Article

Balaton Lake (virtual) projected and perceived destination image amid Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

In days gone by, Balaton Lake predominately attracted domestic tourists, without focusing on the countries which neighbour Hungary and their respective markets. However, as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, domestic and regional tourism flows have been stimulated, as travel restrictions resulted in a tendency towards travel to local and neighbouring destinations. In line with these trends, the research investigates the congruence of both Balaton Lake's projected and perceived (virtual) destination image in the era of Covid-19, with Serbia being considered as a neighbouring and emitting market. The study deployed a sequential exploratory mixed-method approach (qualitative and then quantitative). The study contributes to the existing knowledge by addressing the gap between the visual and textual content of a projected (virtual) destination image and by acknowledging non-visitor perception of destination image in the context of pronounced regional international travel.

Keywords

(virtual) destination image, projected destination image, perceived destination image, content analysis, Lake Balaton, Covid-19, regional international travel

Introduction

Lakes are traditionally a vital part of recreation and tourism in many parts of the world. 'Lake tourism' is also an important part of tourism in Hungary. Within the country lies one of the biggest lakes in central Europe – Lake Balaton, or the "Hungarian Sea" as the lake is often called by Hungarians. It is often mentioned alongside other large lakes in the region such as Lake Geneva in Switzerland or Bodensee in Germany. The lake is shallow enough for its water to quickly warm up to air temperature, meaning the temperature of the water easily surpasses 20 degrees Celsius in the summer months. Balaton as a destination (the lake and its surroundings), is Hungary's most popular holiday resort offering lakeside holidays, historical monuments, biking and walking trails and unspoilt and protected nature to visitors. Today, tourism is the most important economic sector for the lake. On the southern part of the lake there is a wide band of shallow water, making it suitable for family holidays and while the northern side of the lake is deeper it still has numerous safe, holiday-friendly beaches. As well as 'traditional' beach-style holidays (swimming and sunbathing), active holidays have also grown in popularity in the lake region. Water sports such as sailing have been popular for years, while bicycle tourism is increasing due to the completion of a

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bicycle route which encircles the lake. There are six official wine regions near the lake, which also make the region famous for its wine, wine tourism and wine festivals.

At Balaton, the number of guest nights is over six million annually – but the majority of these are accounted for by domestic tourists (Aubert and Berki, 2007) – according HSCO (Hungarian Central Statistical Office) 2019 statistics, 77% of guests were domestic tourists (Lőrincz et al., 2020). Balaton has very strong seasonality – the vast majority of tourists visit in the three summer months only – and the territorial distribution is overwhelmingly centred on its shores. However, there is currently an initiative to extend the destination, both in time and space. In 2019 Lake Balaton accommodated 1,999,545 guests in commercial accommodation, of which 462,576 were foreign guests (Lőrincz et al., 2020). Whereas Hungarian tourists are well aware of Balaton's breath-taking, natural scenery and valuable cultural heritage, these attributes have not been widely promoted in Hungary's neighbouring countries.

At the end of the 20th century, central and Eastern Europe experienced significant political and economic changes that caused a seismic shift in tourism mobility in the region. During socialism and communism, countries in the area largely focused on meeting the needs of the domestic tourist, all but neglecting thought of international tourists. However, with the political changes and in time, as a number of the countries entered the European Union, international travel started to dominate, becoming more and more prevalent. Then, in the last few years – particularly heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic and regional travel has become the priority (and often the only option) for national tourism organisations.

As Serbia is one of Hungary's neighbouring countries, situated to its south, it can be considered to be a valuable emitting tourism market in light of the COVID-19. In line with this, the Hungarian Tourism Agency (HTA) devised a campaign, "WOW Hungary", aimed at tourists from neighbouring countries, including Serbia, inviting them to visit Lake Balaton and other tourist destinations in the country (Pongratz, 2020). Given Serbia's proximity to Hungary, tourists can easily come by car, for a day trip, a weekend visit or longer. The number of Serbian tourists almost doubled between 2015 and 2019 – something that could potentially be exploited in the future by Balaton tourism officials. Mester (2013) argues that Serbian tourists travel mainly to relax and to visit cultural or historical attractions and that they acquire travel information through Internet searches and receiving recommendations from friends. She also asserts that the Serbian

perception of Hungary's image was formed as a result of its famous spas, aqua parks, Hungarian music and dance, close proximity and good price-to-value ratio. Finally, she concludes that Serbian tourists perceive travel agencies as a cheaper, safer and more convenient way to make travel arrangements to Hungary, with price being the most important decision-making factor.

Moreover, it was worthwhile investigating how the Balaton region's destination image has been projected by emitting travel agencies and tour operators and the perception of it among those who have never visited Lake Balaton. An approach that acknowledges and systemises the virtually projected and perceived image of non-visitors is considered a novel approach that further extends knowledge in the field.

The research was conceptualised as three-fold. Since content analysis of textual and visual online content has become increasingly popular within the tourism and hospitality studies (Li et al., 2019; Lian and Yu, 2017), the first part of the research (qualitative) aims to investigate the projected destination image of Lake Balaton based on YUTA (Serbian travel agencies and tour operators association) members' websites' textual and visual information, as well as the gap between them, following the methodology proposed within previous studies on the topic (Govers and Go, 2005; Önder and Marchiori, 2017). Secondly, the quantitative study aims to identify the destination factors of non-visitors based on the attributes identified within qualitative content analysis. Finally, the gap between the projected and perceived image of Lake Balaton is acknowledged. In addition, destination image perception was assessed in the travel reality induced by the global pandemic (Covid-19) and is related to (regional) international travel following the notion of (regional) proximity tourism.

Literature review

Perception of destination image by potential or actual tourists has been identified as a vital consideration for destination managers and marketers (Pike et al., 2018). As destination image is one of the most researched issues within tourism academia, there are a plethora of definitions. Gallarza et al. (2002: 59) stated that "there are almost as many definitions of image as scholars devoted to its conceptualisation". Lai and Li (2016: 10) proposed one of the most comprehensive definitions of tourism destination image: "a voluntary, multisensory, primarily picture-like, qualia-arousing, conscious and quasi-perceptual mental (i.e. private, non-spatial, and intentional) experience held by tourists about a destination". The Internet has become an essential source of information about various destinations, especially

content related to websites and search engines (Vyas, 2019). Morrison (2013: 373) argue that "websites are the global shop windows for promoting destinations". In addition, Molinillo et al. (2018) assert that official websites have a more substantial impact on visitors than social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. Web site content, both textual (information about the destination) and visual images (such as photographs), are considered essential for tourists (Govers and Go, 2005). Thus, the nature and quality of information collated related to a specific destination when searching websites are decisive factors in destination choice, especially for those who have not visited a specific destination in the past.

Kim and Chen (2016: 155) argue that "destination image formation processes are continuous mental progressions in which diverse sources of information converge". Destination image was influenced by information cues gathered through different channels and image formation agents (Milman, 2011). Gunn (1972) identified an organic and induced destination image as a result of information sources of a destination. According to Kim and Chen (2016), organic destination image is formed based on "non-touristic and non-commercial information sources such as news reports and books" (p. 155), in contrast to induced destination image that is "driven by commercial information sources such as advertising or marketer-controlled information" (p.155). Based on Gunn's findings, Gartner (1994) separated the following types of destination image in line with its formation agents: organic (received from individuals); induced (initiated by destination promoters); and autonomous image (independently produced) (cited in Marine-Roig and Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). In addition, the same author proposed the following categories of destination image based on these image formation agents: "Agents I (traditional tourist promotional materials), induced Agents II (tour operators, travel agencies); induced Agents III (traditional publicity); induced Agents IV (travel section articles, newspapers); autonomous (films, news, television documentaries), unsolicited organic (friends and family information, not sought), solicited organic (information sought from friends and family) and organic image (actual visitations)" (cited in González-Rodríguez et al., 2016: 2612). Moreover, the importance of the information sources in destination image formation was also confirmed by Baloglu and McCleary (1999).

Finally, based on place marketing literature (Kotler et al., 1993) and actors involved in destination image formation, both projected and perceived variants were distinguished. Projected images (supply side) closely correlate to ideas and impressions of a place that are presented for people's consideration, while perceived image (demand side) is an outcome of the interaction between what was projected to visitors and constructed in the minds of individuals (Beerli and Martín, 2004). Thus, destination image originates from the interaction between projected and perceived image, or more precisely between different formation of agents and the tourists themselves (Marine-Roig, 2015). Destination image could also be separated into primary and secondary image. A primary image refers to a destination image formatted based on personal experience, while a secondary image is initiated by induced and organic information sources (Kislali et al., 2016).

Frıas et al. (2008: 166) conclude that "tour operators and travel agents are a vital source of information in international tourism and influence the image of tourism destinations". A survey of 11,400 foreign tourists visiting Britain (Marine-Roig and Ferrer-Rosell, 2018) ranked the "travel agent's or tour operator's Web site" as the eighth most important of the 30 key factors that influence holiday destination choice. Therefore, tour operators and travel agencies websites are an influential instrument capable of creating destination image and stimulating visitors who have no previous experience of the destination under consideration. Unfortunately, there is an evident lack of studies focused on tour operator- and travel agency-projected destination image, especially in the context of neighbouring emitting markets. The vital role in destination image formation by travel agencies and tour operators was appraised initially by Gartner (1994), extracting the overt induced II agent – information received from tour operators. Thus, travel agencies' and tour operators' contribution to the destination image formation process requires further examination (Frias et al., 2008). Nowadays, most travel agency and tour operator communication has been transferred to the online environment (especially heightened in light of the Covid-19 pandemic) and thus, websites were identified as information sources with enormous potential to influence the perception of tourists' pre-visit destination image (Frias et al., 2008). Web site content can be divided into textual and visual. Mak (2017) implemented a visual and textual content analysis of the Eastern Taiwan NTO Web site. Ye and Tussyadiah (2011) analysed tourist perceptions of Philadelphia's (USA) destination image based on visual Web site content. In addition, some earlier studies (Stepchenkova and Zhan, 2013) underlined the importance of destination photos on platforms such as Flickr, Facebook and Panoramio, as information sources. According to Lojo et al. (2020), Barcelona's travel agencies were distinguished compared with

other online tourism destination sources due to the attention paid to images with appraisive meaning.

The destination image encapsulates "subjective judgments rather than objective realities" (p. 72), perceiving it as a "dynamic concept that changes according to time and space" (Kislali et al., 2016: 72). Ji and Wall (2015) have investigated image congruency between the projected and perceived destination image, while Ferrer-Rosell and Marine-Roig (2020) have investigated the differences between Barcelona's projected and perceived image based on DMO Web site content. The websites of DMOs, travel agencies and tour operators project an image with the aim of creating demand for a specific tourism destination. However, individuals may have some earlier information about the destination, which also highlights the importance of understanding perceived destination image (Kislali et al., 2016) – especially when the perception of those who had no previous experience with a destination is taken into account. The study aims to understand the congruence (gap) between travel agencies and tour operators (Gartner's overt induced II agent), projected image and non-visitor perceived image.

Hyun and O'Keefe (2012: 29) argue that the "strongest influence on destination image is, of course, actual experience", however non-visitor perception of destination image was also found to be of vital importance for both tourism theorists and practitioners (Tan and Wu, 2016). Previous studies have examined the differences in perception of destination image between visitors and non-visitors (Phillips and Jang, 2010; Stylidis and Cherifi, 2018; Tan and Wu, 2016), however, there is limited insight into solely non-visitor perception of destination image. Only a limited number of studies have investigated non-visitor perceived destination image and if there is any congruence between perception of destination image and what has been projected on travel agency and tour operator websites. As non-travellers are an overlooked tourist segment, their involvement in the study provides added value to existing tourism literature and offers a novel insight into the destination image formation process.

Finally, it is also important to underline that previous studies in the context of projected and perceived destination image have been implemented in "regular" travel circumstances. However, only a limited number of studies have aimed to understand the destination image formation process in the context of Covid-19. External or situational factors (constraints) such as social, health, political, physical, financial, time and distance, are highly relevant in the context of image destination formation in circumstances such as Covid-19. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a considerable effect on destination image formation bringing the health, financial and distance criteria in evaluating destination image to the forefront of discussion. Thus, the context of proximity tourism (Navarro Navarro Jurado et al., 2020), is considered to be tourism and travelling near home (Diaz Soria, 2017; Jeuring and Diaz-Soria, 2017) – a novel travel concept that now is highly applicable given the Covid-19 pandemic and the safety issues and restrictions that have resulted. The study takes into account the unprecedented Covid-19 travel reality, characterised by the preference for domestic tourism and international travel to neighbouring countries (Perić et al., 2021).

Methodology

Fetters (2018) emphasises the importance of integrating qualitative and quantitative methodology within the mixed-methods approach. The mixed-methods approach is considered to be a suitable response to the complexity of the investigated phenomena (Fetters, 2018). The study uses a sequential exploratory mixed-method approach (qualitative followed by quantitative) as proposed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011). Use of the mixed-methods approach also acknowledges the method (qualitative and quantitative) and data (use of various data sources, primary and secondary) triangulation (Decrop, 2004). Accordingly, exploratory qualitative textual and visual coding was implemented to form the sequential online collection of quantitative data of the perceived destination image of non-visitors.

Qualitative research

A content analysis was implemented (both textual and visual) of the travel agency and tour operator (members of YUTA) websites that offer any tourism packages for Lake Balaton. About 500 travel agencies operate on the Serbian tourism market, while 60% of that number are members of the National Association of Travel Agencies – YUTA (Savčić, 2018). The research was conducted from July to September 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic – a period which was characterised by travel agencies and tour operators directing their efforts towards domestic and regional emitting markets. After a thorough evaluation of YUTA members' websites, out of its 329 members, only seven offer packages to Lake Balaton (Alpha Travel See, Avenija Putovanja, Fun Travel, Karpati, Kompas Tourism & Travel, Olympic Travel and Sutrans). Five of these members (Alpha Travel See, Avenija Putovanja, Karpati, Kompas Tourism & Travel and Olympic Travel), are involved in the YUTA *garancjia putovanja* scheme that has been launched as a customer-driven initiative to additionally protect customers from financial and

other risks. The travel agency and tour operator websites with textual and visual information related to Lake Balaton were thoroughly examined with the help of MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. This methodological approach was taken following previous studies focused on the (virtual) destination image assessment of Web site content (Govers and Go, 2005; Önder and Marchiori, 2017). In the first part of the qualitative study, the most frequently used words and/ or phrases describing Lake Balaton's (virtual) destination image (including both tourists package details and destination description information) on travel agency and tour operator websites were identified. Secondly, both the textual and visual content related to Lake Balaton's (virtual) destination image were further analysed and interpreted by extracting categories with distinctive codes that align to the attributes of Lake Balaton and by assessing the relationships between extracted categories.

Open coding was applied to discover the themes and patterns to avoid making the data fit pre-conceived categories. During this stage, all codes were examined to identify broader meaning patterns, before being transformed into categories. At first, data condensation was performed during which Web site textual material was read, re-read and broken down into distinct meaningful units on a sentence-by-sentence basis through simple coding. During this stage "The coding manual for qualitative researchers" by Saldaña (2015) was consulted. In particular, Saldaña (2015) advocates two coding cycles, the first one of initial coding and the second involving classifying, prioritising, integrating, synthesising, abstracting and conceptualising. During the second cycle, pattern coding was applied in order to group codes into a smaller number of categories (Saldaña, 2015: 236). While pattern coding was undertaken, the data was carefully examined by means of a number of key questions to identify similarities, differences and idiosyncrasies within the content: What is trying to be conveyed? What are the similarities? What are the differences?

Quantitative research

Based on the attributes projected within the websites of travel agencies and tour operators, the questionnaire for Lake Balaton non-visitors was conceptualised. Respondents (non-visitors) expressed their perception of the destination image of Lake Balaton. The questionnaire was presented in an online format, using Google Forms, due to the on-going Covid-19 pandemic and the inability to implement in-person interviews with potential respondents. The research was implemented from October 2020 to February 2021 in order to allow

for sufficient data to be gathered, in order for the implementation of the designated quantitative statistical analysis (descriptive statistics, and exploratory factor analysis). Two datasets were created. The first dataset was created following the convenience and snowball sampling method, choosing respondents from the YUTA members' mailing list and directed to other respondents willing to participate in the research, as recommended by the initially "approached" respondents. An online questionnaire was distributed to the managers and employees of travel agencies and tour operators that do not offer packages to Lake Balaton. In addition, the second dataset was directed towards senior tourism students, due to their familiarity with the topic and likelihood of their involvement in regional international travel, especially in comparison to older travellers and family travellers. Moreover, senior students (students in their final year of graduate studies) were also acting as a proxy of organisations within the tourism industry sector in which they were involved with during their mandatory internship. In order to respond to the procedural issues related to common method bias issues within the data, the recommendations given by Podsakoff et al. (2003) were considered. The survey process gathered data from different data sources (senior students and employees in travel agencies and tour operators) and the questions were mixed within the survey. The anonymity of the respondents (to minimise evaluation apprehension) and the non-ambiguity of the items included were ensured.

Descriptive statistics were implemented to identify Lake Balaton's most important destination attributes, as identified by non-visitors and to compare them to the attributes identified through the keyword analysis (their frequency) of the textual and visual content on YUTA member websites. Exploratory factor analysis was implemented to extract the main factors based on the answers of non-visitors to compare them with the categories extracted within the qualitative coding analysis. The congruence (gap) of Lake Balaton's (virtual) destination image presented on travel agency and tour operator websites was compared to the perceived destination image of respondents who had not previously visited Lake Balaton.

In light of both the qualitative and quantitative study approaches, the following conceptual framework is proposed (Figure 1).

Results

Qualitative analysis findings

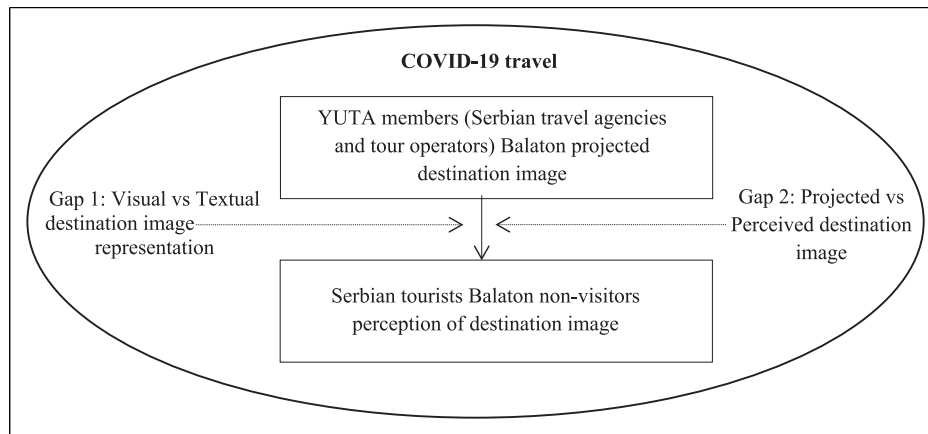Based on the evaluation of the websites of YUTA members who offer packages to Lake Balaton, most of

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Table 1. Keywords frequencies in Serbian (English).

Word (English)	Frequency	%	Rank
Jezero (Lake)	42	25	1
Balaton (Balaton)	23	13.69	2
Mađarska (Hungary)	19	11.31	3
Hotel (Hotel)	9	5.36	4
Crkve (Church)	6	3.57	5
Etno (Ethno)	4	2.38	6
Obilazak (Tour)	4	2.38	7
Selo (Village)	4	2.38	8
Tihanj (Tihany)	4	2.38	9
Vinarije (Wineries)	4	2.38	10

Figure 2. Keywords word cloud.

the travel agencies and tour operators within the evaluation operate in the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina (in the cities of Novi Sad and Subotica) – territory of the old Austro-Hungarian empire and still home to a considerable Hungarian minority. Lake Balaton is usually found within the *Excursions (Tours)* and *Spa and Wellness* sections of the websites (rather than the *Summer Holiday* section). This itself reflects how convenient it is to travel to Lake Balaton from the region and Serbian tourists being familiar with Hungary's spas (Mester, 2013), which is also reflected in the context of Lake Balaton as a destination. The packages often took the form of 1-day tours from Serbia, or longer stays in one of the spa and wellness hotels situated in the proximity of Lake Balaton.

The qualitative research was initiated with a keyword analysis of the textual content of the packages offered by travel agencies and tour operators. It was conducted in the original language of the Web site to ensure that the meaning of none of the words would be lost. In total, 84 keywords were identified, with a cumulative occurrence of 227. Due to the similarity of their meaning, some keywords were grouped, resulting in a total of 38 unique keywords. For the purposes of the study, only the most frequent keywords are presented (Table 1) and further elaborated. Based on the proposed keyword cloud (Figure 2), the common themes within the textual content were acknowledged as distinctive features of travel agencies' and tour operators' Lake Balaton tour-packages.

The most frequent words identified within the text found on travel agencies' and tour operators' websites were (excluding direct reference to Balaton, Lake and Hungary): hotel, church, ethno, tour, village and peninsula. Hence, the identified words could be considered the main destination attributes – confirming Lőrincz et al.'s (2020) arguments that rich cultural heritage and natural landscapes were pillars of the Lake Balaton destination offer. Moreover, a textual reference to the hotel (resort, spa and wellness) within the text on the travel agencies' and tour operators' websites could be also acknowledged as a distinctive feature of the Lake Balaton destination, emphasising the importance of hotels for international tourists visiting Lake Balaton (Remenyik and Molnár, 2018). Finally, the touring

Table 2. Identified textual and visual codes.

Codes	Visual	Textual	SUM
Numerous parks	0	2	2
Silver and gold bech	0	1	1
Water tower 45 m high	0	1	1
Possibilities for touring (wineries, castles, spas and rich cultural heritage)	0	1	1
Crystal clear air	0	1	1
Excellent for visiting throughout year round	0	1	1
Beach volleyball	2	1	3
Crystal clear water	6	1	7
Castles	0	1	1
Bike ride	0	1	1
Concerts and clubs	0	1	1
Surfing and sailing	6	2	8
Fishing	0	1	1
Numerous places to visit and activities	0	1	1
Peace and silence	7	1	8
Famous wineries (Copak-fured and Tiffany)	0	1	1
The coast of Lake Balaton is suitable for viticulture	0	1	1
Untouched nature with unique birds and plants	0	1	1
It is visited by families with children and water sports fans	3	1	4
Arranged quay and promenade	3	1	4
Beautiful view on lake	4	1	5
The average water temperature during the summer is 25°	0	1	1
Hungarian Sea	0	3	3
One of the largest lakes in Central Europe	0	2	2
Near Budapest	0	1	1
Silent baroque church and monastery	0	2	2
Hotel	4	10	14
Ethno motives	0	1	1
Souvenir shops	0	1	1
Traditional style cottages	0	1	1
National tradition	0	1	1
Tihany ethno village	0	3	3
Beautiful scenery of Lake Balaton	10	2	12
Beach	2	1	3
Tihany peninsula	0	7	7
Swimming on Lake Balaton	3	4	7
Feed the swans in Balatonfured	0	1	1
Fascination view on Lake Balaton	8	2	10
Stroll along the promenade in Balatonfured	0	1	1
View from Tihany Cathedral	0	1	1

element of visits to Lake Balaton was also apparent – largely as a result of 1-day Lake Balaton excursion packages of which Serbian tourists take advantage. Some reference was also made to *Tihany* (peninsula) as an important attraction by travel agencies and tour operators (Table 1).

Following keyword analysis, the coding of both textual and visual Lake Balaton-related content from travel agencies and tour operators was completed. In order to capture the complexity of the research phenomena, the coding of content was divided into two cycles with different coding techniques. The initial coding was based on the a priori (Saldaña, 2015) and descriptive coding technique (Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2016), while the second cycle of coding was based on pattern coding (Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2016). A number of codes were identified within the investigated content, both textual and visual, and are presented in Table 2. A total of 50 unique codes were identified, with a frequency of 58 for visual and 68 for textual content (a total of 126 occurrences). The codes were presented in the native language (for the purposes of this paper, they
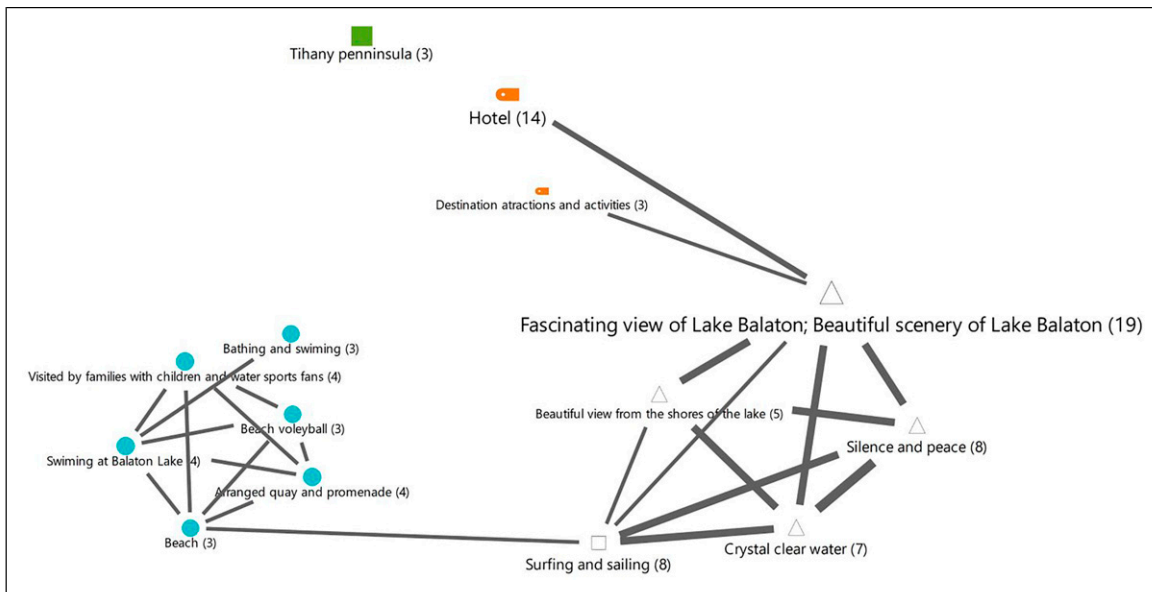
Figure 3. Coding clusters.

have been translated into English). Codes with a considerable discrepancy between visual and textual content are marked in bold. The level of incongruence between the textual and visual representation of the destination was in line with what has been concluded in previous studies (Hsu and Song, 2013; Lojo et al., 2020).

The visual content of Serbian travel agency and tour operator websites was coded by acknowledging sailing and surfing, peace and silence, beautiful natural scenery, breath-taking views of Lake Balaton and crystal clear water. Visual material such as "atmospheric moods" was found to be in common usage for the online projection of destination image (Arefieva et al., 2021). This was also confirmed in the context of Lake Balaton's landscape and ambient features, such as a lake view, crystal clear water, peace and silence. Hsu and Song (2013) study's most represented visual destination image category was leisure and recreation activities, justifying the pictorial representation of surfing and sailing within this study. Moreover, since the natural landscape is dominated by water/the lake itself, it could be considered a dominant image element. The textual content was centred around hotel features and the Tihany peninsula. In relation to the dominance of textual content in contrast to visual content, hotel features could be perceived as infrastructure elements of a destination, complementing Hsu and Song's (2013) findings within their Hong Kong study that the general infrastructure category was commonly depicted through textual representation. Moreover, in order to depict the most distinctive code clusters and

the relationships (co-occurrence) between them, a clustering of the codes was undertaken, resulting in five unique clusters: *hotel*, *Tihany peninsula*, *Balaton view* (with two codes: *fascinating view of Lake Balaton* and *beautiful landscapes of Lake Balaton*), *Surfing and sailing* and *beach activities* (Figure 3). The *Tihany peninsula* cluster was identified as an isolated cluster with no co-occurrence with the other clusters, while the strength of the ties between the *hotel* and *Balaton view* clusters and between the *Balaton view* and *surfing and sailing* clusters were the most prominent. *Surfing and sailing* act as brokerage point between *Balaton view* and *beach activities* clusters, while a higher level of cluster cohesiveness was identified within the *beach activities* and *Balaton view* clusters.

Quantitative analysis findings

In terms of the socio-demographic characteristics of the survey dataset, of the 200 respondents, 64% were female, 84% belong to the 18–25 age group and the vast majority of respondents were single (89%). The initial descriptive statistics of the items (identified as codes within the qualitative research consequently adapted to fit the purpose) are shown within Table 3 (mean values, standard deviation and normality values). The mean values vary in range from 3 to 4, suggesting a high similarity of responses. The item with the highest level of agreement was 'Lake Balaton has beautiful natural scenery' (4.02), while the item with the lowest level of respondent agreement was 'Lake Balaton is excellent for swimming' (3.45). The respondents of Lőrincz

Table 3. Descriptive statistics.

Codes	Mean values	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Lake Balaton is great for swimming	3.45	1.06	−0.162	−0.169
Lake Balaton has excellent beaches	3.53	1.03	−0.247	−0.121
There is a well-maintained quay and promenade along Lake Balaton	3.74	0.97	−0.311	−0.004
Lake Balaton has beautiful scenery and natural landscapes	4.02	1.00	−0.752	0.112
Lake Balaton has quality and modern and well equipped hotel facilities	3.75	0.99	−0.370	−0.097
Lake Balaton has an excellent traffic-geographical position	3.72	0.99	−0.360	−0.112
The temperature of the lake water is ideal	3.49	1.03	−0.127	−0.125
Lake Balaton is especially attractive for tourists because it is one of the largest in Central Europe (Hungarian Sea)	3.88	1.00	−0.654	0.177
The view of Lake Balaton from the nearby shores is beautiful	3.96	1.04	−0.745	0.110
Lake Balaton is an ideal destination for families with children	3.84	1.01	−0.606	0.175
Lake Balaton offers many cultural facilities	3.70	0.97	−0.328	−0.008
Lake Balaton has untouched nature with unique birds and plants	3.81	1.00	−0.510	−0.005
Lake Balaton has a large number of wineries that are attractive for tourist visits	3.70	1.00	−0.305	−0.217
Lake Balaton is characterized by peace and quiet	3.78	0.98	−0.587	0.465
Lake Balaton is an ideal sailing destination	3.59	1.02	−0.260	−0.140
Lake Balaton is an ideal destination for other water sports (except sailing)	3.63	1.01	−0.256	−0.160
There are numerous places and attractions that can be visited on Lake Balaton	3.73	0.98	−0.274	−0.258
Lake Balaton is a good fishing destination	3.64	1.02	−0.285	−0.116
Lake Balaton has a good nightlife	3.49	1.08	−0.144	−0.444
A large number of concerts are organized on Lake Balaton	3.50	1.04	−0.148	−0.217
Lake Balaton is an ideal destination for cycling	3.73	1.00	−0.408	−0.024
Lake Balaton has crystal clear water	3.69	0.96	−0.208	−0.189
Along Lake Balaton there are a large number of castles attractive to tourists	3.61	1.02	−0.356	0.004
Lake Balaton is a great destination to visit all year round	3.65	1.03	−0.298	−0.265
Along the shores of Lake Balaton there are a large number of well-maintained parks	3.74	0.96	−0.359	−0.037
The climate and air on Lake Balaton are great	3.87	0.97	−0.311	−0.598
On Lake Balaton there are many interesting localities with ethno-contents and rich folk tradition	3.73	0.96	−0.089	−0.607
Lake Balaton has a rich Baroque heritage (churches and monasteries) that are attractive to tourists	3.72	1.02	−0.352	−0.268
Lake Balaton has an attractive Tihany Peninsula with characteristic architecture, which is especially attractive to tourists	3.76	0.97	−0.243	−0.405
There are many wellness and spa facilities on Lake Balaton that are attractive to tourists	3.73	0.98	−0.308	−0.251

et al.'s (2020) study (active cycling tourists), who visited Lake Balaton, also emphasised landscapes as a distinctive feature of the Lake Balaton destination. The normality values of skewness and kurtosis had an acceptable normal univariate distribution that ranges between –2 and +2 (George and Mallery, 2010).

Following the creation of descriptive statistics, factor analysis – based on the principal component analysis extraction method – was deployed to group the Lake Balaton distinctive items into factors (Table 4). This resulted in a two-factor solution with eigenvalues higher than 1, accounting for 70.271% of the total variance, which is well-above the common acceptable variance for social science research (60%) suggested by Hair et al. (2010). The Kaiser–Mayer–Olkin measure equals 0.963, confirming the adequate distribution of values for conducting factor analysis. Cronbach's alphas (α) values range from 0.966 to 0.969. There was no single item excluded from further analysis based on the factor loading value.

Factor 1 was determined by Lake Balaton's natural characteristics and it was accordingly titled *Lake*

Table 4. Exploratory factor analysis.

Factors	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	% Of variance explained	Cronbach alpha
Factor 1: Lake Balaton natural scenery and water-based activities	—	19.872	66.239	0.966
Lake Balaton has beautiful scenery and natural landscapes	0.830	—	—	—
The view of Lake Balaton from the nearby shores is beautiful	0.809	—	—	—
Lake Balaton has untouched nature with unique birds and plants	0.774	—	—	—
Lake Balaton is especially attractive for tourists because it is one of the largest in Central Europe (Hungarian Sea)	0.764	—	—	—
There is a well-maintained quay and promenade along Lake Balaton	0.731	—	—	—
Lake Balaton is an ideal destination for families with children	0.712	—	—	—
Lake Balaton has excellent beaches	0.708	—	—	—
Lake Balaton has an excellent traffic-geographical position	0.705	—	—	—
Lake Balaton has quality and modern and well equipped hotel facilities	0.680	—	—	—
Lake Balaton is great for swimming	0.643	—	—	—
The climate and air on Lake Balaton are great	0.636	—	—	—
The temperature of the lake water is ideal	0.632	—	—	—
Lake Balaton is characterized by peace and quiet	0.627	—	—	—
Lake Balaton has an attractive Tihany Peninsula with characteristic architecture, which is especially attractive to tourists	0.601	—	—	—
Lake Balaton is an ideal sailing destination	0.556	—	—	—
Factor 2: Lake Balaton cultural offer and other tourism activities	—	1.210	4.032	0.969
A large number of concerts are organized on Lake Balaton	0.854	—	—	—
Lake Balaton has a good nightlife	0.835	—	—	—
There are many wellness and spa facilities on Lake Balaton that are attractive to tourists	0.771	—	—	—
There are numerous places and attractions that can be visited on Lake Balaton	0.751	—	—	—
Along Lake Balaton there are a large number of castles attractive to tourists	0.737	—	—	—
Lake Balaton has a rich Baroque heritage (churches and monasteries) that are attractive to tourists	0.714	—	—	—
Lake Balaton has a large number of wineries that are attractive for tourist visits	0.674	—	—	—
Along the shores of Lake Balaton there are a large number of well-maintained parks	0.647	—	—	—
Lake Balaton is a good fishing destination	0.644	—	—	—
Lake Balaton has crystal clear water	0.644	—	—	—
Lake Balaton is an ideal destination for other water sports (except sailing)	0.643	—	—	—
Lake Balaton is an ideal destination for cycling	0.625	—	—	—
Lake Balaton offers many cultural facilities	0.603	—	—	—
On Lake Balaton there are many interesting localities with ethno-contents and rich folk tradition	0.597	—	—	—
Lake Balaton is a great destination to visit all year round	0.570	—	—	—

Notes: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis: Rotation Method: Varimax: Only loadings greater than 0.5 are reported; Percent of variance explained is 70.271%; $KMO = 0.963 > 0.5$; Bartlett test of Sphericity: $p = .000$.

Balaton natural scenery and water-based activities. This factor consists of 15 items and accounts most of the variance (66.239%), suggesting its prominence from a non-visitor perspective. The second factor, also includes 15 items, allowing for the conclusion that the codes were evenly distributed among factors, however, this specific factor was acknowledged as being of less importance to non-visitors, accounting for only 4.032% of the total variance. Factor 2 was labelled *Lake Balaton cultural offer and other tourism activities,* as it encircles items that reflect the rich cultural heritage of Lake Balaton and emphasises the different tourism activities within its offer. Previous findings of the perception of the Lake Balaton destination image by Serbian non-visitors was found to be in line with Visit Hungary (2022) promotional campaign which centred around Lake Balaton's distinctive destination attributes such as natural scenery, its cultural offer and both lake and continental activities. Arguably, regardless of the lack of visitation experience of the would-be Serbian tourists who were interviewed, the effects of the Visit Hungary (2022) and/or other promotional campaigns endorse common pre-visit destination-based antecedents, particularly those from induced information sources (Yilmaz and Yilmaz, 2020). In addition to induced sources, some autonomous sources such as word of mouth of friends and relatives who have already been to Lake Balaton might also influence its destination image.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Theoretical implications

The complexity of the destination image formation process has been continuously stressed within previous studies. Gallarza et al. (2002) argue that destination image is "a complex, multiple, relativistic and dynamic concept" (cited in Kislali et al., 2016: 72). Due to its complexity, different interpretations of the concept are expected, especially if respondents are not aware of the destination image they wish to express. Thus, a complex phenomenon such as (virtual) destination image, characterised by multiple elements and processes and prone to relativistic interpretation due to the subjectivity of the subjects involved (Gallarza et al., 2002) ought to be conceptualised to acknowledge a holistic understanding grounded on a mixed-method approach and an evaluation of information taken from different sources. Therefore, the study offers a holistic understanding of destination image formation in the specific context of the Covid-19 pandemic by escalating the discussion in relation to a number of theoretical issues.

Firstly, the study's findings confirm that destination image differs by informational cues. Thus, the study has evenly acknowledged the coverage of the content through textual and visual representation, however with distinctive individualities. Visual representation was generally related to the destination in general, emphasising the dominance of the natural environment of Lake Balaton and its breath-taking scenery, in contrast to a product-specific textual discussion of hotel features and Tihany peninsula sightseeing and activities. The hotel, as an important destination infrastructure attribute, was depicted textually, which was also the case within Hsu and Song's (2013) study and textual dominance within the general infrastructure category. Thus, the study complements Stepchenkova and Zhan's (2013) study that emphasised the vital role of a visual (photographic) representation of a destination. Moreover, it supports Mak's (2017) argument that visual content is more effective in conveying affective attributes – particularly when used to depict "atmospheric moods" (Arefieva et al., 2021) – once again confirming the "picture superiority effect" over mere text (Paivio et al., 1968). Finally, it confirms the affinity of Serbian tourists towards Internet searches and attractive photos as cited earlier in Mester's (2013) study. Moreover, a gap between visual and textual content could be interpreted by acknowledging effective responses stimulated with the help of visual content on one side, in comparison to cognitive-related textual content (Healey and Grossman, 2018). Finally, the study's findings support Lojo et al.'s (2020) argument that travel agencies distinguish themselves from other entities by means of their attention to visual destination content.

Secondly, the study has provided some empirical evidence of the gap (and to some degree congruence) between projected and perceived destination image. The evaluation of travel agencies' and tour-operators' (virtual) projected destination image (both visual and textual) uncovered five clusters of destination image formation: hotel, Tihany peninsula, Balaton view, surfing and sailing and beach activities. Conversely, the perceived destination image of Lake Balaton by potential tourists who had not visited the destination on a prior occasion was divided into prevailing Lake Balaton natural scenery and its cultural offer and other tourism activities. Thus, the perceived destination image was found to be broader, with limited attention on its unique distinctiveness, such as specific activities in its offer (various water-based activities), Tihany peninsula cultural heritage and hotel features. Both the qualitative and quantitative findings confirm the importance of these activities for destination image formation, in line

with the earlier conclusions of Iordanova and Stylidis (2019). Some congruence exists at the destination level of natural characteristics as a common ground of destination image formation from the perspective of both projected (Balaton view as a central cluster in the content) and perceived (Lake Balaton natural scenery and water-based activities) destination image. The natural environment being a strong image element in both segments underlines the relevance of the tourist milieu. Moreover, the study contributes to the on-going discussion of non-visitor perception of destination image (Tan and Wu, 2016) by implementing a study with exclusive focus on non-visitors' perceived destination image in contrast to previous studies that have compared the differences between visitors and non-visitors (Phillips and Jang, 2010; Stylidis and Cherifi, 2018). The lower mean values for non-visitors confirms the relative lack of knowledge/awareness of this group. Finally, virtual destination image (Govers et al., 2005; Hyun and O'Keefe, 2012) was assessed at the level of both projected and perceived destination image, acknowledging the importance of its use in the context of projected destination image – along the lines of previous focus on perceived destination image.

Thirdly, since the complexity of the destination image formation process is more noticeable in times of a global health crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the study extends current knowledge by assessing it in specific travel-related circumstances. Thus, destination image findings should also be understood by taking into account the disruption caused by Covid-19 on long-haul international travel and increased regional (proximity) tourism academic discussion. Thus, the research complements previous studies of proximity tourism (Diaz Soria, 2017; Jeuring and Haartsen, 2017), especially in the context of Covid-19 (Navarro Jurado et al., 2020). Augmented health awareness due to the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak has enhanced regional international travel and emphasised travel to neighbouring destinations as 'less risky', while simultaneously being more convenient due to non-health drives (however still induced by pandemics) such as an economic crisis or travel restrictions (Romagosa, 2020). Finally, study explore the regional visitation of natural (in this specific case coastal as well) settings in contrast to urban centres as one of the interesting implications of the pandemic.

Practical implications

The total volume of Serbian guest nights at Hungarian (country level) accommodation in 2019 was approximately 150,000, with this number having steadily increased in recent years, seeing Serbia emerge as an important source market. The study also assists Lake Balaton tourism authorities in more successfully positioning the destination. Travel agencies and tour operators which offer packages to Lake Balaton have Web site content which is evenly distributed between visual and textual content, however, some distinctive aspects could be further discussed. For example, if travel agency and tour operator managers want to comprehensively promote the features of the destination, they should encourage Web site designers to pay additional attention to achieving the perfect balance of intangible aspects of the destination experience (that can be visually expressed), supported by textual content which emphasises the cultural-geographic specifics of the destination and detailed travel-related information (tour-package details and hotel amenities provided within any deals). Adequate choice of the visual content has the capacity to stimulate the affective response of the visitors, especially those that have never visited destination, while interesting and informative textual content will initiate cognitive curiosity to learn more about the destination and consequently consider it for visitation. Within the image elements, Accommodation (hotels in this case) is an integral part of the image elements, which shows the general importance of appropriate accommodation in travel. Furthermore, it might indicate the potential inclusion of information about hotel facilities in order to provide Serbian travel agencies with further necessary and more attractive information.

Moreover, Lake Balaton destination authorities should discuss how the destination should be projected to regional emitting countries – a recently devised campaign directed towards neighbouring countries has proved to be an excellent starting point. The Hungarian Tourism Agency (HTA) and Lake Balaton DMOs should consider enhancing collaboration with YUTA to assist them in re-branding their projected destination image in line with the destination image they wish to convey. Some congruence in destination image formation was identified in relation to the natural scenery of the lake, while its cultural resources and accompanying experiences were not adequately projected by travel agencies and tour operators, yet perceived as of high importance by non-visitors. Thus, further attention should be given to visual content based on Lake Balaton's natural scenery as it has the potential to induce a positive effective response on non-visitor. This could be accompanied by promotion of Balaton's cultural heritage. Thus, a destination aiming to attract visitors without previous experience must acknowledge a balanced textual and visual representation of the virtual destination image.

Taking into account the specific circumstances of (post) Covid-19 travel mobility, regional travel will

certainly receive additional attention from DMOs due to proximity and minimal travel restrictions. Thus, DMOs should invest their efforts in acknowledging the preferences of regional emitting markets in order to devise a focused regional campaign that is more congruent to the actual destination experience. Regional travel should be supported by national authorities, especially in the context of Covid-19 induced travel restrictions, so preference should be given to shorter stays and individual travel.

Future research recommendations

The research suggests various future directions. Future research could investigate the differences between previous visitors of Lake Balaton and non-visitors regarding perceived destination image. Taking into account the homogeneity of the non-visitor sample, other segments (e.g. families, couples, seniors) could also be addressed. Moreover, it would prove interesting to gather additional information via individual interviews to discover how non-visitor destination image was formed, including reasons for non-visit of the destination. The qualitative research could be complemented with the individual perspective of non-visitor destination image formation, seen as supplemental to what has been evaluated through content analysis. Future research should also put additional focus on the Covid-19 pandemic and its direct (in contrast to indirect provided within the study) effects on destination image formation, especially in the context of regional international travel. Finally, the proposed study opens an avenue for further understanding of pandemic visitation preference of natural (coastal) tourist destinations in contrast to urban destinations. Involving other groups of stakeholders such as tourism professionals operating at Lake Balaton, could be an extension to the research results. In order to validate the long-terms effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on regional travel, a similar study could be repeated in a few years' time in order to track developing trends.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

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