. It then reports on the methodological and analytical procedures that were employed and discusses the findings of the research. Implications for research and Cyprus are then identified, in order for the island to mitigate its seasonal fluctuations.

### Seasonality: A Supply Perspective

Taking into account that seasonality affects a number of destinations, there is a relatively little empirical research in the context of the supply side, especially regarding the public and private sectors' role in tackling seasonality (Goulding et al., 2005; Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2010). In general, research on seasonality has mainly directed its focus on the determinants and policy responses in tackling seasonality (Goulding et al., 2005).

The key determinants of seasonality are thought to be natural and institutional (Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2005). Natural causes refer to the weather conditions that make some destinations unappealing. Institutional, refers to cultural, ethnic, social factors, and general issues that influence consumer decision. For instance, social factors could include public, business, or school vacations (Andriotis, 2005). Additionally, Butler (1994, cited in Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2005) identifies social pressure or fashion, sporting calendars, and inertia or tradition as contributing factors.

Many scholars have concentrated on how destinations have and should respond to mitigate

seasonal imbalances (Cuzzia & Rizzo, 2010; Garau-Vadell & de Borja-Sole, 2008; Getz & Nilsson, 2004; Kastenholz & Lopes de Almeida, 2008; Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2010). Baum and Hagen (1999), for instance, considered possible actions for peripheral destinations to lengthen their tourism season, including market diversification, the creation of events and festivals, product diversification, and structural and environmental responses. Following Baum and Hagen (1999), structural and environmental responses refer to the public and private bodies' plans to continue offering the same degree of service in terms of the facilities of the destination out of the peak season (e.g., maintaining the accessibility to the destination). As Andriotis (2005) notes, some restrictions are not attributed to the human decision factor, such as failure of the government to convince business to stay open during the low season, reluctance of tour operators and carriers to continue through the off-peak season, and availability of workers. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), for instance, find it difficult to hire and retain qualified employees. Therefore, the service quality is negatively affected (Kastenholz & Lopes de Almeida, 2008).

Nevertheless, causes and responses to seasonality only represent some elements of the broader understanding of seasonal fluctuations (Goulding et al., 2005). Particularly, the role and the impact that the attitudes and perceptions of public and private bodies have in mitigating seasonality are largely overlooked. However, some empirical research is evident in terms of examining the perceptions and influence of decision making of individual businesses on seasonality (e.g., Getz & Nilsson, 2004; Goulding et al., 2005; Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2010). The importance of the perceptions of the supply side in terms of tackling seasonality are vital, because to have any type of successful tourism development it is vital that the role, interests, and attitudes of all parties are understood (Byrd, 2007). In his study in the island of Crete, Greece, Andriotis (2005) highlights that the limited collaboration and coordination between the public and private sector have a severe negative impact on the tourism development on the island. Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff (2010) also emphasize that the importance of considering the diverse perceptions and attitudes that exist in the tourism

sector to effectively mitigate seasonal fluctuations of demand. Thus, it could be assumed that the attitudes and perceptions of the private and public bodies play a crucial role in the success of extending the tourism season as well as the strategy chosen to achieve this.

Product diversification is highlighted as a key strategy to mitigate seasonality (Baum & Hagen, 1999; Cuzzia & Rizo 2011). Diversifying the seasonal sun-and-sea product towards New Forms of Tourism (NFT) development is considered fundamental to deal with seasonality and improve the sustainability of the island (Bramwell, 2004; Farsari et al., 2007). This is because, NFT promote the feel of the place and an appreciation of local uniqueness. Furthermore, NFT have the ability to attract new tourism markets, since tourists are now searching for a continuous flow of novel and meaningful experiences, where there is an increase in demand for active and culture tourism and authenticity is more appealing, such as visiting the inland areas, or cultural sites (European Travel Commission, 2006; Kozak & Martin, 2012). In essence, NFT are classified as alternative forms of tourism (such as ecotourism, agrotourism, and culture) and special interest tourism (SIT) (such as conferences, sport, and maritime) (Spilanis & Vayianni, 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" (Spilanis & Vayianni, 2004, p. 272), whereas SIT forms are defined by the particular motives that stimulate traveling.

NFT embody various forms of tourism, and caution should be used when developing a new product for a destination, in terms of its impact on sustainability (Bramwell, 2004). For instance, the promotion of cultural tourism in Malta had created pressure for the locals in the walled city of Mdina due to the large numbers of visitors that they receive (Salanniemi, 2001). The influence of tourism is determined on a variety of issues, comprising the number of tourists, the type of the visitor's encounter, and who manages it, and it could not be perceived that cultural tourism or any other type of tourism is always ethical, green, and on a small scale (Ayres, 2002). For instance, Bramwell (2004) argues cultural visitors and ecotourists might

require luxury and specialized amenities, the comfort of high-quality accommodation that are usually located near large resorts. Therefore, attention should be paid on the impact that a new product could have on the sustainability of the area. Additionally, to effectively mitigate seasonality through product diversification it is crucial to match the various combinations of tourism types to the many potential visitor segments successfully; while promoting sustainability (Bramwell, 2004). The above section examined some factors identified in the literature that should be considered to tackle seasonality. However, to identify how and if these factors are being considered in Cyprus a brief overview of the Cypriot tourism industry is given below.

#### Tourism in Cyprus

Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean basin and it is considered as an economically developed mature destination. This research is based only on southern Cyprus. Cyprus, a service-based economy, and since 1974, witnessed tremendous economic growth due to tourism development (Adamou & Clerides, 2009). Mainly through exploiting its beaches and climatic conditions, it established itself as a conventional mass summer destination, focusing on the sun-and-sea product. However, the unplanned one-dimensional myopic tourism development in the coastal areas has left the destination with poor infrastructure and amenities and enormous strain on the environmental and human resources (Clerides & Pashourtidou, 2007). The seasonality that the island experiences only augments this overstretching of resources.

One major source, of the Cypriot seasonality is the one-dimensional tourist product that it offers (Clerides & Pashourtidou, 2007). Therefore, the island is characterized by the one-peak seasonality form, which is a common characteristic of the sun-and-sea Mediterranean countries (Fernández-Morales, 2003). The main tourist period in Cyprus was from March to October, which was considered high season and then the remainder of the year was low season (Saveriades, 2000). However, the high season has been diminishing over the years, and in 2009 52.9% of annual arrivals were between the months of July and September (Cyprus Tourism

Organisation, 2009). Another, critical reason is the power that tour operators have within the market, which allows them to control the characteristics, tourist flows and prices (Sharpley, 2001). This problem is essentially an issue of supply exceeding demand (Farsari et al., 2007; Sharpley, 2001).

Additionally, seasonality results in the overstretching of business activities during the high season in order to recuperate lost revenue from the low season (Clerides & Parhourtidou, 2007). Subsequently, during the high season there is overcrowding in most of the coastal resorts, along with overbooking and very high prices, causing the exploitation of travelers, hence leading to dissatisfaction (Saveriades, 2000). In their study on tourist satisfaction Clerides and Pashourtidou (2007) found that a large amount of tourists were dissatisfied with their stay in Cyprus, in particular regarding the value for money aspect.

The Cyprus Tourism Organisation (CTO), a semigovernmental organization, is responsible for the planning, promotion, and marketing of Cyprus as a whole. A strategic plan for the years 2003–2010 was developed, in order to tackle the challenges of the tourism industry. The fundamental goal of the strategic plan was to create a sustainable tourism industry through diversifying its product, tackling seasonality, and focusing on quality and the value for money proposition. However, with the key activities concentrating on marketing it could be deduced that the organization plays more of a consultancy role rather than having any authority on tourism development (Sharpley, 2001). For instance, in 2000 the strategic plan was developed; however, sustainable development in the tourism movement has not been established yet (Yiannakis, 2009). Where the CTO has a more influential role, little authority is given for tourism development; for instance, it has control over licenses and evaluating accommodation but they do not have the power to decide if such establishments should be developed in the first place. Equally, a number of trade unions such as Cyprus Hotel Association are powerful and very influential within the industry (Sharpley, 2001). Thus, although, steps have been taken to complete the goals of the plan, a number of strategies did not reach the implementation stage, mainly due to the *laissez-faire* policy that characterizes the island.

### Methodology

The research has an exploratory purpose, thus it follows a qualitative research approach, since the project encompasses a more subjective nature to social research, through the examination and understanding of the perceptions and actions of the social actors. Additionally, this approach is more suitable, as it offers opportunities to better describe the multifaceted processes of tourism (Paget, Dimanche, & Mounet, 2010).

The aim was to investigate the extent that Cyprus could expand its tourism season in order to address the problem of seasonality. This is explored by looking at the extent that policy makers are actively seeking to extend the tourism season of Cyprus, as well as if the product is there to enable repositioning. A case study strategy is followed to comprehend the dynamics and interrelationships within a single setting. Qualitative data had been identified as the most appropriate approach, due to the richness and detail that they offer. Semistructure interviews were employed, to facilitate the data collection process and allow the researcher to explore each issue as it arose.

Judgmental sampling was employed and the interviews were held with both the public and private sector individuals who hold key positions within the CTO (public sector) and the hotel and tour operator associations (private sector). Within the CTO, individuals from all departments in the head office and individuals from the regional offices were interviewed. Within the private sector, individuals from the board of directors of associations were chosen. These respondents were selected due to their positions of influence within the industry and their ability to give information-rich data. They have similar educational and the same cultural background as all respondents originate from Cyprus. Private sector individuals were selected as they could assist in the identification of important issues and although they may not have any authority officially they still exert unofficial pressure on authorities in relation to the strategies and policy. By interviewing both samples a better understanding was gained regarding current issues and future plans within the industry, thus gaining a more holistic image of the industry.

However, to achieve consistency the same set of questions were asked and the saturation principle of grounded theory adopted. Therefore, interviewing stopped when saturation point was achieved. Altogether 16 public sector and 15 private sector participants were interviewed. The interviews were carried out in Cyprus during August 2009 and all interviews were conducted in person and on one-to-one basis. To ensure that all data from the interviews were accurately collected, a voice recorder was used. Finally, following the methodological assumptions of the research, grounded theory was applied to analyze the data obtained.

### *Grounded Theory*

Grounded theory is an inductively analytical process that seeks to elucidate or generate a theory based on the key theme that arises from the data. This analytical process employs coding strategies; the process of breaking down suitable data, such as interviews, into separate units of meaning, which are labeled to create concepts, resulting in the development of a theoretical framework. The process involves three kinds of coding: open, axial, and selective.

### *First Stage of Analysis: Open Coding*

Firstly, all interviews recorded were transcribed. Transcribing interviews assists in remedying the natural limitations of the researcher's memory and result in a more accurate account of the issues that derived from the interviews. Once transcribing was completed open coding was carried out, which encompassed the identification, analysis, and categorization of the data collected. Open coding was associated with early concept development, as attempts were made to discover the units of information that relate to the literature or an example of a broader phenomenon. At this time all data were disaggregated and codes were identified.

All data were coded together, as the questions asked to all respondents related to both objectives. All codes were chosen based on their direct relevance to the research, taking the form of a word, a sentence, or a small paragraph. Once the codes were identified, questions such as who, where, what, how, and so forth, were asked, in order to assist in opening up the data and in terms of



thinking of possible similarities or differences between phenomena. Hence, codes identified were later placed into separate units of information and a conceptual label was provided for each unit. This made the data more identifiable and more manageable. (See Figure 1 for an example of a coded interview.)

The conceptual units identified were then arranged into a pattern of concepts and classified, along with their characteristics and attributes. To achieve this, different units of information were categorized into definite ideas (concepts); in turn similar concepts were arranged together into a category. In turn, two categories were discovered: stakeholders' attitude, and tourism strategy. Both categories are interrelated, as all factors are important to consider in developing winter tourism in Cyprus. These categories were chosen by taking into account the literature reviewed, the content of the concepts and the researcher's scholarly knowledge.

### *Second Stage of Analysis: Axial Coding*

Once the codes, concepts, and categories were detected axial coding commenced, which involved searching relationships between the categories and subcategories of data that derived from open coding. Axial coding required the researcher to link each category with its concepts in relation to their dynamic interrelationships, by reorganizing and rebuilding the data into various patterns; which embody the basis for the theory (Goulding, 2002). (See Figure 2 on how grounded theory was employed.)

Both objectives were dealt with together since they were closely related and interconnected, regarding the content of the categories discovered, thus facilitating the process of establishing relationships within the categories and its concepts. The prepositions derived based on the times of repetition by the interviewees, uniqueness, pertinence with the research and literature, as well as the

**What are your thoughts on Cyprus being able to provide this new type of tourism?**

Generally, Cyprus does have the ingredients to attract special interest tourism [*code: Cyprus does have the ingredients to attract special interest tourism, concept: physical assets of Cyprus, category: tourism strategy*], because we have a pool of history, of culture, of civilisation that goes through the centuries [*code: pool of history, of culture, of civilisation that goes through the centuries, concept: physical assets of Cyprus, category: tourism strategy*] and therefore we have a variety of experiences that the tourist can have in Cyprus because of the small geographical area of the island, you can find nature with so many different colours, from the mountains to the shore, all between an hours' drive or so [*code: from the mountains to the shore all between an hour's drive or so, concept: physical assets of Cyprus, category: tourism strategy*]. Therefore, you can have so many different special interest tourism aspects that can be developed. But what needs to be done is the cooperation between all areas stakeholders for each special interest activity in order to develop the appropriate product [*code: cooperation between all areas stakeholders for each special interest activity in order to develop the appropriate product concept: improvement of coordination within authorities, category: stakeholders attitude*] that would be appealing to the specific target segment of this specific product. In addition to this of course, when you refer to sectors of special interest areas for example conferences and incentives, in order to have Cyprus being established and incorporated to the international map of the possible venues for large conferences with everything, the infrastructure needs to be updated [*code: infrastructure needs to be updated, concept: current tourism infrastructure problems, category: tourism strategy*], to have purposefully built conference centres that could be in a position to not only host but to host successfully such large conferences and combine the conference for example opportunity, as a stimulus, to attract holidaymakers from the benefits of hosting a successful conference in Cyprus.

Figure 1. Example of a coded interview.



Figure 2. Illustration on the use of grounded theory.

researcher's own academic knowledge and experience. The prepositions discovered are presented below (see Table 1).

### *Third Stage of Analysis: Selective Coding*

In this stage a story line was developed that connected the categories together and discussed the issues identified in the research. However, to better understand the story line it is important to discuss the issues that need to be taken into account for Cyprus to succeed in expanding its target market to winter tourists.

### Findings and Discussion

#### *Insufficient Internal Communication, Coordination and Cooperation Between the Public and Private Sector Could be Detrimental to the Successful Development of Winter Tourism*

The above preposition depicts the internal communication, coordination, and cooperation between the private<sup>1</sup> and the public<sup>2</sup> sector, indicating the insufficient internal coordination within the public sector in relation to the implementation of new tourism policies. This has been identified by all public/private sector participants, as a key challenge in the successful development of the Cypriot tourism industry.

A private sector respondent pointed out, "in the tourism industry we are dependent on the accountability of the civil servants and the various governmental departments." He continued, adding that "as long as there is no accountability there is no hope in seeing the necessary improvements." Canada (1979, cited in Elliot, 1997) argued that accountability is the essential requirement needed to

prevent the abuse of power that is given to the civil servants and instead direct that power towards the accomplishment of broadly accepted national aims, with the highest level of efficiency, effectiveness, integrity, and prudence. The insufficient internal coordination within the public sector has been directly linked with delays in the construction of new tourism infrastructure, hindrances in the decision-making process regarding tourism issues, such as new tourism policies, decisions on introducing new products, and so on. A public sector respondent highlighted that "the decisions are taken from the government, and procedures are lengthy, with one reason being the change of government every 5 years," with another stating "most of the strategic plan's objectives have been delayed, due to the hindrances in all the processes, such as construction licenses."

Moreover, a private sector participant noted that "delay in adjusting the legislation to facilitate decision making to adapt to current needs of demand and supply has held back tourism development," with another arguing that "the government is very slow to react regarding tourism issues." Therefore, it could be argued that the government hinders the process of tourism related decisions and development that needs to occur, through extensive bureaucracy, government rigidity, and insufficient cooperation between departments. These issues clearly impede the development of winter tourism, as the necessary actions that need to be taken to aid in extending the season, such as developing new winter products and improving infrastructure, are delayed.

Elliot (1997) pointed out that effectiveness in achieving any objectives set by the organization is a primary responsibility of the individuals within the public sector, and the capabilities and value of the individuals in charge should be in doubt if they

Table 1  
Axial Coding: Prepositions

Stakeholder's Attitudes	Tourism Strategy
Insufficient internal communication, coordination, and cooperation between the public and private sectors can be detrimental to the successful development of winter tourism.	Dependencies of the industry on tour operators and air travel companies are detrimental in addressing seasonality.
Insufficient awareness among the public/private sectors and the local communities as a detrimental factor to the produce diversification.	Special interest tourism (SIT) and alternative forms of tourism development as a factor tackling seasonality.



are not achieved. One private sector participant stated “there is no coordinating body and mechanism with the appropriate authority and resources that will put in place these special and tailor-made products,” with another private sector respondent arguing “currently no organization exists responsible for all aspects of tourism.” The reluctance of the government to establish a governmental body, exclusively responsible for tourism development, could stem from the unwillingness of central bureaucracies to surrender power to others (Bramwell, 2004). These findings correspond with Sharpley (2001) who highlighted that there is a “lack of formal structures for the implementation of policies” (p. 173) as well as a multilayered organization of democratic government, that delay decisions on tourism-related activities.

Despite the issue of insufficient coordination within the government, there are conflicting views on the internal communication, cooperation, and coordination within the public and private sector. A public sector participant stated that “there is a climate of close cooperation between the three core entities, the CTO, the government, and all tourism related enterprises.” However, another public sector participant asserted that “from my personal contact with the different associations they feel that they are not heard as much as they should be.” This could be attributed to the different positions within the CTO that the interviewees hold. Specifically, participants holding key positions within the CTO’s head office, who have a closer contact with the different unions of the industry such as Association of Cyprus Travel Agents, believe that there is adequate communication, cooperation, and coordination.

However, participants within the regional offices who have a closer conduct with the unions of the industry and individual business owners disagree. Thus, it could be argued that although close cooperation, coordination, and communication exist at the corporate level, this is not effectively transferred to the operational level. Hence, the insufficient communication, cooperation, and coordination negatively influence the tourism industry as a whole, as individual businesses are not involved in the decision-making process.

Maybe the problem lies under the different personal interests of each association. That is, they are more interested in advancing their own sectors,

rather than focusing on improving the tourism situation as a whole. As a public sector participant stated, “they only cooperate on issues that interest each association individually and not on issues that interest Cyprus as a whole.” Moreover, a private sector respondent noted “each association views the tourism development under their own lens, hence, sometimes the different interests and suggestions do not match.” However, to have successful tourism development it is crucial that the interests of all parties involved are identified and understood in order to avoid the failure of the process (Byrd, 2007).

From the above examination, it is clear that the lack of coordination and corporation between the public and private sectors significantly hinders the process of developing winter tourism, as there are no uniform aims between the parties. As Andriotis (2005) argues, government’s efforts in convincing business owners to keep their establishments open during the low season plays a crucial role in developing winter tourism.

#### *Insufficient Awareness Among the Public/Private Sector and the Local Communities as a Detrimental Factor to the Product Diversification*

A key public sector interviewee stated that “our priority is to build a healthy tourism economy, rather than take care of the environment or the society.” However, a partnership approach at all levels, throughout the process of development, could maximize tourism benefits and minimize repeat effort and conflicts within a composite and multifaceted tourism sector (Churugsa, McIntosh, & Simmons, 2007). Avoiding taking into consideration the interests of all parties, and encouraging participation in the development, could create major conflicts between parties, which could hindrance or even preclude any type of development (Byrd, 2007).

Byrd (2007) argues that it is the responsibility of the destination’s management organization to promote tourism awareness and encourage sustainable tourism practices. Also, Churugsa et al. (2007) maintain that, to secure a better management of tourism, it is crucial that government capacity regarding the understanding and knowledge of employees is adequate. Thus, it could be argued that key individuals in the CTO are not the most

suitable to promote tourism awareness and sustainable practices. Equally, as a private sector respondent noted, “in semigovernmental organizations most people are followers of political parties,” continuing, “they are not experts on the subject.”

Although, the above statements depict the perception of private sector individuals towards the public sector, it is thought to still influence the tourism development in Cyprus. This is because one of the most important roles of the public sector (CTO) is to exert strong leadership and have the stakeholders’ confidence to achieve stakeholder involvement (Bornhorst, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010). Therefore, as the private sector does not view the CTO as having the necessary knowledge and leadership to manage tourism development in Cyprus, it negatively affects their confidence in the CTO and their willingness to get involved/follow the CTOs’ suggestions regarding tourism issues. Consequently, the perceived insufficient tourism awareness of individuals within the CTO, affects the tourism awareness of the private sector, thus impeding tourism development.

Additionally, a private sector respondent stated that “there is a lack of tourism awareness from the locals,” with another affirming “the local businessmen have not realized the importance of investing in a tourist.” Many public/private sector respondents attributed this lack of tourism awareness to the insufficient tourism education of the locals, and believe that the promotion of tourism awareness should stem from the government. A public sector participant stated “a hesitation exists within the private sector for the construction of new special interest infrastructure.” This is due to the current challenges that the tourism industry faces, which have resulted in the decline in arrivals. Equally, a public sector participant affirmed that “a belief exists that we are going through an economic crisis, we have no money, we cannot upgrade or diversify our product.” However, the current seasonal product of sun-and-sea is highly substitutable and offers no unique selling point for Cyprus (Ioannides, 2002).

Current consumption trends require mature destinations to diversify their target markets, to meet the more personalized forms of travel which could aid in addressing seasonality. Thus, it is crucial for both the private and public sectors to increase their awareness regarding tourists’ demands and for the

public sector to show more financial and technical support on such issues to the private sector, as well as increase the tourism knowledge of the locals. This is vital to be done in order to diversify the product and avoid decline.

#### *Dependencies of the Industry on Tour Operators and Air Travel Companies Are Detrimental in Addressing Seasonality*

As most mature sun-and-sea islands, Cyprus also relies on tour operators<sup>3</sup> and air travel companies<sup>4</sup> for its tourist flow, as it is the fastest and easiest transportation channel for island destinations. A public sector participant noted “the industry needs to reduce the excessive dependency it has on tour operators.” Another public sector respondent asserted that “the number of flights to Cyprus from independent carriers is considerably reduced over the winter season,” with another affirming “it is important to arrange frequent airline services to Cyprus and not frequent charter flights.” As Andriotis (2005) argues, seasonality could be created due to the reluctance of tour operators and carriers to continue during the off-season period. The above responses indicate that tour operators and air travel companies control most of the tourist flows to Cyprus, and their unwillingness to continue their flights during the winter season creates this one-peak seasonality form, hence negatively affecting any effort to create a year-round destination.

Additionally, the dependency on the one-dimensional mass sun-and-sea tourism product has been identified as a causal factor to seasonality, as suggested by a public sector participant: “perhaps there was too much dependency on the mass sun-and-sea tourism product.” Another private sector respondent noted “the tourism industry is dependent on a number of elements with one being our sun-sea product.” A public sector participant stated “we have fallen behind on infrastructure that could have assisted in developing other forms of tourism.” Loukissas and Skayiannis (2001) argued that by adopting the sun-and-sea mass tourism model seasonality is created. Therefore, this dependency on the highly narrow sun-and-sea product has intensified seasonality.

Bramwell (2004) asserted that a destination should be able to match potential products to

suitable target markets. Still, the current one-dimensional product of Cyprus has prevented this, as it only targets the sun-and-sea market, as one private sector respondent emphasized: “the tourist product has to be upgraded and new products that meet current consumption trends need to be offered to move away from the existing narrow product.” The overdependency on tour operators is often observed in destinations which rely extensively on a narrow product and substitutable resources (such as sun, sea, and sand) (Farsari et al., 2007). Therefore, strategies that diversify the product and meet customer demands could encourage tour operators and air travel companies to continue their flights throughout the year, which could aid in addressing seasonality. Additionally, variety in products offered, combined with financial incentives, could attract new carriers to Cyprus, thus reducing dependency on a small number of carriers and tour operators.

#### *SIT and Alternative Forms of Tourism Development as a Factor in Tackling Seasonality*

The analysis indicates that the main function of SIP is complementary to the current sun-and-sea product. As a public sector participant claimed, “special interest products are complementary and there to enrich our main product,” with another stating “special interest tourism should complement, give something extra than the sun-and-sea.” However, many public/private sector respondents believe that SIP would inevitably improve the winter season as well.

A public sector respondent stated that “Cyprus should focus on special interest products to tackle seasonality,” with another asserting “special interest products can entertain, accommodate and attract tourists throughout the year.” This could prove a successful strategy, as the diversity of NFT could assist in lengthening the tourism season (Garau-Vadell & de Borja-Solé, 2008). This is due to NFT products appeal to a greater number of tourists than the sun-and-sea product, and moreover SIP have a year-round appeal (Agarwal, 2002). Given that special interest activities become the hub around which the complete travel experience is designed and developed, and the tourist could travel at any time of the year to participate in that activity (McKercher & Chan, 2005).

A private sector participant affirmed that “in Cyprus the special interest groups usually travel during the off-peak season, i.e. April, May, October, and November.” Similarly, another private sector interviewee noted “the winter tourists visiting around April, May are different and want to experience something else, they want to travel around the island.” Hence, the argument of Garau-Vadell and de Borja-Solé (2008) that NFT could aid in tackling seasonality is supported, given that special interest groups are attracted to Cyprus during the low season. Despite the existence of financial incentives, the analysis indicates that these products are not developed exclusively for winter tourism, but to enrich the sun-and-sea product.

Cyprus does have the geographical characteristics to develop SIT. As a private sector interviewee states, “Cyprus has a pool of history, culture, civilization that goes through the centuries and due to the climate the necessary characteristics to become a competitive winter destination.” A public sector respondent commented that “Cyprus has a small geographical area, within 2 hours you can find yourself from the sea to the mountains.” As Salannemi (2001) asserted, Cyprus has great potential to develop SIP, due to its geographical characteristics, and a cultural heritage and political/nationalistic history that could be the foundations for identity building, thus differentiating the island from other destinations.

The diversification of both SIT and alternative forms of tourism could aid in tackling seasonality as well as creating a more environmentally friendly product, if properly applied (Bramwell, 2004). Given that, NFT promote the feel of the area, the appreciation of local uniqueness, and the improvement of environmental quality of the conventional mass form of tourism, through enhancing the destination and the “greening” of tourist amenities (Bramwell, 2004). Consequently, the Cypriot tourism industry should begin considering NFT as vital in tourism development, especially for the winter season and not just complimentary.

#### Conclusions and Implications

Using an exploratory, interpretive inductive, qualitative research approach, this study focused on exploring and determining the factors that

influence and hinder Cyprus extending its tourism season from the supply side, a perspective that is in need for more research and has rarely been researched in Cyprus.

In terms of theoretical implication, this study's findings show that tackling seasonality begins from the effective and efficient management and operation of the supply side of a destination. In particular, the role that the destination's public and private sector play in mitigating seasonality is being emphasized. Cooperation, coordination, and tourism knowledge of the individuals are crucial factors to address tourism issues in general and seasonality in particular. The relationship of the public and private sectors, as well as the tourism industry as a whole, presents a vital factor that negatively influences the diversification of the tourism product. Moreover, the rigidity of the government is another factor that significantly hinders mitigating seasonality. The findings show that although Cyprus has the necessary geographical characteristics to offer more than the sun-and-sea product, a successful relationship between the public and private bodies of the destination plays an even more important role. It could be suggested that the attitudes and perceptions and relationship of the public and private sectors form a significant part of the problem in tackling seasonality.

Therefore, this study highlights that future research should be undertaken to examine how this relationship could be improved, and the degree of influence that each sector has within the industry. Another path for future research could be to look at the strategies that the public and private bodies use to disseminate knowledge on tourism issues within the industry as a whole. In particular, focusing on the importance that seasonality is given within this process, and looking at the degree of information that individual businesses receive from the public and private bodies. The perspective of individual businesses to such issues, although acknowledged is not studied here, thus this is recognized as a limitation. Since, researching the relationship of individual businesses with the public and private bodies would undoubtedly uncover new influencing factors on tackling seasonality. Such information would expand the knowledge on the nature and dynamics of the influences of seasonality from a supply perspective and offer a more insightful

perspective to effectively improve this relationship, and in effect the tourism planning and development process.

In terms of destination implication, policy makers have to rethink their planning and development processes in order to improve the relationship between the different sectors, especially in terms of their cooperation and coordination. A more holistic approach should be taken where all sectors' views are taken into account in the diversification process. However, it must be highlighted that the sluggish process of product diversification may primarily stems from the rigidity, extensive bureaucracy, and inadequate coordination within governmental departments. Therefore, it could be argued it is vital for the government to improve its governance model through a more efficient control system, increase tourism awareness, gain the stakeholders' confidence, and encourage the involvement of all stakeholders in the development process.

Strategies should be put into place to inform the tourism stakeholders regarding the importance of mitigating seasonal fluctuations for the sustainability of the island. These strategies should also stress the significance of developing appropriate SIP. However, the public sector should offer the suitable support to the industry, be it financial or practical, in order for any development to be successful. Policymakers must focus on policies to decrease their dependency on the small number of tour operators and air travel companies for tourism flow as this could considerably increase accessibility to the island as well as fulfill the demand for independence and flexibility. Nevertheless, it is argued that for Cyprus to diminish seasonality it has to radically rethink its governance model, where flexibility, accountability, coordination, and cooperation are promoted. Only with an improved governance model could Cyprus be able to address its challenges and effectively tackle seasonality.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The private sector refers to all the industry unions and their members, such as Pan-Cyprian Association of Hoteliers, Association of Cyprus Travel Agents and so. Additionally, it refers to all owners of tourism related businesses who may not be a member of any industry unions in Cyprus.

<sup>2</sup>The public sector refers to the governmental departments that are directly or indirectly linked to the tourism industry,



such as the Ministry of Commerce and Tourism, Ministry of Communication and Works, the CTO, and so on.

<sup>3</sup>Dependency on tour operators also includes all charter flights controlled by tour operators.

<sup>4</sup>Dependency on air travel companies refers to national carriers, other private carriers, as well as low-cost carriers.

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