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CLARIFYING THE CONCEPT OF CUSTOMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY FOR A TOURISM DESTINATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper introduces the concept of customer-based brand equity for a tourism destination and thereby completes previous tourism destination studies which have exclusively investigated the destination image concept. Since no other authors have combined the four proposed dimensions (awareness, image, quality and loyalty) to evaluate a destination, the key purpose of the qualitative research was to clarify the customer-based brand equity concept that will be the subject of descriptive and causal research. The study instrument was originally prepared to analyze Slovenia as a tourism destination. In-depth interviews with potential tourists were employed in our qualitative research which served as a pre-step in further measurement instrument preparations.

Key words: customer-based brand equity, tourism destination, tourist behavior, exploratory research, in-depth interviews

ILLUSTRAZIONE DEL CONCETTO DI VALORE DEL MARCHIO DI UNA DESTINAZIONE TURISTICA AGLI OCCHI DELL'UTENTE

SINTESI

L'articolo introduce il concetto di valore del marchio di una destinazione turistica agli occhi dell'utente e rappresenta un'implementazione delle ricerche sin qui eseguite nel campo dello studio delle destinazioni turistiche che ne avevano analizzato solo l'immagine. Gli studi sin qui svolti non avevano considerato tutti e quattro i criteri proposti (consapevolezza, immagine, percezione della qualità e fedeltà) per valutare la destinazione, pertanto l'obiettivo chiave della ricerca qualitativa presentata nell'articolo è quello di spiegare il principio del valore di bene del marchio di una destinazione turistica agli occhi dell'utente, principio che nel prosieguo verrà utilizzato anche nelle ricerche quantitative. Lo strumento della ricerca (questionario) era stato inizialmente predisposto per l'analisi della Slovenia come destinazione turistica. In fase preliminare per la sua elaborazione sono stati utilizzati i risultati della ricerca qualitativa analizzata nell'articolo e nella quale abbiamo realizzato interviste in profondità con potenziali turisti.

Parole chiave: valore del marchio agli occhi dell'utente, destinazione turistica, comportamento dei turisti, ricerca esplicativa, intervista personale in profondità

INTRODUCTION

The customer or tourist perspective on tourism destination has attracted great interest in tourism research (Hunt, 1975; Crompton, 1979; Um, Crompton, 1990; Gartner, 1993; Echtner, Ritchie, 1993; Baloglu, McCleary, 1999; Gallarza, Gil, Calderon, 2002; Pike, 2002; Brezovec, 2002; Brezovec A., Brezovec T., Jančič, 2004; Konecnik Ruzzier, Ruzzier, 2009). The question of how a tourism destination is perceived in the eyes of potential tourists has not been confined to the academic community but has also involved many destination practitioners who, in their investigations, have sought answers to support further destination marketing strategies. Although much work has been done in this area, nearly all the studies have dealt exclusively with the concept of a tourism destination's image (Hunt, 1975; Crompton, 1979; Um, Crompton, 1990; Phelps, 1986; Ahmed, 1991; Fakeye, Crompton, 1991; Echtner, Ritchie, 1993; Gartner, 1993; Hu, Ritchie, 1993; Baloglu, McCleary, 1999a, 1999b; Baloglu, 2001; Brezovec, 2001; Konecnik, 2002).

On the contrary, marketing literature investigates the customer perspective on the branding concept and presents it as a concept that combines several dimensions (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993; Aaker, Joachimsthaler, 2000; Yoo, Donthu, 2001, 2002; Yoo, Donthu, Lee, 2000). In combining previous theoretical and empirical findings, we follow the line of authors (Aaker, 1996; Yoo, Donthu, 2001, 2002) who claim that the customer's evaluation of a brand comprises awareness, image, quality and loyalty dimensions.

As far as tourism destinations can be treated as brands (Gnoth, 2002; Morgan Pritchard, 2002; Cai, 2002; Olins, 2002; Kotler, Gertner, 2002; Gilmore, 2002a, 2002b; Papadopoulus, Heslop 2002; Anholt, 2002, 2003; Morgan, Pritchard, Piggot, 2002; Morgan, Pritchard, Pride 2002; Konecnik, 2004, 2005), the question arises as to whether investigation of the destination image dimension is really an appropriate way to evaluate it from the customer perspective. Drawing on this basic question, there is an open dilemma of whether perhaps the dimension of destination awareness, the quality and loyalty dimensions should also be employed in empirical investigations of the tourism destination phenomenon.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Concept of customer-based brand equity in marketing literature

The marketing literature has investigated the demand-side perspective on the branding phenomenon through the customer's evaluation of brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Yoo, Donthu, 2001). As a relatively newly developed construct, the concept of customer-based brand equity has attracted great interest in the last fifteen years (Barwise, 1993). One of the most commonly accepted definitions of the customer-based brand equity concept was introduced by Keller, who defined it 'as the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of that brand' (Keller, 1998, 45). Following the same author, brand knowledge is conceptualized according to an associative network memory model in terms of two dimensions**,** brand awareness and brand image. During this time, many valuable contributions regarding customer-based brand equity have been made, but several authors still recognize the absence of a general theoretical framework (Agarwall, Rao, 1996; Vazquez, del Rio, Iglesias, 2002) and agreement on how it should be measured (Yoo, Donthu, 2001). Unlike the previous level of versatility of measurement instruments, some efforts leading to an adjustment of brand equity measures are recognized. These steps are evident in analyses (Na, Marshall, Keller, 1999; Faircloth, Capella, Alford, 2001; Yoo, Donthu, 2001, 2002) based on Aaker (1991) and Keller's (1993) categorization. Combining both approaches of the leading authors, we follow the line of researchers (Aaker, 1991; Yoo, Donthu, 2001, 2002) who claim that the customer's evaluation of a brand comprises awareness, image, quality, and loyalty dimensions.

The customer's perspective on tourism destination phenomenon

Since the concept of customer-based brand equity has not been previously investigated for a tourism destination phenomenon, we will attempt to clarify the concept, which was introduced in marketing literature, for a destination brand. Before conducting qualitative research, we sought to obtain as much information as possible from previous studies. As mentioned, the tourism destination phenomenon was chiefly investigated within the topic of a tourism destination image. Our theoretical background reveals something similar which will expand previous insights into the tourism destination image, especially its overview of the measurement area.

In reviewing the attribute-based variables of previous studies (Table 1), we closely followed the earlier insights of the classifications of Mazanec (1994) and Gallarza, Gil and Calderon (2002). Our approach focus on the taxonomy of tourism destination image attributes was oriented to leading journals covering the tourism destination image theme: *Annals of Tourism Research*; *Tourism Management;* and the *Journal of Travel Research.* These articles were all published in English and in their empirical research focused on the attribute-based image component. In addition, some interesting articles have

Table 1: Review of attribute-based variables of tourism destination image studies from 1975 to 2002 in selected tourism journals.

Tabela 1: Pregled spremenljivk na osnovi značilnosti podobe turistične destinacije v izbranih turističnih revijah med leti 1975 in 2002.

Functional ◄———► Psychological

AUTHOR/ATTRIBUTES	Various sites/activities	Historic/cultural attractions	Beaches	Mountains & lakes	Nature	Nightlife & entertainment	Shopping facilities	Information available	Sport facilities	Transportation	Cities/towns		Price, value, cost	Climate	Crowdedness	Cleanliness	Accessibility	Safety	Political stability	Gastronomy (food/wine)	Friendliness	Residents characteristics	Communication	Resident's receptiveness	Relaxation	Opportunity for adventure
Hunt (1975)	▽			▽	▽				▽		▽			▽					▽			▽		▽		
Goodrich (1978)	▽	▽	▽		▽	▽	▽		▽			▽								▽	▽			▽	▽	
Crompton (1979)					▽					▽			▽	▽	▽	▽		▽			▽	▽				
McLellan, Foushee (1983)								▽					▽	▽	▽			▽		▽	▽		▽			
Gartner (1986)	▽	▽		▽	▽	▽			▽		▽															
Haahti (1986)		▽			▽	▽			▽				▽				▽				▽			▽		▽
Phelps (1986)	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽						▽	▽	▽					▽		▽	▽			▽
Gartner, Hunt (1987)	▽			▽	▽				▽		▽			▽										▽		
Calantone et al. (1989)	▽	▽	▽		▽	▽	▽		▽	▽			▽					▽		▽	▽				▽	
Gartner (1989)	▽	▽		▽	▽	▽			▽		▽													▽		
Embacher, Buttle (1989)	▽	▽			▽							▽	▽	▽			▽			▽		▽		▽		
Ahmed (1991)	▽	▽		▽	▽	▽	▽		▽		▽			▽										▽		
Chon (1991)	▽	▽			▽		▽			▽		▽	▽	▽			▽	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽		▽		
Crompton, Fakeye, Lue (1992)	▽	▽	▽		▽	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽		▽	▽	▽						▽	▽			▽	▽	
Dadgostar, Isotalo (1992)		▽		▽	▽	▽	▽		▽			▽													▽	
Echtner, Ritchie (1993)	▽	▽	▽		▽	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽		▽	▽	▽	▽	▽		▽	▽	▽	▽	▽
Hu, Ritchie (1993)		▽			▽	▽	▽		▽	▽		▽	▽	▽			▽			▽		▽	▽	▽		
Ross (1993)																										
Driscoll et al. (1994)	▽	▽			▽	▽	▽						▽	▽		▽	▽	▽			▽					
Gartner, Bachri (1994)								▽		▽		▽				▽		▽			▽			▽	▽	
Ahmed (1996)	▽	▽			▽	▽	▽		▽		▽													▽		
Alhemoud, Armstrong (1996)		▽	▽		▽	▽	▽													▽						
Baloglu, Brinberg (1997)																										
Court, Lupton (1997)	▽	▽		▽	▽				▽					▽						▽					▽	▽
Walmsley, Young (1998)																										
Baloglu, McCleary (1999b)	▽	▽	▽			▽			▽			▽	▽	▽		▽	▽			▽	▽	▽				
Chen, Kerstetter (1999)	▽	▽			▽	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽		▽		▽			▽	▽		▽	▽		▽		▽	▽
Choi, Chan, Wu (1999)	▽		▽		▽	▽	▽	▽				▽	▽	▽				▽		▽	▽		▽		▽	
Chen, Hsu (2000)	▽				▽			▽				▽	▽	▽				▽			▽		▽		▽	▽
Baloglu (2001)	▽	▽	▽		▽	▽			▽			▽	▽	▽		▽		▽		▽	▽	▽			▽	
Baloglu, Mangaloglu (2001)	▽	▽	▽		▽	▽			▽			▽	▽	▽		▽		▽		▽	▽	▽			▽	
Bigne, Sancez, Sancez (2001)																										
Konecnik (2002)	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽	▽			▽		▽	▽	▽	▽		▽		▽		▽	▽	▽			▽	▽
TOTAL	**22**	**22**	**11**	**9**	**26**	**20**	**14**	**7**	**19**	**8**	**8**	**15**	**17**	**20**	**3**	**8**	**8**	**13**	**3**	**17**	**16**	**11**	**7**	**13**	**13**	**7**

Sources: based on Mazanec, 1994; Gallarza, Gil and Calderon, 2002; and all authors mentioned in the table.

been published in other journals (such as *Tourism Review*) and are thus also incorporated in our analysis. Following the mentioned selection criteria, the final review process of tourism destination image measurement consisted of 33 articles. The rule we applied regarding the same authors in our categorization procedure should be explained. Many authors have published the results of a single research project in more than just one article. Although the variables are mostly equivalent, we regarded those articles as being independent.

The selection procedure for attribute-based variables followed similar three rules as employed in the variables categorization of Gallarza, Gil and Calderon (2002). Firstly, when articles included information-reduction methods, the original numbers of attributes were noted. Secondly, only the more universal attributes were considered, as we ignored those that are only typical to a specific destination. Thirdly, logical groups of similar attributes (different sport facilities) were included in one common attribute (sport facilities). Finally, all attributes were ranked within 26 different variables, as shown in Table 1. In rank order, the Echtner and Ritchie (1993) procedure of attributes categorization into a functional-psychological axis is followed.

The attribute taxonomy presented in Table 1 allows for deep insights into the attribute-based variables of tourism destination image measurement. Although the classification of the mentioned dimensions may vary according to the subjectivity of authors, it represents a good basis for further analysis of the tourism destination image. The balance between functional and psychological attributes suggested by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) seems not to have changed over 25 years. However, studies done since 1990 seem to offer more attributes. 'Nature' was the attribute mostly measured in all tourism destination image studies (26), followed by 'various sites' (22) and 'historical/cultural attractions' (22) attributes. Higher ranked attributes also included variables connected with the entertainment component, sport facilities. Mostly the same ranking attributes were recognized by two previous typologies (Echtner, Ritchie, 1993; Gallarza, Gil, Calderon, 2002). The chief differences appear for the attribute 'resident's receptiveness', previously ranked in highest position compared to our classification. In our opinion, this difference exists because we analyzed the additional criterion of "friendliness" which could also be interpreted as an attribute of a resident's receptiveness. When we add the two above-mentioned criteria together, the attribute is also found in the highest position (24) in our methodology.

Unlike the systematic overview of attribute-based image variables, no recent analysis has explicitly mentioned that previous image investigation could also include a quality dimension. Further, in reviewing previous articles dealing with the tourism destination phenomenon, we only found a few papers covering the topic of perceived quality investigation for a tourism destination (Fick, Ritchie, 1991; Keane, 1997; Murphy, Prichard, Smith, 1999; Weiermair, Fuchs, 1999). However, this is particularly interesting since the tourist's overall evaluation of a tourism destination is a combination of products, services and experiences. In all these examples, quality is a vital element of the consumer's behavior.

Most likely the biggest misunderstanding arises due to its difficult operationalization for a tourism destination. This opinion is shared by Keane (1997) in his contribution to the tourism destination quality dimension, since at the beginning he reiterates Pirsig's question of 'what is quality really?' Further, he links the quality dimension together with the pricing category. The importance of price has also been recognized by other authors investigating the tourism destination phenomenon (Crompton, 1979; Phelps, 1986; Embacher, Buttle, 1989; Crompton, Fakeye, Lue, 1992; Echtner, Ritchie, 1993; Baloglu, McCleary, 1999b; Baloglu, Mangaloglu, 2001; Konecnik, 2002, 2004). Hence, price is seen as one of the important quality extrinsic cues (Olson, 1977). On the other hand, many previous tourism destination studies have employed price levels (or even the value dimension) as one of the attribute-based image variables.

Dealing with the price category, we came to the conclusion that the previous tourism destination image studies could possibly also include a quality dimension. This was only shown where the price variable is a possible quality extrinsic cue. However, the same argument was proposed by Baker and Crompton (2000, 788), who stated that 'much of the image research reported in tourism measures perceptions of quality of a destination's attributes'. This can also be partly supported by the image concept investigation of Baloglu and McCleary (1999a), where the 'quality of experience' represents one of the factors in conceptualizing the image construct.

The main dilemma arises as to which criterion can be used for dividing variables into quality and image attributes. However, the comparison of those variables with other types of brands makes no sense because these variables are largely specific and measures should be customized for the unique characteristics of specific brand categories (Park, Srinivasan, 1994; Low, Lamb, 2000). At the same time, only a few previous studies can partly indicate the quality intrinsic cues of a tourism destination (Murphy, Prichard, Smith, 1999; Baker, Crompton, 2000; Ekinci, Riley, 2001). From those studies, only some quality variables (i.e. transportation, accommodation) can be stressed. Therefore, we only obtain some suggestions which cannot represent the basis for preparing a quality variable scale.

Unlike the enormous amount of work done in the tourism destination image area, fewer studies investigate

the awareness perspective of the destination phenomenon. The concept of tourism destination awareness has mostly been investigated within the topics of destination selection or the travel decision process (Woodside, Sherrell, 1977; Moutinho, 1987; Goodall, 1993), where the awareness of a tourism destination is treated as a first and necessary step leading to a destination visitation, but it is not a sufficient one (Milman, Pizam, 1995). Even less research interest has been paid to the loyalty concept of a tourism destination, where some studies (Gitelson, Crompton, 1984; Fakeye, Crompton, 1991; Ryan, 1995; Bigne, Sanchez, Sanchez, 2001) only partly incorporate some of the measures that indirectly indicate the loyalty concept. Oppermann (2000) shares the same opinion in his seminal work on tourism destination loyalty, in which he claims that this concept should not also be neglected for a tourism destination brand.

PURPOSE

The key purpose of the qualitative research was to clarify the customer-based brand equity concept that will be the subject of descriptive and causal research. However, four dimensions of customer-based brand equity concepts have been transferred from the areas of product and services brands and are also proposed for the tourism destination brand. Because no other authors' in the tourism destination area have employed the proposed four dimensions, the main question arises as to whether all four dimensions can also be perceived for our analyzed brand. Therefore, we sought to obtain a greater insight into and understanding of each of the dimensions as perceived from the tourist's point of view. Apart from the four proposed dimensions of the customer-based brand equity concept, the fifth content area of discussion was the topic of information sources. The second key purpose of the research involved identifying the variables of the proposed dimensions, especially those that have not been extensively investigated (awareness, loyalty) or which have been included within other investigation topics (quality dimension). Accordingly, we will specially consider where to establish the boundary between image and quality dimensions.

Therefore, further research questions are discussed:

- the tourism destination phenomena perception in the eyes of potential tourists;
- the perception of each proposed dimension of customer-based brand equity and possible selection of variables;
- the type and importance of information sources;
- fixing the boundaries between a tourism destination image and the perceived quality dimension; and
- the tourist perception of the tourism destination loyalty dimensions without a previous visitation and potential variables for its measurement.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research techniques have already been employed in previous brand equity studies (Wright, Nancarrow, 1999). Besides focus groups, in-depth interviews are one of the most commonly used techniques in the direct qualitative research procedure (Calder, 1977; Fern, 1982b, 1983; Greenbaum, 1988; Malhotra, 2004; Aaker, Kumar, Day, 2004). Although there are many advantages and disadvantages of each technique, there is no common agreement between the authors as to which technique generates better ideas and can be regarded as superior. The appropriateness of the technique also depends on the research problem and its conceptual nature.

Greenbaum (1988) cited several advantages of individual (one-to-one) interviews versus the focus groups technique: flexibility, confidentiality, purity, depth of information, portability and individual focus. For him, there are also disadvantages of interview techniques that are mostly reflected in cost and time dimensions and the client's involvement with the technique. The time and cost dimensions are probably the most evident reasons why focus groups are used most often (Greenbaum, 1988) and are popular (Fern, 1982a, 1982b, 1983) methods of qualitative research. Despite its popularity, in his investigation Fern (1982a) came to the conclusion that in-depth interviews provide a longer list of ideas and thoughts about a relatively complex concept and therefore suggested preferring the in-depth interview technique when examining complex concepts.

With the aim of understanding the customer-based brand equity concept of a tourism destination better, in-depth interviews with potential tourists were conducted. The participants were selected from the group of international students. The target group of this research was either undergraduate or postgraduate students. Two criteria were considered in the sample selection: the nationality of participants and the participants' previous travel experiences. Since we wanted to obtain tourists' opinions regardless of their culture, individuals from different countries were invited to participate. An additional criterion for the selection of participants was their previous travel experience. Altogether, twelve potential tourists were encouraged to participate in the interviewing process.

Half the respondents were males and half were females. Six came from European countries, three from East Asia and the Pacific, two from the Americas and one from the Middle East. Three were between 18 to 24 years of age, six from 25 to 34, whereas the rest (three of them) were between 35 and 44 years old. Five of them were students, while seven of them were employed. They prefer to travel with their partners or families, with or without the help of a travel agent or tour operator. On average, they have visited around fifteen different countries and have primarily traveled for holiday reasons.

A topic guide was used to steer the overall interview process. This guide was originally prepared in English and then translated by a professional language translator into German. Both language possibilities were offered to participants in the interview process. Eight respondents chose to answer in English and four in German. The interview questions asked about the respondents' perceptions of the tourism destination phenomenon, especially their perception of proposed customer-based brand equity for tourism destination dimensions. The interview also posed questions regarding the respondents' travel characteristics and socio-demographic details. The interviews were performed by a skilled interviewer who was fluent in both English and German. Participants were encouraged to talk freely, without any interruption on the interviewer's part. In examples where greater clarification was needed, additional questions were asked. The interviews were carried out using a laddering technique (Aaker, Kumar, Day, 2004; Malhotra, 2004) with the aim to probe into a tourist's deep underlying psychological and emotional reasons that affect their intention to visit a tourism destination. Having this in mind, we also chose the venue for the interviews. A cafeteria in the city center with many motifs of traveling through different countries was selected as a reasonable place for the interviews. Because the most appropriate time for interviewing in this cafeteria was around midday, all interviews were conducted from 10 am to 2 pm. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The length of interviews varied from 35 minutes to over 2 hours. The typical overall length of interviews was around 1 hour and 15 minutes.

Content analysis was conducted independently by two researchers. The content part of the analysis was clearly specified and consisted of five discussed areas. The main purpose of the research was to identify the dimensions (awareness, image, quality, loyalty and sources of information). In the second part, the authors had to aggregate potential variables for each proposed dimension due to links with the previous literature. The two then compared their analyses relative to the set purposes. According to suggestions (Miles, Huberman, 1994), the differences between the two sets of research were resolved through discussion.

RESULTS

Reflecting the chief aim of the research, namely to clarify the customer-based brand equity concept for a tourism destination, which was further used to investigate Slovenia as a tourism destination, twelve potential tourists were encouraged to define their interpretation and perception of tourism destination phenomena. At the beginning, respondents were asked to answer the question: 'How would you describe tourism destination phenomena? Please try to mention all characteristics or attributes that are important to you in evaluating a tourism destination?' Answers to these questions mostly contain a range of tourism destination attributes. However, some respondents mentioned only a few destination attributes while others included many important aspects in their tourism destination evaluation. Therefore, the number of attributes mentioned varied from 7 to 52. From the content analysis of the abovementioned attributes it is also evident that a respondent's specific and narrow important attributes also varied according to the respondent's way of life. Hence, sports-oriented people mentioned very detailed destination characteristics that are important for different sports activities (like wind, waves, snow and so on). Mostly in the same way, two respondents were deeply interested in culture and one of them in history. Therefore, they described in detail the so-called cultural and historical destination characteristics. Although the respondents enumerated a range of different destination attributes and different words and expressions were mentioned in the process, all attributes can be placed into one category already presented in the previous analysis (Table 1). However, it is interesting that three respondents mentioned some attributes in connection with quality (i.e. service quality, quality of accommodation, quality of infrastructure).

After describing the tourism destination perception, respondents were asked more detailed questions oriented at an interpretation of each customer-based brand equity concept for a tourism destination dimension. First, we investigated the awareness dimension and posed the following question: 'Which conditions should be fulfilled for you to think you are aware of a specific tourism destination?' Instead of answers, we received a question in response from ten out of the twelve respondents: '*By awareness do you mean that I know the destination?*' After the explanation that we had the same things in mind, the respondents explained their perception of destination awareness. Eleven respondents believed that awareness can be explained through recognition of the destination's name. Three of them also added name recognition in comparison to other destinations. Further, eight of them also believed they should have some opinion about the destination. This opinion was explained either by imagining some of the most important destination attributes (seven) and/or knowing the geographical location (five answers). After the respondents explained destination awareness, we asked them a further question: 'Do you believe a previous visit is a necessary condition for destination awareness?' All of them agreed that visiting the destination is definitely not a condition of awareness. Three of them also explained their opinions with individual examples. However, they were definitely convinced that they have knowledge about many destinations which they have never visited. Further, they listed numerous sources (recommendations from friends and relatives, ads on television, news on

television, books, movies and documentary films, internet, brochures) from where they received information about specific destinations.

Because the image dimension was already the subject of discussion at the beginning, we did not investigate this topic once again. However, our intention was to delve deeper into the relationship between image and quality dimensions. First, some cues from previous literature (Baker, Crompton, 2000) were given that the traditionally developed concept in the tourism destination image literature also includes the quality dimension. Further, a sign of incorporating quality dimensions was pointed out by three respondents, which in discussions of broader tourism destination attributes were also connected with the term quality. Therefore, we formulated the following questions: 'How would you describe the term quality for a tourism destination? Which quality attributes are important for you in the process of evaluating a destination?' Ten respondents immediately answered that they already included the quality attributes at the beginning of the conversation. One of them also asked: *'Haven't we already spoken about the quality issue?' Do you remember that I even used the words 'quality of'?'* Generally, respondents share the opinion that quality is an important issue in the destination evaluation and selection process. *'Beautiful nature and attractions are important in destination selection, but the quality level in destination counts as well. For me it is important that the destination has a good infrastructure and accommodation to stay in'*. On the contrary, two respondents pointed out they do not connect quality with a tourism destination. Therefore, we asked them to explain this in more detail or perhaps through a concrete example. *'For me it is totally unimportant whether the room is big and beautiful, whether it is clean, whether I get clean towels every day... Actually, I am not sensitive to these issues. For me it is really much more important that I visit fantastic museums, exhibitions, festivals...'*. In addition, the other respondent answered in the same way: *'When I was in India, their transport systems didn't bother me. Actually, I enjoyed the crowded busses, full of people. Ok, the smell wasn't very nice but I enjoyed each journey on their busses a lot.'* Following the answers of our respondents, we can definitely conclude that a tourist's perception of a destination also includes a quality dimension even though this aspect has been ignored in previous literature.

Tourism destination loyalty was the last customer-based brand equity concept to be discussed. At the start we posed the question: 'How would you describe yourself as being loyal to a specific tourism destination?' All respondents believed loyalty can be explained by previous visits to a destination. One described himself as a loyal tourist because he visits a particular destination nearly every year. However, four respondents spontaneously considered a future intention to visit a destination as a possible loyalty sign. In addition, only two respondents mentioned in conversation the possibility of recommending the destination to their friends. Therefore, we asked them the more detailed question: 'Do you have a habit of recommending a destination to your friends? In which circumstances do you recommend a destination to your friends?' All of them agreed that they have already recommended some destinations to their friends. The most commonly given reason (ten respondents) for recommending a destination was their satisfaction after having visited the destination. However, two respondents said they have the habit to recommend a destination to their friends very often and in many different circumstances. Besides the reason of being satisfied with a previous visit, they also recommend a destination when they read or watch something interesting about a tourism destination, or when they receive a good recommendation about a destination from their friends. In addition, we asked the ten other respondents whether they recommend a tourism destination only in the circumstances of having previously visited it. Six of them agreed that they have already recommended a destination to their friends although they have not actually visited it in the past. On the contrary, four respondents made destination recommendations only after previously visiting a destination.

Information sources were an additional discussion topic of our in-depth interviews with potential tourists. Respondents were asked the question 'Which type of information sources do you prefer when gathering tourism destination information?' Mostly the respondents mentioned typical information sources, with an emphasis on information gathered from their friends and relatives, TV news and advertisements, travel agents and/or tours operators, brochures and information gathered via the Internet. However, ten respondents believed it is hard to state the most important source because in nearly all circumstances they combined at least two or more different sources to gather as much information about a destination as possible. This diversity of information gathering can be represented through the words of one respondent. *'It is quite hard to say which information source is the most important. Sometimes I watch television and see a fantastic place/sights or a building I am interested in. So I ask my friends whether they have any more information about that destination. Or I try to find some information from books. Yes, in the last few years I have always also searched for information via the Internet. And then I go back to search for some additional data in specialized newspapers. But, as I told you, last time the process was totally different. I just went to a tourist office and booked a vacation. Perhaps I also asked my friends to give me some additional information.'*

At the end of the in-depth interviews, we asked each respondent to decide which of the 26 proposed attrib-

utes represented quality attributes in their opinion. The attributes were prepared with reference to previous literature (Table 1) and were to some extent adjusted for our investigated tourism destinations that were selected for further quantitative research. The attributes were written on a list of paper. Each respondent had to indicate those attributes that were, in their opinions, perceived as quality ones. The quality variables are presented in Table 2. However, we decided to include only those variables which were indicated at least by nine respondents. Further, we encouraged them to explain their decision in detail.

Table 2: Quality variables indicated signed by respondents.
Tabela 2: Spremenljivke kakovosti, ki so jih izbrali anketirani.

VARIABLE	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
Unpolluted environment	9
Accommodation	12
Infrastructure	12
Cleanliness	12
Personal safety	12
Local food/cuisine	9
Prices of tourism services	11
Service quality	12
Ease of communication	10
Value for money	10

Source: the qualitative research Investigation of the Dimensions of the Customer-based Brand Equity of a Tourism Destination.

All twelve respondents were clearly convinced that they perceived accommodation, infrastructure, cleanliness, personal safety and service quality as quality variables. Except for one, all of them treated the prices of tourism services as a quality variable. Further, ten agreed that value for money and ease of communication represent a quality variable in tourism destination content. The variables attracting least agreement from the proposed ten variables were an unpolluted environment and local food/cuisine. In addition, the respondents said they also have the biggest problems with their decisions on these two variables. *'Yes, at the beginning I wasn't so sure whether an unpolluted environment is a quality variable. But, I have already decided that nature is definitely an image variable so unpolluted nature is something superior to this image and therefore I include this variable within quality ones.'* Further, one of them related the variable of an unpolluted environment with the variable of cleanliness in a way *'...actually, it is similar to cleanliness, isn't it?'* Their explanations of a destination's food or cuisine mostly had the same connotations. Nine of them connected the variable of local food and cuisine with the service sector, as a result of local people's work. However, the variable of people was the most surprisingly ranked variable. On average, quality scientific literature treats human capital (people) as one of the most important parts of the whole quality process. On the contrary, only three respondents indicated people's friendliness as a quality variable, whereas nine of them believed people's friendliness is an image perception. Therefore, we opened a further discussion on why they treated this as an image variable. Nine of them thought they perceived people's friendliness in a general way. *'Some people – nations – are friendly, they are open to you as tourists, while others are not so. Although some local people are not so friendly, they can still provide high service quality.'*

CONCLUSIONS

The paper presents the results of a qualitative research which served as a pre-step in further measurement instrument preparations (Konečnik, Gartner, 2007; Konečnik, Ruzzier, 2008), which was used to investigate Slovenia as a tourism destination. The qualitative research was made with the aim of clarifying customer-based brand equity for the tourism destination concept. In this part we closely followed the previous research findings for different types of brands, but we adapted our discussion to the tourism destination concept. At the same time, we also prepared a review of the theoretical background about a tourism destination. After that we conducted in-depth interviews with potential tourists and thereby gathered their opinions and perceptions of tourism destination phenomena.

The most valuable findings were seen in the clarification of all four proposed dimensions. First, we were able to gain more insights into the awareness and loyalty dimensions, which have not been extensively studied in previous tourism destination studies. The discussion with potential tourists reassured us that it makes sense to also incorporate awareness and loyalty dimensions in traditionally investigated image studies. Another very important finding of this qualitative research is seen in the separation of the previously investigated image dimension into two dimensions (image and quality). Drawing on the opinion of the twelve potential tourists, we were able to separate all proposed variables into either the image or quality dimensions. All these important conclusions were incorporated in the preparation of variables for each proposed dimension.

The study is interesting also from the practical point of view. Practitioners can get an insight how tourists evaluate a destination in their minds. In depth interviews gave us a detailed opinion about tourists' evaluation of a destination, particularly their perception of the attribute based items for our proposed brand equity dimensions. Practical improvements and tourism destination mar-

keting strategies can therefore stress different attribute based items for investigated destinations.

Although the exploratory qualitative research gave us important information to assist in further preparation of a measurement instrument for the customer-based brand equity of a tourism destination, it should be treated as the first step leading towards this conceptualization. Therefore, we believe additional investigation is needed. It might be possible to increase the number of potential tourists expressing their opinions. In this case, it would be possible to investigate whether the opinions of tourists differ between different groups of tourists according to their sociodemographic (i.e. nationality, gender, occupation) and travel (i.e. previous travel experience) characteristics. This would be especially important in that part where we separated the traditionally investigated image dimension into two dimensions: image and quality. It would also be interesting to conduct similar research using the focus group technique and to then compare the results. Finally, we call for other authors to express their opinions on our view of all four proposed dimensions of a tourism destination to help us better clarify each dimension.

RAZJASNITEV KONCEPTA PREMOŽENJA BLAGOVNE ZNAMKE TURISTIČNE DESTINACIJE V OČEH PORABNIKA

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POVZETEK

V prispevku je predstavljen premoženja blagovne znamke turistične destinacije v očeh porabnika, ki dopolnjuje predhodne študije turističnih destinacij, osredotočene izključno na koncept podobe destinacije. Raziskovalci pri vrednotenju destinacije doslej še niso povezali štirih tukaj predlaganih dimenzij (zavedanje, podoba, kvaliteta in zvestoba); tako je bil ključni namen pričujoče kvalitativne raziskave razjasnitev koncepta premoženja blagovne znamke v očeh porabnika, ki bo v nadaljevanju predmet opisnih in vzročnih raziskav. V izhodišču je bila raziskava prilagojena za analizo Slovenije kot turistične destinacije. V okviru kvalitativne raziskave smo izvedli poglobljene osebne intervjuje s potencialnimi turisti, ki so služili kot izhodišče za razvoj nadaljnjih raziskovalnih orodij. Rezultati kažejo, da je v nadaljnje empirične študije premoženja turistične destinacije z vidika turistov mogoče vključiti vse štiri predlagane dimenzije. Na podlagi mnenj potencialnih turistov smo lahko tradicionalno raziskovano podobo razdelili bodisi na spremenljivke podobe bodisi na spremenljivke kakovosti. Ta delitev je skupaj z določitvijo spremenljivk potencialnega zavedanja in zvestobe omogočila pridobitev dragocenih podatkov, ki bodo v pomoč pri ustvarjanju bodočih raziskovalnih orodij.

Ključne besede: premoženje blagovne znamke v očeh porabnika, turistične destinacije, vedénje turistov, pojasnjevalne raziskave, poglobljeni osebni intervjuji

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