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HOW DO NEGATIVE DESTINATION IMAGE ELEMENTS AFFECT DOMESTIC TOURISM?

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Abstract: Destination image perceptions have a strong impact on the visit intention of tourists. While positive representations of a destination affect this intention favorably, negative representations decrease it. During the first year of the pandemic, intensified tourist flows toward dominantly nature-based destinations influenced the increase of prices, crowdedness, and pressures on nature within them. These developments were covered by numerous media reports and were heavily present on social media, which is a strong channel for modifying image perceptions. This study aims to establish the strength of the presence of these negative image elements in the consciousness of tourists and the strength of the impact of these elements on the intention to spend the summer holiday in Serbia, as well as on the desire to spend the summer holiday at the seaside. During June and July of 2021, a survey was conducted among 234 participants. The collected data was analyzed through structural equation modeling (SEM). It was established that all three negative elements are moderately present in the image perceptions of domestic destinations, whereby overpricing was determined to be slightly more present than the excessive amount of visitors and nature endangerment. Despite this, the studied elements do not pose a negative impact on the tourists' intention to spend the summer holiday in the country. A strong positive effect of the perceived expensiveness of destinations (ED) on the desire to go to the seaside (DGS) was established.

Keywords: destination image; negative image; domestic tourism; Serbia

1. Introduction

Destination image is defined as a mental representation of a tourist destination (Rodríguez del Bosque & San Martín, 2008). It has three components—cognitive, affective, and conative, which together form the overall destination image. The cognitive image comprises cognitions about the destination's attributes. Feelings that a person has toward a destination form the affective image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). It is generally accepted that destination image has a positive effect on tourists' behavioral intentions (Chi & Qu, 2008). Numerous destination attributes may contribute to the creation of a negative image, such as air pollution (Becken et al., 2017). Foreign tourists in Belgrade, the Serbian capital, have negative perceptions of the public transportation and available information sources in the city (Todorović et al., 2018). The role of the media in shaping people's perceptions of tourist destinations is well known.

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Reporting about a destination in a positive light contributes to a more favorable image, while unfavorable reports create negative tourists' perceptions (Stepchenkova & Eales, 2011).

This study is inspired by observations of aspects of domestic tourism that had a dominant place in the public discourse during the first summer of the pandemic (2020). As a result of the significant difficulty of visiting traditional seaside destinations, the interest of Serbian demand turned toward domestic destinations. The media followed this interest by reporting about less-known sites, while social media influencers visited and recommended them. All of this contributed to the public's "discovery" of destinations such as Bešenovo Lake or Pačir Spa (both situated in the northern part of the country). While such increased awareness represents an extremely important positive consequence of the pandemic, the increased demand caused a large increase in prices, while an unusually high number of visits to some sites led to significant crowdedness and negatively affected the environment. The mentioned phenomena then found themselves in the focus of the domestic media. On social media, posts with such content had a strong role in negative electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which has a stronger impact on image than traditional negative WOM (Ishida et al., 2016). Given that the observed phenomena represent perceptions, they belong to the cognitive image domain and could negatively impact willingness to travel domestically (WTD). Prices of summer holidays in Serbia were particularly present in the media, almost exclusively in a negative context (Table 1). In addition to comparisons to prices of summer holidays abroad, the dominant topic was the increase in prices as a result of the pandemic. The excessive number of people at some sites was particularly addressed in the context of the absence of physical distance in the pandemic conditions, but also in the context of huge differences in visitation between some "newly-discovered" and "forgotten" destinations. On social media, one could see photos of people waiting in line to take a photo at prominent viewpoints, as well as photos of lines of cars at the access point of numerous sites. Deterioration of attractions due to an excessive number of tourists was also present in traditional and social media, primarily in the context of littering, but also in the context of direct destruction of the attraction.

Table 1. Selected examples of internet-media articles on prices, crowdedness, and pollution

Author/Source	Article
Trivić (2020)	Summer holiday in Serbia more expensive than abroad
A. B. (2020)	Why does 7 days in Vrnjačka Banja (major spa resort in Serbia) cost as much as 10 or 15 days at the seaside?
Jokić (2020)	While everybody increases apartment prices in Serbia, these people emerged as true stars
N1 Belgrade (2020)	Hot and without distance in Aquapark in Jagodina (town in the mid-Serbia)
Simić and Nikolić (2020)	As if corona didn't exist: Hundreds of people in front of Tumane monastery (popular pilgrimage destination in eastern Serbia) without masks, densely packed next to each other
Noizz.rs (2020)	While people wait in lines in Pačir (lake in the northern Serbia), no one goes to these three spas in Serbia – they are completely empty
Radio-Television of Vojvodina (2020)	Bešenovo lake (in the Srem district) covered in trash after visitors, locals collect
Beljan (2020)	The other, uglier side of Serbia: We swear by our beauties this summer, but we don't stop destroying them
Milošev (2020)	Influencers from Serbia destroy the tourist attraction: The unusual site will never be the same

These developments have at least two common aspects. Firstly, perceived expensiveness of destinations (ED), crowdedness of destinations (CD), and pollution of destinations by tourists (PDT) were all reinforced by the pandemic, as a specific external stimulus of tourist behavior. Secondly, they all belong to the cognitive image domain, which is particularly influenced by the media and strongly impacts tourists' behavioral intentions, thus stressing the importance of a better understanding of their impacts in the domestic tourism context.

Hypothesis (*H*) *1–3: Perceptions of expensiveness (H_1), crowdedness (H_2), and pollution (H_3) of domestic destinations negatively affect the WTD.*

Serbian tourist demand is primarily oriented toward foreign destinations, particularly those at the seaside. Todorović and Belij (2019) established that preference for foreign destinations represents the biggest constraint for the participation of domestic demand in domestic tourism. The majority of trips abroad (80%) organized by travel agencies in 2019 were directed toward countries which are traditionally linked to seaside holidays (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020). Given the magnitude of this preference, we propose that the identified negative image elements not only discourage Serbian citizens from traveling domestically but also reinforce their preference toward seaside destinations.

Hypothesis 4–6: Perceptions of expensiveness (H_4), crowdedness (H_5), and pollution (H_6) of domestic destinations positively affect the desire to go to the seaside (DGS).

2. Methodology

The data collection was conducted through a survey, in which a structured questionnaire was used. In order to properly select only potential domestic tourists, which are the focus of the study, a question related to the country of residence was included at the beginning of the questionnaire. The constructs whose mutual impacts are explored were measured by items that were rated by the participants on a five-point Likert scale (1 indicating complete disagreement; 5 indicating complete agreement). WTD was measured by the scale used by Kock et al. (2016), which was adapted for the current study by adding specific mentions of summer holidays and Serbia. The remaining scales are original and were developed for this study (Table 3). The reliability of the scales used for the measurement of all five constructs was confirmed through a pilot survey, which showed that latent variables possess sufficient internal consistency.

The survey was conducted during June and July of 2021, whereby the questionnaire was distributed digitally. The survey had 240 participants. Based on the first question, responses of six participants, which do not live in Serbia and therefore are not potential domestic tourists, were excluded from further analysis. The responses of 234 participants were further analyzed. Based on the proposed hypotheses, the latent variables were connected into a model, which was tested by covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) in the RStudio package.

3. Results and discussion

The socio-demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 2. Almost half of the sample is represented by participants younger than 30. The majority of participants are female and well-educated, with only a quarter without a university degree.

Table 2. Sample size (N = 234) and characteristics

Category	%
Age	
<30	49.57
30–39	29.92
40–49	14.96
>50	4.27
Undisclosed	1.28
Gender	
Female	67.95
Male	31.62
Undisclosed	0.43
Education	
PhD	6.41
Master's degree	24.36
Bachelor's degree	42.31
Primary or secondary school	25.21
Undisclosed	1.71

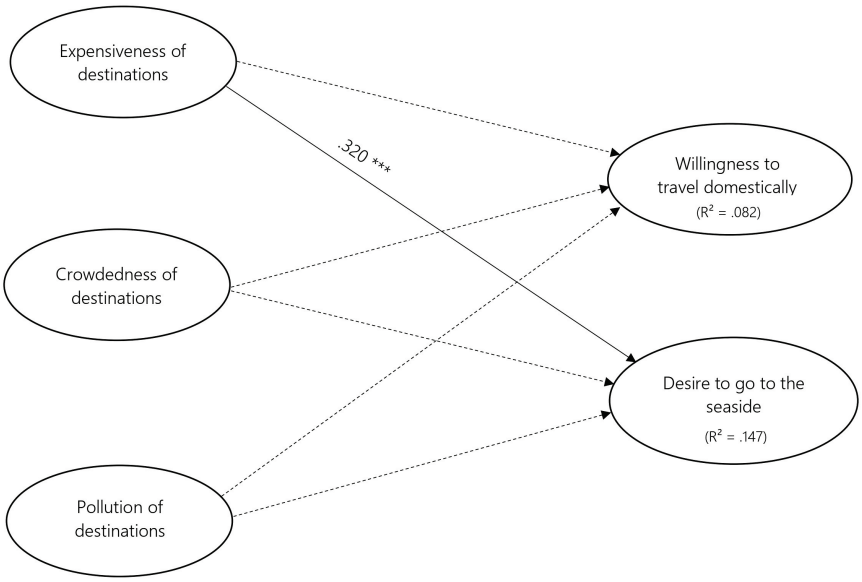
Out of the negative image elements, ED had the highest average score (3.57), while CD (3.23) and PDT (3.22) had lower and almost identical average scores. When it comes to behavioral intentions, DGS (4.19) had a significantly higher average score than WTD (2.28). Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (*CR*), and average variance extracted (*AVE*) of every construct (Table 3) were above the recommended thresholds (α > .7, *CR* > .7, *AVE* > .5; Hair et al., 2009).

Table 3. Characteristics of the constructs

Construct/Item	*FL*	α	*CR*	*AVE*
ED (newly-developed)		.865	.866	.683
1. The prices of summer holidays in Serbia are too high.	.876			
2. Summer holidays in Serbia are too expensive in relation to their quality.	.803			
3. The prices of summer holidays in Serbian destinations are unsuitably high.	.799			
CD (newly-developed)		.770	.769	.529
1. During the summer, Serbian destinations are too crowded.	.774			
2. Large crowds during the summer negatively affect the impression of the most beautiful destinations in Serbia.	.781			
3. There are too many cars in Serbian destinations during the summer.	.616			
PDT (newly-developed)		.843	.842	.640
1. The most beautiful natural amenities of Serbia are filled with waste left by the tourists during the summer.	.825			
2. The large number of visitors during the summer negatively affects our natural amenities.	.799			
3. The large number of tourists during the summer significantly contributes to the pollution of nature of Serbia.	.776			
WTD (adapted from Kock et al., 2016)		.926	.952	.870
1. I intend to spend my summer holiday this year in a Serbian destination.	.929			
2. I will probably choose a Serbian destination for my summer holiday this year.	.940			
3. I am going to spend my summer holiday this year in Serbia.	.930			
DGS (newly-developed)		.911	.914	.782
1. I want to travel to the seaside this summer.	.924			
2. I have the need to go to the seaside this summer.	.905			
3. I would like to have a summer holiday at the seaside this year.	.821			

Note. *FL* = factor loading.

Results of SEM (Figure 1) showed that the collected data fit the proposed model well (X^2/df < 3; Hair et al., 2009; *CFI* > .95; Hu & Bentler, 1999; *TLI* > .9; Schumacker & Lomax, 2016; *RMSEA* < .08; Fabrigar et al., 1999; *SRMR* < .08; Hu & Bentler, 1999). By taking into consideration only statistically significant impacts, one hypothesis was confirmed, while five were rejected (Table 4). ED has a positive impact on DGS (0.320, p < .001).



Model fit: X^2/df = 2.181, *CFI* = 0.958, *TLI* = 0.944, *RMSEA* = 0.071, *SRMR* = 0.047, *** p < .001

Figure 1. Structural equation modeling results.
Note. The rejected hypotheses are shown in dashed lines. R^2 = determination coefficient; X^2/df = relative chi-square; *CFI* = comparative fit index; *TLI* = Tucker-Lewis index; *RMSEA* = root mean square error of approximation; *SRMR* = standardized root mean square residual.

For both endogenous variables (WTD and DGS), the determination coefficient was calculated. The model explained 8.2% of the variance of WTD (R^2 = .082) and 14.7% of the variance of DGS (R^2 = .147).

The significant presence of the analyzed negative elements in the destination image of Serbia, particularly CD, is in accordance with media reports, examples of which were presented in the introductory considerations of the study. However, these factors do not have any impact on WTD. When it comes to repeated visits,

Table 4. Hypothesis testing

H	Relationship	Path coefficient	p-value	Result
H_1	ED → WTD	–.013	.870	Rejected
H_2	CD → WTD	.426	.086	Rejected
H_3	PDT → WTD	–.165	.484	Rejected
H_4	ED → DGS	.320	.000	Accepted
H_5	CD → DGS	–.254	.289	Rejected
H_6	PDT → DGS	.341	.137	Rejected

tourists assign greater importance to positive than negative eWOM (Ishida et al., 2016). Assuming that the majority of participants traveled domestically at some point of their life, or that at least they view Serbia as something well familiar, the smaller role of negative eWOM presents one possible explanation of the results that indicate that perceptions of ED, CD, and PDT do not negatively affect WTD.

When it comes to the redirectional impact of negative image elements, it was established that the perception of CD and PDT does not have an impact on DGS. That means that the choice of seaside destinations, as main competitors of domestic destinations, when it comes to summer holidays, does not get affected by the Serbian demand perceptions of popular domestic destinations as crowded with people and cars, as well as polluted because of tourist activities. On the other hand, it was established that the perceived domestic ED strongly directs citizens toward seaside destinations. This finding is in accordance with the media reports that often mention prices in domestic tourism by comparing them to prices of seaside summer holidays. In addition, this is in accordance with the frequent narrative in Serbian society that domestic bathing destinations cannot compete with international ones, particularly when the relationship between the offer quality and price is considered.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study contribute to the literature on consumer behavior in Serbian domestic tourism by improving our knowledge about the impacts of negative destination image elements on behavioral intentions of Serbian demand toward summer holidays in the country and summer holidays abroad. Despite their presence in the awareness of domestic tourists, none of these elements have an impact on WTD. However, one of the elements (ED) has a strong and statistically significant direct impact on DGS. This confirms that negative image elements in domestic tourism can strongly direct demand toward foreign destinations.

Negative image elements whose impact was explored were chosen based on their increased presence during the pandemic. However, neither their origins are connected to this crisis nor does their role in the destination image of Serbia perceived by domestic tourists end with the pandemic, which further emphasizes the need to study them. This is particularly the case, but not limited to the role of perceived ED, as the element whose redirectional impact was undoubtedly confirmed. Future studies of the impact of perceived domestic ED should consider the role of potential moderating variables, such as previous domestic tourism experience or exposure to (e)WOM. The role of CD and PDT requires additional research in the contexts of different behavioral intentions, such as willingness to partake in domestic cultural tourism or ecotourism, where the impact of these elements could be stronger. In addition, conducting the research on a different sample would also improve our understanding of the role of these factors, given that the current sample is skewed in favor of women, younger and highly educated people.

ED is a present and impactful image element of Serbia as a destination for Serbian tourists and is therefore recognized as a relevant issue that should be addressed from the perspective of tourism product development and quality management, as well as by the use of marketing instruments. This could result in better perceptions of value for money of domestic destinations and limit the redirectional potential of ED. One innovative method for image recovery is the use of cartoon mascots in a promotion (Xu et al., 2022). In the context of this study, in addition to their role in the improvement of negative image elements such as

excessively high prices, mascots could be used to promote favorable behavior at destinations, such as taking care of one's trash and decreasing the use of cars.

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