

THE IMAGE AND IDENTITY OF CROATIA AS A TOURIST DESTINATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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JEL classification codes: L83, M31

Abstract:

The concepts of destination image and identity have aroused a great deal of interest among tourism researchers and practitioners in recent years. The increased interest in the concepts of destination image and identity can be ascribed to a growing number of international tourist arrivals and growing competition among tourist destinations. The rising similarities of tourism products and services and interchangeability of tourist destinations have emphasized the need to create a unique image and identity of Croatia. The identity is the basis for creating and positioning an image of a tourist destination. Likewise, without an image, a tourist destination has no identity.

This paper is set in the context of tourism marketing, or more specifically, the paper is trying to show the interdependence of the image and the identity of tourist destinations. Since these two concepts are variable and manageable, they should be taken into particular consideration when setting guidelines for a long-term strategy of Croatian tourism development. The purpose of this exploratory study is to assess perceptions about the image and identity of Croatia as a tourist destination. For this purpose, this study uses a survey encompassing n=416 students at the Faculty of Economics and Business – Zagreb, who represent young Croatian citizens that form an important tourist segment of Croatian tourism.

Key words: Image, Identity, Tourist Destination, Quantitative approach, Croatia

1. Introduction

In recent years, the identity and image have become the subjects of rather intensive organizational studies, possibly due to the fact that both concepts are multilayer notions, dealing with individual and organizational issues and permeating into the character and behavior of organizations and their members (Gioia *et al.*, 2000). The rising similarities of tourism products and services, and the interchangeability of tourist destinations have emphasized the need to create a unique image and identity for destinations (Morgan and Pritchard, 2002). Identity is the basis for creating and positioning an image of a tourist destination, but without an image, a tourist destination does not have an identity, either.

This paper deals with interdependence of the image and identity of tourist destinations. Since these two concepts are variable and manageable, they should be paid a close attention when setting guidelines for a long-term strategy of Croatian tourism development. The purpose of this exploratory study is to empirically explore perceptions about the image and identity of Croatia as a tourist destination. The student segment of the leisure travel industry was chosen not only because it is big, but also economically important, representing a significant portion of all international travellers and generating multimillion-dollar business.

2. The image of tourist destinations – concept and determinants

The concept of *tourist destination image* came into the focus of tourism research in the early 1970s with Levens' (1972) image study of eight Mediterranean countries. Shortly after, Hunt (1975) analyzed the image of four American states, and the same year Riley and Palmer compared the image of British and European resorts. Since then, tourism destination image has become the focus of numerous studies in tourism, and attention to this concept increased during the 1990s (Tasci *et al.*, 2007). Many studies demonstrated that the image is a valuable concept in understanding the process of selecting a tourist destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a:868; Gallarza, *et al.* 2002; Prebezac and Mikulic, 2008).

Prebezac and Mikulic (2008) stated that the common characteristics of studies engaged in creating a destination image is multidisciplinary approach (anthropology, sociology, geography, marketing etc.) and interdisciplinary approach (destination positioning, destination selection process, consumer behavior etc.). Such research practice led to an absence of an explicit and universally accepted definition of destination image, while offering a variety of interpretations, depending on researcher's interest and viewpoint.

Despite the revolutionary contribution to destination image by Echtner and Ritchie (1991), most studies do not have a common consensus on the definition and the most appropriate way of measuring the image of a tourist destination. Tourism scholars use many different definitions, putting the destination image literature at risk of becoming quasi-theoretical and non-scientific. However, most definitions are associated with the theoretical foundations on image assessment first proposed by Boulding (1956). Moreover, many researchers agree that Hunt's article from 1971 represents the foundation of tourist destination image research (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002). A list of selected definitions of destination image is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected Definitions of Destination Image

Crompton (1979) stated that <i>...image may be defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and</i>

impressions that a person has of a destination.

Echtner and Ritchie (1991) introduced one of the most comprehensive definitions of tourist destination image: *...tourist destination image includes different attributes, and holistic, functional, psychological and unique components.*

Fakeye and Crompton (1991:10), Court and Lupton (1997:35) adapted **Reynolds' (1965)** definition of destination image as: *“...the mental construct developed by a potential visitor on the basis of a few selected impressions among the flood of total impressions; it comes into being through a creative process in which these impressions are elaborated, embellished, and ordered”.*

Dadgostar and Isotao (1992:34): *“...the overall impression or attitude that an individual acquires of a specific destination. This overall impression is considered to be composed of the tourist's perceptions concerning the relevant qualities of the destination”.*

Gartner (1993; 1996): *...destination images are developed by three hierarchically interrelated components: cognitive, affective, and conative.*

Milman and Pizam (1995:21): *“...a sum total of the images of the individual elements or attributes that make up the tourism experience”.*

Baloglu and Bringer (1997) adapted several definitions from several researchers and create their own one: *...image is the sum of believes, ideas and impressions which people have about place or destination.*

MacKay and Fesenmaier (1997:537): *“...a compilation of beliefs and impressions based on information processing from a variety of sources over time, resulting in an internally accepted mental construct . . . a composite of various products (attractions) and attributes woven into a total impression”.*

Walmsley and Young (1998:65): *“...a common structure or schema of evaluations that can be used to differentiate between tourism destination”.*

Tasci et al. (2007): *...interactive system of memories, opinions, feelings, visualization and notion to destination.*

By the definitions stated above it can be concluded that the destination image is hard to define (Pearce, 1988; Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Castro *et al.*, 2007). This is one of the most studied concepts in the tourism literature around the world (Mayo, 1973; Hunt, 1975; Goodrich, 1978; Chon, 1991), which provided a significant contribution to better understanding of the tourist's behaviour (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a; 1999b).

Based on recent research studies, it is possible to define some common determinants of the image of tourist destinations. Image consists of many different factors. In the first place, it is a tourism of particular destination, official promotional activities, as well as the tourists themselves and their experiences from previous visits to a particular destination or experiences of their relatives and friends. Furthermore, tourist destination image is certainly influenced by generalization and familiarity. There are also residents' national characteristics,

the social and political environment, stereotypes created in the past and exogenous shocks. The image of a destination is also influenced by news in the media, its history, cultural heritage and tradition, natural beauty, service quality, product brands and their export, care for the environment, international business, foreign investments, celebrities, scientific achievements, and finally, but not less importantly by the residents' attitude towards their country. It should be stressed that people from different parts of the world can have different perception about received information, which is why different nations may also differently perceive the image of a destination, as well as have a different experience of the destination itself.

3. The identity of tourist destinations

The number and diversity of definitions of the *identity of tourist destinations* are notably fewer compared to definitions of destination image. The reason is in smaller representation of identity in literature and a much smaller number of research studies that deal with it. The destination's competitive identity is what makes a destination unique and memorable. The identity discerns one destination from another, being the source of international competitiveness of a destination. It allows the destination to rise above the competition in the eyes of their main generating markets, becoming the headstone of destination branding (UNWTO and ETC, 2009).

The rising similarities of tourism products and services, and the interchangeability of tourist destinations have emphasized a need for destinations to create a unique image and identity (Morgan and Pritchard, 2002; UNWTO and ETC, 2009). According to Saleh (1998), identity is necessary for the continuity of culture and the coherence with the past. The projected identity of a tourist destination is a reflection of national, regional, and cultural attributes of symbolic significance.

Due to the complex structure of tourist destinations, the size and variety of participants, economic and political situation, wider geographical area, locals, culture, central idea etc., it is possible to regard destinations as a kind of organization. In most articles on organizational identity, scholars use Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition, typically invoking the main dimensions of identity as something substantial, distinctive and enduring. The identity can be regarded as an instrument that projects the image of the organization to its wider business and public market, communicating values and organizational image. Organizational identity is the articulation of everything that an organization represents, the ways and means of its operating. It is associated with the way in which an organization conducts its business activities, as well as the strategies it adopts and implements in its business activities (Kestic, 2003; Rocco, 2003).

Olins (1999), and van Riel and Balmer (1997) define organizational identity as consistent and target organizational representation prominent in managing organizational symbols and logotypes—i.e. strategically planned and operationally applied internal and external self presentation.

An efficient identity achieves three objectives; (i) it achieves the character and proposed organizational value, (ii) it implements that character in an impressive way, and (iii) provides emotional strength behind organizational mental representation (Kotler and Keller, 2008). On the one hand, the creation and maintenance of an apparently enduring identity are essential to long-term successes (Albert and Whetten, 1985). On the other hand, organizations must

possess the ability to promptly adapt to an increasingly turbulent environment as an essential condition for well-being and even survival (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gustafson and Reger, 1995). Although theoretical and empirical research on organizational identity acknowledges the potentially changeable nature of identity (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998), scholars continue to downplay, underplay, or inadequately develop the implications of recreating identity as a dynamic concept, thereby making apparent durability of identity illusory. Identity becomes unstable because of its complex interrelationship with image and is characterized by fluidity. Perhaps most importantly, the instability of identity is actually adaptive in facilitating organizational change in response to environmental demands (Gioia *et al.*, 2000).

Core features of identity are presumed to be resistant to ephemeral or faddish attempts at alteration because of their ties to the organizations history. Gagliardi (1986:124-125) argues that the main strategy of an organization is usually geared to maintaining its identity, especially under threatening conditions of change (although he also notes that organizations "...usually change to remain what they have always been... [they] must change in order to preserve identity"). Yet, this paradoxical statement nonetheless suggests that identity is not, and indeed cannot be, enduring in any strict sense, even though it apparently retains continuity in its essential features (Fiol *et al.*, 1998; Wilkins, 1989).

4. The relationship between the image and identity of a tourist destination

In recent years, identity and image have become the subjects of rather intensive organizational studies, perhaps because both concepts are multilevel notions that deal with individual and organizational issues, and because both penetrate into the character and behaviour of organizations and their members (Gioia, Schultz, Corley, 2000). Identity is the basis for the creation and positioning of tourist destination image. Still, without an image, a tourist destination does not have an identity. Destination image represents the overall impression about a destination, represented by the identity and overall features which are important for the target market. Due to the fact that tourist destination image is based on the identity of tourist destinations, and that it is the impression about the overall tourist destination, it typically occurs that a tourist destination is identified and recognized according to its image. Effective communication should be part of the overall strategy which is set to determine and create the image of a destination, representing its identity (Grgic, 2007; Kesic, 2003; Rocco, 2003).

According to Rocco (1993) identity is a narrower concept than image, although they overlap: image can be defined as a set of impressions, images, ideas, as a complex experiential structure of attitudes, beliefs, preconceptions and previous experiences of consumers, dealers, suppliers, public and other actors in communication, business and market trends about product, brand, company, person or organization. At the same time identity represents a set of content, symbolic and stylistic features (destinations, products, conducts, communication), which help an organization to be distinguishable from the competition, making it specific and recognizable.

The foundations for asserting the interrelationships between identity and image are well established in the literature. In principle, they reach back at the individual level to Coolley (1902) and James (1918), and extend forward at the organizational level to Albert and Whetten (1985), Dutton and Dukerich (1991), Dutton *et al.* (1994), Reger *et al.* (1994), Elsbach and Kramer (1996), Gioia and Thomas (1996), and the insightful synopses contained

in Whetten and Godfrey (1998), among others. Assembling these essential processes into coherent framework demonstrates that the relationship between identity and image creates the potential for a variable identity (Gioia *et al.*, 2000).

5. Research

The objective of the primary research is to analyze the perceptions about the image and identity of Croatia as a tourist destination among Croatian students of business and economics. Students represent an important tourist segment of Croatian tourism. They are also tourists who will in future make decisions where to travel with their families and friends, and choose Croatia as a place to spend their vacation or not.

5.1. Methodology

The aim of this exploratory study was to assess perceptions about the importance of particular determinants of the image and identity of Croatia as a tourist destination. In this study we used a convenience sample consisting of n=416 student travelers at the Faculty of Economics and Business - Zagreb, who, in turn, form an important tourist segment of Croatian tourism. A two-part self-administered questionnaire was used:

1. In the first part, respondents were asked to rate the importance of 10 distinct factors that are frequently mentioned as important determinants of tourist destination image in related research. Respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance of each determinant on a direct rating scale ranging from 1 (less important) to 5 (very important).
2. In the second part, respondents were presented with a list of six statements regarding the identity of Croatia as a tourist destination. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement describing the current identity of Croatia on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data collection took place during January 2012 using a paper-and-pencil version of the questionnaire. The data were analyzed using the statistical software package PASW Statistics 18.

5.2. Analysis and results

Table 2 presents the results (arithmetic means and standard deviations) for the first question that dealt with importance of particular image determinants with regard to Croatia as a tourist destination.

Table 2: Perceived importance of determinants of Croatia's image as a tourist destination

Determinants	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation
Official promotion of Croatian tourism by the Croatian National Tourist Board	4.42	0.792

Experience from previous visit to Croatia and experiences of friends and relatives	4.49	0.691
News about Croatia in media on generating markets	4.36	0.808
History of Croatia	3.66	0.908
Cultural heritage and tradition of Croatia	4.17	0.778
Natural beauties of Croatia	4.72	0.551
The quality of services in Croatia	4.64	0.682
Brands from Croatia and their export	3.69	0.897
Celebrities from Croatia (athletes, actors, politicians)	3.56	0.944
Care for the environment	4.14	0.851

As can be seen from Table 2, the student sample perceives all mentioned factors to be important in explaining the image of Croatia as a tourist destination—i.e. all factors are rated 3.6 or higher. However, “Natural beauties of Croatia” are perceived to be the most important factor influencing Croatia as a tourist destination (mean=4.72), closely followed by “The quality of services in Croatia” (mean=4.64). There also seems to be the largest agreement among respondents in regard to the importance of these two factors as they have the lowest standard deviations (0.551 and 0.682, respectively). The “Experience from previous visit to Croatia and experiences of friends and relatives”, and the “Official promotion of Croatian tourism by the Croatian National Tourist Board”, are ranked third and fourth respectively (means=4.49 and 4.42, respectively). Interestingly, the “History of Croatia” received a relatively low ranking (mean=3.66), with only “Celebrities from Croatia” being ranked lower (mean=3.56).

Table 3 presents the results for the second question that dealt with perceptions about the identity of Croatia as a tourist destination.

Table 3: Perceptions about Croatia’s identity as a tourist destination

Statement	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation
Croatia has a clearly built identity	3.10	0.846
The identity differentiates Croatia from other tourist destinations	3.26	0.866
The identity of Croatia represents the essence of Croatia as a tourist destination	3.34	0.919
The identity of Croatia is part of the Croatian image	3.74	0.882
The identity is the basis for branding Croatia	3.82	0.849
The identity of Croatia is visible/well represented in Croatia’s promotional activities	3.36	0.885

The results reveal that the respondents agreed with all of the statements (on average), with mean Likert ratings ranging between 3 and 4. The respondents agreed most with the statements that “...*The identity of Croatia is the basis for branding Croatia*” and that “...*The identity of Croatia is part of the Croatian image*” (means=3.82 and 3.74, respectively). Conversely, they agreed least with the statement that “...*Croatia has a clearly built identity*” and that “...*The identity differentiates Croatia from other tourist destinations*” (means=3.10 and 3.26, respectively). Accordingly, the respondents seem to acknowledge the importance of Croatia’s identity for communication and positioning purposes (identity is central to image and the brand of Croatia as a tourist destination), but they do not perceive Croatia’s identity as a tourist destination to be clearly/well developed, nor that it is a strong factor for differentiating Croatia from competitor destinations.

5.3. Limitations

The greatest limitation of this research is the use of the convenience sample. Research was conducted in a single academic institution (Faculty of Economics and Business - Zagreb) with a sample of students of business and economics education. It would therefore be necessary to carry out additional studies in faculties belonging to different universities and colleges across Croatia. Another limitation of this study is that the scale used to measure the importance of Croatia's image as a tourist was neither tested for content validity nor internal consistency. The choice of destination attributes was based on a literature review, but there still appears to be a lack of agreement on dimensions and attributes of the destination image concept.

6. Conclusion

The concept of destination image has aroused a great interest among tourism researchers and practitioners in the past few decades. It has received huge attention because it is recognized as an important aspect of the success of marketing destinations, and as such represents the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have about the destination. However, it is an intangible category that depends on numerous individual characteristics of tourists. It is possible to observe its width and diversity of approaches, and a large number of researchers who engage in it.

In addition to the image, the notion of identity has become a subject of fairly intensive studies. Identity is the basis for creating and positioning the image of tourist destinations, but without the image, tourist destination has no identity. Effective communication of tourist destination needs to be part of the overall strategy, organized to establish and create a destination image representing its identity.

In this exploratory study, two different approaches were combined to measure the image and identity of Croatia as a tourist destination respectively, as perceived by Croatian students. Results showed that natural beauties of Croatia, quality of services and experience from previous visit to Croatia are considered to be the most important factor influencing image of Croatia as a tourist destination. The respondents seem to acknowledge the importance of Croatia's identity for communication and positioning purposes, but they do not perceive Croatia's identity as a tourist destination to be clearly/well developed, nor that it is a strong factor for differentiating Croatia from competitor destinations.

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