



THE INFLUENCE OF BRAND ELEMENTS ON LOYALTY IN HEALTH TOURISM DESTINATIONS: CASE STUDY OF PROLOM BANJA

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Abstract: *The purpose of this research is to test the impact of destination brand elements (image, quality, and awareness) on loyalty in the context of Prolom Banja as a health tourist destination. The research was conducted on a statistical sample of 172 respondents. The authors distributed a questionnaire online through the official Facebook profile of Prolom Banja. The impact of destination brand elements on loyalty was tested by using multiple regression. Research results showed that destination quality and destination awareness make a uniquely significant contribution to destination loyalty prediction, i.e. a positive impact of predictor variables (quality and awareness) on destination loyalty was identified. Also, the findings show that the image of the destination does not make a significant unique contribution to the prediction of destination loyalty. The results were discussed, implications and limitations were presented, as well as recommendations for future research.*



INTRODUCTION

The destination brand in a narrower sense represents „the name, symbol, logo, word, or other graphics that serve to identify and distinguish the destination from the competition” (Veljković & Đorđević, 2011, 48). „The brand provides the promise of a pleasant travel experience to a specific destination for potential visitors, and for those who have already visited a specific destination, it serves to strengthen the memory of beautiful experiences” (Kerr, 2006, 277; cited from Veljković & Đorđević, 2011, 48). In addition, „the destination brand represents a set of perceptions that a person has about the place, i.e. a mix of key characteristics that make it recognizable and memorable in the minds of consumers (i.e. users of tourist services)” (Chi, 2020). Therefore, branding of a tourist destination represents all elements of a tourist into a unit capable of expressing an identity that is rather singular and capable of differentiating the destinations from its competition (Tsaur et al., 2016). In other words, „the goal of branding a tourist destination is to create a perception in the minds of consumers of tourist services about the uniqueness and particularities of the destination” (Perić & Mandarić, 2020, 443). When it comes to health tourism destinations, one of the possibilities for achieving recognizability and being unique in the tourism market is achieving higher quality of health tourism services and creating strong and recognizable wellness and spa brands (Chi et al., 2020; Perić & Mandarić, 2020; Smith & Puczko, 2009). Koncenik and Gartner (2007) in their study imply that image, quality, awareness and loyalty are the four key elements of a destination brand. Similarly, García et al. (2012) present in their research the possibility of presenting successful branding of a tourist destination in a form of a pyramid which consists of four constructs, respectively image, perceived quality, awareness, and loyalty. Having in mind the importance of destination branding, the influence of health tourist destination brand elements on loyalty is still an insufficiently researched area, especially in the Republic of Serbia, which indicates a research gap. In that sense, the purpose of this paper is to examine the effect of the elements of the destination brand, i.e. image, quality and awareness on loyalty to Prolom Banja as a health tourist destination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Kotler et al. (2002), image of the destination is „a set of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have about the destination”, respectively, the image represents a simple picture combined of associations and information related to a particular destination. Tourists can perceive the image of the destination through various marketing channels, but also through their tourist trips, where they create a realistic impression of a



particular tourist destination (Tse & Tung, 2022). Pike and Ryan point out that the image of a destination consists of a cognitive and an affective component. The cognitive component includes tangible attributive elements of the destination, while the affective component refers to general feelings about the tourist destination (2004). Accordingly, some research implies that the image of the destination has a crucial role in shaping the preferences of tourists and is an important element for loyalty (Šainović, 2016; Lin et al., 2007; Blain et al., 2005). In this sense, the image of the destination is strategically important for differentiation from competing destinations (Tsaur et al., 2016). On the other hand, previous studies (Králíková et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2013; Chi & Qu, 2008; Bigne et al., 2001) indicate that the image of a destination influences tourists when choosing a destination, subsequent travel assessments, their future intentions, and intentions to revisit the destination.

When it comes to destination quality, the literature recognizes two concepts, namely: destination quality and destination components (Žabkar et al., 2010). Certain authors argue that quality of a tourist destination can be divided into destination quality services and natural destination quality (Tosun et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2000). Therefore, destination's quality includes the natural beauty and attractions of the destination, as well as the services provided in the destination (Tosun et al., 2015). Accordingly, tourists include services, products, natural beauties, attractions and acquired experiences in the total evaluation of the quality of the destination (Perić & Mandarić, 2020, Bigović, 2016). It is theoretically recognized, but also empirically confirmed that the quality of the destination positively affects the intentions of behavior that represent loyalty (Putri et al., 2022; Perić et al., 2020; Bigović, 2016; Tosun et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2013). Such behavioral expressions of loyalty are most often manifested through the intention to repurchase services, respectively through the intention to conduct positive word-of-mouth propaganda (Bigović, 2016).

Destination brand awareness has a very important role in making a travel decision (Ye, 2012), respectively it can be considered the first and necessary step leading to a visit to a certain tourist destination (Isa & Ramli, 2014). This is why, in most tourist destinations, creating brand awareness is becoming a significant strategy, bearing in mind the growing competition between tourist destinations (García et al., 2012). Therefore, awareness of a tourist destination refers to what a potential tourist knows or thinks he knows about a certain tourist destination (Koncenik & Gartner, 2007), i.e. for a certain tourist destination to be successful, it is necessary to be recognized by potential tourists. Vila et al., 2021). Therefore, awareness of a tourist destination is an important element that supports the creation of a

destination brand identity (Tsaur et al., 2016). To increase awareness of a particular tourist destination, destination marketing should be focused on advertising and creating a recognizable brand (Jago et al., 2003). In this sense, the task of marketing managers in a tourist destination should be focused on “raising awareness of the potential of the tourist destination as a means of building awareness of the destination brand” (Chi et al., 2020). Previous research has suggested that brand awareness has a significant effect on loyalty and buying intent (Kumail et al., 2022; Chi et al., 2020; Junaedi & Harjanto, 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Chekalina et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2015; Sean Hyun & Kim, 2011). Namely, Junaedi and Harjanto (2020) examined in their study whether the awareness of the destination has an impact on the intention of tourists, and the results of the research confirmed the significant effect of the awareness of the destination on loyalty manifested through the intention of tourists to visit it again.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Based on the previously presented literature review, following, the authors present the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1.

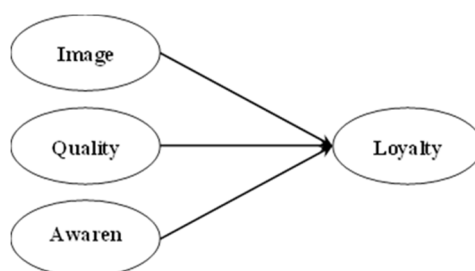


Figure 1. Conceptual research framework

According to the conceptual framework of the research, the following research hypotheses will be tested:

H₁ The image of the destination has a positive effect on loyalty.

H₂ The quality of the destination has a positive effect on loyalty.

H₃ Destination brand awareness has a positive effect on loyalty

The research was conducted in November 2021 through an online questionnaire distributed on the official Facebook profile of Prolom Banja, on a sample of 172 respondents.

The measurement of constructs (image, quality, awareness and loyalty) was performed using a questionnaire used in the study of Perić and Mandarić (2020), which was constructed based on the studies Kim and Lee (2018); Huo



(2017) and Tsaur et al. (2016). Respondents' responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale. The reliability of the questionnaire for measuring constructs in the research was checked using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, whose values indicate that all constructs have very good reliability because the coefficients are higher than 0.8 and the prescribed minimum is 0.7 (DeVellis, 2016).

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The basic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic characteristics of the sample

Characteristics of respondents		Frequency (N=172)	
		N	%
Gender	Male	61	35.5
	Female	111	64.5
Age	18 – 25	22	12.8
	26 – 35	45	26.2
	36 – 45	63	36.6
	46 – 55	32	18.6
	Over 56	10	5.8
Education	Secondary school	55	32
	High school/Faculty	86	50
	Master/Ph.D.	31	18

As shown in the previous table, the characteristics of the respondents included gender, age and education. The largest number of respondents in the sample are women (64.5%), while the age structure is diverse. When it comes to the educational structure, 50% of the sample consists of respondents with a college or university degree.

Descriptive statistics show that all constructs have a mean value greater than 4, which indicates a high perception of respondents about the examined constructs.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Loyalty	4.09	0.83
Image	4.48	0.60
Quality	4.26	0.70
Awareness	4.3	0.61

The relationship between loyalty, image, quality, and destination awareness was tested with the use of Pearson linear correlation coefficient. The authors conducted the preliminary analyses in order to prove the satisfied assumptions about normality, linearity and homogeneity of variance. The results of Pearson's correlation are given in the following table.

Table 3. Correlations

	L	I	Q	A
Loyalty (L)	1			
Image (I)	0.491**	1		
Quality (Q)	0.703**	0.744**	1	
Awareness (A)	0.684**	0.753**	0.857**	1

** $p < 0.001$

Pearson's linear correlation results show that there is a significant, moderate, and positive correlation among image and loyalty ($r = 0.491$; $n = 172$; $p = 0.00$), a significant positive and strong correlation between quality and loyalty ($r = 0.703$; $n = 172$; $p = 0.00$); awareness of destination and loyalty ($r = 0.684$; $n = 172$; $p = 0.00$); quality and image ($r = 0.744$; $n = 172$; $p = 0.00$); awareness of destination and image ($r = 0.753$; $n = 172$; $p = 0.00$), as well as awareness of destination and destination quality ($r = 0.857$; $n = 172$; $p = 0.00$).

In order to see how much of the variance of two variables is common, respectively how much of the variance of one variable is explained by the variance of the other, the value of the coefficient of determination was calculated. Consequently, when the positive moderate correlation between image and loyalty ($r = 0.491$) is squared, 24.1 percent of the total variance is obtained. So, the image of the destination explains 24.1 percent of the variance of loyalty to the destination. On the other hand, the quality of the destination explains 49.4 percent of the loyalty variance, and the destination awareness 46.7 percent of the loyalty variance. So, when the elements of the destination brand (image, quality and awareness) are observed individually, they all explain a decent part of the loyalty variance, i.e., the elements of the destination brand individually have a positive effect on loyalty.

Multiple regression was applied to examine the joint impact of destination brand elements (image, quality, and awareness) on destination loyalty. By conducting the initial analysis, the authors tested the presumptions of normality, linearity of multicollinearity, homoskedasticity and the presence of extreme values. The results indicated quite clearly that there were no significant obstacles for application of multiple regression. The results of multiple regression are shown in the following table.



Table 4. Regression model

Predictors	Dependent variable: Loyalty				
	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig.
Image	-0.230	0.114	-0.169	-2.015	0.046
Quality	0.598	0.127	0.504	4.702	0.000
Awareness	0.510	0.147	0.379	3.477	0.001
R^2	0.53				

Results presented in table 4 indicate that the model is statistically significant ($F(3, 172) = 63.22$; $p = 0.001$), and that predictor variables explain 53% ($R^2 = 0.53$) of the variation of the dependent variable, i.e., shows that 53% of the variability is in destination loyalty under the influence of destination brand elements (quality and awareness). Therefore, two predictor variables (quality $\beta = 0.50$, $p = 0.000$; awareness $\beta = 0.38$, $p = 0.001$) make a uniquely significant contribution to the prediction of destination loyalty, respectively; increasing quality and awareness, i.e., recognizability of the destination is associated with greater loyalty to the destination. Accordingly, the greatest contribution to the explanation of loyalty variance has quality, followed by destination awareness, while the image variable is not statistically significant and does not make a unique contribution to destination loyalty prediction, which can be attributed to overlap with other independent variables in the model.

The following table shows the results of hypothesis testing.

Table 5. Hypothesis testing results

Hypotheses	Results
H_1 Image \rightarrow Loyalty	Not supported
H_2 Quality \rightarrow Loyalty	Supported
H_3 Awareness \rightarrow Loyalty	Supported

DISCUSSION

Destination image and destination loyalty are highly researched variables in the tourism literature. In their meta-analysis Zhang et al. (2014) synthesized 66 published articles on the connections among destination image and loyalty, and the findings indicated a statistically significant relationship between different dimensions of destination image and tourist loyalty, respectively the results confirmed that destination image has a significant effect on loyalty of tourists. This finding contradicts the findings of our research, given that no statistically significant connection between destination image and loyalty has been identified. Namely, even if the



statistical significance at the level of $p < 0.05$ is accepted, we again get a result contrary to the findings of the study by Zhang et al. (2014), bearing in mind that in that sense the finding would indicate a negative connection between these two constructs. In any case, the effect of destination image on loyalty can be complex and multiple, rather than linear and one-dimensional, as observed in this study.

The issue of destination quality represents one of the main challenges for the management and marketing of a tourist destination. Numerous studies have examined the links between destination quality and loyalty, and their findings have confirmed the effect of destination quality on loyalty and behavioural intentions (Putri et al., 2022; Perić et al., 2020; Bigović, 2016; Tosun et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2013), which is in accordance with the results of this study. Therefore, tourists who have developed a positive perception of the quality of Prolom Banja as a health tourism destination show positive intentions in behaviour that are represented in loyalty to the stated destination. This finding suggests that spa management and health tourism service providers should strive to maintain a level of quality, as this can certainly reflect on a positive image, which later enables sustainable and responsible development of this health tourism destination.

The results of the research confirmed that awareness of the destination brand has a significant impact on destination loyalty, which is in accordance with the results of previous research (Kumail et al., 2022; Chi et al., 2020; Junaedi & Harjanto, 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Chekalina et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2015; Sean Hyun & Kim, 2011). This finding suggests that tourist destination awareness is considered an initial step which leads to the visit to a particular tourist destination (Isa & Ramli, 2014) and that in this sense creating destination awareness should be one of the main strategies of destination management and marketing.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the effect of destination brand elements (image, quality and awareness) on destination loyalty in the context of Prolom Banja as a health tourist destination. The findings of the descriptive statistical analysis show a high perception of the respondents about the examined constructs. A moderate to strong correlation was identified between all constructs, but the results of multiple regression confirmed that only two predictor variables (quality and awareness) give a uniquely significant contribution to the prediction of destination loyalty, while the image is not statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, and thus does not make a unique contribution to variability in destination loyalty. Based on the above stated, it can be



concluded that the first hypothesis has not been proven (H1), while the remaining two hypotheses (H2 and H3) have been proven.

This study provides theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study sought to bridge the academic gap due to a lack of research on the relationship between destination brand elements and loyalty in the context of a health tourist destination, and given the fact that destination brand elements play an important role in differentiating from competing destinations. When it comes to practical implications, understanding the impact of destination brand elements on loyalty can help destination management and marketing increase and expand tourists' awareness of a tourist destination. That is why it is important to check the perceptions of tourists about the destination, bearing in mind that perceptions significantly affect loyalty. Also, tourist destinations should provide the desired level of destination image through advertising or promotional efforts. These activities will contribute to better recognizability of the destination, which can be reflected in the growth of tourist turnover and employment of the local population.

Although the results of this study have important implications for the management and marketing of a tourist destination, there are certain limitations that also represent recommendations for future research. The population of this study was limited to tourists who stayed in Prolom Banja, so the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other health tourism destinations. In that sense, similar research should be repeated in other health tourism destinations in the Republic of Serbia, bearing in mind the large share of health tourism in its tourist turnover (Perić & Mandarić, 2020), but also to increase the possibility of generalizing results.

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