

Unique Destination Attributes as a Basis of Tourism Experience

Petra Zabukovec Baruca

University of Primorska, Slovenia

petra.zabukovec@fts.upr.si

Žana Čivre

University of Primorska, Slovenia

zana.civre@fts.upr.si

In today's highly competitive tourism market, tourists are not only interested in new, unique tourism products and services, but also in unique tourism experiences, as experiences represent an important competitive advantage for a destination. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the attributes of a destination's identity that are defined as unique, by analysing unique experiences in three main coastal destinations in Slovenian Istria and defining communication strategies to promote the uniqueness of their tourism experiences. The results of a qualitative research confirm that the uniqueness of tourism experiences results from the attributes of the destination's identity. These attributes primarily relate to nature and natural resources, cultural heritage, and culinary experiences. The unique tourism experiences are conveyed through speciality, innovation, authenticity and various positive emotions such as hedonism, excitement, curiosity, surprise, happiness, and pleasure to ensure memorable value-added experiences and encourage tourists to visit year-round. The study contributes to the knowledge of unique tourism experiences. Finally, theoretical implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research are provided.

Keywords: uniqueness, destination, unique attributes, tourism experience



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Introduction

Regardless of the destination's competitiveness, the tourism providers that constitute its offer must constantly compete with each other to meet the increasing needs of tourists. At the destination level, marketing practises contribute positively to the destination's competitiveness by providing an answer to the question of how to attract tourists. As tourists' behaviour and travel motivation change due to the dynamic environment, tourists have become very demanding and expect more than just a typical offer at the destination (Williams, 2006). Moreover, Ritchie and Crouch (2003) state that the key to a destination's competi-

tiveness lies in its ability to attract more tourists and provide them with satisfying, memorable experiences in a profitable way while improving the well-being of the destination's population and preserving its natural capital for future generations. In the context of creating memorable experiences for tourists, Dwyer and Kim (2003) have pointed out that a competitive destination must be more successful than its competitors in various aspects of the overall tourism experience. Thus, to be competitive in the global tourism market, destinations must be innovative, distinctive, and constantly strive to improve the unique tourism experience. One of the most important sources of competi-

itive advantage in this respect is the uniqueness of a destination.

Destinations need to discover and create their own unique identity and to differentiate themselves from the competition. Presenting the uniqueness of a destination in a competitive tourism industry is a complex process. It requires a lot of ingenuity and creativity to stand out in a saturated field. Generally, the destination as a place has existed for generations and is defined by its history, culture, topography, way of life, built and natural environment, and its people. The aspects that make a destination distinctive and memorable are derived from a variety of attributes that are considered the DNA of a destination (Anholt, 2009), consisting of a unique physical and cultural environment, the products associated with the destination, and the people. However, these factors are no longer a differentiator, but have the potential to reduce substitutability. To achieve this, destination marketers are increasingly focusing on the tourism experience, and creating unique products based on the destination's identity. In addition, success also depends on marketing messages based on unique attributes that appeal to the emotions of potential tourists. As regards the historical, cultural and physical attributes deeply rooted in the development of unique products such as typical local food or souvenirs, these can have emotional attributes or signals that allow tourists to be involved in a personal experience when buying and consuming them (Rachão et al., 2020; Spielmann et al., 2018). In particular, unique products, thanks to their intrinsic and symbolic value, contribute to the creation of the local and cultural identity of destinations and allow tourists to approach culture in a more emotional and participative way (Spielmann et al., 2018).

Today, many tourists most likely perceive experiences as memorable (Gilmore & Pine, 2002) and therefore demand to go beyond the typical forms of tourism (Kim et al., 2012). They are looking for something new, unique or different that will lead to a strong memory of the travel experience (Kim et al., 2012). They desire to have a unique experience at the destination (Brown, 2005; Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). The unique attributes can be found among the physically tangible attributes as well as among the intangible and

affective attributes. In many cases, these attributes are related to the destination experiences (Kim, 2014). For example, Tung and Ritchie (2011) concluded that positive emotions and feelings associated with tourism experiences, such as happiness and excitement, are a critical component of memorable tourism experiences. Therefore, the tourism experience is considered to be diverse and subjective and represented by various symbolic aspects. It is important for destinations to identify unique elements that offer unique travel experiences. Unique experiences at the destination lead tourists to develop a positive image of the destination and thus they are more likely to have an engaging experience. Experiences and their meanings usually appeal to tourists' overarching needs, such as novelty, excitement, enjoyment, prestige, socialisation and learning, and contribute to the enhancing of well-being (Dimanche, 2018).

This study examines the uniqueness of tourism destinations from an internal supply-side perspective. Its main purpose is to explore a theoretical framework for analysing the unique attributes of a destination that derive from the destination's identity. In particular, it aims to identify the fundamental attributes that lead to the creation of the unique destination products that contribute to a memorable tourism experience at the destination, and to apply the results of the study in the context of the tourism destination Slovenian Istria. In this context, the main aim of the paper is to identify attributes of the destination identity that are defined as unique through the analysis of unique experiences at the destination and to discuss communication strategies of the uniqueness of the destination Slovenian Istria on an expressive level of marketing communication. In this context, the main research questions of the paper are (1) *What are the attributes of the unique tourism experiences through the destination identity?* and (2) *What are the communication strategies to promote the uniqueness of tourism experiences in Slovenian Istria?*

The paper is structured as follows. First, the literature on destination uniqueness and the role of unique tourism experiences is reviewed. This is followed by research methodology and interpretation of research results using the Slovenian Istria region as an exam-

ple. Finally, theoretical implications and recommendations for future research are given.

Literature Review

Destination Uniqueness

A destination is a place that attracts visitors for a temporary stay and is an amalgam of all tourism services and experiences offered to consumers (Buhalis, 2000). Tourism organizations use the unique and distinctive characteristics of a destination as attractors that increase tourists' attention to the destination. Uniqueness is particularly important because it affects the distinction between similar destinations in the minds of target customers (Qu et al., 2011). Destinations with unique characteristics tend to be viewed as attractive, and in fact, the assertion of uniqueness has become an institutionalized practice that is reflected in the destination's brand, tourism products, and marketing communications. Also, asserting the uniqueness of a destination has also become an institutionalized practice to highlight the identity of a place. Prayag (2007) defines a destination identity that can help create a set of unique and positive associations in the minds of consumers. This uniqueness is communicated in brand identity, which often emphasizes the historical, social, and cultural values of places (Richards, 2014). In recent years, it has been recognized that a successful destination brand must convey the expectations or promise of a memorable travel experience that is distinctively associated with that destination (Ritchie & Crouch, 2000; Blain et al., 2005). The uniqueness of the tourist product results from the attributes of the destination's identity. These attributes include not only the tourism product, such as quality accommodation, shopping facilities, or sporting activities, but also other environmentally attractive elements that in many cases are the main attraction associated with potential tourism demand and a source of tourism competitiveness. These primary attributes of the destination offer are climate, natural beauty and cultural heritage, hospitality, safety and more (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Goeldner et al. (2000) emphasize that successful tourism is not just a matter of better transport and hotels, but of giving a special national flavour to the traditional way of life and providing tourists with a favourable image of the benefits

of these goods and services. Basic and general features are not enough for a successful destination. Preference is given to those destinations that recognize features with various unique elements and incorporate them as unique tourism experiences in the destination's offer.

In their three-dimensional model for destination image, Echtner and Ritchie (1993) consider the dimension of commonality versus uniqueness, i.e. the characteristics that are common to many destinations and the characteristics that distinguish one destination from another. Therefore, for effective destination positioning, the attributes that are closely associated with the destination in customers' perception should be considered first, as well as the other attributes that are objectively unique to a destination and can distinguish it from its competitors (Ibrahim & Gill, 2005). It is about identifying the destination's distinctive characteristics and its strongest and most competitive assets in the eyes of its potential visitors and consistently incorporating this into all marketing communications. Accordingly, identifying the unique and distinctive elements of a destination is a necessary first step for a place marketing strategy that can encourage tourists to choose the destination (Qu et al., 2011). In this context, the development of a destination brand has become a powerful strategic tool due to the ever-increasing competition among destinations. The destination's competitive advantages are recognized by potential tourists through the highlighted differences compared to other competing destinations, which are consistently communicated throughout marketing communications. Kotler et al. (2006) emphasize that brands have become one of the most important determinants of a destination's success because they can be used as tools to convey a destination's unique identity. The main objective of this process is to create a desirable and appealing destination product based on distinctive, unique attributes of the destination and to accurately convey this image to potential tourists. The task of destination marketing organizations is to identify the unique assets of their destination in order to evoke certain feelings, values, cultures and general attitudes that people experience when visiting a place. Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) have found that when the identity of a place is strong enough to be felt or ex-

perienced, we often speak of a 'sense of place,' which is also often associated with the uniqueness of the destination. Similarly, Anhold (2009) uses the term 'sense of place' to describe the personality of a place, which results from a variety of factors that are considered the 'DNA of a place.' The term 'DNA' is used metaphorically to express the unique characteristics of places: the special attractions or attributes of a place that position it as unique compared to its main competitors. Attributes can range from functional to psychological (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993) or represent unique characteristics of a place. The uniqueness of attributes refers not only to physical tangible characteristics, but also to intangible and affective characteristics such as emotions, atmosphere, stories and legends.

It becomes clear that our understanding of sense of place can help destinations to foster tourists' attachment to a place through unique attributes that are either part of culture, history or nature. Culture, for example, is one of the diverse and rich factors that determine the overall attractiveness of a tourism region. These include social norms and traditions, language, style of dress, architecture, crafts, art, music, gastronomy, etc. In tourism, the exposed or material culture of a destination has the greatest affective power. Goeldner et al. (2000) also point out that history can be one of the most interesting dimensions of a destination and is a rich tool to create a unique tourism experience. History is also what distinguishes a destination from others and is one of the most important motivations for visiting this or that destination. Local historical sites, stories and legends create a romantic and lasting experience for visitors to a destination. Nature, landscape, natural resources and environment are the most fundamental dimension of a destination. In many cases, these attributes are linked to the destination experience (Kim, 2014). Among the myriad features of a destination, the uniqueness of the destination is usually an essential element of the tourist encounter, and destinations with unique features are also more likely to be perceived as beautiful and therefore have a strong pull motivation (Kirillova et al., 2014). Such features can help build a destination's image as unique (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Qu et al., 2011), explain tourists' attachment and engagement with the

place, and contribute to memorable experiences (Kim, 2014). Due to their uniqueness and distinctiveness, typical attributes offer potential sources of differentiation in positioning the destination brand.

Identifying the distinctive characteristics of a destination is crucial for tourism development in terms of product development, marketing issues and resource conservation. The ultimate goal is to communicate this difference as a potential competitive advantage to visitors (Jarratt et al., 2019). A toolkit can include unique selling propositions, information-based resources that can be shared with visitors, branding guidelines and resources, visitor-based research, recommendations for improving the visitor experience, and various other forms of information (Jarratt et al., 2019).

In the academic sphere and in tourism practise, destination uniqueness is associated and overlaps with the aforementioned meanings of place identity and sense of place, as well as with the notion of local distinctiveness and concepts such as authenticity (Castéran & Roederer, 2013). Local distinctiveness is mentioned as one of the critical factors in developing a distinctive product, especially in the context of souvenirs, local food and beverages, as it ensures that tourists' vision of the destination is maintained through their sensory engagement with the unique, distinctive and original place-based values (Lin & Mao, 2015; Spielmann et al., 2018). The marketing process to develop a unique product for a destination is not always easy and poses particular challenges to the art of marketing. These challenges are related to the complexity of the tourism product and the number of stakeholders involved in destination marketing. Although the facts of a tourist's experience are also not explicitly known, one might assume that a good tailor-made trip must focus on uniqueness.

Tourism Experience

Although tourism experiences have been extensively researched in the field of tourism (Chirakranont & Sakdiyakorn, 2022) and tourism marketing (Prebensen & Foss, 2011), there is still a relative lack of knowledge and academic work addressing stakeholder perspectives on uniqueness in relation to tourism expe-

periences offered at destinations. Moreover, tourism experiences are a serious concept in the field of tourism, especially in the area of destination positioning (Oh et al., 2007).

Due to the changing economy, society and consumer needs, consumers will continue to prefer buying experiences rather than products (Kim et al., 2012). Thus, the focus has shifted from a service-based (tourism product) to an experience-based economy (tourism experience), also referred to as the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). As memorable experiences have high value (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), developing and offering memorable experiences is a focus of the service industry (Wang et al., 2020) and destination marketing (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016).

Li et al. (2022) define tourism experience as 'a process of individual psychological activities, and its degree of memorability depends on whether the tourism experience meets the expectations and demands of tourists, while high arousal often indicates that tourists' expectations are consistent with reality and that satisfaction is high.' Tourism experiences are particularly appealing to target groups who have a desire to experience and see different destinations and the lives of local people at the destination (Ritchie et al., 2011). Therefore, tourists are likely to experience pleasure when consuming tourism experiences (Li et al., 2022).

Furthermore, experiences can be memorable in a unique way (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Since some tourist segments have distinct experiences with products and services (Wong & Wan, 2013) and eagerly seek unique tourism experiences (Tiberghien et al., 2020), it is argued that the uniqueness of the experience is the main element that leads to memorable experiences (Kim et al., 2012). Therefore, it is an important need for tourists to share their unique experiences with different destinations, interaction with locals and other travel memories. In this sense, destination managers should avoid over-commercializing their offerings and focus on unique and authentic tourism experiences (Yolal, 2016). In recent research, destination-specific attributes are proved as an antecedent of pro-environment tourist behaviour in the context of tourism experience (Jia, 2015). Other results show that individuals who perceive the attributes

of the destination very positively also have a positive memorable experience, which leads to a higher intention to visit the destination again (Madhzar et al., 2015).

Methodology

The overall objective of this article is to identify the unique attributes of destination identity and communication strategies. Identifying such unique attributes is very important for marketing planners in destinations as they provide a competitive advantage over the competition. To answer previously defined research questions, a qualitative research was conducted using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are the preferred method for data collection when the researcher's goal is to understand the unique perspective of the participant better than a general understanding of a phenomenon (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Therefore, the supply side was analysed first. The main advantage of semi-structured techniques is their ability to capture the holistic components and unique characteristics of a destination (Govers et al., 2007) and to allow respondents to freely describe in their own words their intentions in creating and communicating products, feelings and perceptions about a destination.

As tourist boards in Slovenia are a central tourism organization for each destination, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of the main tourist boards responsible for marketing communication in the destinations of Slovenian Istria, who are competent for designing unique tourist experiences.

Thus, three key local representatives and experts of the tourist boards for the destinations of Piran/Portorož, Izola and Koper form the sample for this research (Table 1). The interviews were conducted between March 9 and 18, 2022. At the beginning of each interview, the researchers introduced the purpose of the research. As each tourist board is responsible for the development of new tourism products and their promotion, its main objective lately has been the development and promotion of unique tourism experiences.

The questionnaire referred to the *Slovenia Unique Experiences Guidebook* published by the Slovenian

Table 1 List of Interviewees

Respondents	Tourist Organization	Destination
Respondent A	Tourist board Portorož	Portorož/Piran
Respondent B	Izola Tourism Association	Izola
Respondent C	Koper Public Institute for Youth, Culture and Tourism	Koper

Tourist Organization (Slovenska turistična organizacija, 2020). The interview consisted of two main parts, namely unique experiences at the destination and promotion of unique experiences at the destination. The first part of the questionnaire contained six open-ended questions about the main unique experiences, their unique elements/attributes and symbols of destination identity. This part of the interview also includes the criteria for their development, aim, and reasons for developing memorable, unique tourism experiences. The second part of the interview also consisted of three open-ended questions on the promotional efforts of destinations to offer unique tourism experiences. In this context, expressions/words and feelings were identified. At the end, a short question was asked about how to measure tourists' impressions of unique experiences at each destination.

Research Results

The results of the qualitative research are presented and compared. In line with the research objectives, a holistic view of destination uniqueness attributes is of particular importance to this study. In order to obtain a comprehensive view of destination uniqueness, it was crucial to obtain in-depth information on the attributes of destination uniqueness through unique products and their promotion.

This section of the study presents the results of the semi-structured interviews, which are divided into two parts. The first part of the analysis focuses on the importance of developing and offering unique experiences at the destination for its tourists.

In this part, the *first research question* is answered by proposing a method for identifying unique destination attributes. To answer the first question, re-

spondents first listed the most unique tourism products/experiences at each destination. In this way, we were able to identify several unique tourism experiences offered at each destination.

In addition, respondents selected and listed a number of attributes for product uniqueness based on the unique experiences offered by their destination. To provide a comprehensive overview, the responses are summarized in Table 2. For each destination, respondents indicated unique tourism experiences for three different areas, namely nature and natural resources, cultural heritage and culinary experiences. The analysis of tourism experiences shows that the most experiences can be found in the destination Portorož – Piran, which is also the most developed tourist municipality, followed by the destination Izola and then Koper.

In all three destinations, it is evident that experiences of all kinds are the predominant unique attributes of nature and natural resources. These include natural landscapes and protected parks, and salt pans with useful derivatives such as mud, salt, and salt flower, which are an integral part of the experiences that the representatives consider unique. Portorož – Piran has the most unique experiences based on salt and salt pans, such as the unique outdoor spa centre Thalasso Spa Lepa Vida, located on the salt pans. Among the natural attributes, olive groves, vineyards and truffles are often highlighted in all three destinations, which are part of the unique outdoor experiences related to the hinterland and typical Istrian villages. The cultural heritage is based on the unique attributes of Venetian architecture, which can be found in all three coastal towns (Koper, Izola and Piran). Here it is all about arousing curiosity, discovering hidden treasures and learning stories about city life. In the hinterland, cultural heritage is combined with the architecture of Istrian villages, getting to know Istrian life, nature and cuisine. An important source for learning more about the peculiarities of life in Istria are the unique interpretations of virtual boutique museums #butmuz, which allow visitors to experience the past in a unique way and connect with the history of Istria.

When analysing the tourism experience, the local and traditional cuisine of Slovenian Istria is of great

importance. The local cuisine is strongly represented with various attributes, both in outdoor activities in nature and cultural heritage. The interweaving of traditional cuisine with other activities and attractions is part of the experience at this destination. In terms of natural resources, there is a strong connection to the sea, where the source of unique experiences is linked to fishing and fish, which are part of the tradition, especially in the destination of Izola, which offers a mix of Istrian and seafood cuisine due to its proximity to the hinterland. Local attributes that create unique experiences are often part of tourist gastronomic events in Izola. Olive oil, wine and fish are typical attributes of various culinary festivals, as well as sustainable culinary campaigns such as Kilometre Zero (kmo) in preparing unique dishes with local ingredients from the sea and the land. In addition, there are various culinary events in all three destinations, outstanding tourist culinary experiences in nature such as the 'Vintage culinary experience,' 'Wine experience with an unforgettable sunset in the hinterland of Slovenian Istria' and 'Truffle hunting and tasting.'

The culinary cultural heritage product in Izola is also well designed. Even today, the Romans are known for their hedonistic lifestyle and fondness for good food, and this is part of the culinary experience when discovering the Roman heritage in the Istrian region as part of the tourist experience called 'Roman tastes under the stars in the archaeological park.' In order to increase tourist satisfaction, it is particularly important to understand what attributes influence travellers' experiences of local cuisine.

In addition, the uniqueness of tourism experiences derives from the *attributes of the destination's identity*. Thus, Table 2 shows a unified experience of three destinations in Slovenian Istria. The identity of Slovenian Istria is primarily determined by the sea, which represents the first contact with the Mediterranean and dominates the local history, natural environment, climate and landscape, and is probably the most distinctive element for tourism experiences. The sea is not only a point of attraction, but also offers specific elements such as beaches, wilderness, protected areas like salt pans, fishing and local products, and allows for a variety of outdoor activities on and by the sea. The ba-

sic symbols of identity also come from the sea, such as the salt in the destination Portorož – Piran and the fish in Izola. Another important element is the sun, which is a symbol of Koper. The three destinations are very different in terms of landscape and vitality. They differ in that Koper is a city centre with maritime, nautical, bathing and sports tourism, Izola offers cosiness and authenticity and is based on fishing, and Piran – Portorož is one of the most developed destinations with salt pans and mediaeval Piran. Despite the differences, they have common unifying elements of shared identity, such as the fact that all three cities, Koper, Izola and Piran, were islands. All three representatives pointed out that part of the identity of this region is the meeting of three cultures: Slovenian, Italian and Croatian, which is reflected in the architecture, bilingualism, dialects, and customs, and translated into a sense of place. The attribute of uniqueness also refers to intangible and affective qualities such as emotions, atmosphere, stories, and legends.

Next, respondents were asked to provide *reasons, goals and criteria* for developing memorable, unique tourism experiences. As far the *reasons* for developing memorable experiences, the expert from the Tourist Organization Board Portorož & Piran highlighted the following in particular:

Each experience is characterized by its offer, which is aimed at a specific audience, by individual elements on which the identity of the destination is based (e.g. local artisanal products such as salt and salt flower, thalassotherapy, olive oil, garlic, Piran sea bass, Malvasia and Refošk wine, tradition, landscape, cultural and natural heritage, sustainable elements). So they cannot be transferred to another environment because they would lose their added value.

The representative of Izola gave reasons for creating memorable experiences, mostly related to cultural heritage, such as place, culture, history, the area inhabited since 4000 BC, and the Romans. For the destination of Koper, the expert emphasized that: 'Since unique tourism experiences are designed for small groups, they offer a memorable and unusual experi-

Table 2 Unique Attributes of Destination and Examples of Unique Tourism Experiences at Destination

Attributes/Destination	Portorož/Piran	Izola	Koper
<i>Nature and natural resources</i>	Landscape and protected parks, footpath, climate, fish, truffles, olives, panoramas, salt pans with useful derivatives (e.g. mud, salt, salt flower)	Sea, fish, hinterland, cliffs, nature park, salt pans	Sea
Examples of unique outdoor experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An unforgettable day at the Fonda Fish Farm • Vintage Gourmet Tour • Truffle hunting with cooking workshop and other active cultural and culinary experiences with a touch of Istria • The unique outdoor spa centre Lepa Vida Thalasso Spa on salt pan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roman tastes under the stars • The Forgotten Secret of Izola 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candlelit Dinner Date • Vintage Gourmet Tour • Truffle hunting
<i>Cultural heritage</i>	Saltworks, fishing, the medieval town of Piran, traditional events, Venetian architecture, Istrian customs and traditions, Šavrini, legends and stories of Piran	Paranzana, shipbuilding, fishing, boutique museums, traditional events, Roman culture	Venetian architecture, typical Istrian villages
Examples of unique cultural heritage experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saltpans Feast • Saltharvester for a day • Discovering the secrets of Piran 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network of boutique museums #BUTMUZ • The Forgotten Secret of Izola • Roman tastes under the stars 	
<i>Culinary</i>	Traditional cuisine – truffle, olive oil, salt, fish, wine	Wine, fish, garlic	Olive, wine, salt, truffle
Examples of unique culinary experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wine experience with an unforgettable sunset in the hinterland of Slovenian Istria • Truffle hunting and tasting • Persimmon Festival 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wine experience with an unforgettable sunset in the hinterland of Slovenian Istria • Truffle hunting and tasting • Persimmon Festival 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vintage Gourmet Tour • Sweet Istria
<i>Attributes of the identity of Slovenian Istria</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sea • Salt and salt products • Hinterland, customs, Istrians 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sea • Fish • First contact with the Mediterranean – way of life, climate, contact of cultures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sea • Climate, Venetian architecture, green hinterland, delicious local food and drink

ence. To some extent, they allow personalization and meet the high expectations of demanding guests.’

In terms of the *goals* of a memorable experience, respondents agreed that it is critical that tourists experience the uniqueness of a particular place that they cannot experience anywhere else. In addition, they want to highlight new, unique experiences outside of the peak season. In this way, they want to increase

the added value of the destination and encourage off-season consumption, as well as extend the average length of stay per destination. In summary, an important common goal of all three destination marketing representatives is to encourage tourists to visit year-round and offer them something new and memorable with added value. Finally, respondents highlighted the *criteria* for developing a memorable, unique tourism

experience, which are presented. From the responses, we can conclude that the most prominent criteria are boutique, innovation, authenticity, sustainable focus, individual approach and exclusivity when it comes to designing new, unique, memorable experiences in destinations in Slovenian Istria. Examples of new, unique tourism experiences include, for example, 'Discovering the Secrets of Piran,' the outdoor adventure game 'The Forgotten Secret of Izola,' the #BUTMUZ boutique museums network and 'Romantic Candlelight Dinner Date.'

In the second part of the research, in order to answer the second research question, respondents were also asked about the communication terms they use to describe unique experiences and what emotions they appeal to when communicating unique experiences. The experts describe the uniqueness of the experiences with the following communication terms: pleasure, hedonism, excitement, relaxation, curiosity, surprise, happiness, and joy. Also, when asked what emotions are addressed when communicating unique experiences, the experts mentioned the following emotions: happiness, joy, excitement, pleasure, relaxation, mystery, curiosity and surprise.

It is also interesting to note that impressions about the attractiveness of a unique tourism experience from the tourists' perspective are observed primarily on the basis of comments in social networks and personal contacts with tourists directly on site.

Discussion

Understanding what are unique experiences at a destination is a challenge for destination marketers. This article contributes to the research questions of identifying unique attributes of tourism experiences through the destination identity and their symbolic and expressive level of marketing communication using Slovenian Istria as an example. In order to better understand the essence of unique tourism experiences, it is necessary to analyse their multidimensional structure for different travel experience contexts. The study follows a qualitative approach based on open-ended interviews with professionals from the tourist offices of the three main destinations in Slovenian Istria. This allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the con-

cept of uniqueness of tourism experiences in destinations.

Based on the research results from the qualitative research, we identified important attributes of uniqueness and its symbolic and expressive character in relation to the communication aspect.

To answer the first research question, respondents were asked about the destination attributes of unique tourism experiences through destination identity, followed by goals, reasons and criteria for developing new unique tourism experiences. It turns out that the most frequently represented attributes are those that are associated with nature and natural resources in tourism experiences and which give them uniqueness. This includes a number of unique attributes such as sea, salt, fish, hinterland, olive trees, vines, truffles, views, and natural parks, which are most often associated with outdoor experiences. It should be emphasized that cultural heritage is often highlighted in experiences with unique attributes such as the architecture of towns and villages, Venetian history and the Istrian people or Šavrini, which are associated with the region of Istria and its authentic culture and customs. Unique tourism experiences based on both natural resources and cultural heritage are often complemented by local taste experiences. Cuisine enhances the touch of uniqueness of the experience based on local culinary ingredients such as truffles, salt flower, olive oil, wine, persimmons, asparagus, garlic, and fish, which form the basis of traditional cuisine with a Mediterranean touch. According to Tiberghien et al. (2020), offering unique products, such as the exploration of culinary traditions, has a positive impact on strengthening the tourism experience and creating a USP (unique selling proposition). This is also consistent with Stone et al.'s (2021) view that experiences related to the culinary are associated with memories in terms of various connections (interpersonal, social, emotional, sensory, experimental, novel, etc.). Thus, the authors argue that culinary experiences can have a major impact on creating memories while travelling to create memorable experiences.

The research results in this part confirm that the uniqueness of tourism experiences comes from the identity of the place. The elements that belong to the

unique experiences derive from the particular character of the places. The character of the place, which includes special, attractive and recognizable attributes of the destination, is different from others and is reflected in nature and culture, outdoor activities, local products and landscapes and buildings.

Regarding the *reasons* for creating new unique tourism experiences, practitioners expressed that they associate uniqueness with a memorable and outstanding experience that allows a certain level of personalization and meets the high expectations of demanding guests. They also seek to create unique tourism experiences based on the elements/attributes of the destination identity of Slovenian Istria (e.g. local products such as salt, olive oil, wine, etc.) that are not transferable to another environment because as such they lose their added value. In addition, the *goal* of the three main destinations in Slovenian Istria is to offer and promote unique tourism experiences to visitors in order to encourage them to visit outside the peak season. According to the research findings, the most common *criteria* for developing new, unique, memorable tourism experiences in destinations in Slovenian Istria are boutique, innovation, authenticity, sustainable focus, individual approach and exclusivity. This is in line with the view of Li et al. (2022), for example, who claim that innovation can stimulate tourists' emotions such as novelty, pleasure, and freshness, which leads to a better tourism experience. Moreover, tourists looking for unique and authentic tourism experiences are more likely to look for something different from standard tourism products and services (Tiberghien et al., 2020). Criteria for creating uniqueness include enriching the visitor's experience at the destination, which is often enhanced with intangible attributes such as romance, exploration, discovery, and boutique, which aim to provide tourists with exceptional value and remarkable experiences. These sensory experiences, derived from stimuli from nature and culture, stand out and trigger emotion and engagement. In this vein, the first research question has been answered.

In the second part of our findings, we focused on the symbolic and expressive levels of uniqueness associated with tourism experiences at a destination. This is particularly important because they enhance

the quality of the experience and contribute to memorable tourism experiences (Kim, 2014). Thus, this paper also addresses the challenges from a marketing communications perspective in order to answer the second research question. Following the research findings, the uniqueness of the experiences at the main tourist destinations in Slovenian Istria is described in terms such as hedonism, pleasure, excitement, relaxation, curiosity, surprise, happiness, and joy. Similarly, the emotions they want to evoke in their communication strategies are: happiness, joy, enthusiasm, pleasure, relaxation, mystery, curiosity, and surprise. Focusing on how specific uniqueness attributes help consumers fulfil their hedonistic travel desires requires a more pragmatic approach that links the notion of uniqueness of tourism experiences to the significant contribution that destination attributes can make to enabling unique experiences. Involvement, hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, and novelty are attributes that have the potential to connect with tourists' emotions, leading to increased attention, learning ability and happiness, ultimately resulting in memorability (Larsen & Jenssen, 2004; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Moreover, this may be consistent with the research findings of Li et al. (2022), who argue that pleasure and excitement moderate the relationship between night tourism atmosphere and memorable tourism experience.

Similarly, research findings point to the following emotions as appealing in the delivery of unique experiences: happiness, joy, enthusiasm, pleasure, relaxation, mystery, curiosity and surprise. In this vein, unique and meaningful travel experiences are often designed to include intangible unique attributes in addition to tangible attributes. Emotions are therefore considered central to memorable tourism experiences (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). We argue that uniqueness through communication begins by focusing on methods by which experiences are advertised, communicated, and remembered through these domains. According to Agapito et al. (2014), most sensory tourism experiences relate to nature, from beach vacations to rural retreats, engaging multiple senses simultaneously. It was found that tasting local food (Stone et al., 2021; Agapito et al., 2014) and smelling fresh air are two of

the most important sensory experiences for tourists, suggesting that developing unique experiences goes hand in hand with creating meaningful and memorable sensory experiences (Agapito et al., 2014). This finding is also consistent with the results of our research.

Conclusion

With this in mind, the paper offers some observations that can be considered as recommendations for the future development of unique tourism experiences. This research contributes to a better understanding of the importance of the concept of uniqueness in tourism experiences at the destination, with clear implications for marketing communications that give tourism experiences a unique touch and greater appeal in the tourism market.

The research included holiday experiences related to relaxation and fun at the destination with a more idyllic and unique escape experience, where social and special aesthetic dimensions stand out and trigger emotions and engagement: tourism experiences with a romantic atmosphere, fantasy, dreams, nostalgic moments of interaction and multisensory elements. It would be interesting to associate uniqueness with unconventional tourism experiences, such as adventure or volunteer tourism, where people seek an unusual and attractive experience.

Finally, this study also shows that the unique attributes exhibited reinforce the interest and experience, and to some extent correspond to the identity of the place, which is important for the image of the destination in which they are located, and therefore are important for the destination brand. For example, truffles are very representative of Istria, just as the salt flower is a sign of salt pans in this area of Istria, and in this sense helps to consolidate the image and identity of the destination, which affects the destination brand and loyalty and attachment to the place.

Today's tourists are no longer satisfied with the superficial, all-inclusive, generic, standardized offer, but are looking for a deeper contact with the destination they are visiting (culture, landscape, people). They want a real, original, normal, not artificial, not made-up, not tourist experience. An experience that

has been around since time immemorial and is unique. Therefore, practitioners and marketers in tourist destinations look for the fundamental and authentic attributes of the destination, which may be contained in unique points, attractions, places or experiences. In this regard, this study contributes to identifying a set of unique attributes per destination that can serve as a guide for destination managers. Identifying the distinctive, unique characteristics of a destination is necessary for tourism development and management and has important implications for tourism marketing planners and travel suppliers. Our findings can help marketing planners select the target constellation of attributes and develop more efficient unique experience products for destinations and their marketing communication strategies for campaigns. Tourism managers could use them to identify their own local particularities.

The robust results suggest that combining the most distinctive attributes with a strong emotional component is important for a destination's positioning strategy. This paper clearly identifies the natural setting and roles of unique and distinctive attributes, integrating them into the tourism product or experience. Therefore, it is essential that destination management and marketers focus on an image campaign that can further promote destination uniqueness and differentiation from other destinations and sustain effective marketing strategies in this respect. Hence, marketing and advertising campaigns can underline the unique attributes of natural and cultural heritage, which will provoke an emotional experience during tourist visits.

As a research study, some limitations of the current approach are obvious. First, this study investigates the uniqueness of the tourism experience on the supplier side using qualitative research. However, this research method is inherently less objective than quantitative research and therefore more limited in terms of statistical and comparative analyses. It would therefore make sense to further investigate the tourist side and the perception of the uniqueness of the tourism experience with quantitative research, to find out if the attributes belonging to the tourism experience provide the tourist with a unique experience or if there is a gap

between the promises of the offer and the actual experience. The aspect of the tourist's satisfaction with the tourism experience is also important, as they have a greater potential to share the experience and memories of the experience with a unique touch. Second, in examining unique tourism experiences, the study rely on interviews with representatives of tourism organizations in destinations that are involved in marketing of tourism experiences. In this sense, some of the criteria used for data collection may not provide a comprehensive basis and those who conduct these experiences may not reflect all possible unique experiences. Third, this study assessed the attributes of tourism experiences' uniqueness for selected tourism experiences in three destinations highlighted by respondents as the most important, and not all that are offered, or even smaller destinations in Slovenian Istria such as Ankaran, which could mean that not all attributes of destination uniqueness are covered in this area. Fourth, the range of unique experiences does not include a comparison between unique and non-unique experiences, which could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the unique experience. Fifth, other marketing constructs related to destination uniqueness could be explored, such as different market segments (families, young couples, seniors) or destination positioning through USP, brand, and the like. Finally, criteria at the level of symbolic and expressive communication are important to attract and effectively market unique experiences, so the most market-effective communication approaches and web-based marketing channels should be tested in the market. Uniqueness as a distinctive element in tourism experience has recently gained importance and is used increasingly.

Therefore, future studies could explore the above comments from each category over time. Future studies should also consider exploring the relation between tourists' need for uniqueness as a representation of differentiated identity based on several target markets and destination settings.

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