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ISTRAŽIVANJE IMIDŽA DESTINACIJE I PROMOTIVNE AKTIVNOSTI SRBIJE – PERSPEKTIVA POSETILACA

EXPLORING DESTINATION IMAGE AND PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES OF SERBIA – VISITORS’ PERSPECTIVE

Apstrakt: U najnovijoj literaturi je naglašena značajna uloga koju imidž destinacije igra u oblikovanju putničkog ponašanja turista i potencijalne koristi koje se mogu izvući i za turističku destinaciju i za celu zemlju. Stoga je glavni cilj ovog istraživanja bio da se ispita kako strani i domaći turisti percipiraju kognitivne, konativne i celokupnu sliku Srbije, kao i efikasnost njenih promotivnih napora. Anketno istraživanje sprovedeno je u glavnim destinacijama Srbije, a obuhvatilo je ukupno 956 turista. Nalazi su otkrili značajne razlike između dva turistička segmenta i rasvetlili manje percipirane aspekte imidža destinacije, ističući oblasti koje zahtevaju pažnju u budućnosti. Ovaj rad nudi vredne implikacije koje mogu efikasno da se pozabave identifikovanim problemima.

Ključne reči: slika destinacije, kognitivna slika, konativna slika, slika, Srbija.

Abstract: The well-established literature emphasized the significant role that destination image plays in shaping tourists’ travel behavior and the potential benefits that can be derived for both the tourist destination and the entire country. Thus, the main goal of this research was to explore how foreign and domestic tourists perceive Serbia’s cognitive, conative, and overall images, as well as the effectiveness of its promotional efforts. The survey research was conducted in the major destinations of Serbia, and it involved a total of 956 tourists. The findings revealed significant differences between the two tourist segments and shed light on lesser-perceived aspects of the destination image, highlighting areas that require attention in the future. The paper offers valuable implications that can address the identified issues effectively.

Keywords: destination image, cognitive image, conative image, overall image, Serbia.

Introduction

Tourism products are specific, and differentiate from other products that consumers purchase (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Besides, given the dominance of intangible nature of tourism services, tourists' perception of destination image prevails (Gallarza et al., 2002). Thus, when planning a trip, tourists depend on the destination image to create an early notion of what to expect at the destination (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Also, the destination image plays a crucial role in influencing the pre-travel purchasing decision, shaping the overall travel experience, evaluating that experience, and subsequently impacting post-travel behaviors and intentions (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Daskin & Pala, 2022).

In the tourism market, there is a constant presence of competition between destinations, striving to secure distinctiveness (Xu & Au, 2023). Nowadays, the competition has transitioned to the rivalry between the images of competing destinations (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015). Such competitive conditions triggered the desire of the destination to improve, manage and present a positive image (Alcocer & Ruiz, 2020). The unique image of a destination facilitates the identification of its defining traits (Lin & Kuo, 2018) and elevates its reputation in the tourism market (Qu et al., 2011).

Consequently, in the past few decades, there has been a significant emphasis in academic circles on the destination image (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015; Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2019). Indeed, when researchers gain a deeper understanding of destination image and its encompassing components, it becomes simpler for destination marketers to create effective and tailored approaches for different segments of tourists (Stylidis et al., 2017; Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2019). Hence, gaining insights into tourists' perception of a destination's image and proactively striving to enhance it are indispensable for achieving success in destination management and marketing (Chen et al., 2010; Konecnik, 2002). On the other hand, destinations take the most of marketing communication and promotional activities

to shape their images (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Fridgen, 1984; Gartner, 1993).

The principal aim of the paper was to explore the perception of destination image and the quality of the promotion of Serbia from the visitors' perspective. The research has been conducted as follow-up research to the one conducted for the development of the Strategic marketing plan of Serbia, done in 2019. The study aims to check if the perception of Serbia has changed in the past four years and to identify what are the attributes that have been improved the most.

Literature review

In diverse academic disciplines, the image and destination image have multiple interpretations, indicating the lack of a universal definition (Baloglu, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gartner, 1993; Kim & Richardson, 2003). Nevertheless, one notable definition, provided by Crompton (1979, p. 18), characterizes a destination image as "the amalgamation of beliefs, ideas and impressions held by tourists regarding a specific destination". Moreover, the concept of destination image refers to how tourists subjectively interpret and perceive the reality of a destination (Bigné et al., 2001).

There are two principal academic approaches that have explored the formation of destination image. In the first approach, known as the traditional perspective, the image is believed to be predominantly cognitive (Mazurski & Jacoby, 1986). On the other hand, the modern approach highlights that the image is shaped by both cognitive and affective aspects (San Martín & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2008). Thus, the cognitive dimension captures a tourist's understanding and belief about the qualities and features of an object or destination (Pike & Ryan, 2004; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010). Besides, the affective image encompasses all the emotions and feelings that tourists experience towards a specific object or destination (Kim & Richardson, 2003). Some researchers (e.g., Baloglu, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999) have highlighted the crucial significance of incorporating both dimensions

to comprehend the true nature of the image, as it is not solely determined by the physical attributes and characteristics of the destination. Indeed, the synthesis of cognitive and affective images culminates in the formation of the overall image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), encompassing both tangible and intangible elements (Alcocer & Ruiz, 2020).

Also, according to certain authors (e.g., Gartner, 1993; Pike & Ryan, 2004), it has been posited that a third dimension, known as the conative image, exists, which pertains to behavioral associations with the destination. For instance, it can be a tourist's intention to visit, revisit or spread positive word-of-mouth about the destination (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2009; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010; Wang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023).

The destination image is an important factor in understanding tourists' behavior, and researchers have explored how it relates to other constructs and the effect it has (Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2020). For instance, it was confirmed that tourists' personal involvement (e.g., Prayag & Ryan, 2012), travel motivation (e.g., Chelliah et al., 2021) and country stereotype (e.g., Yan et al., 2023) shape their perception of destination image. Besides, previous studies found that destination image influences tourists' destination attachment (e.g., Stylidis, 2020; Tasci et al., 2022), trust (e.g., Davies &

Chun, 2002), satisfaction (e.g., Puh, 2014) and intention to revisit the destination (e.g., Kim, 2014). Also, destination image has received attention from researchers due to its significance in improving marketing and management approaches (Chu et al., 2022). Thus, in recent research, Bratić et al. (2023) delved into the depths of different tourists' cognitive image profiles, providing a deeper understanding that can greatly contribute to the creation of effective destination marketing and management strategies.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the research were domestic and foreign tourists in various destinations in Serbia. A total of 956 tourists filled in the survey. There is a higher number of female respondents (62.5%), while the average age of the sample was 35.45 years. When it comes to education, there is the highest number of highly educated visitors (43%), followed by those who have finished secondary school (41.21). Visitors mostly have an average income compared to the average monthly income in their place of residence. The sample included a higher number of foreign visitors - 63.91%. The distribution of destinations where visitors were surveyed, together with detailed sociodemographics is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents (N=956)

Gender		Average monthly income	
Male	37.45	Bellow avarage	30.12
Female	62.55	Avarage	45.18
		Above avarage	24.68
Average age – 35.45 years, Min. 18, max. 69		Domestic tourists	36.09
		Foreign tourists	63.91
Education		Destinations	
Elementary school	5.85	Novi Sad	12.97
Secondary school	41.21	Belgrade	24.06
Higher school	9.94	Niš	9.31
Bachelor, Master or PhD	43	Zlatibor	9.41
		Tara	8.16
		Kopaonik	9.83
		Vrnjačka Spa	10.04
		Sokobanja	8.89
		Spa Koviljača	7.32

Source: Author

Instrument

The instrument for data collection was a survey. The survey consisted of several parts. The first part included the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents (gender, age, education, average monthly income etc.). The second part referred to the assessment of the image of Serbia (cognitive, conative and overall image). For assessing cognitive image, a scale of 22 items was used. The scale was initially based on Echtner and Ritchie (1993) and Gallarza et al. (2002), and further developed and modified by Kovačić et al. (2022). Individual items of the cognitive image were evaluated by tourists based on their assessment of the agreement with the stated statements on a 5-point Likert scale from (1 - do not agree at all, to 5 - completely agree). The overall image was evaluated by tourists on a scale from (1 - very negative, to 5 - very positive), while the quality of the promotion was evaluated on a scale of (1 - very bad, 5 - excellent). Finally, the conative image was assessed by evaluating the degree of agreement with statements: I would return to destination and I would recommend destination to other people. The statements were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale from (1 - do not agree at all, to 5 - completely agree).

Procedure

The research was conducted from March to October 2023 in the major tourist destinations of Serbia – cities (Novi Sad, Belgrade, Niš), mountains (Zlatibor, Tara, Kopaonik) and spas (Vrnjačka Spa, Soko Banja, spa Koviljača). The pen-and-paper questionnaires (in Serbian and English) were distributed with the help of employees in accommodation facilities and attractions at destinations. The tourists were informed about the purpose of the study and that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. The data were processed by SPSS (Statistical Software for Social Sciences) version 23.

Results

Cognitive image evaluation

Firstly, the cognitive image was measured, based on the perception of different de-

stination elements referring to the information and knowledge that tourists have about the destination. Afterwards, the overall image of Serbia and the specific destination in Serbia the tourists have visited was measured, and finally, the conative image that refers to the behavior, i.e. to whether tourists would return to the destination, whether they would recommend it, etc. has been analyzed.

Assessment of the cognitive image of Serbia is shown in Figure 1. Figure 1 presents elements of cognitive image which are ranked from the highest to the lowest average value.

Research has shown that tourists consider the tourist destination in Serbia they are currently visiting to have good gastronomic offers, friendly residents, excellent level of service, high safety and security, quality accommodation facilities, good restaurants, cafes, and bars, and good nightlife as the most important attributes. These are the only claims that have been rated with an average score higher than 4. With other attributes and elements of the destination, tourists are less satisfied. They rated the Interesting architecture, Lots of activities for kids, The possibility of adequate public transport at the destination, A diverse range of activities for families, Various shops, good traffic accessibility and Good price-quality ratio as the lowest.

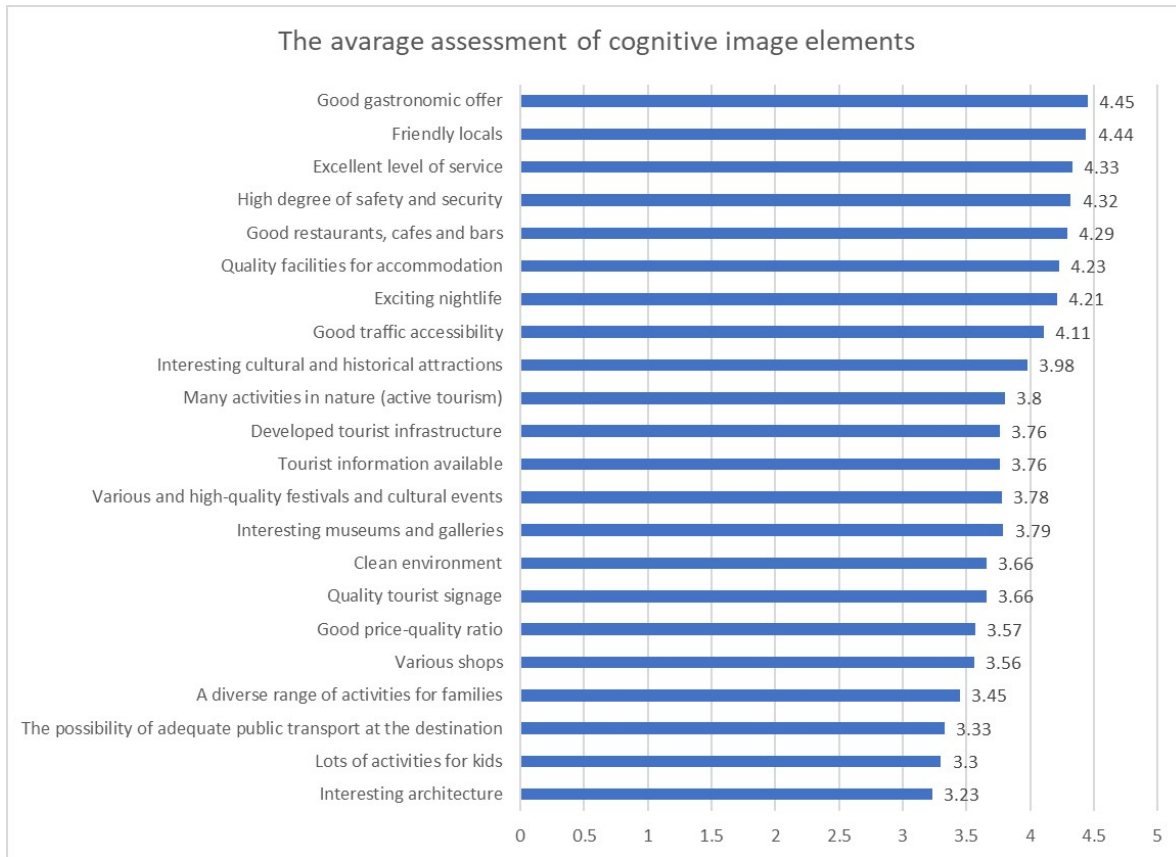
Among foreign tourists (over 80%) in the TOP 5 by the highest number of ratings, the following stand out:

- Good gastronomic offerings;
- Pleasant local residents;
- Safety and security
- Good restaurants, cafes, bars;
- Quality accommodation facilities;

Among domestic tourists (over 75%), the following can be classified in the TOP 5 in this regard:

- Exciting nightlife;
- Quality accommodation facilities;
- Excellent service level;
- Good restaurants, cafes, bars;
- Good gastronomic offerings.

Figure 1. *Assessment of the Cognitive image of Serbia by tourists*



Source: Author

The overall image of Serbia

When it comes to assessing the overall image of the destination where tourists were surveyed and the overall image of Serbia, the results indicate that the destination's image where tourists were surveyed is better rated. While the average rating of Serbia's image is 3.75, indicating ample room for improvement, the average rating of the tourist destination where tourists are is 4.05, which is

significantly better. One possible explanation for this finding could be the insufficient knowledge of tourists and the lack of personal experience with most tourists compared to other destinations in Serbia, which could have influenced them to make this judgment based on representations of Serbia in the media or the experiences of friends and acquaintances.

Table 2. *Overall assessment of the image and quality of promotion by tourists*

	Mean value	Standard deviation
The overall image of Serbia	3.75	0.877
The overall image of the destination in Serbia they have visited	4.06	0.754
Assessment of the quality of the promotion of Serbia	3.76	.988

Source: Author

When it comes to potential differences in the perception of Serbia's image among foreign tourists, there are certain regional specificities:

- Tourists from Eastern Europe perceive Serbia's image as very positive in 86% of cases.
- Tourists from Asia perceive it as such in 92% of cases.
- Tourists from Western Europe consider Serbia's image positive in 68% of cases.

Assessment of Serbia's Conative Image

The conative image of Serbia as a tourist destination has been evaluated as very positive by both foreign and domestic tourists. It was measured by the desire for a return visit to destinations in Serbia and the intention to

recommend Serbia to other people, and the results are shown in Table 3. Considering the exceptionally high level of overall satisfaction, both of domestic tourists with the destination they visited (89% of domestic tourists are mainly or completely satisfied) and of foreign tourists with their stay in Serbia (91.5% of foreign tourists are mainly or completely satisfied), it is not surprising to find a very high conative image, i.e., tourists' desire to return to the destination.

Considering that not all attributes are equally important to all tourists, their slightly lower ratings may not necessarily be associated with lower satisfaction and desire to visit the destination again (as evidenced by the higher conative image compared to the cognitive and overall image).

Table 3. Return intentions of tourists and intention to recommend

	Return intentions		Intention to recommend a destination	
	Mean value	Std. deviation	Mean value	Std. deviation
Foreign tourists	4.21	.876	4.43	.564
Domestic tourists	3.89	1.021	4.39	.632

Source: Author

Evaluation of the Quality of Serbia's Promotion

The average rating of the quality of Serbia's promotion by tourists (measured on a scale from 1 - very poor, to 5 - excellent) is 3.76, which is a fairly low rating and indicates that there is still work to be done in this segment. Additionally, there are certain regional differences observed when it comes to assessing the quality of promotion.

- Tourists from Western Europe less frequently assess the promotion of Serbia as very positive compared to tourists from Eastern Europe and Asia.

- Only 23% of foreign tourists from Western Europe indicate that Serbia is fairly and very well promoted.

- Domestic tourists also believe that tourism in Serbia is not sufficiently promoted.

Namely, only 15% of domestic tourists believe that tourism in Serbia is sufficiently promoted.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of the current research identified notable differences from the findings presented in the previous research conducted for the development of the Strategic Marketing Plan of Serbia. Firstly, significant variations were observed in tourists' assessment regarding the cognitive image of Serbia. For instance, in the present study, the item *Safety and Security* achieved a higher mean score (4.32) and secured the fourth position among the investigated items. However, in the previous research, it did not manage to attain a place within the top five (4.11). The tourism industry is quite delicate and can be greatly impacted by even the smallest risks, particularly those that pose a threat to tou-

rists' safety (Lee & Chen, 2011). Thus, this is an important finding, which points out the enhancement of significant aspects of a destination, as tourists' perceived safety risks have the potential to generate negative publicity for the destination (Lee & Chen, 2011). In addition, the item *Good traffic accessibility* obtained a higher score (4.11) compared to the findings in the research for the marketing plan (3.79). In their recent study, Zhong et al. (2023) found that Traffic within the destination was highlighted as a crucial element that shapes tourists' overall image of a destination. Moreover, in this study, the item *Interesting museums and galleries* received slightly higher evaluations (3.79) compared to the Marketing Plan research, in which it was given the lowest ranking (3.49). Indeed, museum facilities are an important part of a destination's offer, as these leave a significant impact on tourists' pre-visit destination image (El Sheikh, 2020). Similarly, the item *Various and high-quality festivals and cultural events* was better scored (3.78) than in the previous research (3.58). This is supported by the previous study of Kovačić et al. (2019), which found that when evaluating specific destinations in Serbia, like Roman sites, tourists tend to give higher evaluations to Attractive cultural events and festivals. In contrast to the Marketing Plan research, where *Interesting architecture* was ranked higher (3.72), it ended up being the least ranked among all cognitive image items in the current research (3.23). It is possible that tourists did not fully appreciate the surrounding buildings while exploring the destination or were not as interested in hearing stories about the authentic architecture. So, it would be beneficial to introduce tours guided by knowledgeable local guides, who would, through interesting storytelling, spark curiosity in tourists for the destination's original architecture and aesthetic. Having unique architectural features is an essential factor in enhancing the identity of a destination (Schwarzer, 2002; Godfrey & Gretzel, 2016). Also, Good price-quality ratio was rated higher (3.87), but in this research, it received a lower score (3.57). In fact, when

it comes to being satisfied with a destination and wanting to recommend it, value for money is seen as a major factor (Mwesiumo & Abdalla, 2023). Accordingly, when promotional content emphasizes the unique features of a destination and showcases exciting experiences, it increases tourists' perception of value for money (Kansal et al., 2015).

Moreover, when it comes to the overall image, it is possible to draw some significant observations from the obtained results. In the present research, there has been a slight decrease in the mean score for the overall image of Serbia (3.75), compared to the previous study conducted for the Marketing Plan (3.81). Also, in this study, a lower score was observed for the overall image of the concrete destination in Serbia that tourists visited (4.06), compared to the previous research (4.23). So, it is possible that when tourists spend a significant amount of time at a concrete destination, they have the opportunity to explore it, interact with locals, and gain a better understanding of the destination's attributes and offerings. However, it appears that familiarizing oneself with a single destination has a limited influence on shaping the overall image of the entire country. Thus, it would be beneficial to encourage tourists to extend their stays in Serbia, explore different parts of the country, and gain a deeper understanding of the distinct customs, identities and cultural facets that contribute to the unique image of Serbia. On the other hand, the evaluation of the promotion of Serbia was rated higher (3.76) compared to the evaluation in the research for the Marketing Strategy Plan (3.34). It is an encouraging finding that suggests that efforts and actions taken to enhance the promotion of Serbia, a pivotal marketing activity, have been recognized. Building on the previous finding, it is important to focus promotional activities on tourists, inspiring and motivating them to discover the diverse destinations that Serbia has to offer.

Besides, the current research found some valuable variations in how foreign tourists perceive Serbia's image. Concerning this, one of the responses to why the perception of Serbia's

image among foreign tourists from some regions of the world is worse compared to others can be linked to their opinion about the quality of Serbia's promotion in their countries. Respondents who believe that the promotion of Serbia in their country is not at a commendable level also showed a poorer perception of Serbia's image. Furthermore, the lowest average perception of Serbia's image, especially in Western European countries, can also be linked to the greater sensitivity of Western countries to political unrest and events in Serbia (wars, assassination of the Prime Minister, unresolved situation of Kosovo and Metohija, corruption, and poverty). From this, it follows that specially designed promotion is needed in these markets that will focus primarily on dispelling prejudices and rebranding Serbia as a tourist destination. On the other hand, in countries and regions where Serbia's promotion is better rated, respondents also have a better image of Serbia as a tourist destination.

Lastly, the results revealed that both foreign and domestic tourists exhibited favorable conative images of Serbia and the concrete destination they visited. Thus, they demonstrated a higher readiness to return to these destinations. Given that the majority of tourists visited only one destination in Serbia, the desire to revisit Serbia may be associated with their desire to explore other tourist destinations and products that Serbia offers or to return to the existing destination (which is related to high satisfaction with the stay at the destination). The overall image and cognitive image of Serbia were formed based on representations of Serbia in the media and tourists' experiences with specific destination attributes they visited.

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