



## Thermal Tourism: With Specific Reference to Perceptions of Students\*\*

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### Abstract

Tourism is an important sector for countries as an impulsive force for the economy. In order for the regions to increase their share of tourism market, it would be to their benefit to make use of the alternative tourism activities in a profitable and efficient manner. Considered among health tourism, thermal tourism has some relatively attractive features as compared to tourism of other kinds. As a tourism type available 365 days of a year, thermal tourism has some advantageous aspects. The sample of this study comprises the students receiving tourism education in Afyonkarahisar, also called the capital of thermal tourism. The main purpose of this study is to examine thermal tourism in terms of the strengths, opportunities, threats and weakness dimensions with specific reference to the students' assessment. As the data collection technique, questionnaire forms were employed. The study included 1135 students receiving tourism education at different levels; namely high school, associate degree and undergraduate. The findings of the study suggest that having a university is a strong aspect, and that having no airport is the weak aspect of Afyonkarahisar. Besides, as for the opportunity side, thermal tourism as a whole year activity makes up the opportunity dimension, and unfavorable zoning effects are the threats aspects.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Turkey is among the first six countries on the global scale in terms of tourist arrivals and in the first twelve in tourism receipts (UNWTO, 2013). This is an important indication that tourism is an important sector for Turkish economy. The importance attached to tourism and related activities takes place in government policies and strategic plans for tourism. Resource-efficient tourism and getting more share in tourism market, thus augmenting the economic contribution of tourism, is among the strategic targets of Turkey. One of the targets is to develop the alternative tourism offerings and activities. Considered among health tourism, thermal tourism is a kind of tourism product available 365 days in a year. Getting the optimum advantage out of thermal tourism is viable through comprehensive and sound planning, performing case analyses, managing the present state as well.

SWOT analysis, in essence, can be said to be subjective evaluation which structures the data in a logical manner in order to evaluate not only the present situation but also to perform future projections (Gürlek, 2002). SWOT analysis is an analytical technique encompassing the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats of a project or venture under consideration and is an analysis method that paves the way for evaluating the internal and external settings for enterprises (Kotler et al., 1999; Cebecioğlu, 2006; Akgemci, 2007; Kreiner & Wall; Haines, 2009: 154). SWOT stands for strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Peter & Donnelly, 1991; Keegan, Moriarty & Duncan, 1992; Kotler et al., 1999; Boone & Kurtz, 2001; Middleton and Clarke, 2001; Doswell, 2002). Table 1 offers a relatively comprehensive explanation for strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Kotler, 2000; Çabuk & Yağcı, 2003; Moran & Johnson, 2005; Reid & Bojanic, 2006; Akgemci, 2007; Kreiner & Wall, 2007; Young & Jude, 2008; Torlak & Altunışık, 2009; Hughes, 2010; Hutchison, Macy & Allen, 2010):

**Table 1.** Explanation of SWOT Analysis

<b>Strength</b>	Features that give a competitive advantage and product-related priority over others
<b>Weaknesses</b>	Disadvantages relative to others in terms of such features as publicity, understaffing and financial resources
<b>Opportunities</b>	Conditions in which opportunities are offered for a given establishment with respect to product delivery, technological superiority, competitiveness and growth.
<b>Threats</b>	Potential threats and dangers a given enterprise might be faced with.

SWOT analysis highlights two main features. One of them is an evaluation of strong and weak aspects as well as opportunities and threats, and the other is that it makes it possible to carry out future projection based on the present data (Akgemci, 2007). Bearing this in mind, it is of great importance that SWOT analysis should be run for Afyonkarahisar, called “the capital of thermal tourism in Turkey”. According to the data obtained from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2012), Afyonkarahisar has the accommodation capacity of 21.339 in total. Besides, the

number of people who stayed at hotels was reported to be 695.290. With the ongoing tourism investments, Afyonkarahisar is on the right path to be an indispensable destination in thermal tourism. The key feature of this study is that thermal tourism has been evaluated by the eyes of students receiving tourism education. Extant literature accommodates a number of studies into thermal tourism. The main focus of the studies conducted is on the reasons why a given destination is preferred, satisfaction level of customers with the services offered. To mention some of the studies specifically, Göyün & Akpınar (2003) conducted a study on the potential of Kızılcahamam Sey spas, another focal point for thermal tourism in Turkey, and concluded that the facilities offered should be improved in terms of service quality and publicity activities should be enhanced to develop the social and economic status of the locals. İlban et. al., (2008) in their study into destination image of Gönen, another outstanding place for thermal tourism, found out that the place under consideration is a neat, modern destination with high quality of life, offering transportation with reasonable prices, recreational activities, and publicity facilities are sufficient in order to promote the thermal potential of the place under consideration. In the same vein, a study on thermal tourism on Gönen conducted by Tunçsiper & Kaşlı (2008), they highlighted the economic effect of thermal tourism on a wide range of services and facilities from transportation, entertainment to oil stations, dairies and food establishment, and etc. besides, İlban & Kaşlı (2009) in their study on the factors on the development of thermal tourism found out that the influential factors hindering thermal tourism are marketing, recreational amenities, private sector, planning, tourism versatility and skilled labor. In another study on the image of thermal tourism by Emir & Durmaz (2009), Afyonkarahisar has been described as an orderly destination and taking part in thermal tourism activities is regarded as a trend. On the other hand, according to the findings, the region has been reported to be unsafe and marketing fails to meet up to expectations. Serpen et al., (2009) emphasized the potential of Afyonkarahisar in thermal tourism and concluded that the city would be the most notable and trendy center of Central Anatolia. Belkayalı & Akpınar (2009) evaluated Yalova spas with a view to destination planning and management approaches and set out to find out the economic value of recreational and tourism activities by means of the method of travel cost.

Bertan (2010) reported that the visitors to Pamukkale (Hierapolis) go there primarily for the purposes of health and care. Besides, the expectations of the visitors are met at high levels, hence leading to high level of satisfaction. However, when it comes to other purposes such as holiday, entertainment, culture and business, the expectations fail to be met. In his study on the potential of Nevşehir Kozaklı spas, Çetin (2011) reviews the purpose of visit, frequency of visit and demographic features of the visitors. On the other hand, Özer & Songur (2012) discussed statistical data on health tourism based on some theoretical information. Taş (2012) presents us how thermal tourism has evolved in Afyonkarahisar, detailing the thermal sources. Sandıkçı & Özgen (2013) examined SWOT analysis of Afyonkarahisar with the personnel at thermal tourism hotels. Sandıkçı & Özgen (2013) points to strong aspects of Afyonkarahisar thanks to the thermal tourism image and rich natural assets of

health tourism. However, lack of access to incentives offered by the government within the tourism encouragement law and inefficient functioning of the travel agencies in fulfilling their missions were reported to be weak aspects. On the other hand, while the recently-established airport and thermal tourism services offered all year on constitute the opportunities the city has in thermal tourism, increasing bargaining power of customers and newly-emerged thermal destinations are reported to be the notable threats. Çiçek et al., (2013) underlined the facts that thermal establishments located in the central Anatolia offer services for domestic visitors and these establishments do not qualify for opening to foreign markets. One of the means which will pave the way for the set objectives is SWOT analysis at the regional base (Emir, 2011). The main objective of this study is to evaluate SWOT analysis of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar with specific mention to the opinions of students receiving tourism education.

**DATA COLLECTION**

As the data collection tool questionnaire forms have been employed. Developed through the contribution of previous studies (Crouch & Brent Ritchie 1999; Mueller & Kaufmann, 2000; Tabak, 2003; Gökçe, 2006; Durgun, 2006; Durgun, 2007; Çelik & Murat, 2008; İlban et. al., 2008; Çelik, 2009; Wickramashinghe & Takano, 2009; Subramoniam et al., 2010; Türksoy & Türksoy, 2010), the questionnaire is two-fold. The first section is composed of four questions on demographic features. The second section, on the other hand, is composed of 60 statements on SWOT analysis. Nineteen statements represent strengths, 20 statements for weakness, 12 statements for opportunities and 9 statements for threats. 5-point Likert-type scale was employed, ranging from 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree). Subsequent to the suggestions and corrections by field experts for the questionnaire about appropriateness in terms of the content and the clarity, a preliminary implementation was conducted and the questionnaire was finalized with 60 items. Besides, reliability analyses have been reported in Table 3, 4, 5, and 6.

**METHOD**

**Study Group**

The sample of the study is comprised of students receiving tourism education 2010-2011 in Afyonkarahisar. The population covers 1453 students, 350 high school students, 759 students with associate degree and 344 undergraduate students. Due to cost, time and distance limitations, a sample of 1135 students were chosen based on random stratified sampling, and accordingly the sampling included 190 high school students, 682 students with associate degree and 263 undergraduate students, total being 1135. Table 2 reports the demographic findings of the participants.

**Table 2.** Demographic Features of the Participants (n=1135)

Variables	Groups	f	%
Education	High School	190	16,7
	Associate's	682	60,1
	Undergraduate	263	23,2
Gender	Male	700	61,7
	Female	435	38,3
Age	19 and below	201	17,7
	20-21	719	63,3
	22-23	187	16,5
	24 and above	28	2,5
Internship	Completed	629	55,4
	Not Completed	506	44,6

**FINDINGS**

The data collected were analyzed through SPSS. The demographic features of the students are presented in frequency and percentile distributions. The assessments of the students on SWOT are described in mean scores and standard deviation and Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for each factor is calculated. On the other hand, Pearson's Correlation was employed to test the relations among the students' SWOT assessments. Additionally, independent t test for two group variables and one-way ANOVA for three and more variables were employed. Tukey's post-hoc test was used to find out group differences as F-test is significant.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics on the Students' Assessments on the Strengths of Afyonkarahisar

Items	Mean	Sd	$\bar{x}$	$\alpha$
1 University in the city	3,69	1,25		
2 Increasing popularity in recent years	3,62	1,65		
3 Rich and natural resources	3,52	1,15		
4 Geographical location and market advantage	3,41	1,28		
5 Thermal hotels	3,40	1,13		
6 Ongoing tourism investments	3,35	1,14		
7 Contribution of the policies of the ministry of culture and tourism to the city	3,34	1,14		
8 Richness of flora and fauna	3,33	1,18		
9 Hospitality of the locals	3,32	1,18		
10Reserved natural and historical heritage	3,28	1,13	3,25	0.876
11Skilled labor	3,24	1,21		
12Recognition of Phrygian Valley by the ministry as heritage site	3,14	1,18		
13Annual festivals held	3,13	1,13		
14Thermal tourism image	3,09	1,13		
15National values	3,05	1,46		
16Touristic values	3,04	1,21		
17Developing tourism and EU candidateship of Turkey	2,94	1,24		
18Location at the junction point of Turkey	2,91	1,36		
19Richness of the cuisine	2,88	1,26		

Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for reliability of each factor and students' assessments of SWOT are reported in

Table 3 and Table 6. Accordingly, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are 0,876, 0,920, 0,851 and 0,830, respectively. Table 3 shows that students remark "Richness of the cuisine" ( $\bar{x}$ =2,88), "Location at the junction point of Turkey" ( $\bar{x}$ =2,91) and "Developing tourism and EU candidateship of Turkey" ( $\bar{x}$ =2,94) as the items least agreed in the strengths;

According to Table 4, students assess the items "No airport" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,73), "Poor marketing and publicity" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,55) and "Unplanned urbanization" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,52) as the weakest points. On the other hand, such items as "Bureaucratic obstacles" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,14), "Financial problems" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,23) and "Low rate of benefit from the public incentives" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,26) are regarded comparatively weaker points.

**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistics on the Students' Assessments on the Weaknesses of Afyonkarahisar.

Items	Mean	Sd	$\bar{x}$	$\alpha$
1 No airport	3,73	1,37		
2 Poor marketing and publicity	3,55	1,25		
3 Unplanned urbanization	3,52	1,26		
4 Lack of tourism awareness	3,51	1,27		
5 No strategic plan	3,45	1,20		
6 No development plan	3,43	1,20		
7 Lack of service quality	3,39	1,25		
8 Inefficient Travel Agencies	3,39	1,29		
9 Poor superstructure	3,37	1,31		
10 Inadequate image	3,36	1,30		
11 Lack of coordination among public institutions	3,35	1,19		
12 Unwillingness of the public and local institutions for tourism development	3,35	1,26	3,38	0.920
13 Low occupancy at hotels	3,31	1,29		
14 Problems related to hygiene and cleanliness	3,31	1,23		
15 Lack of contribution of the local and public institutions to tourism developments	3,30	1,23		
16 Poor infrastructure	3,29	1,28		
17 Low rate of benefit from the public incentives	3,26	1,20		
18 Financial problems	3,23	1,20		
19 Bureaucratic obstacles	3,14	1,19		

According to Table 5, students assess the most important three opportunities as "Thermal tourism covering the whole year" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,61), "Increasing interest in thermal tourism" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,51) and "The image of the thermal tourism capital" in public opinion" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,47). On the other hand, such items as "Varieties of alternative tourism" ( $\bar{x}$ =2,53), "Participation in national tourism activities" ( $\bar{x}$ =2,75) and "Participation in international tourism activities" ( $\bar{x}$ =2,76) are considered of lower opportunities in terms of thermal tourism.

**Table 5.** Descriptive statistics on the Students' Assessments on the Opportunities of Afyonkarahisar

Items	Mean	Sd	$\bar{x}$	$\alpha$
1 Thermal tourism covering the whole year	3,61	1,27		
2 Increasing interest in thermal tourism	3,51	1,14		
3 The image of "the thermal tourism capital" in public opinion	3,47	1,26		
4 More developed aspects than the competitor thermal tourism centers	3,40	1,22		
5 Increasing number of hospitality establishments	3,30	1,12		
6 Enhanced quality of the hospitality establishments	3,20	1,14	3,12	0.851
7 Contribution of tourism to social and economic development	3,09	1,17		
8 Young population for employment	2,99	1,23		
9 Potential to enter to new markets	2,82	1,10		
10 Participation in international tourism activities	2,76	1,21		
11 Participation in national tourism activities	2,75	1,15		
12 Varieties of alternative tourism	2,53	1,14		

According to the findings reported in Table 6, students assess the most important three threats as "Unfavorable effects of zoning problems" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,29), "Emigration of the skilled labor" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,24) and "Increasing bargaining power of travel agencies" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,23). Furthermore, such items as "Economic fluctuations" ( $\bar{x}$ =2,84), "Increasing bargaining power of customers" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,13) and "Changing requests and needs of customers" ( $\bar{x}$ =3,15) are considered of lower threats in terms of thermal tourism.

**Table 6.** Descriptive statistics on the Students' Assessments on the Threats of Afyonkarahisar.

Items	Mean	Sd	$\bar{x}$	$\alpha$
1 Unfavorable effects of zoning problems	3,29	1,25		
2 Emigration of the skilled labor	3,24	1,26		
3 Increasing bargaining power of travel agencies	3,23	1,21		
4 Risk of destruction of environment and natural resources	3,21	1,18		
5 Emergence of new thermal centers	3,21	1,17	3,16	0.830
6 No consulting with the field specialists by the decision makers	3,18	1,18		
7 Changing requests and needs of customers	3,15	1,13		
8 Increasing bargaining power of customers	3,13	1,18		
9 Economic fluctuations	2,84	1,10		

Table 7 reports the correlation matrix on students' assessment of SWOT analysis. There are statistically significant relationships among the dimensions of SWOT in the eye of the students. There is a moderately positive relation between the strengths and opportunities of the SWOT analysis ( $r=0,683$ ), which suggests that the higher the

perceptions of students on the strengths, the higher the perceptions on opportunities as well. On the other hand, there is a moderately negative relationship among the variables strengths threats and weakness; as the perception on the strengths are higher, the perceptions on weakness and threats are lower. Besides, there is a moderately positive relation between the students' assessment of the weakness and threats ( $r=0,539$ ). This suggests that as the perceptions get higher on the weakness, the perceptions on the threats get higher, too.

**Table 7.** Correlation Matrix on Students' Assessment of SWOT analysis.

Variables	Strength	Weakness	Opportunity	Threat
<b>Strength</b>	1,000			
<b>Weakness</b>	-0,234*	1,000		
<b>Opportunity</b>	0,683*	-0,172*	1,00	
<b>Threat</b>	-0,470*	0,539*	-0,361*	1,000

\* $p < 0,05$

Table 8 and Table 9 report the results of *t*-test and ANOVA on demographic features, respectively. It was found that there was no statistically significant relationship between the students' assessments of the strengths and weakness by gender ( $p > 0.05$ ), whereas there was a statistically significant relationship between the strengths and opportunities in terms of gender ( $p < 0.05$ ). Regarding the arithmetic averages, female student's scores lower on the assessments of the strengths and opportunities compared to male students. When it comes to internship, there was a statistically significant relationship between the strengths and opportunities ( $p < 0.05$ ). Arithmetic averages indicate that students who did not complete internship score lower on the strengths and opportunities, while those who completed internship score higher on the weakness aspect.

**Table 8.** Comparison of Students' Assessment of SWOT Analysis by Gender and Internship Status.

Variables	Groups	Strength		Weakness		Opportunity		Threat	
		Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd
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
	<i>p</i> (sig)	0,000***		0,244		0,000***		0,356	
Internship	Completed	3,31	0,65	3,42	0,75	3,17	0,71	3,20	0,72
	Not Completed	3,17	0,72	3,32	0,82	3,04	0,73	3,11	0,82
	<i>p</i> (sig)	0,002**		0,028*		0,003**		0,066	

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

Table 9 indicates the results of Variance Analysis. The results show that except for the weakness, there is statistically significant difference in students' assessments on the strength, opportunities and threats in terms of age. The mean scores of the students younger than 19 years of age for

the strength aspect are higher than the other age groups. When it comes to education status, there was a statistically significant difference in education status ( $p < 0.05$ ). Accordingly, high school students' assessment for the strength and opportunities aspect is higher compared to other students under consideration. In short, high school students give priority to strength and opportunities dimensions. On the other hand, the assessments of undergraduate students are lower when it comes to the weakness and threats dimensions compared to those of high school and associate's degree students. This is an indicator that the perceptions of undergraduate students on the weakness and threats dimensions are high.

**Table 9.** Comparison of Students' Assessment of SWOT Analysis by Age and Education

Variables	Groups	Strength		Weakness		Opportunity		Threat	
		Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd
Age	19 and below	3,38 <sup>a</sup>	0,66	3,44	0,75	3,29 <sup>a</sup>	0,72	3,32 <sup>a</sup>	0,67
	20-21	3,21 <sup>b</sup>	0,70	3,33	0,79	3,08 <sup>b</sup>	0,72	3,10 <sup>b</sup>	0,79
	22-23	3,20 <sup>b</sup>	0,67	3,46	0,78	3,08 <sup>b</sup>	0,71	3,24 <sup>b</sup>	0,74
	24 and above	3,28 <sup>b</sup>	0,53	3,31	0,77	2,99 <sup>b</sup>	0,61	2,92 <sup>a</sup>	0,70
	<i>p</i> (sig)	0,016*		0,130		0,002**		0,000***	
Education	High School	3,42 <sup>a</sup>	0,42	3,20 <sup>a</sup>	0,72	3,55 <sup>a</sup>	0,59	3,07 <sup>a</sup>	0,78
	Associate's	3,16 <sup>b</sup>	0,69	3,25 <sup>a</sup>	0,77	3,04 <sup>b</sup>	0,75	3,20 <sup>b</sup>	0,71
	Undergraduate	3,18 <sup>b</sup>	0,61	3,82 <sup>b</sup>	0,69	2,98 <sup>b</sup>	0,63	3,35 <sup>a</sup>	0,73
	<i>p</i> (sig)	0,000***		0,000***		0,000***		0,000***	

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

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The main highlight of this study is the implementation of SWOT analysis through the eyes of students receiving tourism education. Schools offering tourism education at high school, associate's degree and undergraduate level make up an advantage for the province. Specifically, university education offered within the borders of the province is regarded as a strong aspect with respect to employment of skilled labor needed by tourism firms. This also offers opportunities in promoting the collaboration between university and tourism firms. A study by Sandıkçı et al., (2013) highlight the importance of the promotion of university-private sector collaboration and underline the importance of the employment of health specialists from universities in thermal therapy services. In a similar vein, Akbulut (2010) points out that the cooperation among universities, non-governmental organizations and local authorities should be enhanced in order to promote spa and thermal tourism activities and facilities. It is of great significance that institutions offering tourism training and education should be incorporated into tourism planning and marketing activities in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the plans and strategies set. The increasing popularity of the city in recent years and the abundant natural resources in thermal tourism are the other strong aspects of the city in the eye of the students. Similarly, Sandıkçı & Özgen (2013) in their study on SWOT analysis of

Afyonkarahisar with specific reference to thermal tourism underline rich thermal resources, image of the city and the increasing popularity of the city. However, Taş (2012) points out that rich thermal water resources are not the only condition for the development of thermal tourism. He adds that apart from the viable transportation, promotion activities of the thermal establishments and the recreational activities to support thermal tourism are *sine qua non*. Thanks to the governmental incentives for tourism investments, Afyonkarahisar holds a righteous and important market share in thermal tourism. The bed capacity of the city is on the increase subsequent to governmental incentives, which attracted the attention of the travel agencies and tour operators to the city, thus leading to the increasing popularity of the city. The items in the questionnaire on which students agree less are the rich cuisine and the location at the junction point of Turkey and EU candidacy. The city should make the most of its location in a much more efficient manner.

Students consider such factors as “no airport, poor marketing and strategy and unplanned urbanization” as the weakest points of Afyonkarahisar. Zafer Airport, located in a nearby city, made the transportation to Afyonkarahisar relatively easier and effective compared to previous years. Rich networks of transportation make a destination attractive to a wider range of people. Hence, recently-launched High Speed Train operating to nearby cities will definitely have favorable effects on the tourism movements in Afyonkarahisar. Planning with efficient infrastructure and superstructure undoubtedly is a prerequisite in tourism management at national level. However, there is another consideration which is sustainability, which should not be made a matter of bargain during the planning process for the good of later generations. Natural environment in thermal tourism regions is indispensable; therefore, thermal tourism destinations should not merely incorporate buildings but green areas as well. Kervankiran & Özdemir (2013) support the importance of natural environment and claim that tourism activities in Afyonkarahisar develop in an unplanned and unregulated. Besides, they stress that superstructure without infrastructure is bound to create problems in the medium terms not only in environmental aspects but also in visual aspects.

Participants regard such items as “Thermal tourism covering the whole year, Increasing interest in thermal tourism and The image of “the thermal tourism capital” in public opinion” as the outstanding opportunities of the city. The findings of Sandıkçı & Özgen (2013) support our study. Both hotel employees and tourism students state common views on the opportunities of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar. Despite the fact that thermal tourism independent of the environmental factors, in its very essence, is a kind of tourism feasible during the 12-month of period, there is seasonal concentration in demand. When the occupancy rates of the thermal hotels are considered, there is high seasonal occupancy especially in summer months. A similar case is reported by Türksoy & Türksoy (2010) in their study on thermal tourism in Çeşme, where occupancy rates are at the highest during summer months. This could be considered as an indicator that the awareness of thermal tourism and promotion activities are not clearly established.

It should also be noted that thermal tourism is not only for those with health problems but also for those with an aim to lead a healthy life. In this context, thermal tourism manages to draw the attention of the investors and the informed public alike. There are a lot of thermal centers at Afyonkarahisar such as Gazlıgöl, Sandıklı, Heybeli and Ömer-Gecek thermal centers, outnumbering other provinces in Turkey. This is important in that Afyonkarahisar could rightfully be introduced as the capital of thermal tourism in Turkey. This being the case, it will not be wrong to say that all these offer a variety of opportunities for the entrepreneurs.

To the assessments of the students “Unfavorable effects of zoning problems, emigration of the skilled labor and increasing bargaining power of travel agencies” are the top three threat factors for thermal tourism. Incentives provided by government to tourism incentives no doubt lead to an increase in tourism investments. In all aspects, this, along with the dense housing, creates visual pollution and creates a density above the carrying capacity of the city. It should be kept in mind that this will inevitably have adverse effects on not merely the locals but visitors as well. Therefore, in planning the zoning areas, it is of great benefit that strategic decisions should be made. Emigration of the skilled labor is a threat for tourism development of the region. Among the factors that cause this to occur are wage policies of hotels, lack of accommodation for the skilled labor and career development opportunities. As the number of hotels increase, naturally the competition among the hotels gets fierce. Considering the developing market nature of the region, the relations with the intermediary firms come to the forefront. Hoteliers are more flexible and concessive to tour operators and travel agencies due to competition. For this reason, hotels should be market-oriented and enhance service quality and customer satisfaction and should build up joint marketing strategies in order to minimize their dependence on the intermediaries.

Students’ assessments’ of the strengths and opportunities dimensions differs by age. Female students scoreless in their assessments of the strengths and opportunities dimensions. Besides, in terms of internship status, their assessment on the weakness and threats dimensions differ significantly. Students who did not complete internship score lower on the strengths and opportunities, while those who completed internship score higher on the weakness aspect, which could be put down to the structure of tourism perception of the students. It could be held that the common framework in their mind is 3S (sea, san and sun). Besides, those who did not complete their internship lack experience and it might be said that they are inclined to compare Afyonkarahisar with other popular tourism destination, where 3 S still counts.

It is clear from the findings that age is not an important variable in students’ assessments on opportunities and threats dimensions. Those 19 years of age and below state favorable opinion on the strengths and opportunities aspects; however, when it comes to the threats aspects, they state less favorable opinions. Those within the range of the stated age are mostly high school students. Besides, the facts that students within this age range are native of Afyonkarahisar and they have strong sense of belonging may lead to emotional assessment. This is also observed in the education status variable.

Education status is an important factor in students' assessment of SWOT analysis. The assessments of high school students are more positive in the strengths and opportunities dimension compared to students of other educational status. On the other hand, assessment of undergraduate students on the weakness and the threats dimensions are comparatively negative. It will not be incorrect to assume that students of associate's degree and high school are the residents of Afyonkarahisar and as for undergraduate considering the fact that students they are from other cities to have higher education in Afyonkarahisar, they tend to compare Afyonkarahisar with the cities they are from. Another point to mention is that as the education level increase the perception on the weakness and threats aspects increase as well. Hence, students with higher education status might be said that they have a comprehensive point of view towards thermal tourism, thus being more critical.

Under the light of the findings and the results of the study, tourism school at different level are definitely an advantage for Afyonkarahisar. Thanks to these schools, labor power tourism establishments do need could be obtained from these schools. Besides, considering the geographical location of Afyonkarahisar, the city is at an important junction point. High Speed Train Project that will be finalized in the very near future will definitely add up to the attractiveness of the city in all aspects. Presently, no airport is available in the city; however, Zafer Airport, located 60 km away from the city, if planned operationally, could be a great asset in the development of thermal tourism. Another point under consideration is to perform planning activities in a manner that will not influence the life quality of the posterity and will take care of the sustainability of the tourism resources. What's more, setting up a joint platform to set strategies for the promotion of thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar by the shareholders will definitely be beneficial. While doing this, especially, the public and private sector representatives responsible for destination management should make use of social networks in a more efficient way for the promotion activities. Recreational services that will enrich thermal tourism services should be concentrated and thermal therapies should be supported healthy diet prescriptions. While the average therapy lasts for 21 days, the statistics of Afyonkarahisar clearly reveal that the average is 2,2 days in the city, which is also supported by the study done by Kervankıran & Özdemir (2013). This could be explained by the fact that the thermal hotels are used mainly for convention purpose rather than therapy purposes. Hence, hotels should widen up range of services in therapeutic services and focus their means and attention on the therapeutic-oriented customers.

#### LIMITATIONS

While this study contributes to thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar, one of the most important thermal cities of Turkey, it has some limitations, too. One of them is the sample of the study. The study was carried out with 1135 tourism students from different educational settings in Afyonkarahisar between the dates October 2010-June 2011. Thus, one should be careful about generalizing the findings of the study to different samples and different cities offering thermal tourism. Same study could be run with people

serving to thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar at various positions, and for other cities with thermal tourism.

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