

The Influence of Previous Visitation on Customer's Evaluation of a Tourism Destination

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The paper investigates the customer's perspective on a tourism destination brand through four proposed dimensions: awareness, image, quality and loyalty dimension. In addition to the brand's dimensions evaluation, the influence of previous visitation on each proposed dimension is presented. The evaluation of tourism destination brand Slovenia in the minds of German respondents serves as an investigated example. In addition to an evaluation for each investigated dimensions' variables for destination Slovenia as perceived by German respondents, the study confirms also the influence of previous visitation on brand evaluation. In the investigated example, previous visitation is recognized as the improvement factor in Slovenia's evaluation in the minds of German respondents.

Key Words: customer's evaluation, tourism destination, brand, previous visitation, Slovenia

JEL Classification: M31, M39

Introduction

A significant amount of effort has been devoted to presenting the customer's perspective on brand concept (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993). Those analyses have not been oriented only toward evaluation of products (Yoo et al. 2000; Faircloth et al. 2001), services (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1999) and organizational brands (Dowling 2002), but also towards evaluation of a destination brands (Cai 2002; Morgan and Pritchard 2002; Olins 2002; Konecnik 2004). The entry of many new destinations into the market is forcing all destinations to compete in the battle to win more tourists (Konecnik 2002). The role of smaller destinations is even more emphasized because the vast majority of tourists (70%) visit just

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ten main countries (Morgan et al. 2002). To achieve their goals, destinations are doing their best to remain competitive in the international market (Baloglu and McCleary 1999; Gomezelj Omerzel 2006). Within the last few years, attention has been oriented towards the development of a destination brand, which should have a strong and unique position in the mind of potential tourists.

Many empirical studies about tourism destination evaluation stress the important role of previous visitation, which is treated as an improvement (Fakeye and Crompton 1991; Milman and Pizam 1995; Baloglu and McCleary 1999) or realistic (Hu and Ritchie 1993; Mackay and Fesenmaier 1997) factor in destination evaluation. Regardless of its positive or even negative effect on the tourist's evaluation of a destination, previous visitation was recognized as an important factor in the process of tourists' evaluation of a destination brand.

The main purpose of this paper is to present the customer's perspective on destination brand evaluation and to confirm (or reject) the influence of previous visitation on the process of brand evaluation. The evaluation of a tourism destination brand Slovenia in the minds of German respondents will serve us as an investigated example.

Customer's Evaluation of a Tourism Destination

Customer's evaluation of a tourism destination phenomenon has attracted enormous interest among tourism research lines. Within this demand-side perspective on the tourism destination phenomenon, mostly the concept of tourism destination image has been investigated (Hunt 1975; Crompton 1979; Gartner 1986; 1993; Echtner and Ritchie 1993; Baloglu and McCleary 1999; Baloglu 2001; Brezovec 2001; Brezovec et al. 2004; Gallarza et al. 2002; Pike 2002). Although the numerous empirical studies have stressed the important role of the image concept in destination brand evaluation, the marketing researchers argue that a customer's perspective on the brand equity phenomenon should incorporate a more comprehensive measure for its evaluation (Faircloth et al. 2001; Yoo and Donthu 2001).

The so proposed customer's perspective on brand evaluation was introduced through the concept of customer-based brand equity (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993; Yoo and Donthu 2001). As a relatively newly developed construct, the concept has attracted great interest in the last fifteen years (Barwise 1993; Vazquez et al. 2002). Till now, no consensus has been reached as to which dimensions constitute the customer's per-

spective on brand. On the contrary, there is some evidence leading to an adjustment of brand equity dimensions. These steps are evident in analyses (Faircloth et al. 2001; Yoo and Donthu 2001) based on Aaker (1991) and Keller's (1993) categorization. Combining both approaches of the leading authors; we follow the line of researchers (Aaker 1991; Yoo and Donthu 2001) who claim that the customer's evaluation of a brand comprises awareness, image, quality and loyalty dimensions.

Similarly as in the previous group of authors, we argue that a customer's (tourist's) perspective on the tourism destination phenomenon consists of tourism destination awareness, tourism destination image and quality dimensions, as well as tourist's loyalty toward the investigated destination. Numerous studies have already proposed a spectrum of variables which incorporates a dimension of the tourism destination image concept (Gartner 1989; Echtner and Ritchie 1993; Gallarza et al. 2002). During our review we came to the conclusion that the previous tourism destination image studies could possibly also include a quality dimension (Konečnik 2005a).

In contrast to numerous studies dealing with the tourism destination image concept (which also include a quality dimension), the other two dimensions have been less intensively studied. Tourism destination awareness has mostly been investigated within the topic of the destination selection process (Woodside and Sherrell 1977; Moutinho 1987). These studies argue that awareness is a first and necessary step leading to destination visitation, but it is not a sufficient one (Milman and Pizam 1995). Tourism destination loyalty has only attracted some interest within the tourism destination brand. Oppermann (2000) shares the same opinion in his seminal work on tourism destination loyalty, in which he argues that the loyalty dimension should also not be neglected for a tourism destination. Some previous studies about a tourism destination have only partly incorporated the loyalty dimensions (Gitelson and Crompton 1984; Fakeye and Crompton 1991; Bigne et al. 2001).

Hyphothesis

The previous visitation phenomenon has attracted significant attention within tourism destination investigations. There are at least three content areas for investigation. First, the topic has been extensively investigated in connection with a tourism destination's image (Hunt 1975; Fakeye and Crompton 1991; Hu and Ritchie 1993; Milman and Pizam 1995; Baloglu and McCleary 1999; Baloglu 2001); second, it has been recognized as

an important dimension in the content of tourist information sources (Gartner 1993); and, third, it represents one part of the whole destination choice process (Woodside and Sherrell 1977; Woodside and Lysonski 1989; Moutinho 1987; Um and Crompton 1990; Goodall 1993). However, it is not surprising that expressions such as direct or previous experience (Baloglu 2001), internal information-search process (Gitelson and Crompton 1983; Gartner and Bachri 1994) or significative stimuli (Um and Crompton 1990) are treated as synonyms. Although the majority of empirical studies treated previous visitation as an improvement factor in the formation of a tourism destination image (Fakeye and Crompton 1991; Milman and Pizam 1995; Baloglu and McCleary 1999; Konecnik 2002; 2005b), some researchers have recognized it as a realistic factor (Hu and Ritchie 1993; Mackay and Fesenmaier 1997) in image evaluation. Image as a realistic factor could either improve the visitor's opinion about a destination (in order the destination exceed his expectations) or even negatively influence his/her opinion about the visited destination (in case personal expectations regarding the visited destination were not met). Without taking into consideration which group of authors we are following, previous visitation has been recognized as an important factor in a tourist's image-formation process. In addition, previous studies also confirm its important role in the tourism destination awareness dimension and a tourist's interest in visiting a destination (Milman and Pizam 1995).

Hypothesis 1: Tourists' previous visitations significantly influence their perceptions of the destination evaluation.

Hypothesis 1a: Tourism destination awareness differs between tourists who have visited an investigated destination compared to those who have not.

Hypothesis 1b: Tourism destination image differs between tourists who have visited an investigated destination compared to those who have not.

Hypothesis 1c: A tourist's perceived quality of destination differs between tourists who have visited an investigated destination compared to those who have not.

Hypothesis 1d: Tourism destination loyalty differs between tourists who have visited an investigated destination compared to those who have not.

TABLE 1 Number of international tourist arrivals and overnights of tourists from abroad in 2003 for Slovenia

Country	Tourist arrivals	Market share (%)	Overnights of tourists	Market share (%)
Germany	229372	16.7	813241	19.5
Italy	288507	21.0	729181	17.5
Austria	201367	14.7	690827	16.5
Croatia	93639	6.8	264827	6.3
Netherlands	46764	3.4	195356	4.7
Switzerland	22514	1.6	62165	1.5
Other	490974	35.8	1419788	34.0
Total	1373137	100.0	4175385	100.0

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2004.

Methodology

DATA GATHERING

Data were collected using the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) method, which was selected due to the method's possibility of ensuring simple random samples (SRS). Individuals aged older than 18 years were invited to participate in the study. These individuals represent the potential tourist population of our analysed brand Slovenia. In 2003, German tourists had around a 17% market share in foreign tourists' arrivals and around a 20% market share in foreign overnight stays (table 1), which represented the most important group of tourists in Slovenia. The research was conducted in June and July 2003. The telephone interviews were performed by a German professional research agency. A total of 1437 people were contacted and the response rate was 42.9%. The final sample consisted of 402 respondents.

THE OPERATIONALISATION OF THE VARIABLES AND THE STUDY INSTRUMENT

The operationalisation of variables followed previous research findings and suggestions for the development of scales (Churchill 1979). To operationalise the awareness variables, the suggestions by Milman and Pizam (1995) as well as Yoo and Donthu (2001) studies were employed. The tourism destination image, which also included the quality dimension, has been the subject of many empirical studies in tourism research. Therefore, the operationalisation of image and quality vari-

ables was achieved according to the suggestions of leading authors in this area: Hunt (1975), Echtner and Ritchie (1993), Gartner (1986; 1989), Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Gallarza et al. (2002). Finally, earlier research findings about the brand loyalty dimension (Oliver 1996) and its application to the tourism destination level (Fakeye and Crompton 1991; Oppermann 2000; Bigne et al. 2001) were employed in operationalising the variables for tourism destination loyalty. Content analyses from the qualitative research were an additional source used for this purpose. First, we relied on findings from the in-depth interviews with potential tourists, which divided traditionally proposed image attribute-based variables into variables presenting the image and the quality dimension. Second, the results of the qualitative experience survey research among destination managers and marketers were considered. Finally, scale refinement in line with experts' opinions represents an additional source of information (Konečnik 2005a).

The study instrument includes questions about the four proposed dimensions (awareness, image, perceived quality and loyalty) for the tourism destination Slovenia as well questions describing the travel profiles of respondents and their socio-demographic characteristics. The study instrument only employed closed questions. For each proposed dimension a set of variables was employed (five awareness, sixteen image, ten quality and four loyalty variables for investigating each of the four proposed dimensions). The variables are measured on a unipolar 5-point Likert scale, whereby 1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree'. All scales included a neutral mean. Generally, all variables were measured in positive directions. Only three variables (one for the awareness dimension, the second for image and the third for the quality dimension) had a negative direction (Spector 1994). In further analysis, these variables were properly reverse scored. Respondents had the possibility to choose one of several answers offered.

DATA ANALYSIS

With the aim of presenting the Germans' perception about the proposed dimension for Slovenia as a tourism destination, univariate statistics (means and standard deviations) for each of the proposed variables of dimensions will be presented. In this example, analyses will be done on the whole sample of respondents. Further, all respondents will be separated into 2 conceptual groups, regarding the dividing criteria needed for hypotheses testing. The first group of respondents represents those Germans who had already visited Slovenia in the past (so called visitors),

while the second group of respondents represents those Germans, who had not visited Slovenia in the past (so called non-visitors). For confirmation or rejection of the proposed hypotheses, the independent sample t-test procedure (Sharma 1996; Rován and Turk 2001) will be used to show significant differences for each investigated variable of four proposed dimensions: awareness, image, perceived quality and loyalty. In these analyses, because the significance value for the Levene test was high, the equality of variances was assumed. We will present the mean for each group of respondents, t-tests between the groups and the statistical significance only for those variables where statistical significant differences between the investigated groups will appear.

Results

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The final sample consists of 402 German respondents. We were able to ensure simple random samples (SRS) due to the way of interviewing (CATI method). Therefore, we suspect that the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (table 2) reflect the characteristics of the whole population in the German markets. Most German respondents came from the Nordrhein-Westfalen area (21%), followed by Bayern (17%) and Baden-Württemberg (11%). The majority of them have finished secondary school (almost 30%), whereas the other educational classes are almost equally represented. Somewhat less than 60% were employed, with average incomes from €1500 to €2000 (17%). Most (75%) of them were older than 35 years. Approximately 54% of the respondents were female, and 46% were male.

The results of personal experiences with Slovenia indicate that the majority of Germans are aware of Slovenia as a tourism destination, because almost 94% of them had already heard of Slovenia ($n = 376$). By contrast, only 26% of respondents ($n = 98$) who had heard of Slovenia had visited Slovenia in the past, which indicates that only one-quarter of German respondents (24.3%) have personal experience with Slovenia as a tourism destination. On average, they had visited Slovenia once (10%) or two times (7.5%) in the period of the preceding two to five years (8.7%). Many of these respondents (8.4%) visited Slovenia over ten years ago.

Because in our analysis we decided to employ only those German respondents who had heard of Slovenia, the opinions of 376 Germans will be used in our presentation of the proposed dimensions. At the same time we will separate the German respondents who had heard of Slovenia into two groups: 1) those who had already visited Slovenia in the

TABLE 2 Sociodemographic characteristics of German respondents

Sociodemographic characteristics	(1)	(2)
<i>Area</i>		
Schleswig-Holstein	3.2	3.2
Hamburg	2.0	5.2
Niedersachsen	10.7	15.9
Bremen	1.2	17.2
Nordrhein-Westfalen	20.9	38.1
Hessen	8.7	46.8
Rheinland-Pfalz	2.7	49.5
Baden-Württemberg	11.4	60.9
Bayern	16.9	77.9
Saarland	2.0	79.9
Berlin	3.5	83.3
Brandenburg	3.0	86.3
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	0.7	87.3
Sachsen	5.0	92.0
Sachsen-Anhalt	3.5	95.5
Thuringen	4.5	100.0
<i>Education</i>		
Primary school (9 years)	25.9	25.9
Secondary school	29.9	55.7
Grammar school	21.6	77.4
University degree	22.1	99.5
No answer	0.5	100.0

Continued on the next page

past (visitors) and 2) those respondents who had not visited Slovenia in the past (non-visitors, see table 3). The demographic profile is presented in an aggregated nature rather than by separating two proposed groups of respondents, because no significant differences were found between their sociodemographic characteristics. In addition, the correlation matrix between variable previous visitation and other variables (education, employment status, personal income, age, gender and geographic area) was employed (table 4). The results imply that none of the correlations between investigated variables was statistically significant, which indi-

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Sociodemographic characteristics	(1)	(2)
<i>Employment status</i>		
Employed	58.5	58.5
Self-employed	5.7	64.2
Student/scholar	5.0	69.2
Retired	15.9	85.1
Housewife/Unemployed	13.9	99.0
No answer	1.0	100.0
<i>Personal income</i>		
< €500	8.2	8.2
€500–1000	15.4	23.6
€1000–1500	15.7	39.3
€1500–2000	16.9	56.2
€2000–2500	8.2	64.4
€2500–3000	4.0	68.4
€3000–3500	1.2	69.7
€3500–4000	2.2	71.9
> €4000	2.7	74.6
Without personal income	10.0	84.6
No answer	15.4	100.0
<i>Age</i>		
18–24 years	6.7	6.7
25–34 years	18.9	25.6
35–44 years	27.6	53.2
45–54 years	21.1	74.4
55–64 years	14.4	88.8
More than 65 years	10.7	99.5
No answer	0.5	100.0
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	46.3	46.3
Female	53.7	100.0

Column headings as follows: (1) percentage, (2) cumulative percentage.

cates, that the only difference between the two groups is determined by the variable of previous visitation.

TABLE 3 Sample characteristics of German's respondents

Characteristic	Yes	No
Have heard of Slovenia as a tourism destination	376	26
Have visited Slovenia as a tourism destination	98	278

Notes: $n = 402$.

TABLE 4 Correlation matrix between previous visitation and other variables

Variable	PV	E	ES	PI	A	G	GA
Pearson correlation	1	0.099	-0.031	0.038	0.099	-0.048	0.021
Sig. (2-tailed)	-	0.055	0.544	0.466	0.055	0.358	0.685

Column headings as follows: PV – previous visitation, E – education, ES – employment status, PI – personal income, A – age, G – gender, GA – geographical area. Notes: $n = 376$.

ANALYSES OF DIMENSIONS (AWARENESS, IMAGE, QUALITY
AND LOYALTY) AND THE INFLUENCE OF PREVIOUS VISITATION
ON DIMENSIONS' EVALUATION

German respondents stated they had heard of Slovenia as a tourism destination (mean 4.51), which was the best evaluated awareness variable among German respondents (table 5). A much lower level of Slovenia's awareness in the mind of German respondents was recognized in other four investigated awareness variables. Germans had agreed only to some extent that they can recognize the name of Slovenia among other destinations (mean 3.11) or imagining it in their mind (mean 3.03). On the contrary, they have many problems in quick recalls of some of Slovenia's characteristics (2.22) and especially in recalling the symbol or logo of Slovenia as a tourism destination (mean 1.51).

TABLE 5 Awareness variables for Slovenia as a tourism destination for German respondents

Variable	M	SD
I have heard of Slovenia.	4.51	0.90
I can recognize the name of Slovenia among other destinations.	3.11	1.45
I have difficulty imagining Slovenia in my mind (r).	3.03	1.56
Some characteristics of Slovenia come quickly to mind.	2.22	1.38
I can recall the symbol or logo of Slovenia as a tourism destination.	1.51	1.10

Notes: M = mean, SD = standard deviation. Variable scale: from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree); $n = 376$.

TABLE 6 Statistically significant differences in Slovenia's awareness variables due to previous visitation

Variable	(1)		(2)		T-test	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		
Heard of Slovenia	4.73	0.67	4.42	0.96	2.95	0.003 ^β
Name of Slovenia	3.93	1.23	2.82	1.41	6.90	0.000 ^α
Characteristics of Slovenia	3.44	1.37	1.78	1.10	11.95	0.000 ^α
Imagining Slovenia	3.80	1.49	2.77	1.51	5.85	0.000 ^α
Symbol or logo of Slovenia	1.89	1.40	1.38	0.95	3.99	0.000 ^α

Column headings as follows: (1) Germans who have visited Slovenia in the past ($n = 98$); (2) Germans who have not visited Slovenia in the past ($n = 278$).

Notes: α significant at < 0.001 , β significant at < 0.01 , M = mean, SD = standard deviation, T-test = independent sample t-test (equal variances assumed). Variable scale: from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Previous visitation to Slovenia (table 6) has significantly improved the awareness perception of Slovenia as a tourism destination in the mind of German respondents. Statistically significant differences between respondents who have visited Slovenia in the past compared to respondents, who have not visited it, were found in all five awareness variables. Except for the variable of hearing of Slovenia as a tourism destination, all other investigated significant differences were confirmed at the level of 0.000, which indicates a strong influence of previous visitation on awareness dimension, especially in those awareness variables which indicate a higher level of brand awareness (Aaker 1991).

The results indicate that German respondents hold a relatively neutral opinion about Slovenia's image as a tourism destination (table 7). It is quite hard to say that Germans' perceptions about Slovenia's image variables are positive because none of the investigated image variables attracted a mean of at least 4 on the scale from 1 to 5. On average, they mostly agreed that Slovenia's people are friendly (mean 3.99), Slovenia has pleasant weather (mean 3.93) and beautiful nature (mean 3.91), and especially beautiful mountains and lakes (mean 3.64). By contrast, they had doubts about modern health resorts (mean 2.58) in Slovenia, its political stability (mean 2.69), Slovenia's good nightlife and entertainment (mean 2.75) and partly also about its exciting atmosphere (mean 2.89). Although the mean scores of the latter variables were below 3, we can hardly talk of any negative perceptions in any of Slovenia's image variables with German respondents.

TABLE 7 Image variables for Slovenia as a tourism destination for German respondents

Variable	M	SD
Friendly people	3.99	0.80
Pleasant weather	3.93	0.81
Beautiful nature	3.91	0.99
Beautiful mountains and lakes	3.64	1.03
Relaxing atmosphere	3.59	0.89
Good opportunities for recreation activities	3.51	0.98
Interesting historical attractions	3.42	1.07
Poor opportunities for adventures (r)	3.40	1.17
Lovely towns and cities	3.39	1.02
Interesting cultural attractions	3.38	0.98
Good beaches	3.19	1.21
Good shopping facilities	2.98	0.99
Exciting atmosphere	2.89	0.93
Good nightlife and entertainment	2.75	1.10
Political stability	2.69	1.05
Modern health resorts	2.58	1.04

Notes: M = mean, SD = standard deviation. Variable scale: from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Previous visitation to Slovenia (table 8) improved Germans' opinions about its image variables. However, German respondents who have visited Slovenia in the past shared positive opinions about its beautiful nature and friendly people. The mean score of both attributes was higher than 4, which indicates that previous visitation has a strong influence on Slovenia's image perception. Previous visitation has the biggest influence on Germans' perceptions of Slovenia's beautiful nature, mountains and lakes, good opportunities for recreation activities, as well as its political stability.

Germans perceived Slovenia's quality dimension (table 9) quite badly, especially due to their intrinsic quality variables. The results show that more than half of the proposed intrinsic quality variables for Slovenia were evaluated with a mean score below 3. The quality of infrastructure (mean 2.66) in Slovenia was the worst perceived variable in the minds of German respondents, followed by Slovenia's level of personal safety (mean 2.73) and its quality of accommodation (mean 2.82). Ger-

TABLE 8 Statistically significant differences in Slovenia's image variables due to previous visitation

Variable	(1)		(2)		T-test	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		
Beautiful nature	4.31	0.78	3.74	1.02	4.88	0.000 ^α
Beautiful mountains, lakes	3.95	0.93	3.52	1.04	3.49	0.001 ^α
Lovely towns and cities	3.57	1.03	3.32	1.02	2.03	0.043 ^γ
Recreation activities	3.80	0.87	3.40	0.99	3.44	0.001 ^α
Friendly people	4.14	0.69	3.93	0.82	2.14	0.033 ^γ
Political stability	3.06	1.09	2.56	1.00	3.94	0.000 ^α
Relaxing atmosphere	3.76	0.90	3.53	0.87	2.18	0.030 ^γ

Column headings as follows: (1) Germans who have visited Slovenia in the past (*n* = 98); (2) Germans who have not visited Slovenia in the past (*n* = 278).

Notes: ^α significant at < 0.001; ^γ significant at < 0.05. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, T-test = independent sample t-test (equal variances assumed). Variable scale: from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

TABLE 9 Quality variables for Slovenia as a tourism destination for German respondents

Variable	M	SD
Low prices of tourism services	3.98	0.74
Appealing local food (cuisine)	3.78	0.83
Good value for money	3.73	0.79
Few problems with communication	3.29	1.18
Unpolluted environment	3.13	1.00
High level of cleanliness	2.99	0.83
Low quality of services (r)	2.86	1.04
High quality of accommodation	2.82	0.87
High level of personal safety	2.73	0.91
High quality of infrastructure	2.66	0.89

Notes: M = mean, SD = standard deviation. Variable scale: from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

mans have much higher opinions about Slovenia's local food, which represented the best evaluated intrinsic quality variable. By contrast, data showed respondents' better opinions about Slovenia's extrinsic quality variables. However, this is especially stressed in the evaluation of Slovenia's prices of tourism services.

TABLE 10 Statistically significant differences in Slovenia's quality variables due to previous visitation

Variable	(1)		(2)		T-test	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		
Cleanliness	3.15	0.84	2.93	0.82	2.21	0.028 ^γ
Personal safety	3.01	0.87	2.63	0.90	3.51	0.001 ^α
Communication	3.13	1.13	2.76	0.99	2.94	0.003 ^β

Column headings as follows: (1) Germans who have visited Slovenia in the past ($n = 98$); (2) Germans who have not visited Slovenia in the past ($n = 278$).

Notes: α significant at < 0.001 , β significant at < 0.01 , γ significant at < 0.05 . M = mean, SD = standard deviation, T-test = independent sample t-test (equal variances assumed). Variable scale: from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

TABLE 11 Loyalty variables for Slovenia as a tourism destination for German respondents

Variable	M	SD
I would like to visit Slovenia in the future.	3.21	1.33
I intend to recommend Slovenia to my friends.	2.86	1.34
Slovenia provides more benefits than other similar European destinations.	2.41	0.99
Slovenia is one of the preferred destinations I want to visit.	2.30	1.14

Notes: M = mean, SD = standard deviation. Variable scale: from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Previous visitation to Slovenia (table 10) improved Germans' perceptions about Slovenia's personal safety (statistically significant at the 0.001 level), their communication possibilities with Slovenians (statistically significant at the 0.01 level) as well as Slovenia's level of cleanliness.

From all proposed loyalty variables, Germans (table 11) agreed only with the statement that they would like to visit Slovenia in the future (mean 3.21). Because this loyalty variable significantly differs from the neutral mean (3), this could imply a possible future visit to Slovenia by German respondents. Other three loyalty variables were evaluated with a mean score less than 3.

Germans who have visited Slovenia in the past agreed significantly more about their future visitation of Slovenia and its possible recommendation to their friends and relatives than those Germans who have never been to Slovenia (table 12). Both variables of so called attitudinal loyalty measures were evaluated with a mean score higher than the

TABLE 12 Statistically significant differences in Slovenia’s loyalty variables due to previous visitation

Variable	(1)		(2)		T-test	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		
Slovenia provides more benefits	2.58	1.02	2.34	0.98	1.97	0.049 ^γ
Visit Slovenia in the future	3.60	1.21	3.06	1.34	3.50	0.001 ^α
Recommend Slovenia	3.28	1.33	2.68	1.30	3.71	0.000 ^α

Column headings as follows: (1) Germans who have visited Slovenia in the past (*n* = 98); (2) Germans who have not visited Slovenia in the past (*n* = 278).

Notes: *α* significant at < 0.001, *γ* significant at < 0.05. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, T-test = independent sample t-test (equal variances assumed). Variable scale: from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

neutral mean (3). Further, significantly better evaluation about Slovenia’s benefits in comparison to other similar European destinations was recognized by those Germans who have visited Slovenia in the past.

Discussion and Conclusion

German respondents are aware of Slovenia as a tourism destination, although they have still problems in their quick recall of some of Slovenia’s characteristics. Further, they hold mostly neutral or even slightly positive opinions about Slovenia’s image. On average, they perceive Slovenia as a country of friendly people and pleasant weather with beautiful nature, especially due to its beautiful mountains and lakes. In addition, they shared much worse opinions about Slovenia’s quality dimension, especially about Slovenia’s intrinsic quality variables: infrastructure, personal safety and its accommodation. By contrast they evaluated Slovenia’s extrinsic quality variables more positively. All together, this perception can also be presented in Germans’ attitudinal loyalty dimension about Slovenia. The results here indicated only a slight attitudinal loyalty of Germans, mainly through their interest in visiting Slovenia in the future.

Consistent with previous research we found that previous visitation (table 13) plays an important role in customer’s evaluation of a tourism destination. Regarding the results of Germans’ evaluation of Slovenia as a tourism destination, we can conclude that previous visitation to Slovenia improved Germans’ awareness of Slovenia as well as their loyalty attitude to the investigated destination. Because we have confirmed the statistically significant differences in all investigated variables for awareness di-

TABLE 13 The influence of previous visitation on the customer's evaluation of a tourism destination

Hypothesis	Number of variables (statistically significant differences)	Results	
H1	Previous visitation → Customer's evaluation of a tourism destination		Confirmed
H1a	Previous visitation → Awareness	5v	Confirmed
H1b	Previous visitation → Image	7v	Partly confirmed
H1c	Previous visitation → Perceived quality	3v	Partly confirmed
H1d	Previous visitation → Loyalty	3v	Confirmed

Total number of: awareness variables – 5, image variables – 16, quality variables – 10, loyalty variables – 4.

mension, and in three out of four loyalty variables, we can confirm both of the proposed sub hypotheses (H1a and H1d). Further, previous visitation to Slovenia has also some influence on Germans' perception about Slovenia's image (sub hypothesis H1b) and quality (sub hypothesis H1c) dimension. Due to a previous visit, Germans have a better opinion about the beauty of Slovenia's nature, its mountains and lakes, towns and cities as well as its recreational activities. Previous visitation improved also the Germans' perceptions about the political stability in Slovenia, its relaxing atmosphere and peoples' friendliness. In addition, due to previous visitation, Germans evaluated better also three intrinsic quality variables for destination Slovenia. Therefore we can conclude that there is also some influence of Germans' previous visitation on Slovenia's image and quality perception, which indicates, that we can partly confirm also the sub hypotheses H1b and H1c. Combining the results of all four proposed sub hypotheses, we came to the conclusion that hypothesis H1 can be confirmed, which implies on the influence of previous visitation on customer's evaluation of the tourism destination. However, due to the limited number of items (variables) confirmed for quality (three out of ten) and image (seven out of sixteen) dimension, the results indicated that previous visitation had an influence only on some quality and image proposed variables. But we cannot generalize that previous visitation had an influence in evaluation of our proposed image and quality dimension in general.

The evaluation of quality dimension by Germans who had visited Slovenia in the past, in comparison to those Germans who had not visited it in the past, was the most unexpected conclusion of our research

among German potential tourists. We had expected that previous visitation would improve the opinion about Slovenia's quality dimension more, especially due to the fact that the quality variables were evaluated quite badly. This could be probably also explained by the sample characteristics. Many of the German respondents had visited Slovenia over ten year ago. According to our opinion, the major quality improvements have been made during the last ten years, which could imply that the real quality level has not been perceived by those respondents who had visited Slovenia many years ago.

The comparison of those results with the results of previously made research in 2001 about Slovenia's image as a tourism destination (Konečnik 2002; 2005b) indicates similarities in the conclusions. Our main conclusion – that previous visitation is an important factor in customer's evaluation of a tourism destination – was also confirmed in this research. The target group was tourism representatives (and not potential tourists in general), and the questions included only the destination image and quality dimension variables (awareness dimension was included as the filter question at the beginning, while loyalty dimension was not investigated). Representatives who had visited Slovenia in the past, had in common a better opinion about its image and quality dimension than did the group of experts who had not visited Slovenia. In contrast to the only slight improvement in Slovenia's quality evaluation among Germans' visitors in our research (statistically significant differences were confirmed in three out of ten proposed quality variables), influence of previous visitation on Slovenia's quality perception from the tourism representatives' point of view was perceived as being much stronger. Representatives who had visited Slovenia in the past, evaluated mostly all of the investigated quality variables significantly better than those representatives who had never visited Slovenia till that time.

As far as previous visitation is treated as a realistic factor in destination evaluation (Hu and Ritchie 1993; Mackay and Fesenmaier 1997), the results of both investigations should be considered in further marketing strategies for destination Slovenia. Because previous visitation was confirmed as an improvement factor in Slovenia's evaluation, this could be a sign that there exists a gap between what is offered and what is perceived. Marketing campaigns could for example stress the issues regarding Slovenia's political stability and personal safety, as two of the variables which have been significantly better evaluated by those Germans who visited Slovenia in the past. Beside the consideration of different

perception among potential tourist groups familiar with Slovenia and those not familiar with it, another important suggestion should be derived from the characteristics of Slovenia's identity. The combination of the characteristics stemming from the identity of Slovenia and results of the presented researches should represent a good base for developing further marketing strategies on foreign markets. Because the quality dimension was perceived relatively badly by the Germans' respondents, further marketing strategies on German markets should stress also the high quality level of Slovenia's tourism offer, which has improved considerably during the last few years.

Although the presented paper provides a contribution at the theoretical, empirical and also practical level, there are still many further research opportunities. If we were able to enlarge the sample size of the visitors, it would be reasonable to investigate not only the phenomenon of previous visitation, but also the phenomenon of repeat visitation. In this case it would be reasonable to investigate whether the perception of the destination differs between tourists who have visited a country several times and those tourists who have visited a country fewer times. This differentiating criterion for visitor's separation should be made at some relatively high number of previous visitations, because Fakeye and Crompton in their study (1991) came to conclusion that the majority of changes occur during the first visitation. Further, with an increasing number of visits, tourists build up a more complete opinion about the specific tourism destination, which can also influence their perception of destination evaluation. In addition, it will be reasonable to repeat the same study also on other main target markets for Slovenia as a tourism destination, as Italy, Austria and Great Britain are. Armed with those results, as well as with the affirmation of Slovenia's identity, more efficient marketing strategies on main target markets could be developed.

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