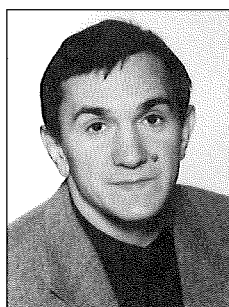
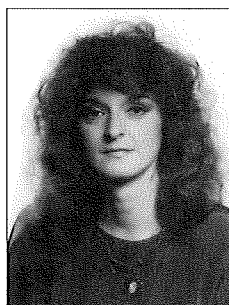


VI. Tourist Country Brand Positioning in the Eyes of Croatian Students

Tihomir Vranešević
docent
Oddelek za marketing
Ekonomska fakulteta
Univerza v Zagrebu
Hrvaška



Đurđana Ozretić Došen
docentka
Oddelek za marketing
Ekonomska fakulteta
Univerza v Zagrebu
Hrvaška



Summary

Drawing on earlier research into the issues of brand and aiming to continue research into brand as an important market feature that influences the gaining and retaining of the competitive edge for products and services, the authors decided to research the influence of brand on the perception of a tourist country. In the first part of their work they give a presentation of the theoretical framework and point to the specifics of brand as a marketing feature in the service sector. Particular focus is given to the features of brand as part of the marketing of a tourist destination. In the second part they give the results of an empirical research study whose objective was to gather data on the influence of brand on the perception of a tourist country. Respecting all limitations, the authors feel that the research results are indicative as the main objective of the exploratory research has been achieved, that is, the nature of the researched phenomenon has been explained and the obtained results may serve as a useful basis for setting out a concrete hypothesis for future research.

Povzetek

Pozicioniranje blagovne znamke turistične dežele v očeh hrvaških študentov

Na podlagi zgodnjih raziskav na področju blagovne znamke in želje po nadaljnem raziskovanju blagovne znamke kot pomembne tržne značilnosti, ki vpliva na pridobivanje in zadržanje kompetitivne ostrine izdelkov in storitev, so se avtorji odločili raziskati vpliv blagovne znamke na percepcijo turistične dežele. V prvi fazi svojega dela so predstavili teoretično ogrodje in specifične blagovne znamke kot tržne karakteristike v storitvenem sektorju. Posebna pozornost je veljala lastnostim blagovne znamke kot dela trženja neke turistične destinacije. V drugem delu so prikazali rezultate empirične študije, katere namen je bil zbiranje podatkov o vplivu blagovne znamke na percepcijo turistične dežele. Ob upoštevanju vseh omejitev so avtorji prepričani, da so izsledki raziskave indikativni, saj je bil njen glavni cilj dosežen, tj., narava raziskanega fenomena je bila obrazložena in dobljeni rezultati lahko služijo kot uporabna osnova pri določanju konkretne hipoteze za prihodnje raziskovanje.

1. INTRODUCTION

The choice of a product or service brand is of key importance and many marketing experts feel that it is a crucial marketing

Elektronski naslov avtorjev:

tvranes@efzg.hr

ozretic@efzg.hr

decision. A well-chosen brand provides a number of distinctive advantages: it points to the benefits of a certain product/service; it contributes to the creation of the identity of a product/service and manufacturer/supplier; finally, it facilitates sales, implies quality, creates the feeling of confidence, security, strength, durability, loyalty, status, uniqueness, etc.

Despite intensive research concentrated on brand in the last decade, very little dealt with brands in the service sector. Specific features of services, in particular their intangibility, show that choice of brand and image building can be more important for services than for goods (Onkwist and Shaw, 1989). Furthermore, due to the diversity of services and the ways in which they are provided, the politics and strategy of brand differ from one service to another (Turley and Moore, 1995).

Customers/clients in the service sector perceive the brand as a group of associations forming a mental whole that surrounds and includes the brand. Brand positioning is the place a brand has in the consciousness of a customer/client in relation to competition brands. A brand can be successfully positioned in the customer/client consciousness only if equal importance is given to what marketing experts consider important and to the perceptions of customers/clients in the service sector (Upshaw, 1995).

The article is divided into two parts in line with the two objectives that had been set out:

- In the first part, the authors summarise the theoretical premises on the elements important for branding in the service sector, particularly in tourism,
- In the second part they present exploratory research on the influence of brand on the perception of a tourist country.

2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Service brand

Generally, in the service sector the name of a service provider is at the same time the brand, or to be precise, the brand name. Although a service provider usually offers a range of different services (for instance airline companies offer transport in First, Business and Economy Classes), customers usually perceive them as components of a brand. Hence selecting a brand in the service sector is the key factor in marketing strategy, particularly for those service providers that operate in a highly competitive market, as well as for those that internationalise their operations. A strong brand will accelerate brand awareness as well as market reception. A strong brand is one that has either most or all of the following four features (Berry, Lefkowitz and Clark, 1988):

- Distinctiveness – immediately identifies the service provider and emphasises the provider in comparison to the competition.

- Relevance – informs about the nature of the service, conveys and prompts perception of the services benefits, thus aiding the identification and the positioning of the service provider in the customers consciousness.
- Memorability – easy to remember, use and recollect.
- Flexibility – sufficiently broad to cover not only the current operations of the service provider but anticipated changes and expansion as well.

2.1.1. Tourist country brand

The customer/client – tourist selects a tourist destination on the basis of his/her perceptions, ideas and convictions about the destination and not on the basis of objective reality (Chon, 1991). Therefore, the importance of brand for the tourist destination is extremely important. Managing the destination brand is very demanding (Lumsdon, 1997) for the following reasons:

- the tourist destination is an offer that consists of many products, services and their respective brands,
- it is difficult to form brand distinctiveness for a live and dynamic community,
- the control of brand identity becomes difficult.

Tourist countries apply a strategy of tourist brand. Stereotypes and prejudices about a country (that perhaps do not reflect the real situation) may be positive and negative. This additionally strengthens the fact that managing a tourist country brand is not only a demanding job but also an important element in the marketing strategy of international tourism (Ozretić Došen, Vranešević and Prebezac, 1998).

2.2. Elements forming the value of a service brand

Elements that form the value of a service brand aim to identify the brand and differentiate it from the service of competition. These elements are names, logos, symbols, persons, and slogans. They are needed to amplify the brand consciousness and to facilitate the formation of strong, positive and distinct associations connected with the brand. The testing of the elements' ability to form the brand value is carried out through customer polls. Tests are carried out in such way that brand elements are presented individually, for example only the name, logo or slogan.

Essential criteria for selecting elements of brand are (Keller, 1998):

- Memorability – easy to recognise and remember
- Meaningfulness descriptiveness, convincing, interesting and entertaining, excellent visual and verbal presentation
- Protectability legal, from violation of intellectual rights by competition
- Adaptability – flexibility, easy to modernise
- Transferability – within the service sector, to other markets, culturally, geographically

The choice of brand is crucial since frequently a brand name entails and represents the central theme and/or key association in a very compact and economic way. The brand name can be a very efficient communication vehicle; it can be spotted and its meaning can be registered or activated in the memory in only a couple of seconds.

The visual elements of brand – logos, symbols, persons, are also crucial factors in creating brand value, particularly because they impact brand awareness. Visual elements have a long history of being used as a means to denote descent, ownership and affiliation. For example, families and countries have been using symbols to represent their name and descent the Habsburg eagle in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In services, due to their intangibility and abstractness, signs, symbols and persons are very important parts of brand. They convey meanings and associations that shape and change customer/client perceptions about the service provider and the service itself.

Slogans are short sentences conveying descriptive and convincing information about the service and brand. Like *brand name* they are an efficient vehicle that enables customers/clients to understand and use the service offered to them.

2.2.1. Elements important for the value of the tourist country brand

The tourist country brand represents a unique brand that links all individual brands and sub-brands of products and services that a country offers to the market in the form of a total tourist product.

The tourist country brand usually has two elements, brand name and logo. The brand name is set i.e. it is the name of the country the brand belongs to. Hence the logo, as a visual element, becomes very important. It may take on various shapes:

- The brand logo can be (and frequently is) the country's name written in a specific, distinct or characteristic way – for example Italy's brand
- Together with a country's name written in a specific, distinct or characteristic way comes the partially or completely abstract logo that is linked with a country – for example Spain. The logo that is not a word (in Spain's example it is the sun designed by painter J. Miró) is usually called a symbol.

Due to its visual nature, the brand logo of a tourist country is easily recognised. A well-designed and shaped logo that is adequately used in marketing activities increases the tourists' recollection of a country brand and no doubt impacts the positioning of a tourist country.

3. RESEARCH ON THE INFLUENCE OF BRAND ON THE PERCEPTION OF A TOURIST COUNTRY

In order to determine if brand affects perception and the experience of respective tourist countries, an exploratory research with essential elements of experimental procedure was carried out. The respondents were the students of the Faculty of Economics in Zagreb. The objective of the research was to determine how students experience the similarities/differences between individual tourist countries – depending on the presentation or the absence of a tourist country brand.

One of the reasons why the authors decided to carry out the research study on the influence of brand on the perception of a tourist country was the branding inconsistency in the development of a marketing strategy for Croatia as a tourist destination. Namely, during the last five years, 1995-2000, the tourist brand of Croatia was changed four times. In the period from 1995 until the time of the research study there were three different brands, with the last one appearing only recently, in November 2000, just before this article was written.

3.1. Methodology

The main hypotheses of this research project were:

- Exposure to a tourist country brand has a direct impact on the perception of individual countries.
- A perceptual map of tourist countries will differ depending on whether country brands or names are compared.

As it was an exploratory research, the hypotheses were determined in a general manner. There was an additional objective, namely, getting perceptual maps of Croatia's tourist competitors in the Mediterranean area.

Primary data were gathered on the sample of students – respondents at the Faculty of Economics in Zagreb, May 2000. The research involved 190 students.

The objects of the research study were 10 countries (Cyprus, France, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey). The respondents were asked to express their opinion about the similarities/differences between pairs of countries. All available combinations were presented and respondents were asked about 45 pairs of countries.

The respondents were divided into two groups (Control and Experimental). The control group compared countries according to their name while the experimental group expressed its opinion based on the comparison between two tourist brands (note that each brand had the name of the country it belonged to). (Tourist brands are in the Appendix).

The control group had 109 students and the experimental 81. They expressed their opinion on a scale of 10 without numeric grading so that the scale took on interval features. It

is evident that the experimental procedure E-Post/C-Post (Marušić and Vranešević, 1997) was used, which means that all measurements were done after the experimental group was exposed to the independent variable.

Answers were analysed in such a way that the graphic markings of similarities/differences on the scale were transformed into numeric marks (grades) and the mean grade was calculated on the basis of which further analysis was conducted. For the purpose of evaluating the justification of the set hypotheses, a t-test on independent samples was carried out in order to see if a statistically significant difference existed between similarities/differences of respective countries depending on whether only country name or country tourist brand was used as a visual aid during the survey. Together with this relatively firm procedure, a more subjective approach was used to obtain perceptual maps through the application of MDS (multidimensional scaling). In the selection of this approach, all its advantages (the option of using any data on similarities or differences, no knowledge of research objects required but only the existence of any perceived relation, the ability to apply the approach on any group of the same research objects ...) were taken into account. The main feature of MDS is that it aims to determine the spatial arrangement of points (in a determined greater or smaller number of dimensions) whose distances best correspond to input data, implying the obtaining of perceptual maps (Green, Tull and Albaum,1988).

3.2 Findings

In accordance with the main hypotheses, the obtained results expressed by mean grades on similarities/differences between respective countries indicated that there is a statistically significant difference (with $p < 0,05$) between some pairs of countries depending on whether the countries were presented with or without a tourist destination brand. (Figure 1.)

With eleven pairs, depending on whether the tourist brand was used or not, there were statistically significant differences. This points to the importance of brand when only two countries are compared. It also seems that perception has been influenced by the geographic location of the countries: the closer the country pair, the greater the similarity in the respondents opinion. This is also valid conversely: the greater the geographic distance, the higher the mean grades, the greater differences between countries. Moreover, we realise that Croatian students "wish" Croatia to be like Italy, Spain and France. At the same time they "wish" Croatia to be perceived differently than Turkey (and Cyprus, as well). The reasons for this could be the opinion that Croatian students have quite different perceptions of these two tourist countries in comparison to their perception of other Mediterranean tourist countries.

Using MDS, perceptual maps of Control and Experimental groups were obtained (Figures 2 and 3)

Figure 1. Mean grades of similarities/differences between countries

Country A	Country B	Mean grade similarities/ differences Control group	Mean grade similarities/ differences Experimental group	p level (pair t test on independent sample)
CYPRUS	FRANCE	7,17	6,72	n.s.s.
FRANCE	GREECE	6,75	6,42	n.s.s.
GREECE	CROATIA	5,96	6,31	n.s.s.
CROATIA	ITALY	4,51	4,70	n.s.s.
ITALY	MOROCCO	6,06	5,63	n.s.s.
MOROCCO	PORTUGAL	3,88	4,05	n.s.s.
PORTUGAL	SPAIN	2,30	2,41	n.s.s.
SPAIN	TURKEY	6,72	7,51	,006
TURKEY	TUNISIA	5,01	4,28	,020
TUNISIA	CYPRUS	4,19	4,52	n.s.s.
CYPRUS	GREECE	2,83	3,02	n.s.s.
GREECE	ITALY	4,35	4,54	n.s.s.
ITALY	PORTUGAL	4,85	4,21	,010
PORTUGAL	TURKEY	6,88	6,75	n.s.s.
TURKEY	CYPRUS	4,81	4,48	n.s.s.
CYPRUS	CROATIA	6,67	6,81	n.s.s.
CROATIA	MOROCCO	7,74	7,41	n.s.s.
MOROCCO	SPAIN	4,41	4,40	n.s.s.
SPAIN	TUNISIA	5,15	5,61	n.s.s.
TUNISIA	FRANCE	6,58	6,38	n.s.s.
FRANCE	CROATIA	6,12	6,11	n.s.s.
CROATIA	PORTUGAL	6,07	5,72	n.s.s.
PORTUGAL	TUNISIA	4,96	5,19	n.s.s.
TUNISIA	GREECE	5,06	4,84	n.s.s.
GREECE	MOROCCO	5,02	5,14	n.s.s.
MOROCCO	TURKEY	4,63	5,26	,049
TURKEY	FRANCE	7,99	7,67	n.s.s.
FRANCE	ITALY	3,95	3,21	,008
ITALY	SPAIN	3,85	2,90	,000
SPAIN	CYPRUS	5,16	5,06	n.s.s.
CYPRUS	ITALY	5,20	5,10	n.s.s.
ITALY	TURKEY	7,09	7,50	n.s.s.
TURKEY	GREECE	4,22	4,94	,033
GREECE	PORTUGAL	5,11	5,09	n.s.s.
PORTUGAL	CYPRUS	5,33	5,15	n.s.s.
CYPRUS	MOROCCO	4,63	5,01	n.s.s.
MOROCCO	TUNISIA	3,69	3,58	n.s.s.
TUNISIA	CROATIA	7,78	7,52	n.s.s.
CROATIA	SPAIN	5,72	5,26	n.s.s.
SPAIN	FRANCE	4,83	3,82	,001
FRANCE	MOROCCO	5,63	4,77	,004
TUNISIA	ITALY	6,26	6,56	n.s.s.
CROATIA	TURKEY	7,89	7,20	,021
GREECE	SPAIN	5,02	4,68	n.s.s.
PORTUGAL	FRANCE	5,11	4,22	,001

Remark 1: the lower the grade, the greater the similarity in the respondents opinion and conversely, the higher the grade, the greater the difference between countries in the opinion of the respondent.

Remark 2: n.s.s. not statistically significant difference at $p < 0,05$.

Figure 2. Perceptual map Control group

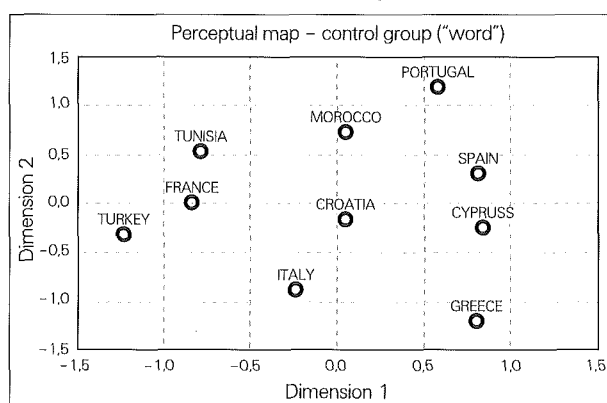
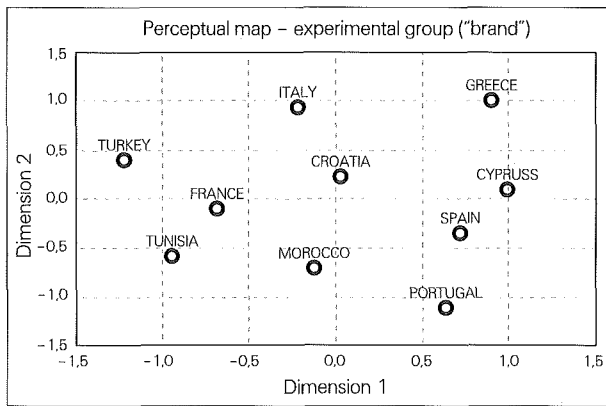
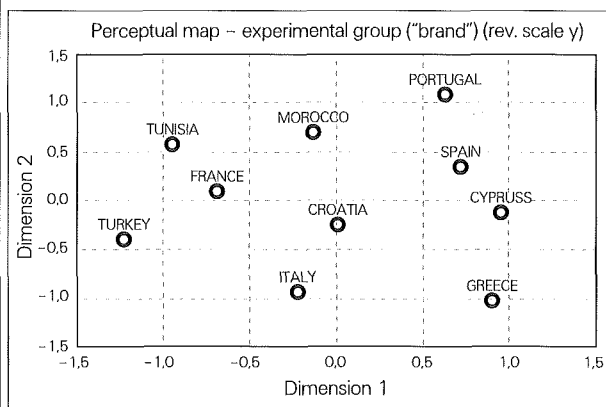


Figure 3. Perceptual map Experimental group



The obtained "stress values" are very low (around 0.18 - 0.19). These show that the obtained perceptual maps adequately represent (in view of the exploratory nature of the research) the sum of squared deviations from real data of calculated mean grades. Only, at first glance do the obtained maps differ significantly. But if on axis y (dimension 2) we apply reverse scaling and we "twist" it, that is, mark it from the highest to the lowest value, we obtain almost the same perceptual map as in the case when country names were used (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Perceptual map Experimental group (with reversed axis y)



The positions of respective countries somewhat differ in relation to perceptual maps of the control group. These differences are small. One of the main advantages but also disadvantages of MDS is the subjective approach to the determination of dimensions. Taking into account the objectives of the research, no effort was made into discovering the "underlying" dimensions, their importance and significance. What is evident in all perceptual maps is that Croatia to respondents served as reference country in relation to which they observed the similarities/differences of all other countries. This is understandable since the respondents were very homogeneous they were all Croats of the same age group and the same level of education.

3.3. Implications of research

If we are to take into account the findings of the research, differences exist in similarities/differences between countries

depending on whether comparisons were made based on country name or country tourist brand. The differences expressed by mean grade are statistically significant with the following country pairs: Turkey-Tunisia, Tunisia-Cyprus, Italy-Portugal, Morocco-Turkey, France-Italy, Italy-Spain, Turkey-Greece, Spain-France, France-Morocco, Croatia-Turkey and Portugal-France.

Furthermore, by applying MDS depending on exposure to the tourist brand of compared countries, different perceptual maps were obtained. Based on perceptual maps, we can conclude the following: to respondents, Croatia served as a reference country; and the differences in perceptual maps were not so great, although this was to be expected on the basis of statistically significant differences in mean grades obtained from data on the perception of similarities/differences between countries. Conversely, it is possible to claim that the position of countries on perceptual maps does not differ much, but since differences do exist, we could claim that the perception of some countries and the perceptual construction of these countries are influenced by the tourist country brand. The obvious bias due to the selected sampling procedure should be taken into account.

3.4. Limitations and discussion

When considering the main limitations of this research we should take into consideration the fact that the research was carried out on a small and convenient sample of respondents who were homogeneous in the majority of their features (age, education, nationality) relevant for the subject of research. Selecting a markedly subjective method of data analysis (and this is what MDS and other multivariate methods certainly are) based on an expression of a psychologically experienced level of similarities/differences of research subjects is an additional serious limitation.

Despite everything, the obtained results may be considered as indicative and this research project may serve as an adequate starting point for other research studies, i.e. where a greater number of respondents will be selected according to other sampling procedures and with the use of less subjective approaches and methods of data processing.

The results may also be considered as indicative since the project was conceived as an exploratory research with its main objective being the clarification of the nature of the research phenomenon and whose results would be useful for setting out concrete ("firm") hypotheses that will serve as a starting point for future more comprehensive research projects.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Viewed through starting hypotheses, it is possible to conclude that exposure to the tourist country brand has a direct impact on the perception of some countries but that perceptual maps will only slightly differ depending on whether country brands or names are compared.

Appendix



A tourist country brand cannot in a short term significantly change the perception of a country. That is probably possible in the long term but within limited scopes which is in line with the comprehensiveness and synchronisation of all marketing activities (including brand management).

The findings of this exploratory research show that the view that only investment in institutional promotion through investment in brand (and other elements of visual identity) will bring a significantly competitive advantage in the tourism industry is incorrect. At the same it is incorrect to think that investment in a tourist country brand does not bring any benefits. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the findings of this research show that brand, together with other marketing activities, influence the formation of the experience, perception and image of a tourist country. The saying that "the perception is reality" is perhaps more valid for tourism than for other service industries. All of this shows that the management of a tourist country brand should be a serious, consistent and comprehensive marketing activity. An inadequate approach (for example frequent changes such as in Croatia) can result in an unclear perception of a tourist country. This indeed is a huge shortcoming in attracting new tourists and competing on the global tourism market.

References

1. Aaker, D. (1991), *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand Name*, The Free Press, New York.
2. Aaker, D. (1996), *Building Strong Brands*, The Free Press, New York.
3. Berry, L. L., Parasuraman, A. (1991), *Marketing Services: Competing Through Quality*, The Free Press, New York.
4. Berry, L. L., Leikowith, E. F.; Clark, T. (1988), "In Services, Whats in a Name?" *Harvard Business Review*, Sept.-Oct., pp. 28-32.
5. Chiranjeev, K., Mrugank, T. (1997), "Branding consumer goods: insights from theory and practice", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol 14, no 3, pp. 206-219.
6. Chon, K. S. (1991), "Tourism Destination Image Modification Process Marketing Implications", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 12, no 1, pp. 68-72.
7. Davis, S. (1995), "A Vision for the Year 2000", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol 12, no 4, pp. 65-82.
8. Green, P. E., Tull, D. S., Albaum, G. (1988), *Research for Marketing Decisions*, Prentice Hall.
9. Low, G. S., Fullerton, R. A. (1994), "Brands, Brand Management, and the Brand manager System: A Critical-Historical Evaluation", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. XXXI, May, pp. 173-190.
10. Joachimsthaler, E., Aaker, D. A. (1997), "Building Brands Without Mass Media", *Harvard Business Review*, Jan-Feb, pp. 39-50.
11. Keller, K. L. (1998), *Strategic Brand Management*, Prentice-Hall, Inc.
12. Lumsdon, L. (1997), *Tourism Marketing*, International Thomson Business Press, London.
13. Marušić, M., Vranešević, T. (1997), *Istraživanje tržišta*, Adeco, Zagreb, pp. 135-158.
14. Mrugank, V. T., Chiranjeev, S. K. (1996), "Brand origin: conceptualization and review", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol 13, no 3, pp. 27-42.
15. Onkvisit, S., Shaw, J. J. (1989), "Service marketing: image, branding and competition", *Business Horizons*, Vol 32, no 1, pp.13-18.
16. Ozretić Došen, Đ., Vranešević, T. (1997), »Marka kao tržišni aspekt proizvoda: Istraživanje stavova o markama nekih hrvatskih proizvoda«, *Računovodstvo i financije*, no 4, pp.89-96.
17. Ozretić Došen, Đ., Vranešević, T., Prebežac, D. (1998), »Značaj politike marke u razvoju marketinške strategije hrvatske kao turističke destinacije«, *Acta Turistica*, no 2, pp.111-127.
18. Turley, L. W., Moore, P.A. (1995), "Brand Name Strategies in the Service Sector", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol 12, no 4, pp.42-50.
19. Upshaw, L. B. (1995), *Building Brand Identity*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
20. Vukonić, B. (1995), »Smisao i objašnjenje pojma turistička destinacija«, *Turizam*, no 3-4, pp.66-71.