# DIGITAL MEDIA, PERCEPTION AND THE SELECTION OF THE 2016 BEST EUROPEAN DESTINATION: THE CASE OF ZADAR

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines how foreign tourists perceive the city of Zadar in the Republic of Croatia, which was selected the* Best European Destination *(BED) in 2016. Analysing the perception and identifying the images that tourists have about Zadar is significant as a tool of identifying strengths, weaknesses and potentials of Zadar in developing the destination's strong tourism image and identity. This article is based on the quantitative field research formed on a structured questionnaire applied to 250 foreign tourists who visited Zadar in May and June 2016. The data acquired by the research was processed by the methods of descriptive statistics, and followed up by content analysis of chosen sites and social media. According to the results, the destination of Zadar is characterized by some very strong images, which are natural attractions, culture and events, but also by some issues concerning the sustainability of the destination. Firstly, the results of the research are presented to the employees of the Zadar Tourist Board in order to present Zadar as the destination of tourists from all over the world as well as the overall Zadar's offer for tourists that can be easily accessed via social media; and further on also to other DMOs since measuring tourists' perceptions based in selection processes such as BED is significant for successfully developing and branding every destination.*

**Keywords**: digital media, perception, image, destination, tourism, Zadar

## I MEDIA DIGITALI, LA PERCEZIONE E LA SELEZIONE PER LA *EUROPEAN BEST DESTINATION 2016*: IL CASO DI ZARA

### *SINTESI*

*Il contributo esamina come i turisti stranieri percepiscono la città croata di Zara che nel 2016 vinse il titolo quale migliore destinazione europea, la* Best European destination *(BED). L'analisi della percezione turistica e l'identificazione delle immagini che i turisti hanno di Zara sono importanti strumenti di valutazione dei punti di forza e di debolezza e delle opportunità della città nello sviluppo dell'immagine turistica e nella costruzione di una identità forte della destinazione. L'articolo si basa sulla ricerca quantitativa condotta sul campo mediante un questionario strutturato applicato su 250 turisti stranieri che hanno visitato Zara nel maggio e giugno 2016. I dati ottenuti dell'indagine sono stati elaborati con metodi della statistica descrittiva; in seguito è stata fatta l'analisi riguardo il contenuto dei siti scelti e dei social. Secondo i risultati la destinazione di Zara è caratterizzata da determinate immagini rilevanti, come le attrazioni naturali, la cultura e gli eventi ma anche da certi aspetti legati alla sostenibilità della destinazione turistica. I risultati della ricerca sono stati dapprima presentati al personale dell'Ente per il turismo di Zara con lo scopo di mostrare la città come la destinazione per turisti da tutto il mondo e la sua offerta turistica complessiva alla quale si può accedere facilmente tramite i social; in seguito agli altri DMO poiché la misurazione della percezione turistica basata sui processi di selezione come la BED risulta rilevante per lo sviluppo e il branding di ogni destinazione turistica.*

**Parole chiave:** media digitali, percezione, immagine, destinazione, turismo, Zara

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## INTRODUCTION

Zadar was voted European best destination in 2016 by participants from Tourism Offices, community managers and the 288,992 voters.[1] For years, tourism, which is image-driven industry (Elliot et al., 2011, 521), has been a dominant economic activity in the Zadar county (Brkić-Vejmelka et al., 2015), but, nevertheless, it is assumed that the title of the 2016 best destination enhanced Zadar's tourism opportunities. This result was achieved with huge media support, which consequently helps in the creation of a destination image and has a significant role in the perception of a destination by tourists. Especially the usage of social media has created numerous opportunities and enabled immediate dissemination of impressions, which has further on enhanced the number of potential tourists, and actual tourists as well – with 11 million overnight stays in 2016, the Zadar County saw a record season.[2] Also probably due to the fact that the potential of new media (eg. mobile apps, online social platforms, blogs, online audio/video streams) has been recognized by relevant Croatian tourist institutions, and that that new media is effectively used in advertising (Blaće et al., 2015, 114). It is due to social media that tourists have taken on both the role of users and producers of information (Dettori et al., 2016), and by using advanced technology word of mouth (WOM) messages can be transmitted anywhere and anytime (Blaće et al., 2015, 113). Since tourists have become involved and very active social media content producers ("influencers" according to Madden et al., 2016), the perception of a destination is crucial. The purpose of this paper is to examine foreign tourists' perception of Zadar using also the Best European Destination results. In this light, the results will give immediate response to which attributes of Zadar as a tourist destination are mostly valued by foreign tourists. So far, several studies have already illustrated that destination images influence tourist behaviour (among the earliest were Hunt, 1975; Pearce, 1982; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991 etc.). Destination image has a significant role in the process of branding and marketing a destination, and, according to Pike and Ryan (2004), to position a destination successfully in the marketplace. Anholt (2004) believes tourism is one of the six dimensions that influence a destination brand (other five dimensions are culture & heritage, people, governance, export brands, investment & immigration) in close interaction. Dinnie (2011) states that the role of tourism is essential because it enables personal interaction with the local people. Analysing the perception and identifying the images that tourists have about Zadar is significant as a tool of identifying strengths and weaknesses of Zadar, which is fundamental further on to establish an understanding of tourist behaviour and of Zadar's brand identity.

## DESTINATION IMAGE FORMATION PROCESS AND TOURIST PERCEPTION

Kiralova & Pavliček (2015) state that destinations are territories, geographical areas, such as a country, an island or a town with some political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning. According to Buhalis (2000), the competitiveness of a destination depends on the ability to develop and project a unique and recognizable brand, which points to the fact that Zadar has excellent predispositions for developing a recognizable brand. The destination image formation process on the one hand suggests that people can have an image of a destination even if they have never visited it or been exposed to destination's advertising, and on the other hand, due to the fact that there is change in destination image before and after visitation, it is advisable to separate the images of those who have visited and those who have not (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). In the intense global competition of (city) destinations, creating a distinctive destination image is fundamental for the successful tourism industry, also in Croatia. But what is destination image? Pearce (1988, 162) states that image is *a term with vague and shifting meanings*", but points out the strong visual component (Pearce, 1988, 163). It is often described as simply "impressions of a place" or "perceptions of an area" (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Hampton et al. (1987) believe that image is an abstract subjective and multidimensional concept of an individual's total impressions, and also Um & Crompton (1990) define destination image as a holistic construct. In the last few years, a growing travel experience among tourists has resulted in more specific expectations (Dolnicar & Grabler, 2004, 2), and in the so called post Echtner & Ritchie era, destination image is often referred to as the quality of tourism experience (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Consequently, the process of selecting a destination is greatly influenced by the tourists' motives, attitudes, and perceptions (Gnanapala, 2015), or as Dolnicar and Grabler (2004, 2) argue, image measurement for city destination management is gaining importance, "*as a city's image heavily influences destination choices, creates destination brand value and serves as an indicator for the substitutability of destinations*".

In the studies of the destination image, many conceptual approaches exist (Crompton, 1979; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Murphy, Benckendorff & Moscardo, 2007; Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2012; Fernandez & Lopez-Sanchez, 2014, and others). Echtner & Ritchie (1991, 7–8) believe that destination image consists of functional characteristics, relating to the more tangible aspects of a destination, and psychological characteristics, concerning the more intangible characteristics,

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1  https://www.europeanbestdestinations.com/best-of-europe/european-best-destinations-2016/ (4. 8. 2016).
2  https://www.croatiaweek.com/record-2016-16-3-million-visitors-to-croatia/ (6. 1. 2018).

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thus, destination image is comprised of two major components, namely holistic and attributes. When it comes to unique and intangible atmosphere, state Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 8), Paris as an example is often perceived as romantic. Gartner (1993) developed a three-component model of destination image consisting of a) cognitive that relates to beliefs and knowledge about a destination, b) affective that relates to feelings about a destination, and c) conative that represents a combination of images developed during the cognitive stage and evaluated during the affective stage. Baloglu and Brinberg (1997) differentiate between cognitive and affective dimensions of the destination image, White (2004) mentions a behavioural component, while according to Fernandez and Lopez-Sanchez (2014, 1588), destination image "*can be considered as a general impression or as the set of tourists' individual impressions of a particular tourism destination or, more specifically, the set of expectations and perceptions that a potential tourist has about a destination*". Anuar, Ahmad, Jusoh and Hussain (2012, 108) argue that perceptions and expectations are closely intertwined and constantly changing "*due to the changes of tourists' characters, attitude and lifestyle towards a tourism destination*" (Anuar et al., 2012, 108). Thus, it is essential to explore tourist's behaviour and tourists' perceptions because, as Gallarza, Gil and Calderón (2002, 57) opine, perceptions, rather than reality motivate potential tourists. And what is perception? Lamb et al. (2014) describe it as the process by which individuals select, organize, and interpret stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture. Solomon (2001), similarly, understands perception as the process in which sensations (immediate response of sensory receptors to stimuli such as sights, sounds, smells, taste, and feelings) are selected, organized, and interpreted. The concept of tourist's perception "*includes the personal perception of the multiple components of the tourism destination*" (Fernandez & Lopez-Sanchez 2014, 1589), and is, for that matter, one of the crucial subjects in the tourism research.

Di Marino (2008, 4) points out the importance of making distinctions between perception "a priori", perception "in situ", and perception "a posteriori":

a) perception "a priori" is the mental construction that an individual makes without physically visiting the destination;
b) perception "in situ" is a key moment in the tourist's experience due to the fact that it contrasts with the image they have imagined (tourists never arrive to the destination with a null perception, they have some image of the destination before the actual visit, which can be confirmed or not;
c) perception "a posteriori" indicates that tourist's perception of the destination does not finish with the ending of the journey, but continues with looking at the photographs, discussing it with

friends etc. Further on in the paper, the tourists' perception of Zadar "in situ" will be analysed.

The scientific literature on destination perception from various points of views is abundant; while the perception of Croatian destinations, however, seem to be relatively unexplored in the sense of foreign tourist's perception. According to Fernandez and Lopez-Sanchez (2014, 1587), "*an appropriate image allows making the potential clients aware of the differential aspects of the place, which generates competitive advantages, as well as trust in the destination, favouring tourists' attraction and loyalty*". It should be observed that usually "*tourists have a limited knowledge about the destinations they have yet to visit*" (Fernandez & Lopez-Sanchez, 2014, 1587), and thus, Fernandez and Lopez-Sanchez (2014, 1587) emphasize that in order to be competitive, a destination needs a strong, positive, and distinctive image, which is recognizable in the home markets of the potential tourists. Sanchez and Pulido (2012, 250) note, however, that a destination needs the "*capacity to communicate its attractions*" and adapt them to potential tourists' expectations. This is underlined also by Chi and Qu (2008, 632), who argue that the overall satisfaction of tourists is "*determined by destination image and attribute satisfaction*", stating that satisfied tourists will more likely to return to the destination and share their positive experience with friends and relatives.

It is significant to note that the objective, also in the case of Zadar, should not only be to attract more tourists by emphasizing the attractions that strengthen the tourist's perception of Zadar, but, what is most important, to manage the destination in such ways that the sustainability of Zadar is ensured in the long run. Research studies in the recent years show that sustainability has been gaining significance among the destination's attributes (Fernandez & Lopez-Sanchez, 2014; Miller et al., 2010). Also in the *Tourism development strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2020* sustainability is represented by stating that Croatian tourism will use resources "*based on the principles of responsible and sustainable development*" (Strategy, 2013, 3) and implement "green" concepts (*Strategy* 2013, 27, 30).

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL/DIGITAL MEDIA IN DESTINATION IMAGE FORMATION PROCESS

In accordance with the analysis of the historical development of equipment in the everyday life and work of the mankind, the fifth technological revolution is presently witnessed in which ICT (the information communication technology) is a moving force and plays a significant role (Krajina & Perišin, 2008). As a result of the fifth revolution, people are practicing "*digital citizenship*" (Mossberger et al., 2008). At the times of the global crisis that has affected the tourism sector as well, some of the IC technologies are considered key ones

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in overcoming the difficulties faced by the companies in the realm of tourism. IPK International forecasts from year to year that there will be an increase in the Internet (online) booking.

The shaping up of media shapes up as well the public opinion developed by the media audience. Habermas (2007) considers it a term used in attempts to describe "*the attitude of public as an audience and a sort of consensus in the mutual attitude towards someone (the government) or something (an event)*"[3]. Nowadays, the Internet and the virtual communication provide for the people to communicate regardless of the place they are at a particular moment and the distance among them. Technology has been developing constantly, but due to some continuous changes in the Internet and information technology has not reached even close to its absolute peak. Peruško (2011) states that "*there are at least two laptops, several smart phones and a TV set in every household*". The media audience has been brought closer to media and the digital media are, in turn, a part of the everyday life. Media supported by the digital technology provide for the new ways of distributing information and enables people from everywhere in the world to stay connected.

In accordance with the available data, it can be estimated that in Croatia there will be more than 50 million networking devices in the year of 2020; in other words, even six devices per a networking person. ICT and tourism are strongly related because there are many technologies that are applied for the first time exactly in tourism. That is the reason that ever since a long time ago, the relation between tourism and ICT has been considered a mutually enticing one. The tourist industry has followed new trends and has constantly made innovative requests for the ICT solutions in tourism. Also innovations in digital media, or the so-called new media have influenced and continue to influence people's ways of thinking and living, and have brought human interaction and society to a highly interconnected and complex level (Chen, 2012, 1–2). The development of the smart society is inconceivable today without technologies that have become the foundations of the smart social development, and that have provided benefits for people, society and doing business. The use of social networks is of an utmost importance for enabling people to share their experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). All the media, including the digital ones, have their audience through which they influence the assessment of the media content. Nowadays, so much various information is available to tourists that "*it is safe to presume that the tourists should be wanting to validate or confirm the information*" (Madden et al., 2016, 257). A positive word of mouth may create a favorable image, and the negative word of mouth may have negative effects on

the destination image and tourists' intentions to come to a destination (Zhang, Zhang & Law, 2014). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) believe TripAdvisor is the most popular tourism website, while Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) state that Facebook is leading among social media. Irrelevant of the social medial choice, the path from a person to the retrieved information is substantially different than it used to be. All information is easily accessed via the Internet, which has significantly changed the way tourism related contents are distributed (Buhalis & Law, 2008), via the social networks and other digital media. Consequently, for achieving positive destination perception all tourism stakeholders need to take the possibilities of advanced technology and the role of "influencers" (Madden et al., 2016, 257) into consideration, and act accordingly.

## MEDIA, TOURISM AND EBD

Media facilitate obtaining tourism-related information, which help tourists plan their trips (Ja d ewska & Jagnuszewska, 2017, 35–36). It has occurred more and more frequently for the last several years that the respectable world media publish articles describing Croatian destinations and moreover, various media publish the rang lists of the best tourist destinations based on research. The lists, based on the opinions of the readers, frequently state the Croatian towns of Dubrovnik, Mljet, Korčula, Hvar and Zagreb. In this respect, social media are becoming extraordinarily relevant. It is through social media that tourists represent the places they visit (Nelson, 2017, 291).

One of the organizations that creates destinations' lists is the European tourist organization EBD (European Best Destinations) based in Brussels. Its objective is to promote culture and tourism in cooperation with tourist offices. At the world and Europe levels, in cooperation with EDEN organization,[4] EBD promotes cultural diversity and the ways of living in the European destinations. The EBD's portal features more than 2.5 million visitors and several thousand followers at various social networks. Among Croatian destinations, Advent in Zagreb was voted the best in Europe for several years in the row (Bradbury, 2017), Stari Grad in 2017 and Hvar in 2018 thanks to EBD (europeanbestdestinations.com). This award in tourism is significant because it offers the potential tourists suggestions for best travel destinations in Europe. In 2016, Zagreb won exactly 29,901 votes out of 101,703 votes; the voting lasted for 10 days and the votes were collected from readers of portals from 176 countries worldwide. Lagging behind Zagreb on the list, there were Vienna, whose Advent celebration tradition goes as far back as the 13th century, as well as Strasbourg and Brussels. Thanks to this award, Za-

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3   Habermas (2007), https://unquietbrutality.wordpress.com/2007/11/09/javnost-mnijenje-te-masa-i-mediji/ (15. 11. 2016).
4   http://www.eden-online.org/ (21. 6. 2017).

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greb was included into the best tourist destination list created by various media. A few months before Zagreb, Zadar won the title of the best European destination. With only two mouse clicks at www.birajzadar.com one could vote for Zadar as the best destination. The Town of Zadar Tourist Board's marketing campaign "Biraj Zadar" ("Vote for Zadar") was created by Vedran Božičev, Mate Pece and Loreta Bačić. The campaign included the total of 13 million profiles around social networks and Zadar won ahead of renowned European destinations such as Athens, Nantes, the Azores, and Paris. The town of Zadar won a total of 288,992 votes. Thanks to the social networks and the "Vote for Zadar" campaign that lasted for 20 days and was implemented by a volunteering group of young enthusiasts, Zadar was supported – among others – by the world sport stars Luka Modrić and Colllin Jackson and by the world top model Helena Šopar; a vote for Zadar was as well given by the Japanese television star, master chef Toshihiro Nakatsuji. The campaign was joined by numerous renowned citizens of Zadar who motivated and invited their friends throughout Croatia and the world to vote for Zadar.

The Croatian National Tourist Board[5] points out that "*the contemporary tourists, when choosing the destination, pay a lot of attention to personal recommendations and this is why the posts based on personal experiences are the best reasons for all potential tourists to come to Croatia*". The same is emphasized by Nelson (2017, 292), who claims that the so-called *Travel 2.0* provides tourism stakeholders "*with unprecedented insight into tourists' perceptions, preferences, expectations, experiences, and reactions*". The information is valuable because, further on, it enables destination managers and organizers to better understand their tourists, and adjust image creation and branding of the destination accordingly.

## ZADAR AS A DESTINATION

Zadar, which is located on the Croatian Adriatic Coast, in the northern Dalmatia, plays a significant role in the Croatian tourism industry. *Tourism development strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2020* (Strategy, 2013, 3), which is the main development document of Croatian tourism, states that in the last 25 years, Croatian tourism has gone through a transition process burdened with issues and challenges of the economic and social development of the country, also facing new opportunities as Croatia joined the European Union in 2013. Ivanovic, Vucenovic, and Baresa (2014, 114) state

that Zadar has been connected to tourism since the ancient times, but in the modern sense of the term, tourism in Zadar has been present since the middle of the 19th century. Zadar's Old Town Peninsula offers attractions from Antique, Roman, Middle Age, and Renaissance eras, and also a modern attraction – the first sea organ in the world (an experimental instrument played by the sea waves randomly forcing the air through the tubes). With its 75.000 inhabitants, the city of Zadar is also an administrative, economic, cultural, and political centre of the region. Due to its rich resources, historic, natural, and cultural attractions, museums, galleries and events, it has become a popular tourist destination, and tourist arrivals in the region have been growing. In the recent years, Zadar has experienced a significant growth in a number of tourists. In 2014, 1.4 million tourists visited Zadar,[6] and according to Zadar Tourist Board, in 2015 Zadar saw the record tourist season,[7] broke it again in 2016 with the help of the title European best destination, and again in 2017[8]. Besides the fact that, according to *Lonely Planet,* "*Zadar is quirky and unique*", this online guide also emphasizes "*its two unique attractions – the sound-and-light spectacle of the Sea Organ and the Sun Salutation*".[9] At the website of the European best destinations, it is stated that "*Zadar is a city of exceptional history and rich cultural heritage, a city of tourism*", where you can see the most beautiful sunset, according to Alfred Hitchcock, who visited Zadar in May 1964.[10]

In the last ten years, the accessibility of Zadar has been improved by the construction of the highway system and by new air traffic connections (Strategy, 2013, 7). Thus, the city is easily accessible, and it has well developed public transport. It has two ports – one for local and international ferries, boats, and speed boats and the other one for cruisers. By land, the highway connects Zadar to Zagreb – the capital of Croatia, to Rijeka, to Split, and to Dubrovnik. The city also has its own airport 9 kilometres from the city centre, which connects Zadar to the following European cities and capitals: Rome, Paris, London, Manchester, Luxembourg, Bern, Stockholm, Oslo, Gothenburg, Warsaw, Hamburg, Hannover, Brussels, Cologne, Frankfurt, Karlsruhe, Munich, Düsseldorf, Stuttgart, Marseille, and Barcelona.[11] According to the 2014 research by Ivanovic, Vucenovic and Baresa, it was the arrival of low-cost airline companies to the Zadar airport that has significantly boosted the number of tourists in Zadar. Trains, however, have no special significance for tourism due to the poor quality of the tracks and slow speed (Strategy, 2013, 7).

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5   https://croatia.hr/en-GB (21. 6. 2017).
6   http://www.croatiaweek.com/12-9-million-tourists-visit-croatia-in-2014/ (20. 5. 2017).
7   http://www.total-croatia-news.com/travel/733-zadar-achieving-a-record-tourist-season. (20. 5. 2017)
8   http://www.croatiaweek.com/12-9-million-tourists-visit-croatia-in-2014/ (20. 5. 2017).
9   https://www.lonelyplanet.com/croatia/dalmatia/zadar (20. 7. 2016).
10  http://www.europeanbestdestinations.com/destinations/zadar/ (21. 6. 2016).
11  http://www.zadar.travel/en/about-zadar/ (21. 6. 2016).

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## METHODOLOGY

According to Echtner and Ritchie (1991), destination image can be measured by employing structured or unstructured methodologies, although, they observe, tourism researchers have a strong tendency for the structured – probably because the level of detail provided by structured methodologies is less variable than by unstructured methodologies, where the level of details gathered is highly dependent upon communication skills of the individuals used in the study. For the same reasons, to obtain foreign tourists' perception of Zadar, a structured empirical quantitative field research has been carried out – "in situ", using descriptive statistics for result analysis. Data has been collected from a survey conducted in the City of Zadar in the period



Image 1: Zadar: The street Kalelarga overlooking the church of St. Anastasia (Photo: Jasna Potočnik Topler)

between 22 May 2016 and 22 June 2016. During this period, Zadar was full of visitors, thus, it was possible to interview different kinds of tourists. The sampling of our 250 respondents was done at random by performing face to face structured questionnaires, which were attribute focused, during the whole day at various locations in Zadar. For the purposes of the research, a special 5-part questionnaire was designed – the instrument was prepared according to Echtner and Ritchie (1991) and Vareiro, Ribeiro and Remoaldo (2015). The first part of the questionnaire examines the profile of a tourist, the second part examines the motivational factors for visiting Zadar, the third part asks about the adjective that describes Zadar best in accordance with the tourist's experience, the fourth part investigates tourist's satisfaction with Zadar's attributes (5-grade Likert's scale), and the last part of the questionnaire investigates the tourist's time spent on going to museums, shopping, on the beach and on boat trips. As far as city perception analysis (CPA) is concerned, this method – like any other model – has the limitation in the sense that sometimes respondents are asked to respond to attributes or characteristics that do not necessarily comprise the image they have of a destination, but if the research is not focused on the unique attributes, CPA provides relevant information on more general and common traits. Responses recorded from completed questionnaire surveys were pre-coded and coded, and put into tables that allowed the performance of the required statistical tests using the descriptive tests in the SPSS programme. Since descriptive statistics did not present statistically significant differences between different types of tourists and their motivation for visiting the destination, the analysis of the first part of the research was followed up by the content analysis of the "Turistička zajednica grada Zadra" (Zadar Tourist Board) and "Uniline Zadar" sites along with social media TripAdvisor and Facebook. The content analysis was picked due to the fact that this type of analysis is a widely used research technique (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Brunt, Horner & Semley, 2017) when researching perceptions of a tourist destination. Using content analysis, via the identification of attributes in words, phrases, sentences, and pictures, and later on the coding of the attributes, insights into the tourist view of the destination of Zadar were provided, and the results of the questionnaire survey additionally supported. According to the results of the study, some recommendations for the Zadar destination management are offered, both in terms of creating state-of-the-art tourism strategies and in understanding tourist behaviour. The latter is relevant not only for Zadar, but for each and every destination.
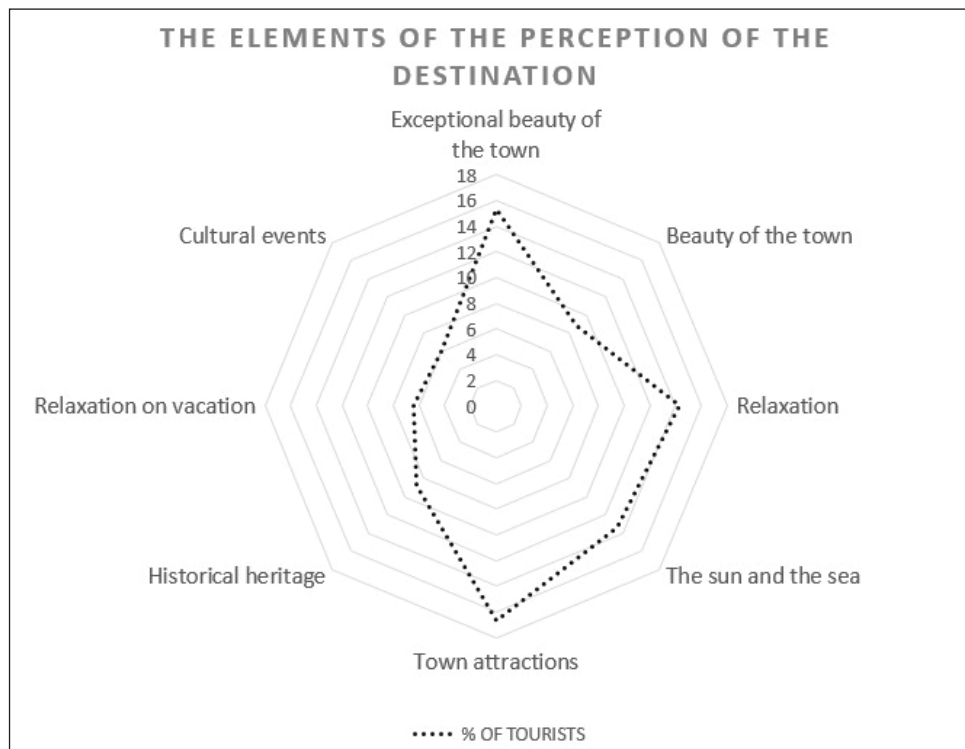
## RESULTS

The analysis of the first part of the questionnaire showed the following results: The randomly chosen sample of respondents comprised 57.68% of female

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*Table 1: Reasons of coming to Zadar as a destination*

| REASONS FOR COMING | %  OF TOURISTS |
|---|---|
| Tour around the city and the region | 36,4 |
| European Best Destination of 2016 | 22,7 |
| Cultural heritage | 10,3 |
| Gastronomy and wine | 7,9 |
| A visit to relatives and friends | 7,9 |
| Cultural events | 5,6 |
| Job | 4,2 |
| Architectural heritage | 2,3 |
| Religious reasons | 0,9 |
| Conferences, workshops | 0,9 |
| Sports events | 0,9 |
| TOTAL | 100 |

lowed with around 3% whereas the tourists from other countries made up less than 3% of the tourist population. Based on the data obtained from the Zadar Tourist Board, the tourists stay in Zadar as a destination for 2–3 days on average. The data on staying in Zadar as a destination obtained from the survey are as follows: 41.86% of the respondents stays in the destination for 4–7 days, 31.63% stays for 2–3 days, 19.56% of respondents stay for more than 7 days and 6.9% of respondents stay in Zadar for only 1 day. The educational structure of the respondents was as follows: 35.81% of respondents completed less than secondary education courses, 50.23 % of respondents completed university education courses, whereas 13.95% of respondents received their MA and PhD degrees. The vast majority of respondents (81.86%) did not travel to Zadar within a package arrangement but provided for their staying for themselves and, consequently, only the remaining 18.14% arrived to Zadar within a package arrangement. 46.51% of respondents obtain the initial information on Zadar via the Internet, 12.09% of them obtained information from tourist agencies' employees, 28.37% were informed by friends, 8.37% of respondents obtained the information through web advertisements and 4.65% of respondents did not report the source of information. Table 1 shows travel motivation of the Zadar visitors, more precisely, the share of the particular reasons that influenced the decision of coming to Zadar.

and 42.32% of male persons aged as follows: 39% respondents aged 18–25, 31.62% respondents aged 26–45, 19.53% respondents aged 46–65 and 9.76% of respondents aged over 65. The data has shown that 70% of the surveyed foreign tourists were younger than 45. The most of the surveyed came from Germany (11.16%) and France (11,16%); Sweden, Ireland and Austria fol-



*Picture 1: The elements of the perception of the destination*

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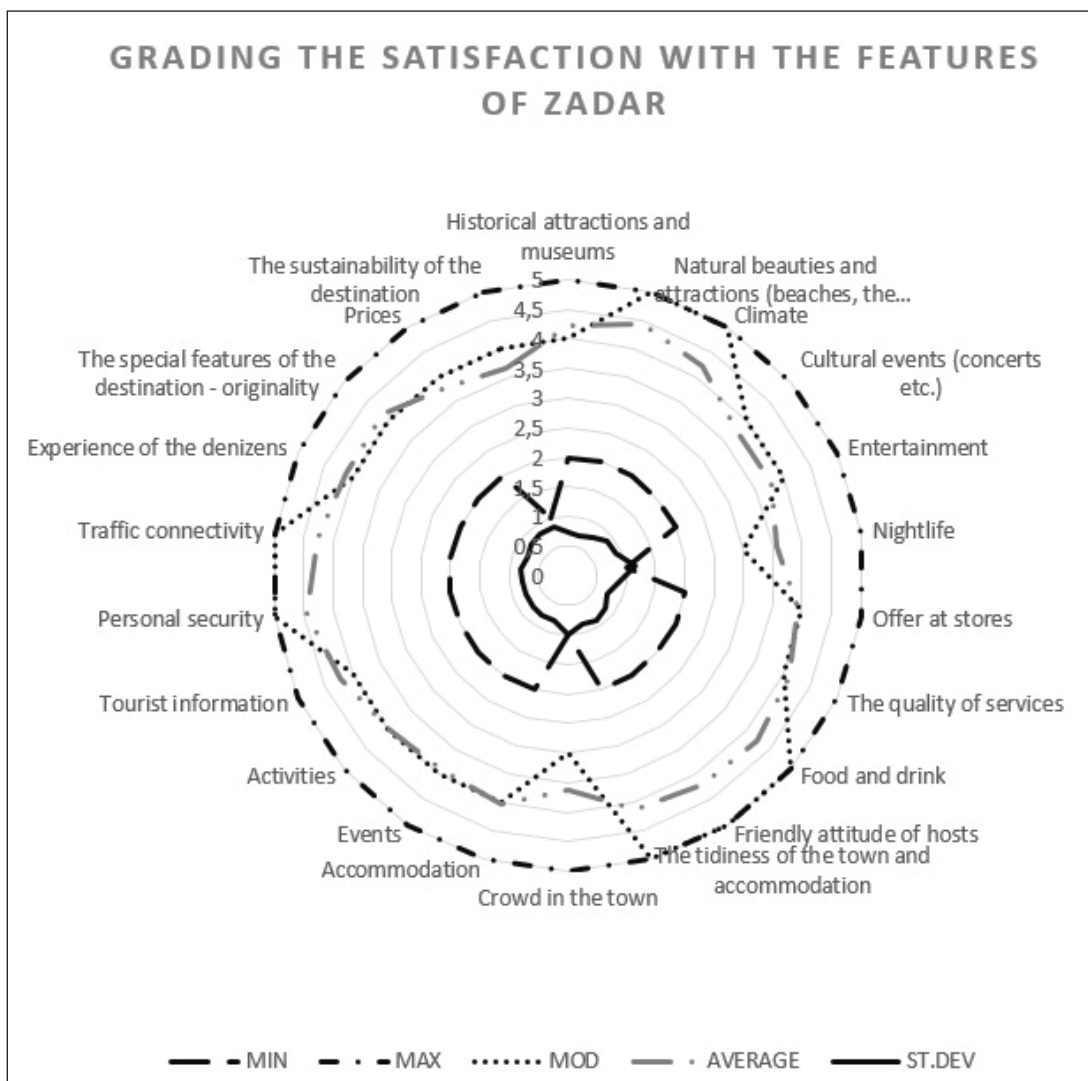


*Picture 2: Grading the satisfaction with the features of Zadar*

It can be easily seen that 22.7% of the tourists were motivated to come to Zadar thanks to the fact that Zadar was elected the best European destination. This result supports the theory of "influencers" (Madden et al., 2016) and the fact that social media has a significant role in the destination image process. Picture 1 shows the data on the elements of the perception of the destinations that impressed the tourist most upon their arrival to Zadar.

In the fourth part of the research, the respondents evaluated their satisfaction with the features of Zadar as a tourist destination by means of a Likert's scale ranged 1-5. Picture 2. shows the lowest and the highest grades, the most frequent grade, the average grade and the standard deviation value.

It can be easily seen that the tourists gave the best grades to the natural beauties of Zadar, the climate, the security of tourists, the traffic connections and the origi-

nality of the destination (the Sea Organ, the Sun Salutation). These turned out to be also the strongest selling points of the Zadar destination according to the follow up content analysis of the "Turistička zajednica grada Zadra" (Zadar Tourist Board) and "Uniline Zadar" sites along with social media TripAdvisor and Facebook. The content analysis additionally revealed that the Zadar Tourist Board strongly advertises Zadar as an event destination (TripAdvisor, Facebook and both of the analysed sites had pre-and-post information about various and plentiful events in Zadar).

On the other hand, the lowest grades in the survey were awarded to the traffic bottlenecks, the nightlife and the sustainability of the destination.

The analysis of the fifth part of the questionnaire – the distribution of time on activities-showed that the respondents mostly went to the beach every day of their stay; the boat excursions and then visiting museums and go-

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*Image 2: Tourists attending the Greetings to the sun – "Pozdrav suncu", one of the most popular sights in Zadar (Photo: Jasna Potočnik Topler)*

ing around the shops followed. Also content analysis of the sites "Turistička zajednica grada Zadra" (Zadar Tourist Board) and "Uniline Zadar" along with social media TripAdvisor and Facebook showed that in the representation of Zadar contents about natural attractions, culture and events prevail, and that the destination of Zadar is most strongly driven by the corresponding images.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of the study was to analyse the perception of the Zadar destination and to identify the images that tourists have about Zadar since this is significant as a tool of identifying strengths and weaknesses of Zadar, which is further on essential for establishing and branding of Zadar. What is more, results from this study may be useful also for other (Mediterranean) destinations and their DMOs since they support the belief that measuring tourists' perceptions of a destination is significant in the processes of branding and developing destinations and their images. The research implicates the relation between the development of IC technologies and the development of media and, in turn, the outgrowing rate of use of ICT in media, influences the ways of doing business in tourism. The travellers very often choose the destination and accommodation by themselves and their choices are based on the experiences shared by the social media users. The accelerated contemporary life pace requests a faster and faster exchange of information for which the Internet application and mobile applications are needed. The data showed that a certain number of tourists choose the accommodation at arriving to the destination and they use mobile application to book the accommodation on the move. Digital

campaigns feature a positive influence on tourism in the towns in which they resulted in a significant increase in number of visits and the number of bed-places. This can be seen from the example of Zadar for which the stated data have shown a constant growth in visits. Almost 50% of the respondents chose the destination on the basis of the Internet data; this leads to the conclusion that the special attractions of a destination should be promoted as good as possible through the digital and social media and the digital media campaigns considering that this means investing a small amount of money in order to get a significant profit. The results of the research show that the destination of Zadar has three very strong selling points, which are natural attractions, culture and events, and that these are strong images of Zadar. However, the results also imply that there are problems with the sustainability of the destination and with the traffic bottlenecks and this is a problem that can be solved if mobile applications are used and if the new concept of a smart city is adopted. A significant role in solving the problems of the kind is played by digital and social media. Due to that further research involving content analysis is required with the goal that tourism stakeholders in Zadar put additional effort in educating themselves about the possibilities they offer and try to make social media work for them. Because in the long run, following social media can bring improvements in the tourism offer and greater tourist satisfaction. Moreover, employing unstructured methodologies in the Zadar destination image research is advised in order to acquire free descriptions of a destination by the respondents (open-ended survey questions) in order to acquire not only general and holistic, but also unique features of a destination.

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# DIGITALNI MEDIJI, DOJEMANJE IN IZBOR ZA NAJBOLJŠO EVROPSKO DESTINACIJO 2016: PRIMER ZADRA

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*POVZETEK*

*Pričujoči članek predstavlja raziskavo, ki je med drugim potekala v Zadru maja in junija 2016, v letu, ko je bilo mesto s pomočjo novih medijev izbrano za najboljšo evropsko destinacijo (*European Best Destination*). Komunikacija prek digitalnih medijev in družabnih omrežij ima v turizmu vse pomembnejšo vlogo, saj se uporablja v marketingu, pripomore pa tudi k izboljšanju turističnih storitev in pozitivnemu doživljanju destinacije. Terensko raziskovanje v Zadru je vključevalo 250 tujih, naključno izbranih turistov, ki so v tem času obiskali destinacijo Zadar. Cilj je bil ugotoviti, kakšen je bil motiv tujih turistov za obisk Zadra in kako ga, ko so na destinaciji, dojemajo. Analiza dojemanja oz. percepcije destinacije je namreč ključno orodje v razvoju vsake destinacije, prav tako pri vzpostavljanju njene identitete, saj je informacija o tem, kako turisti vidijo in doživljajo določeno destinacijo, izjemno pomembna, ker upravljalcem destinacije in turističnim deležnikom omogoča, da prepoznajo prednosti, slabosti in potenciale destinacije ter podobo destinacije na tej osnovi ustrezno načrtujejo, nadgrajujejo in prilagajajo. Z uporabo metod strukturiranega vprašalnika (na raziskovani destinaciji), opisne statistike in analize vsebine ugotavljamo, kdo so naključni tuji turisti, zakaj so v Zadru in kako ga dojemajo. Ugotovitve so v prvi vrsti namenjene načrtovalcem turizma v Zadru, hkrati pa tudi upravljalcem in deležnikom drugih (mediteranskih) destinacij, saj izpostavljajo pomen novih medijev za podobo destinacije in pomen merjenja turistične percepcije destinacije pri njenem razvoju. Rezultati so med drugim pokazali, da je Zadar destinacija, katere glavni atributi so naravne znamenitosti, kultura in dogodki. Raziskava tudi kaže, da so v letu 2016 pri privabljanju turistov na destinacijo odločilno vlogo odigrali novi mediji, ki so povečali turistični potencial Zadra. Slednje se je najbolj odrazilo v znatnem povečanju števila turistov v mestu in njegovi okolici v primerjavi s preteklimi sezonami.*

**Ključne besede:** digitalni mediji, percepcija, destinacija, turizem, Zadar

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