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Perception of tourist destination brand

Abstract. Since tourism has changed from individual or small-group to mass tourism, the conditions in it have changed too. Thanks to the interest of tourism participants, many destinations have become dominant over the others and due to some new trends there are also many other destinations that attract attention. To be able to compete with the dominant destinations, it is inevitable for the other destinations to build their own name by providing high quality services as well as by a recognizable brand. The article deals with brand perception in tourism on the example of the Slovak Republic. The survey perception has been conducted on the basis of the domestic population in 2015, and by means of the semantic differential method we have evaluated the perception of the brand which represents the country and should support its tourism.

Keywords: Tourism; Brand; Destination Brand; Brand Perception; Marketing Tools

JEL Classification: M30; M31

Acknowledgement: The paper was created as one of the outputs of the ongoing scientific research grant 1/0145/14 – VEGA «On-line reputation management (ORM) as a tool of Slovak SMEs' competitiveness increasing and its use in the conditions of the Central European virtual market».

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Сприйняття бренду в туризмі

Анотація. Наслідком змін у сфері туризму, які перетворили туризм з індивідуального на масовий, також стала зміна умов у ньому. Завдяки інтересу учасників туристичного процесу одні туристичні напрямки стають популярнішими, ніж інші та домінують над ними. Сучасні тенденції в туризмі позначені тим, що все частіше з'являються нові маршрути й місця, які викликають інтерес у туристів. Щоб конкурувати з домінуючими напрямками, нові туристичні маршрути повинні сформувати свій власний упізнаваний бренд. При цьому повинно бути забезпечено високу якість сервісу й залучення відомих туристичних брендів. У цій статті розглянуто сприйняття Словаччини як туристичного бренду, виявлене в результаті проведеного авторами опитування громадської думки серед жителів Словаччини в 2015 році. Також за допомогою семантичного диференціального методу оцінено сприйняття бренду країни, який є її відображенням і повинен сприяти підвищенню туристичного інтересу.

Ключові слова: туризм; бренд; бренд туристичного напрямку; сприйняття бренду; маркетингові інструменти.

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Восприятие туристического бренда

Аннотация. Учитывая то, что туризм изменился и из индивидуального превратился в массовый, условия в нем изменились также. Благодаря интересу участников туристического процесса одни туристические направления становятся более популярными, чем другие, и доминируют над ними. Современные тенденции в туризме таковы, что все чаще появляются новые маршруты и места, которые вызывают интерес у туристов. Чтобы быть в состоянии конкурировать с доминантными направлениями, новые туристические маршруты должны создать свой собственный узнаваемый бренд, а значит, обеспечивать высокое качество сервиса и вовлечение известных туристических брендов.

В этой статье рассмотрено восприятие Словакии как туристического бренда, выявленное в результате проведенного авторами опроса общественного мнения среди жителей Словакии в 2015 году. Также посредством семантического дифференциального метода оценено восприятие бренда страны, который является ее отражением, и должен способствовать повышению туристического интереса.

Ключевые слова: туризм; бренд; бренд туристического направления; восприятие бренда; инструменты маркетинга.

1. Introduction

The significance of tourism is rising continuously. Its performance is reflected in the world's economy. But it depends on the level of the country's development as well as on its primary potential. Thanks to tourism, more developed European countries perform a high share in GDP. However, in Slovakia the share is lower and it is comparable to the less developed European countries where the share of tourism equals to approximately 2-4% of the country's GDP. This state can be also caused by the fact that Slovakia is an inland country. Thus, seaside countries have a great advantage now: tourism participants prefer seaside tourism during the summer season. Therefore, if a country like Slovakia wants to proceed, it is very important for such a country to invest into different marketing tools for its support. The paper deals with the brand as important communication tool.

2. Brand and its importance

According to the definition of the American Marketing Association (AMA) a brand represents a name, term, symbol, design or a combination of all the mentioned elements which identify the products and services of a certain seller and differentiate them from those of competitors. A brand is a bundle of meanings; it adds either rational and tangible aspects or symbolic, emotional and intangible dimensions to a product that differentiate it from competitive products. Brand names should be memorable, meaningful, likeable, adaptable, transferable and protectable. Companies can choose different strategies for their brands. Besides co-branding with other brands, an extension or multi-brand strategy can be adopted. Also corporate branding, i.e. using the same company name for all company products, is a possibility. Brand strength is measured on the basis of a number of factors, such as leadership, internationality and stability etc. The marketing value of a brand, or brand equity, is composed of five factors which are: brand awareness; product performance and perceived quality; imagery associations and brand feelings; high brand loyalty; and other assets such as legal protection and a good distribution network. Strong brands lead to a number of benefits for the company, the consumer and the retailer (Pelsmacker et al., 2013) [10].

Brand in tourism sphere

The notion of tourism brand appears for the first time approximately at the beginning of the 20th century and it represents a new concept that differs from the traditional perception of a brand as such. Many authors state that it is different in the fact that the price offer is not crucial in the fight to win tourism participants. Morgan and Pritchard (Caldwell and Freire, 2004) [2] point out the fact that the competition and the fight for customers is conducted by the «hearts» of the participants. In the field of tourism it is important to mention the notion of a destination brand. It is important for every country to have a brand and image which will evoke a clear and definite impression, relation and attitude by the potential visitors. The fact that «branding» is inevitable also in the field of tourism is supported also by Gucik's opinion (2011) [5] who thinks that a brand is a tool thanks to which the owner and the provider of the brand can require a higher price, to improve the positive image in relation with the public and to make promotion simpler. Aaker (2003) [1] also shows his opinion on the brand value and he writes that the brand value represents a name and symbol of the brand. Many authors put an important emphasis on building a tourism brand of a high quality thanks to which tourists will build a long relationship and positive perception of their visited destination. Gucik (2011) [5] defines the destination brand as a graphic illustration of a geographical name. It is an inevitable part of prosperity and distinction from other brands. To this definition, Makovnik (2007) [8] further describes the destination brand as expressing and representing also destination's value, character and style which is slowly developing and getting its form. According to Cetinsky et al. (2006) [3] a destination brand expresses the identification and distinction from other destination and rememberability in comparison to competitors and connecting unique and unrepeatable experiences of the participants based on the visit of the destination.

Every country wants to present itself in the best light possible and wants to be perceived in the most positive way (Zeglen, 2012 [14]; Dorcak and Pollak et al., 2014 [4]). Therefore, building the image of a country often depends on many factors and the support of the whole country. Image perception represents the connection of several attributes together which decide and influence the selection of spending holidays. The role of image is therefore to raise interest in a holiday destination in the mind of a potential visitor. Image is related to good reputation as well as goodwill. Building good reputation requires a long-term process which needs a great effort to form opinions of consistent character by many types of people. It is an output of good quality of solidity and promotion (Gucik, 2011) [5]. A country as a travelling destination and a goal of customers' staying in the destination operates in tourism in a highly competitive environment (Kolcun et al. [7], 2014; Zawadzki, 2013[13]; Stacho et al., 2013 [11]).

3. Methods and methodology

The aim of the paper is to find out and describe brand perception of tourism destination on the example of Slovakia.

To conduct the survey, several survey methods have been chosen. To work out the theoretical concept of the paper, the method of literary search has been used which focused on domestic as well as international scientific and specialized literature oriented to the issue of tourism, creating the strategies of tourism as well as (and especially) to brand creating or the so-called branding in this field. For the second part of the paper, we have chosen the semantic differential method as the crucial method which is used to find out how people perceive terms with the application that is the brand of Slovakia as a tourism destination. It has been selected regarding the fact that, apart from denotative significance, each term also has a connotative meaning and from the results it is easier to define and describe its perception.

The survey was conducted among a total of 150 respondents in 2015. Survey samples were created by the respondents who have permanent residence in Slovakia or Slovak citizenship. To conduct the survey on the perception of the brand of Slovakia an identical bipolar scale was used. It consisted of ten opposite adjectives (attractive – unattractive, new – old, interesting – uninteresting, stimulating – unstimulating, recognizable – unrecognizable, catchy – uncanny, rememberable – unrememberable). The respondents expressed their perception of the brand of Slovakia. For subsequent results evaluation, the average values for individual items were counted (i.e. bipolar pairs of adjectives). In this case it is true that the higher the values were, the more negative evaluation was and vice versa: the lower the values were, the more positive evaluation of the brand was. It is based on the scale of 7 degrees (where 1 is positive perception/evaluation, and 7 is negative evaluation).

4. Results and discussion

Slovak promotion through Slovak Tourist Board

The country's marketing strategy should be conducted by the state at the highest level. But nowadays, it is a very complicated concern because even the tourism legislation itself needs its corrections and updating so that tourism could function and make progress. Marketing activities are covered by the Slovak Tourist Board – SACR (institution receiving contributions from the state budget specializing in marketing and state promotion and operating under the Ministry of Transport, Construction and Regional Development of the Slovak Republic). It was established by the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic in 1995. It has the state funding support and tries to promote the country abroad through publishing promotional materials and giving presentations at international events related just to this industry. It contributes to the creation of a positive image of Slovakia abroad and it supports the sale of tourism products of the Slovak Republic. SACR is authorised to officially represent the country abroad and to establish detached offices both at home and abroad.

The Slovak Tourist Board operates in several international joint projects, for example the Cooperation of the V4 countries in the third markets, Cooperation within coalitions, Work with overseas markets, etc. Its activities also include creation of the

country's positive image and subsequent attraction of a greater number of tourism participants.

Image creation of a given country depends mainly on its perception by its domestic citizens. Showing some pride to one's own nation is an important factor for imaging and branding. The attitude of the Slovaks towards their homeland is positive on one hand, but on the other hand it has many negative elements which can result from the standard of living of the inhabitants, the current political situation of the country, etc. According to Timoracky et al. (2013) [12] and based on the Branding of the SR research which was conducted in relation to Slovak inhabitants, several shortcomings have been found out. They are the so called stereotypes which reflect their negative attitudes and perception. It is mainly about negative thinking and constant complaining, lack of successes pride, low self-esteem, lack of openness, poor cooperation, impatience, poor quality of services, innovativeness. Negative attitudes are not occasional cases of only the Slovak population. It is known that other countries can be experiencing them as well.

In 2011, there was a survey focused on the perception of Slovakia as a tourist destination through the Slovak Tourist Board which can be found in the Marketing strategy of the Slovak Tourist Board (2011-2013). This survey, based on the semantic differential and then through cognitive perception of Slovakia as a tourist destination and by conscious information processing, was trying to find out the perception of Slovakia as a tourist destination. To conduct the survey the method of bipolar scale of eleven opposite adjectives (educated – uneducated, likeable – unlikeable, sociable – unsociable, modern – tradition-oriented, interesting – uninteresting, unique – replaceable, young – old, thrilling – boring, attractive – unattractive, progressive – conservative, exclusive – casual) was used and by the means of which the addressed respondents were expressing their attitudes towards their perception of Slovakia as a tourist destination. For the subsequent results evaluation, the average values were counted for individual items (i.e. bipolar pairs of adjectives). In this case it is valid that the higher the values were the more negative evaluation was and vice versa, the lower the values were, the more positive evaluation was. It is based on the scale of 5 degrees, where 1 is positive evaluation and 5 is negative evaluation. The average value on the 5-degree scale was then the value of 2.5. Figure 1 shows that the average values were around 3. From the abovementioned data

it follows that Slovakia seems to be a more average country to foreign tourism participants and thus it does not belong to more preferable countries. The results confirm the poor awareness of the country and poor knowledge of its possibilities as well as a smaller extent of promotion in external markets in general which is determined by multiple causes.

Foreign tourists also studied the brand of Slovakia and demonstrated their perception of it in the context of the New Strategy of Tourism Development until 2013 prepared by SACR together with the consulting IMP Company (Innovative Management Parking Consulting, Ltd.) 4000 respondents were randomly selected from among 18 countries. The research resulted in the following:

- Less than 40% of potential visitors perceive Slovakia as a tourist destination.
- The respondents do not perceive the image of Slovakia as clear and definite.
- The respondents are seeing an interest in spending their holidays in Slovakia.
- The level of satisfaction with the quality of services provided during the holidays was medium (IMP 2010). The Slovak Tourist Board presented a marketing concept for 2011-2013 (Marketing strategy SACR, 2011) regarding this survey which states that «this analysis of the IMP company shows emotional image of the brand. Especially in tourism this profile plays an important role in the decision making process and by the selection of a destination». The mentioned semantic differential shows that the respondents do not have a clear picture about Slovakia. Only three characteristics deviate from the axis of the average value. As for the viewpoint of tourism experts (a total of 231 respondents) the profile is very similar. However, it is slightly clearer by the same parameters as it is by population in general. Slovakia is perceived as a country which is traditionally oriented, interesting and likeable.

While conducting our survey, we did not consider the previous researches conducted by the Slovak Tourist Board. We focused on the perception of the Slovak tourism brand by the domestic population. Tourism brand can represent a significant factor based upon which the tourism participants can make their decisions and they often do so. For the purpose of survey processing we used the brand which is used to present Slovakia on the outside. It is a tricolour (blue, red and yellow) butterfly. The butterfly as a symbol should represent the fact that

the country is relatively young and can fly into the awareness of other nations as a butterfly. For the brand perception, as it has already been mentioned, we used 10 antonyms on a 7-degree scale. The average value was 3.5. Before conducting the abovementioned survey, we had assumed that the Slovak tourism brand of a butterfly was not suitably selected because at first sight it could evoke a feeling that the country is perhaps best known for its special species of butterflies etc. It is also important to mention that apart from the brand, the country expresses itself through the slogan which reads «Little Big Country». In this case we also think that it is not clear what is actually meant by the slogan «Little Big Country». It would be more appropriate to make the slogan complete by adding the words «country» and «potential» with the meaning «Little country with Big potential».

According to average values it can be seen that the highest rate (4.30) was observed in the case of the tenth item. This item was about the fact whether the brand was perceived as known or unknown in the tourism market. The second highest value was the value of 4.09 which was shown by the second item of semantic differential. The third item was about being interesting or not. Although these values were presented as the highest ones, in reality they meant that the respondents' opinions on being well-known or unknown and being interesting or boring were oscillating around the middle of the scale. Thus, we can assume that the respondents do not perceive Slovak tourism brand as the one which is sufficiently repre-

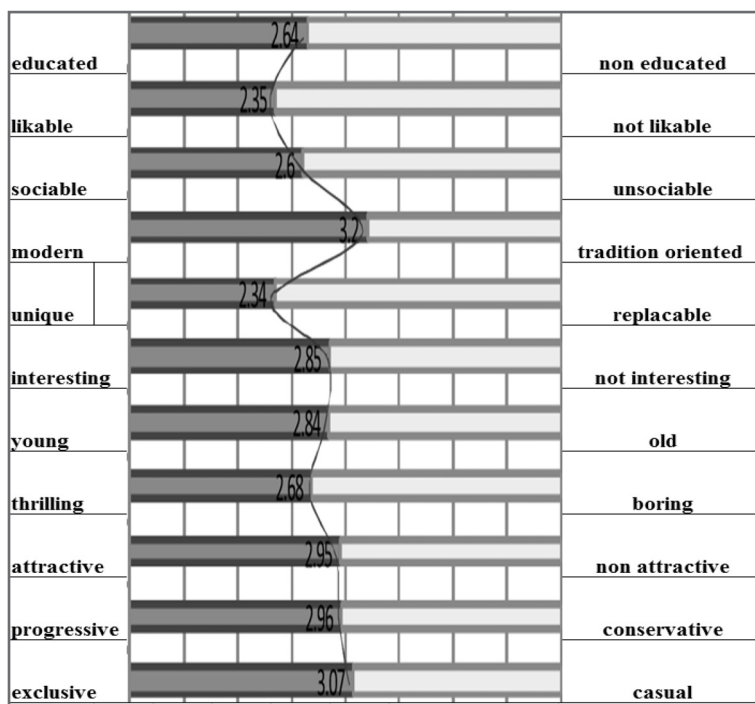


Fig. 1: Semantic differential - affective perception of Slovakia as a Tourism Brand
Source: Slovak Tourist Board in IMP, 2010

sentative and clearly shows its potential. It means that the brand itself is obscure and does not reflect the country's identity. The results can be seen in Figure 2.

5. Conclusion

According to the results of the conducted research which is based on the semantic differential method, we have come to the following conclusions. Generally, tourism branding is an important communication tool. It can make tourism destinations, tourism service providers and establishments profitable. First of all, it is necessary to build a recognisable and premium brand which clearly represents the main ideas. At the example of the conducted survey, it is possible to conclude that Slovakia represented by butterfly logo has still much to improve. Taking into consideration the survey based on the questionnaire mentioned above and the semantic differential according to which the results were evaluated, we have concluded that the brand is considered to be neither attractive nor traditional. Thus, its quality should be improved. It should be more distinctive and single-valuated. It should contain national values that could be easily recognised not only by domestic tourists but also by the foreign ones.

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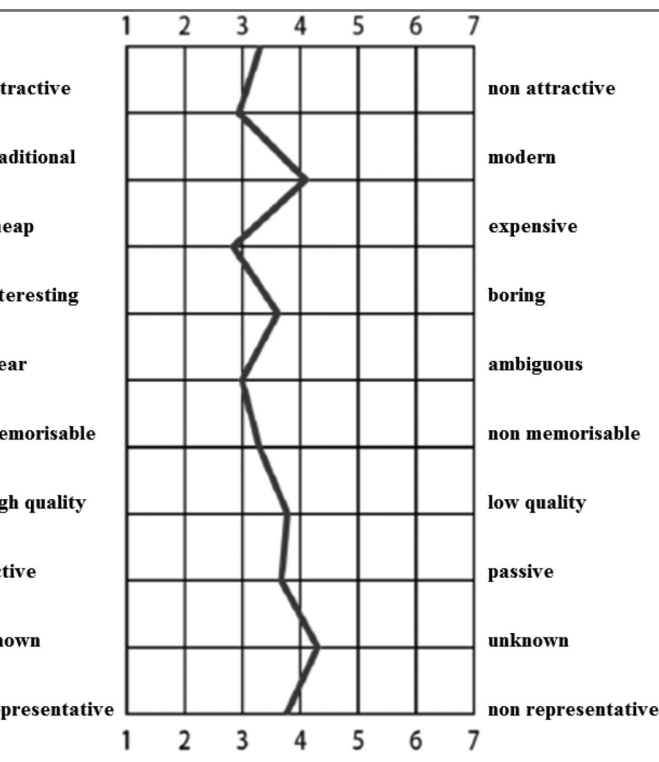


Fig. 2: Survey results on Slovak tourism brand perception
Source: Own processing, 2015

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Received 26.05.2015

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