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## DOES A DESTINATION IMAGE DIFFER BASED ON THE GENDER OF “ITB” VISITORS? THE CASE OF SERBIA AS A DEVELOPING TRAVEL DESTINATION

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**Abstract:** This paper's frame of reference is tourism marketing, evaluating the image of targeted travel destination from the gender standpoint. For emerging destinations in south-eastern Europe like Serbia, latent connections between destination image and gender are therefore of particular interest for exploration. The International Travel Trade in Berlin (ITB) was the venue for the research. The connections between ITB visitors' gender and the image they perceived about Serbia were assessed, crossed with their socio-demographic attributes, annual travel spending, information sources, association and awareness of Serbia. In this way, the authors wanted to observe and explain the perception of this target group of Serbia's image. The findings suggest that men and women do not differ in attitudes related to the country's image. On the other hand, there is a difference in image scores for positive, negative and no associations of Serbia. The research results could help in modifying tourism strategies for Serbia.

**Keywords:** gender; marketing; destination; travel; image; Serbia

### Introduction

With the ongoing development of the travel industry and high destination competitiveness, it becomes an imperative for tourism destinations to be perceived as brands. Ryan and Zahra (2004) agreed that a country's image is an integral part of its overall economic development. In light of this, brand image presents an integral role in the success of tourism destinations, since “image, seen as a mental picture formed by a set of attributes that define the destination in its various dimensions, exercises a strong influence on consumer behavior in the tourism sector” (Beerli & Martín, 2004, p. 1). Pavlović, Avlijaš, and Stanić (2016) point out how destination and nation image are very complex concepts, conveying desired message to different profiles of visitors.

Taking into account the last five years (2013–2018) of tourism development in Serbia, the following official studies still indicate the unfavorable position of Serbia as a travel destination. Brand Finance, the world's leading brand valuation consultancy, emphasizes that international

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tourism market today is as competitive as never before, which makes the working environment very challenging, since many new destinations attempt to rebrand their offers. In this new turn of events, international opinion of a nation's brand is crucial. Taking an evidence of ascends and declines of the values of national brands year after year, in 2013, Brand Finance put Serbia on the 6th position of the "list of losers", with a decrease of 23%. More precisely, the value of Serbia's national brand decreased from \$40 billion in 2012 to \$31 billion in 2013. On the list of 100 most valuable brands in the world, Serbia has fallen from the 69th place in 2012 to the 75th place in 2013 (Brand Finance Nation Brands, 2013). The latest Brand Finance's report from 2018 indicates that Serbia holds the 80th place (down by 5 positions since 2013), with \$40 billion of the national brand value (Brand Finance Nation Brands, 2018).

Furthermore, according to Travel and Tourism Competitive Index (TTCI), Serbia did not have an enviable position in Europe back in 2013, with the European rank on the 40th place (out of 42 countries), just above Bosnia and Moldova, and the 89th position overall (out of 140 countries), down by 2 positions in Europe and 7 positions overall since the assessment in 2011. The newest TTCI evaluation from 2017 shows similar ranking – the 39th place (out of 42) among European countries and the 95th position overall (out of 136 countries) (World Economic Forum, 2017).

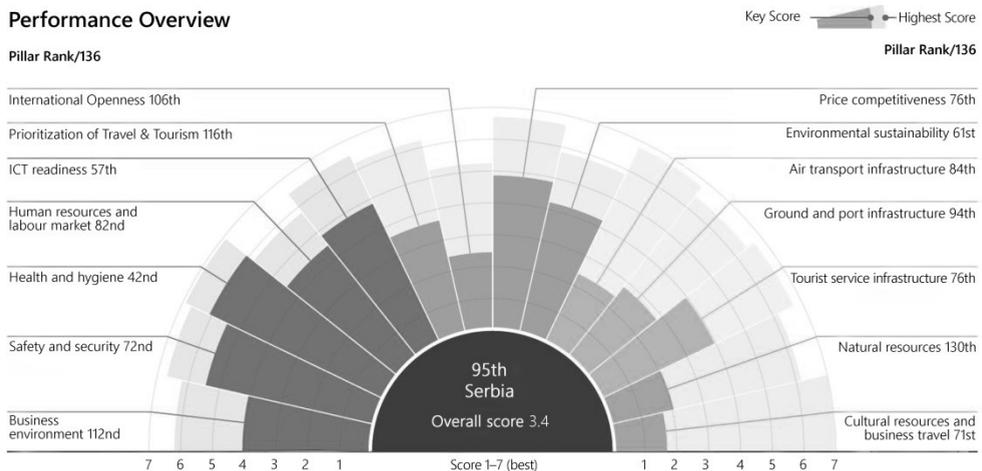


Figure 1. Serbia's profile of 14 travel & tourism pillars. Adopted from "The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report", by World Economic Forum, 2017.

Considering fewer indicators as the significant competitive advantage in Serbian tourism industry, World Economic Forum's research (2017) on the competitiveness in the field of travel and tourism (Figure 1) put Serbia's performance in the middle or in the second half of world's countries. On the whole, Serbian tourism competitiveness, measured by its share in the world market, is characterized by a declining and uncertain trend. Certainly, it is not an appropriate place regarding its geographical position and available resources (Simat, Berić, Vuksanović, & Milutinović, 2013).

Bearing in mind all the aforementioned, the authors have decided to take an insight into the perceived image of Serbia. This study takes into account the views of potential tourists, regardless of whether they have had the opportunity to visit Serbia or not. It is, therefore, an attempt to provide an insight into the recognition of Serbia as a travel destination and, more precisely, gender

differences relating to the perceived image of Serbia. Nowadays a plethora of new challenges are placed before new travel destinations (Kladou & Mavragani, 2015). This paper does not suggest that Serbian tourism destination marketers should focus on either males or females, but, preferably, to appeal to both categories, it may be desirable to emphasize certain characteristics for each gender. Does the first association on Serbia relate to something positive or something negative? Do males have more awareness of Serbia as tourism destination than females? What is the most common source of information about Serbia for males and for females? Are they familiar with Serbian events as an important part of the tourism offer? Who did Serbia get higher marks for the overall image from? These are some of the questions this study attempts to answer.

## Literature review

The terms "destination" and "destination management" have always attracted attention in tourism research, but also in tourism practice (Steinecke & Herntrei, 2017). Since the first study about a destination image appeared, this topic is still a significant research field. Its importance is widely accepted in the tourism research due to a high influence on individual subjective perceptions and thus in the consequent destination choice (Correia, Oliveira, & Butler, 2008; Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002). A destination image is defined as "an expression of knowledge, impressions, prejudices, imaginations and emotional thoughts an individual has of a specific place" (Lawson & Baud-Bovy, 1977, p. 10). It is the overall perception of the destination that people create after they process a profusion of information from different sources over time (Assael, 1984).

Gunn (1988) differentiates two categories of image: organic and induced. The organic image rests on non-commercial information sources, such as destination reports in news media, information and opinions of family and friends. The induced image, on the other hand, is based on commercial information sources, like various sorts of advertising and information from tour operators and travel agents. Stern and Krakover (1993) proposed a model pointing out that the formation of the destination image is influenced not only by the information obtained from different sources but also by the characteristics of the individual. Chon (1990) emphasizes that "the central postulates of the destination image studies are: that a destination image has a crucial role in an individual's travel purchase related to decision making; and that the individual traveler's satisfaction/dissatisfaction with a travel purchase largely depends on a comparison of their expectation about the destination, or a previously held destination image, and their perceived performance of the destination" (p. 3).

In their study, Fu and Yeh (2014) tested in which degree tourism characteristics of a destination attracted visitors. The results suggested a strong correlation with visitors' satisfaction. The data derived from tourists' image studies frequently provide crucial insights to destination marketers on service and product enhancement (Chen, 2001). Correia et al. (2008) emphasize that this premise should guide all strategic marketing actions. On the whole, the theoretical background about tourist destination image is one of the most extensive (A. Lindblom, Lindblom, Lehtonen, & Wechtler, 2018).

In the framework of tourism, academic research on gender issues began in 1990s (Cole, 2018). Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1991) emphasize that product evaluations may differ according to the gender-based knowledge and perceptions associated with male and female roles in society. Studies have found that gender and age significantly affect the perceived image of tourism destinations (Baloglu, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Chen & Kerstetter, 1999; Walmsley & Jenkins, 1993). Over

the years, relationships between gender, culture and space in the sense of tourism have been emerging as research topics in tourist studies (Aitchison, 1999, 2001; Anderson, 1996; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000, 2005; as cited in Vanolo & Cattani, 2016). Vanolo and Cattani (2016) in their article analyzing representations of gender and mobility in cruise promotional brochures, outline how activities in tourism are gender-influenced.

Although it could seem inadequate to analyze destination image only on gender perceptions, evidence from the literature and recent studies (e.g., Huang & van der Veen, 2018; X. Li, Li, & Hudson, 2013; Wang, Qu, & Hsu, 2016) indicates that they actually possess capacity for explaining the differences on a destination image. Despite the fact that in present-day time the differences between the travel patterns of men and women are far less noticeable than before, gender differences related to travel and tourism still remain substantive (Collins & Tisdell, 2002). According to Beerli and Martin (2004), from the consumer behavior viewpoint, personal factors correspond with socio-demographic characteristics of a person (gender, age, education level, family life cycle, residence, etc.) along with those of a psychological nature (personality, values, motivations, etc.). Those personal factors influence the individual's evaluations of stimuli and, thus, in like manner, influence the perceptions of the environment and the derived image.

McKercher, Pang, and Prideaux (2011) were among the first to include both gender and nationality in analyzes which involved within-economy gender comparisons, aggregate gender and between-economy comparisons. They showed how gender and nationality have combined effect on attitudes. Hutchison and Gerstein (2016) conducted research how gender and intercultural experiences affect emotion recognition. Results indicated that women exhibited higher rates of emotion recognition than men, but international travel experience did not impact emotion recognition rates for either women or men.

World media nowadays shape destination preferences, with a huge impact on destination image (Micić, Denda, & Popescu, 2019). Regarding the image of Serbia as a travel destination, various changes at the end of the 20th century (political conflicts and insecurity, induced by wars) led to the creation of its unfavorable position in the international tourism market. In the later period, starting with 2001, there has been a steady rise in the number of foreign tourists' arrivals and overnights (Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia, 2019).

A study conducted in 2009 (Armenski, Zakić, & Dragin, 2009) analyzed the relationship between destination image of Serbia, the overall satisfaction of foreign visitors and their destination loyalty. The results showed that tourists who had visited Serbia generally had negative associations related to the country. The authors of this 2009 study consider that tourism should aim at creating a positive image in the minds of potential tourists and seek to increase the volume of the inbound tourism consumption and expenditure.

## Research methods

The paper attempts to investigate the image of Serbia as a travel destination from the gender standpoint. The completing of the specialized paper-based structured questionnaires was performed in 2013 in Germany (06–08 March) at the Messe Berlin—Berlin Expo Center City on a sample of 144 ITB visitors. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: (1) demographic profile of the respondents; and (2) fair visitors' standpoints on the image of Serbia. It was constructed in the English language with questions derived from the destination management literature used in this

paper. The ITB was chosen since it is the world's leading travel trade show where visitors from different countries are in one place.

In addition to the Likert five-point grade scale, the data are showing answers to individual yes/no and closed-type questions from the questionnaire. Aiming at our interest in data description, the comparisons of response differences in respect of gender were conducted. The statistical data analyses applied in the research comprise frequency analysis, descriptive statistical analysis, Pearson chi-square independent test, t-test for the independent samples and two-way between groups ANOVA.

T-test and ANOVA are statistical models used to analyze differences between group means. The t-test analyzes differences between two group means, while the ANOVA test deals with more than two groups. Statistically significant differences occur if the p-value is less than .05. (Clark, Riley, Wood, & Wilkie, 1998). Techniques such as t-test and ANOVA give an indication of whether the difference between groups is statistically significant (i.e., not likely to occur by chance). Although significance testing assists highlight the nature of group differences, it is even more important to assess the degree of relationship (effect size or strength of association) to demonstrate the applicability of the results. In this way, the occurrence of results without practical meaning can be omitted (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

The primary objective in designing the research was the detection of ITB visitors' attitudes related to the image of Serbia. More specifically, the relationships between the perceived images, the visitors' annual travel spending, their association of Serbia, information sources, awareness of Serbia as a tourist destination, socio-demographic profile and visitors' gender were assessed. In this way, the authors wanted to observe and explain the perception of this target group of the image of Serbia. The research was conducted by surveying a convenient sample, and the participation was voluntary and anonymous. The data obtained in the survey were processed in Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), version 21.0.

## Results and discussion

The answers were collected from the respondents from 34 countries from all the continents except Australia. Most of the respondents are from the host country, Germany (28.5%), followed by visitors from Poland (18.1%) and Austria (13.9%). There are much fewer respondents from Montenegro, Croatia, the Netherlands, Romania, Ukraine, Portugal and Spain (2.1–3.5%). The remaining countries are represented by 0.7–1.4%. The analysis of general indicators in the first part of the research shows the structure of respondents by gender, age groups, annual travel spending and educational structure, as shown in Table 1.

Respondents were also asked to give their evaluations of different aspects of the

Table 1  
*Demographics of respondents (%)*

	M	F	M & F
Gender			
Males	—	—	34
Females	—	—	66
Age			
18–35	87.8	91.5	90.3
36–49	10.2	5.3	6.9
50–64	2.0	2.1	2.1
65+	0.0	1.1	0.7
Travel spending per year			
<= 800 €	30.6	36.8	34.7
801–1000 €	34.7	35.8	35.4
+ 1001 €	34.7	27.4	29.9
Education			
Graduate school	14.3	24.2	20.8
College	53.1	55.8	54.9
High school	32.6	20.0	24.3
Total	100	100	100

Note. The sample size was 144; M = males; F = females; M & F = total sample.

Table 2  
*Respondents' attitudes about Serbia*

	M	F	M & F
Association of Serbia			
Something positive	75.5	69.4	71.5
Something negative	10.2	9.5	9.7
No answer	14.3	21.1	18.8
Awareness of Serbia as a tourist destination			
Yes	57.1	56.8	56.9
No	42.9	43.2	43.1
Information source about Serbia			
Internet	40.8	36.7	38.1
Newspapers	7.1	12.2	10.6
TV	25.4	21.8	22.9
Travel fairs	2.8	7.5	6
Family and friends	19.7	17.7	18.3
Other	4.2	4.1	4.1
Previous visits to Serbia			
Yes	32.7	16.8	22.2
No	67.3	83.2	77.8
Familiarity with events in Serbia			
Yes	34.7	18.9	24.3
No	65.3	81.1	75.7
Image of Serbia			
Very poor	0	3.2	2.1
Below average	18.4	11.6	13.8
Average	38.7	43.2	41.7
Above average	38.8	37.8	38.2
Excellent	4.1	4.2	4.2
Total	100	100	100

Note. The sample size was 144; M = males; F = females; M & F= total sample.

rank was 3.28, so it can be said that perceptions of Serbia were average among both genders. When the sample was split into men and women, genders' mean scores were almost identical (3.29 for men and 3.28 for women).

Moreover, the results indicate that the percentage regarding newspapers and fairs as information sources about Serbia is twice as high among women when compared to men. Men mostly turn to other sources of information (internet, TV, friends and family, and other). Furthermore, the research intended to determine whether there were differences among continuous scale score with respect to categorical grouping variables. The normality of the distribution scores for the dependent variable was performed prior to using t-test and ANOVA. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed the significant result ( $p > .05$ ), and the actual shape of normal probability plots suggested a reasonably straight line which indicated a normal distribution of dependent variables. The t-test for independent samples (Table 3) was conducted to determine

destination image of Serbia, presented in Table 2. Interestingly, the respondents are mostly not familiarized with the events in Serbia, as one of the most important part of its contemporary tourism offer with a strong impact on the economy and society (Pavluković, Armenski, & Alcántara-Pilar, 2019). Employing an additional analysis, the gender indicator of the respondents was crossed with categorical variables of interest. Using chi-square test, statistically significant differences were assessed among the respondents on the issue of their association of Serbia. As a result, men and women were not found to be different. On the other hand, chi-square test showed the statistically significant relationship between variables Previous visits to Serbia and Association with Serbia,  $\chi^2(2, n = 144) = 7.368$ ,  $p = .025$ , but the effect size was small (Phi coefficient and Cramer's  $V = 0.23$ ).

People who had visited Serbia reported significantly more (90.6%) positive association to Serbia compared to those who had not (66.1%). Still, people who have not yet been in Serbia declared negative associations in higher percent (11.6%) or provided no answer (22.3%) in comparison to people who had been there (3.1% and 6.3%). Another part of the research was dedicated to the fair visitors' evaluation of the overall image of Serbia in relation to the gender variable. Descriptive statistics determined that, from the lowest rank being 1 to the highest one being 5, the overall mean

whether there were differences among images of Serbia continuous scale score with respect to gender, as well as previous visits to Serbia as independent variables, and scale score as an outcome variable. The images of Serbia did not express statistically significant differences in the attitudes of men and women. This finding supports the research carried out by Baloglu (1997), who analyzed the image of the USA among German tourists, and found no statistically significant relationships between the perceived image and gender.

Table 3  
*The overall image differences on gender and visiting Serbia*

Dependent variable	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances (equal variances assumed)		t-test for Equality of Means					$\eta^2$	
	F	Sig.	Experience	N	M	SD	t		Sig. (2-tailed)
			Gender		Visiting Serbia				
Overall image of Serbia	0.007	.933	Male	49	3.29	0.816	0.010	.992	-
			Female	95	3.28	.846			
Overall image of Serbia	0.554	.458	Not Visited	112	3.19	0.844	-2.675	.008	.04
			Visited	32	3.63	0.707			

Note. *F* = test statistic of Levene's test; *N* = number of people; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *t* = computed test statistic; Sig. = p-value (.008);  $\eta^2$  = effect size eta squared (0.04).

However, there was a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of people who had visited Serbia (*M* = 3.63, *SD* = 0.707) and the ones who had not (*M* = 3.19, *SD* = 0.844), determined with the t-test ( $t(142) = 2.67, p = .008$ , 2-tailed). The difference between the mean values of characteristics by group (mean difference = 0.44, 95% *CI*: 0.76 to 0.11) was moderate (eta squared 0.04).

Table 4  
*The overall image differences on gender and association of Serbia*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.	Partial $\eta^2$
Corrected Model	11.319 <sup>a</sup>	5	2.264	3.550	.005	.114
Intercept	603.682	1	603.682	946.603	.000	.873
Gender	.078	1	.078	.123	.726	.001
Association	9.783	2	4.891	7.670	.001	.100
Gender * Association	.646	2	.323	.507	.604	.007
Error	88.007	138	.638			
Total	1653.000	144				
Corrected Total	99.326	143				

Note.  $R^2 = .114$  (Adjusted  $R^2 = .082$ ); *df* = degrees of freedom; *F* = variance between/within groups ratio. Sig. = p-value (.007). Partial  $\eta^2$  = effect size partial eta squared (.100).

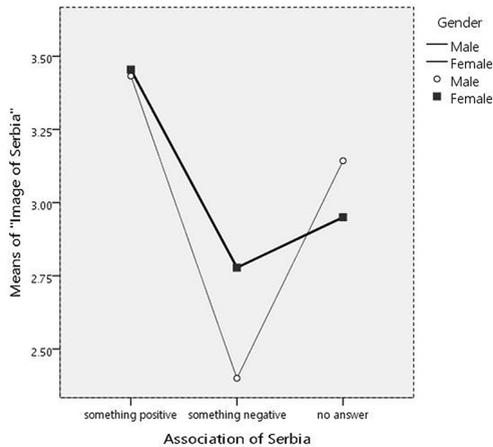


Figure 2. Means plot of gender differences on how association of Serbia impacts overall image of Serbia.

association with Serbia  $F(2, 138) = 7.670, p = .001$  but no significant main effect for gender  $F(2, 138) = 0.078, p = .726$ . This means that men and women do not differ in terms of their image scores, but there is a difference in scores for positive, negative and no associations (Figure 2). The effect size for the association variable is moderate (partial eta-squared  $\eta^2 = 0.1$ ) according to Cohen's (1988) criterion. The results of the Tukey HSD post-hoc test revealed a significant difference in the means of each pair of groups.

## Conclusion

This paper examines gender perceptions of Serbia as a travel destination, contributing to the deficient literature in this field by providing interesting insights into the perceived image of the south-east European country like Serbia.

The results of the study do not support the assumption that the two genders would differ in attitudes related to the image of Serbia. There is no statistically significant relationship between the perceived image and gender, and the images of Serbia did not express statistically significant differences in the attitudes of men and women. There is also no significant difference in the effect of association on image for men and women. Finally, men and women do not differ in terms of their image scores, but there is a difference in scores for positive, negative and no associations.

This research showed statistically significant difference in the attitudes of people who had visited and the ones who had not visit Serbia regarding the overall image of Serbia. Serbia's visitors have significantly more positive associations about the country when compared to non-visitors. Still, non-visitors declared higher percentage of negative associations and blank responses in comparison to visitors. It should be noted that blank responses were taken as significant ones, indicating that a certain number of potential tourists are unaware of either positive or negative facts related to Serbia, and have no perceived image.

As the most common sources of information about Serbia are the Internet and TV, this implies the need for further efforts to define positive and redefine negative organic image that Serbia still

has among potential foreign tourists. Activities also have to be focused on those sources of information which tourists find as not enough developed, such as fairs.

### *Limitations and suggestions for future research*

Certain limitations that exist in the presented research should be perceived as challenges for some future research designs and a stimulus to explore this topic in more depth. First of all, surveying participants of Europe's largest travel fair ITB presents a bias in the views that such a group of people may have, i.e., people who attend such a fair are more aware of destinations than the general population would be. Further, the sample population for the survey is relatively small, although it gives a valuable insight in the researched topic. Future research could examine if respondents visited a Serbian booth at the fair and if that altered their views.

Although the dataset could be perceived as slightly outdated, the position of Serbia in up-to-date official travel rankings as well as the findings in the related research papers suggests that the respondents' attitudes about Serbia's destination image still stand as representative.

It is evident from Table 1 that mostly younger and highly educated population that spends more than €800 on travelling per year took part in the research. Other age groups and travel spending ranges should be considered in future studies. The results of this research could help destination marketing and travel organizations to assess their marketing strategies for the Serbian travel market. Additional studies should comprise more gender differences, such as the country of residence, as well as different components of the perceived image, in order to give a more comprehensive conceptualization of the image of Serbia as a travel destination.

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