

EXPLORING THE BRAND OF VRDNIK SPA: TOURISTS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

With the primary goal of exploring the brand of Vrdnik Spa from tourists' perspective, research with the target group of tourists was conducted in the form of a semi-structured face-to-face interview. The interviews were conducted during April and May 2019. A total of 30 domestic and foreign tourists were interviewed during their stay at destination. Apart from tourists' opinion about Vrdnik brand, the interview intended to reveal the main motivation, sources of information about destination, as well as tourists' opinion about pros and cons of destination. The results indicated three main motives of visit: rest and relaxation, enjoying the nature and thermal water. The main advantage of Vrdnik as a spa destination, as the study revealed, is unspoiled nature, tranquility and hospitable local people. The main disadvantages can be summed up as the lack of tourist infrastructure, signalization and target marketing. Finally, the study revealed that the potential future brand of Vrdnik Spa should be based on: thermal water, unspoiled natural surroundings, local food and drink (honey, cheese, rakija) as well as cultural heritage. The paper provides discussion and some basic steps of building the future brand of Vrdnik Spa based on the given results.

Keywords:

brand, spa destination, tourists, Vrdnik, Fruška Gora Mountain.

INTRODUCTION

Destination branding as a broader concept than destination marketing, encompasses the overall image of the place seen by different target groups (Ruiz - Real et al., 2020). Destination branding enhances destination image, which is an important factor in tourists' travel decision making (Lee et al., 2002). This is why studying the perception of destination brand is so important for tourism marketing.

A brand is a set of all tangible and intangible characteristics that distinguishes one product or service from competition (Aaker, 1996; Kovačić et al., 2020). In accordance with this, Keller (1993) and Aaker (1996) define destination branding as a multidimensional concept consisting of functional, emotional, relational, and strategic elements. Thus, in order to build a solid and clear brand identity, it is necessary to scratch beneath the surface and explore what other characteristics make this destination unique and recognizable.

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The power of the brand is that it contains a multitude of associations that are not obvious at first glance, but have a strong effect on the consciousness of customers (Motta-Filho, 2021). For example, the Vrdnik logo consists of three elements: forest, water and mountain. This logo carries with it a multitude of associations that form a link with the essential meaning of the place (Kovačić *et al.*, 2019) - a spa located in preserved nature, on a mountain, with a pleasant climate. Thus, symbols serve as a basis for the formation of what is visible and what people will recognize and associate with a given brand. What is of key importance is to make a difference and delve into the invisible part of the brand, which is essential for a tourist destination. Given that today there are many similar but also more developed destinations in the region, it is important to explore and emphasize the destination uniqueness that differentiates it from the other spa destinations in Serbia and other countries in the region. Thus, the primary goal of the paper was to explore the brand of Vrdnik Spa from tourists' perspective, in order to define the basic characteristics that make this destination unique, and that will provide a basis for building a strong destination brand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination branding literature began in the early 1970s with Hunt (1975), who provided one of the first definitions of destination image as the "perceptions held by potential visitors about an area", (p.1). Today, more than 40 years later, destination branding remains an important research topic due to its great role in creating the tourist destination position (Ruiz - Real *et al.*, 2020). Destination branding can have so powerful effect that it can even greatly improve a long-lasting, negative destination's image (Currie, 2020), making a significant contribution to destination's competitive advantage (Che-Ha *et al.*, 2016). A systematic literature review on this topic identified several main research areas: destination strategy, experience, customer-based brand equity, place attachment, destination loyalty, word-of mouth, and social media (Ruiz - Real *et al.*, 2020). Almeyda-Ibáñez & George (2017) argues that in the past years, destinations have realized how important destination branding is, and thus, they actively apply it in their destination management process.

Kotler *et al.* (1993) has defined the main target groups in branding indicating that those are 1) visitors; 2) residents and workers and 3) business and industry. Hultman *et al.* (2016) argues that each of those target groups in branding can have different brand vision. Tourists are customers who do not pay for services but for the service brands (de Chernatony & Harris, 2010; Ezeuduji *et al.*, 2014). Destinations with strong brand will perform better than destinations with unbranded offerings, as tourist's awareness of the brand and their perception of the image of the brand (Kapferer, 1997). This is why exploring the destination brand perception from tourist's perspective is of a great importance (Ezeuduji & Nkosi, 2017; Kovačić *et al.*, 2019; Šagovnović & Kovačić, 2020; Soundari, & Shankar, 2020; Chen *et al.*, 2021).

That Brands are a network of associations in consumers' minds (Keller, 1993), which depend on how different target groups perceive the brand. Place branding is a wider and more complex concept than destination branding. While place branding means branding places for residents, companies and tourists (Zenker & Petersen, 2014), destination branding refers to branding places exclusively for tourists. Target groups do not only differ in their perceptions of a place but foremost in their place needs and demands, which is why studying the perception, motives and needs of different target groups is essential for the branding process (Kovačić *et al.*, 2019). Hence, branding strategies should be based on brand perception by different target groups, as well as their needs and preferences while staying at tourist destination. Literature review on this topic indicates plenty of studies focusing on different target groups for destination branding, with majority of them focusing on tourists (Zhang & Zhao, 2009; Ezeuduji *et al.*, 2016; Kovačić *et al.*, 2019). Based on this, the current study is based on the believe belief that tourists are important target group in destination branding, so studying their perception is taken as a basis for deriving some unique points of destination that will serve as a basis for branding strategy.



METHODOLOGY

The research with the target group of tourists was conducted in the form of a semi-structured face-to-face interview. Interviews were conducted during April and May 2019. A total of 30 domestic and foreign tourists were interviewed during their stay at destination in the various accommodation facilities (Hotel Premier Aqua (8), Hotel Termal (6) and private accommodation (16). The sample was convenient and included tourists at destination who were willing to participate but who adhered to the following criteria: were older than 18 years old, did not reside in Vrdnik and had been in Vrdnik at least one night. From the total of 30 participants, 18 were female and 12 were male. Average age of the sample was 39.65. The research has included only tourists older than 18. Domestic tourists were dominant (21), while foreign tourists were from Russia, Ukraine, Slovenia, Germany and Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Interviews were conducted by trained researchers with the help of accommodation managers who provided access to the properties and gave permission to interview the guests. The interviews have lasted from 20 minutes to one hour. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and that their participation is voluntarily. Apart from the tourists' opinion about the brand of Vrdnik Spa, the interview included six more questions to reveal the main motivation, sources of information about the destination, as well as the tourists' opinion about pros and cons of the destination. These questions were open-ended in order to generate more diverse answers.

RESULTS

The first question was aimed to investigate the main motivation to visit Vrdnik Spa. The participants were asked to state their main motivation to visit, with possibility to state more than one motive. The results show that the most dominant motive for the visit of Vrdnik Spa is rest and relaxation, as well as enjoying / staying in nature, while on the third place is the treatment with thermo-mineral water (Table 1). This confirmed that special position of Vrdnik Spa (natural setting of National Park) is a very valuable destination element in tourists' decision making process, and thus should have important role in destination branding.

Table 1. Motives for visit of vrdnik spa

Motives	Frequencies
Rest and relaxation	16
Enjoying nature	12
Thermal water treatment	8
Fresh air	6
Tour of the monastery	3
Tour of the Vrdnik Tower	3
Visit of friends, relatives	1

Source: Authors' analysis

The research also shows that cultural motives are present with a smaller number of visitors. Although they may not be a dominant motive of visit, they should be used to enrich the tourist offer and prolong the tourists' stay at destination.

After that, the dominant sources of information about the Vrdnik Spa were investigated. Most respondents were informed about Vrdnik through: Family, partners and friends (18), via the Internet (9), and TV (3). This findings suggest that word-of-mouth promotion is still dominant, while online promotion is in its initial phase, indicating the need to invest in digital marketing and brand development. Thus, tourist offer of Vrdnik is not enough marketed via commercial promotional channels, which may affect creation of destination brand awareness.



When asked what they like the most about Vrdnik (what are its main advantages), respondents stated the following: preserved nature, greenery, peace and quiet, cordial people, hospitality, thermal water, vicinity of the monastery, good food and fresh air. Thus, the natural surrounding and the people are the basis of future destination brand development.

Table 2. Basic advantages of vrdnik as a tourist destination

Advantages	Frequencies
Preserved nature, greenery	15
Peace and quiet	9
Cordial people, hospitality	6
Thermal water	5
Vicinity of the monastery	4
Great food	3
Fresh air	3
Swimming pools	2
Location in the National Park	2

Source: Authors' analysis

When asked about what they did not like about the Vrdnik Spa (what are its main disadvantages), respondents stated the following:

Table 3. Basic disadvantages of vrdnik as a tourist destination

Disadvantages	Frequencies
Lack of marked paths and trails	7
Lack of information on forest trails (length and severity)	6
Inadequate infrastructure	5
There is a lack of shops, restaurants, cafes, pastry shops, cinema	5
Lack of destination information on the internet	4
Poor connections with cities in Serbia	5
Poor connection with Novi Sad (expensive taxi, no public transport)	5
Organized walks are missing	3
There is no footpath from the center to the old colony	3
Unplanned construction	3
Lack of landscaped footpaths	1

Source: Authors' analysis

These results indicate that Vrdnik Spa still lacks the adequate infrastructure for the pleasant stay of tourists, so new investments are needed. In connection to this, a good destination branding process should certainly lead to attracting new investors to the destination.

After that, the respondents were asked what the brand of Vrdnik could be. Various answers to this question were obtained, and they are summarized in the table 4:



Table 4. Potential brand of vrdnik

Potential brand of Vrdnik	Frequencies
Thermal water	16
Nature and air	14
Products like “rakija” and honey	13
Vrdnik tower	12
Festivals such as “Days of miners”	3
Milica Stojadinović Srpskinja	3
Ravanica monastery	2
Walking tours	3
Fresh air	1
Coal mine	1
Zip line and adrenaline park	1

Source: Authors’ analysis

The results showed ones once again that thermal water and natural surroundings are the most important elements in branding Vrdnik Spa as a tourist destination. Local people as well as local products are also important elements to be considered in the branding process.

The last question was about visitors’ satisfaction with the stay in Vrdnik Spa. Respondents were supposed to rate their satisfaction with their stay in Vrdnik on a scale from 1 - completely dissatisfied, to 5 - completely satisfied. The average grade of the answers is 4.6, and none of the respondents have given a grade less than 4. This indicates that tourists are quite satisfied with Vrdnik as tourist destination.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The paper provides some insights into the tourists’ opinion about Vrdnik Spa brand, which revealed some basis for the future brand building. This study is a part of a greater research project on destination branding which included all important target groups: tourists, local community and potential visitors-general public. This research, focusing on tourists’ perceptions, revealed that thermal water, nature and air and domestic local products like rakija and honey are the most important visible parts of the brand. On one hand, tourists consider preserved nature, peace and quiet and cordial people as major strong points of destination, while on the other, the destination infrastructure is the major drawback which negatively affects the overall satisfaction. Moreover, the research indicates that Vrdnik should tend to build its brand as a recognizable spa tourist destination which, in addition to thermal springs, bases its offer on preserved nature, active vacation and the cultural heritage of the former mine. Creating the international brand of Vrdnik as an unusual spa destination in the National Park which, due to the natural conditions unique in this part of Europe and the history of the former mining place, provides visitors and residents with peace and enjoyment, but also desire to explore. The current research is a basis for defining destination brand values, capabilities and personality, which are essential for successful brand development.



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