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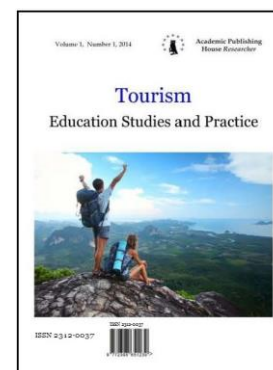
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The Image of Croatia as a Tourist Destination Impression of Serbian Tourists

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Abstract

Tourism can transcend administrative borders by bringing people closer together through the understanding of different cultures, heritages, and beliefs. Therefore, it is potentially one of the most important tools for promoting peace among the peoples of the world. The relations between Serbia and Croatia are very important for the stability of Southeastern Europe. The violent breakup of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s destroyed and severed the relations between two largest Yugoslav republics, and more importantly, relations between Serbs and Croats. Tourism development can be an efficient means for promoting peace in both these countries. In recent years, the tourism development strategy of Croatia has included efforts in trying to evoke the nostalgic and other forgotten feelings that Serbian tourists have with regard to Croatian islands and beaches. The fact that the number of Serbian tourists continued to grow over the years, especially on the Croatian Adriatic, best speaks of the success of that strategy. This paper presents the result of a survey that was conducted from December 2012 to March 2014 on 850 residents from Serbia. The study is focused on determining the image that Croatia has with potential tourists from Serbia.

Keywords: Croatia, Serbia, tourism, destination image, perception.

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the most developed service industry of almost all developed countries, as well as the branch that has its greatest progress in the developing and underdeveloped countries. Successful tourist destination can increase revenues and employment rate. If we look observe the tourism from the aspect of tourism operators, who participate in it, we conclude that the tourist market is highly competitive. Travel agencies, tour operators, as well as cities, regions and countries have to fight for their place and tourists under the influence of cultural and economic globalization. Warm sea, good price and good food are not enough for tourists any more. One of the best ways, i.e. business strategies focussed on differentiation, is creation and development of the destination image.

Destination image has two important roles in the behaviour of visitors: (1) the decision-making process influences the choice of destination (2) to question the behaviour after the decision making, including participation (on-site experience), evaluation (satisfaction) and future behaviour

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intentions (intentions to repeat the visit and the willingness to recommend) (Chen, Tsai, 2007; Lee et al., 2005).

Destination image affects the tourist travels through the decision making process, knowledge and behaviour on site, as well as the level of satisfaction and the memory of the experience (Jenkins, 1999). This paper discusses the survey of opinions of tourists from Serbia in relation to the image of Croatia as a tourist destination.

2. Literature review

The idea of branding is relatively new and academic research is still in its infancy (Gnoth, 1998). Although the words “Brand” “branding” and “the destination image” have already appeared in many academic studies, a distinction has been made between the destination images and branding of destination. The destination image (the image) is more cognitive knowledge, it involves subjective knowledge of the destination (for example, expensive, exotic, urban, cold, and developed) and therefore its evaluation may vary from one person to another. Tourist destination may have a name, but not necessarily the brand (e.g. New York, Paris). Destination branding involves the establishment of instant emotional connection with customers. In an increasingly competitive tourist market, destinations are turning to branding to build an identity that highlights the uniqueness of their products and that will transmit a positive message and motivate customers (Ekinci, 2003).

The subject of branding is the most often products or services. However, people, groups, organizations and destinations can also become a brand (Kotler, 2009). Everything can be branded if consumers have a choice. The main goal of destination branding is to differentiate it from the competition by taking the consumer from the stage of ignorance about the destination until the destination has been visited and later re-visited. In order to achieve the main objective of branding it is necessary to develop awareness and recognition among potential visitors, to create a positive image in their minds through a strong and compelling brand identity (Baker, 2007).

The image of the destination (destination brand image) is crucial for the decision on tourists' visits, investment of foreign and domestic investors and creating strong brands of products and services. In order to compete in an increasingly globalized and competitive economy, tourist destinations should be active in managing their image. The image of a tourist destination is a “collection of all knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imagination and emotions of an individual or a group on a specific destination or just as others see us!” (Chen, Tsai, 2007; Lee et al., 2005; Sun et al., 2008).

The importance of the role that the image has in the process of decision making is now generally accepted, and also in the selection and re-visits (Beerli, Martin, 2004; Yoon, Uysal, 2005; Um, 2006). In order for a tourist destination to have a good image and to attract continually a large number of tourists, it is necessary that the destination really has the offer which the tourists would like. Destination must have an attractive offer of material and immaterial elements such as: architecture, quality cuisine, enchanting natural resources and generally interesting and hospitable culture (Florek, 2005). Also, what a tourist destination needs to have is a quality tourist infrastructure (quality of transport networks, the officials who speak foreign languages, a wide selection of accommodations), which is necessary for tourists to enjoy the tourist offer. Various external factors beyond the control can affect the destination image: government institutions and politics can achieve poor results, it can be shown that the government is shamefully corrupted, and companies that produce brands for export can be captured to behave immorally and unsociably, and foreign media can present the destination in negative context.

Brand of the tourist destination is a combination of key features of that destination, which makes it unique, recognizable and memorable, and at the same time it distinguishes the destination from other competitive places. The brand image is in the minds of consumers, it is created on the basis of their perceptions.

Almost all countries in the world have become aware of the importance of the state tourist brand development, and in accordance with the fact that the tourism is an important sector of service activities in each country. States, as the holders of the brand, have become aware that it is not enough only to invest in the development of individual tourist destinations, such as those related to coastal tourism, then cities, ski resorts and spas, but the entire country has to be presented as a tourist destination to a modern tourist. The importance of country branding lies not

only in attracting more tourists, but also in strengthening of economic and political power of the state itself (Čugurović, 2011).

3. Methodology

The questionnaire used in the study consists of four parts. The first part deals with socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, occupation and level of monthly income). In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to select destinations in Croatia, which in their opinion are the most attractive within certain groups: continental cities, coastal towns, islands, national parks, protected cultural property and spas. In the third part respondents told us how they got informed about Croatia as a tourist destination. The fourth part of the questionnaire examined the most important advantages of Croatia as a tourist destination. Based on the literature review (Beerli, Martin, 2004; Qu et al., 2011; Chen, Tsai, 2007] and reviews of 5 members of the focus group (university professors in the field of tourism) six basic attributes were singled out. In this part respondents marked their views on the 7 – point Likert scale (1 – least important to 7 – extremely important).

Data collection

The survey was conducted on the territory of five towns in Serbia (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Subotica, Nis and Kragujevac) from December 2012 to March 2014. The results presented in this paper relate to the attitudes of Serbian tourists connected to the image of Croatia as a tourist destination. Five researchers took part in the survey. Residents who have at least once visited the Croatian coast have been surveyed. A total of 850 valid responses were collected. The sample included 44.8% males and 55.2% females among the respondents (Table 1). The main age group was 41–50 and represented 24.7% of the respondents. The next biggest age groups were 21–30 making 22.1% of the respondents. Most of the respondents (58.6%) had completed secondary education. Regarding their occupation, the majority of respondents were employed (53.4%). According to their monthly income, the dominant group is the group of the respondents with low income, up to €300 (29.9%).

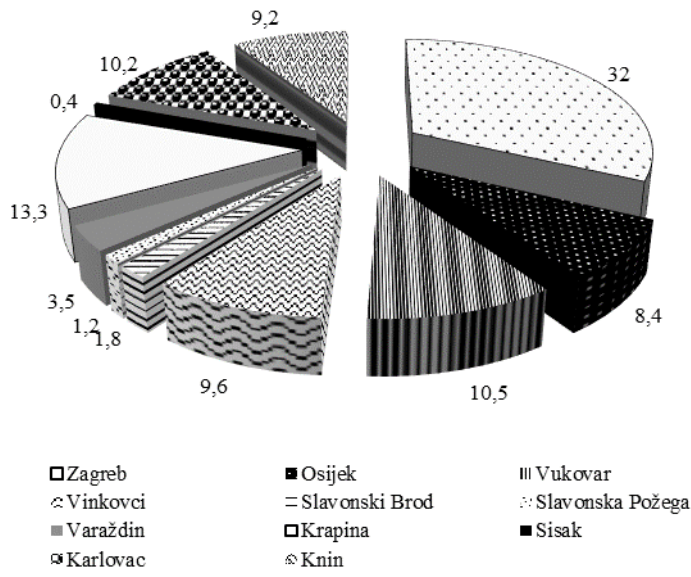
Table 1. Demographic information of tourists (n = 850)

Variable	Sample size	%	Variable	Sample size	%
Age			Average income		
≤ 20	146	17,2	≤ 300 €	254	29,9
21 - 30	188	22,1	301 – 500 €	226	26,6
31 - 40	126	14,8	501 – 700 €	80	9,4
41 - 50	210	24,7	701 – 1000 €	36	4,2
51-60	126	14,8	≥1001	25	2,9
≥61	54	6,4	No income	229	26,9
Gender					
male	381	44,8			
female	469	55,2	Occupation		
Education			pupil	18	2,1
Secondary education	498	58,6	student	214	25,2
college	77	9,1	employed	454	53,4
higher education	186	21,9	retired	79	9,3
master's degree	45	5,3	unemployed	63	7,4
doctor's degree	12	1,4	other	22	2,6

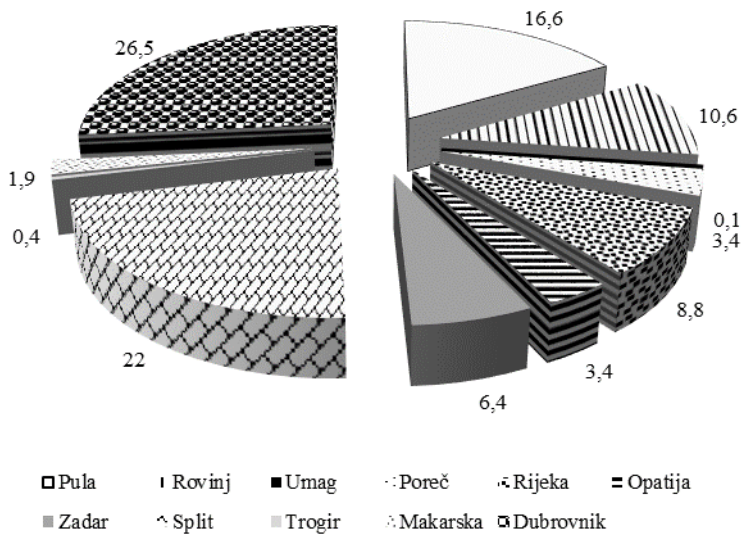
4. Results

When asked which city in continental Croatia they would like to visit, 1/3 of respondents chose Zagreb, followed by Krapina, Vukovar and Karlovac. The coastal town they would like to visit the most was Dubrovnik (26.5%), followed by Split (22%) and Pula (16.6%). As for the Croatian islands, most of the respondents opted for Brioni (18.1%), Hvar (17.4%) and Korcula (13.6%).

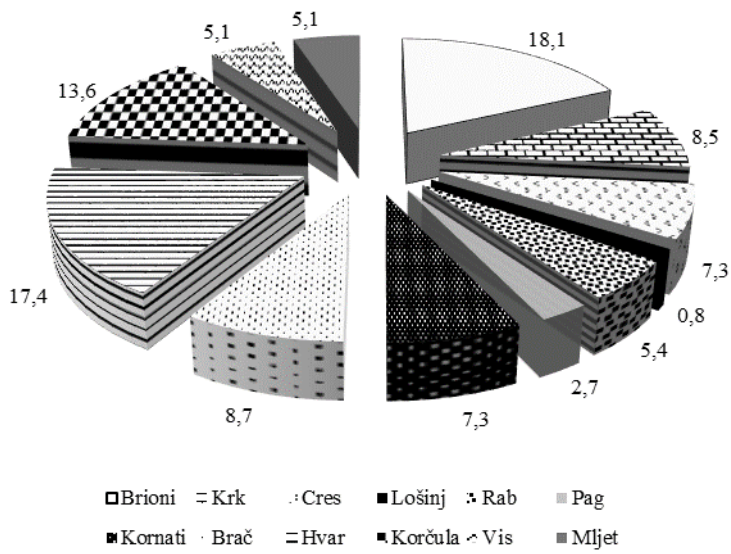
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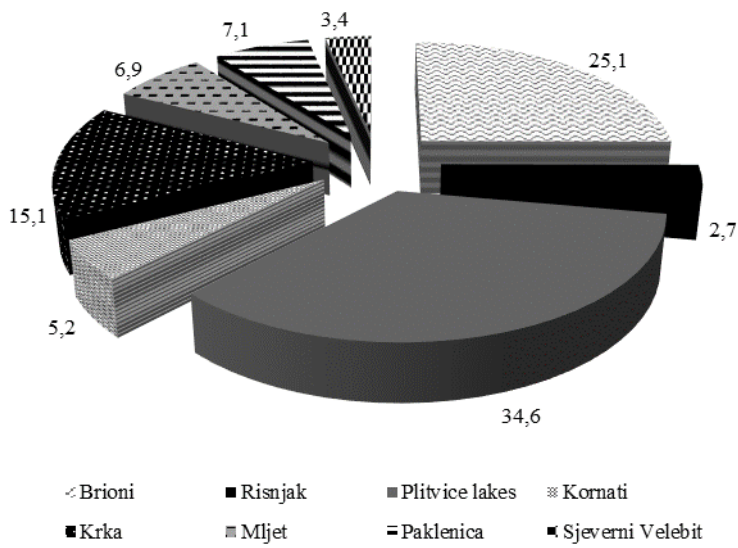
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c)



d)



e)

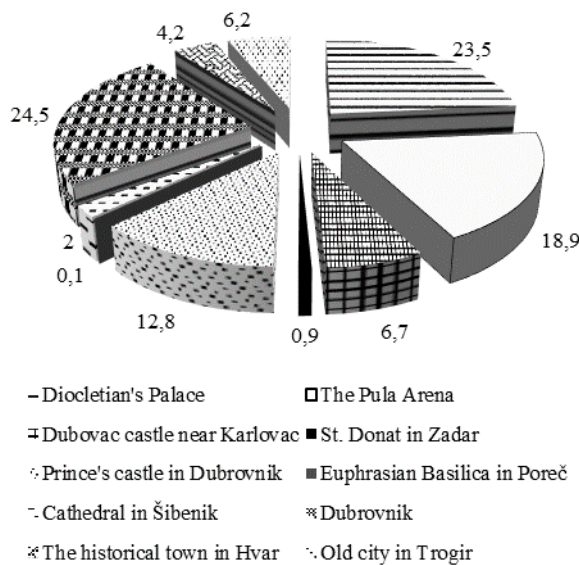


Figure 1 (a-e). Tourist destinations in Croatia selected by potential tourists from Serbia (%)

It is not surprising that the majority of respondents mentioned Plitvice Lakes as a destination they would like to visit (34.6%). Among many cultural and historical monuments in Croatia, the attention of the respondents was drawn to Dubrovnik (24.5%) and Dioklecijan’s Palace in Split (23.5%).

The largest number of respondents mentioned as the main source of information about travel arrangements in Croatia Internet (31.1%), followed by social networks (13.3%) and TV commercials (11.4%) (Table 2). The importance of the Internet in the tourism market is illustrated by the fact that the volume of the online sales of travel services has recorded a rapid growth in recent years. In recent years there has been a change in the use of information technologies in tourism, and the economic and demographic trends have contributed to it and led to changes in lifestyle, and therefore in the tourism industry. The main marketing tool for tourism will also in the future be the Internet and informal discussions. Passengers will decide where to go based on visits to the web site and especially online forums with informal discussions. Decisions about the trip will be made with the help of the Internet, and positive experience received by electronic travel will lead to the physical travel and positive stories to the close environment. This will lead to positive conversations and oral recommendations that are the most effective in attracting new tourists because they are based on real positive experiences of those who have already experienced the destination, and potential tourists trust them (Nenad Brkić: Što bolji brend destinacije, bolja posjeta turist, 2015).

Table 2. Sources of information about Croatia as a tourist destination

Sources of information	N	%
TV commercials	97	11,4
radio commercials	69	8,1
Billboards	81	9,5
TV shows	54	6,4
Specialized magazines	89	10,5
Daily press	49	5,8
Brochures and flyers	34	4,0
Social networks	113	13,3
The Internet	264	31,1
Total	850	100,0

In the opinion of respondents from Serbia (Table 3), the biggest advantages of Croatia for the development of tourism are the beauty of the coast ($=5.62$; $=1.42$) and cultural heritage ($=5.38$; $=1.47$). Based on data from the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia 84% of total tourist arrivals in 2013 were realized in seaside towns (Tourism in figures 2014, 2015). These results were expected considering the state and perspectives of the development of coastal tourism in Croatia. Although according to the number of tourist arrivals it cannot be compared to tourist destinations such as Spain, Italy, Turkey and Greece, when it comes to “sun & sand” tourism, Croatia is with 13.5 million arrivals in 2014 in the group of better visited countries in the Mediterranean. This is supported by several occurrences in the last ten years, such as “discovering” of Croatia in numerous articles of the world’s leading magazines and other media, describing its natural and cultural attractions, the increase in the number of tourist arrivals from the growing number of originating countries, the increase in the number of protected material and immaterial cultural heritage, increased investment in tourism and infrastructure, more diverse tourist offer and others (Tourism, 2015).

Table 3. The biggest advantages of Croatia as a tourist destination according to the opinion of potential tourists from Serbia

Attributes	\bar{X}	σ
Events	4,6447	1,44743
Night life	5,0306	1,51133
Gastronomy	5,1988	1,42144
Cultural heritage	5,3824	1,46684
Beauty of the coast	5,6224	1,42408
Yu-nostalgia	3,7612	2,24593

Tourists’ attitudes are statistically significantly different when it comes to “nightlife”, “beauty of the coast” and “cultural heritage” (Table 4) in the direction that women gave significantly higher marks to these attributes in relation to male respondents (* $p < 0.01$).

Table 4. The results of T-test analysis according to gender

Attributes	\bar{X}		t- test
	Male (N=381)	Female (N=469)	
Events	4,6247	4,6610	-0,364
Night life	4,8136	5,2068	-3,802*
Gastronomy	5,1234	5,2601	-1,396
Cultural heritage	5,1339	5,5842	-4,502*
Beauty of the coast	5,4803	5,7377	-2,630*
Yu-nostalgia	3,8031	3,7271	0,491

* $p < 0.01$

Also, respondents’ opinions significantly differ with respect to the age structure in attributes “night life” and “Yu-nostalgia”. For respondents older than 60, night clubs and bars do not represent a significant factor in destination branding ($p < 0.01$).

The lowest rated attribute was “Yu-nostalgia” ($=3.76$; $=2.25$). However, the “Yu-nostalgia” or memories of good times from the period of SFRY, were the most important attribute for the age group 51-60, and statistically the least important for the group up to 20 years of age ($p < 0.01$) (Table 5).

Table 5. The results of ANOVA according to age group

Attributes	Mean						F	LSD test
	group 1 ≤ 20	group 2 21 - 30	group 3 31 - 40	group 4 41 - 50	group 5 51 - 60	group 6 61 ≥		
Events	4,8219	4,5213	4,5159	4,6667	4,7698	4,5185	1,192	
Night life	5,2603	5,0745	5,2460	4,9476	5,0000	4,1481	5,160*	6 < 1,2,3,4,5
Gastronomy	5,1370	5,3617	5,0714	5,2619	5,0556	5,1852	1,092	
Cultural heritage	5,5685	5,3351	5,1825	5,5286	5,2698	5,2037	1,710	
Beauty of the coast	5,5068	5,6330	5,6667	5,7143	5,6825	5,2963	1,005	
Yu-nostalgia	2,6918	3,5266	3,9841	4,1095	4,8413	3,0741	16,510*	1 < 2,3,4,5,6 5 > 1,2,3,4,6

* $p < 0.01$

Respondents who belong to the age group 51-60 were between 26 and 35 years of age before the war conflicts, i.e. they belonged to the category of young people who were capable of working and who had opportunities to travel. Also, citizens of Serbia owned about 40.000 houses and holiday houses, and many companies from Serbia had their holiday resorts in places on the Croatian coast ([According to documents and statements of refugee and other associations of Croatian Serbs, 2015](#)).

The results of this paper have shown the interest of respondents from Serbia for different destinations in Croatia, but also general impressions regarding the basic attributes that make its major asset for tourism development and the formation of recognizable image. According to the presence in the media (TV, billboards, Internet portals and forums) as well as the personal experience of respondents with destinations in Croatia, a certain image was formed in their minds, which reflects the perception of a destination brand.

4. Conclusion

The image is a concept of great importance for all market participants, and therefore a substantial attention has been given to it in scientific theory and practice. It is a component that can be affected, and that can affect the performance and competitiveness of products, services, places or countries. Destination image affects the perception of the individual, his subsequent behaviour and destination choice. As a multidimensional phenomenon, the image includes not only the belief or knowledge of a tourist destination, but also the feelings of the individual towards the tourist destination.

In tourist literature we can find attitudes that image is more important than material resources, because the perception can motivate or non-motivate consumers much stronger than reality. From this perspective, in the context of globalization, every country, every city and every region have to compete for their share of the world's consumers. The image is very strong factor for the tourism movement, because it very successfully takes the idea that destinations (cities, destinations, tourist sites) should understand the importance of managing both internal identity and external reputation ([Đorđević, 2013](#)).

Results of this study are important because until now researches dealing with attitudes of Serbian tourists when it comes to the image of Croatia as a tourist destination have not been conducted. Also, the most attractive tourist destinations and sites have been singled out according to the perception of respondents.

The authors believe that the results of the study would give a more complete picture if opinions of respondents from Croatia were taken into account related to the basic advantages of tourism development in their country. Also, future researches may be directed towards examining the attitudes of respondents from Serbia in relation to brand destinations of other countries of the former Yugoslavia. In addition to these proposals for quantitative research, the use of qualitative

methods in certain selected groups would give a wider and more reliable picture of the tourist image of the destination.

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