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The Use of Authenticity and Stereotyping in Building the Image of a Destination



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Abstract

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With tourism back on the rise after the Covid-19 pandemic, many places in the world are trying to establish themselves as a destination for tourism. A key part of their success relies on their branding and appeal to the tourists which mostly falls under the description of destination image.

This study focused on how destination image is created, maintained and interpreted by tourists through the concept of authenticity. It also establishes how the perception of authenticity can be potentially twisted into stereotypical associations and how much of a negative influence these have on their destinations. Finally, these findings were applied to the destination image of Slovakia and its position in developing an appealing destination image.

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1 Introduction

There are many factors that can make a destination appealing to travelers. Understanding what the average consumer of tourism activities looks for during the process of destination selection, is a crucial factor for anyone seeking to increase the number of incoming visitors to their designated area. An important note is that there will never be an “ultimate tourist” to serve as a singular point of reference for all destinations since the preferences of every consumer has a considerable gap between each-other (Papatheodorou, 2001). Nevertheless, the key factor in destination choice for every individual traveler is the drive to go beyond his primary place of residence and seek something that his home area cannot provide him with. As Keyes and van den Berghe (1984) point out: “The essential ingredient of tourism is its exoticism.” The tourist often seeks to witness culture and living standards yet unfamiliar to him expressed in its purest form. The history, relics, behavioral patterns, values and traditions is the product that the consumer is interested in purchasing and experiencing.

Formical and Uysal (2006) also claim that a large factor in the decision process for the consumer in picking his destination is its attractiveness and identity compared to its adjacent competition. In turn, it can be interpreted that destinations invent and present their identity by trying to find their main attractions and market them towards groups of people who may find them the most appealing. Such a need to catch consumers’ attention forces destinations to engage their creativity in differentiating itself both from the identity of the consumers’ primary place of residence but More importantly, from the large number of rival destinations with eminently similar characteristics and offer of experiences (Tourism Tattler, 2012). To clarify, this “originality” factor can range from the more general and concrete such as warm climate, attractive scenery or presence of the traveler’s acquaintances (Epperson, 1983), while other factors lean towards abstract concepts such as local culture, community, atmosphere and prospects for the consumers’ well-being (Reit-samer, & Brunner-Sperdin, 2017). It is the latter category of abstract concepts that can be difficult to measure and analyze when attempting to understand and utilize the appeal these abstracts carry.

Furthermore, “The tourist seeks further to incorporate the encounter with the “exotic” into an “authentic” experience” (MacCannell, 1976, cited from Keyes and van den Berghe, 1984). Authenticity is indeed a term whose usage is gaining traction as a forefront tool in marketing of all kinds (Teeny, 2022; Moore et. Al., 2018; Cong et. Al., 2022). Because it is so widely used both by

the consumers and the marketers, the meaning of the term can vary widely in interpretations and runs the risk of being diminished when it is used in characterizing the identity and creating an image of a given destination.

The issue that this thesis will focus on undertaking is instances where this appealing representation of a destination's identity that is cultivated and embraced by the destination management organizations (DMO) and the public has basis in either objective reality (Authenticity) or subjective reality (Stereotypes and Idealization). Subsequently, the consequences of each phenomenon and how they are utilized in destination marketing and identity will be discussed. This introduces the first research question:

1. How do authenticity and stereotypes influence the image of a destination?

Once the answers to this question are found, they will be applied to the country of Slovakia and to find how they impact its foreign tourism scene. Research will be conducted into the appeal this scene holds for its foreign visitors when they decide to tour the country. Whether it stems from the desire to see the authentic reality of what Slovakia as a destination has to offer, or is there arrival characterized with pre-conceptual mental images that may or may not be based on truth or modern standards.

From the personal experience of the author who has travelled and lived in a considerable number of Western European countries, the truth may lie somewhere in the middle. The general circumstance for the author when introducing his Slovakian nationality to other communities has been met with familiarity of the existence of the country. But conversely, he encountered consistent hesitation from these communities with what kind of identity to assign the country. Their knowledge about it has been lacking to the point of uncertainty about the country's location while also being confused with other countries. In this absence, the gaps in knowledge had been consistently filled in with the limited knowledge of the surrounding area, namely the region of Eastern Europe and V4 countries (Czechia, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary). With reports of the U.S. News (2022) developing a list of best countries in 2022 placing Slovakia in 59th place out of 85 overall and overall 79th place in terms of cultural influence, it is apparent that the country lies in relative obscurity. While this data may be founded on potentially subjective opinions, they are still able to influence people's choice of travel destinations.

Thus, this thesis will work with a hypothesis stating that due to general lack of knowledge about the identity of Slovakia, people gravitate towards mental images associative with Eastern Europe. These images often portray the country in a stereotypical manner and subsequently carry on this

perception when deciding to visit the destination. Further details of this hypothesis will be available in the latter section of the thesis alongside concluding thoughts determining the extent to which it can be confirmed or disproven. Furthermore, as a way to diversify the opinions about outside perceptions of Slovakia, several prominent travelers from the BUBO Travel Agency (One of the most prominent travel agencies in the country) and a collection of Slovakian tour providers and DMO's will be questioned about their experiences abroad and how they feel their nationality and country is viewed around the world. This leads us to the second research question:

2. How is Slovakia generally perceived by the wider world?

Finally, an important matter should be addressed to conclude this discussion. While a great deal of intelligence about a county and its cultural image is created in the minds of the foreign tourists, a key component of this knowledge originates in the countless measures a country takes to introduce its public image and make its presence known to the wider world. In tourism, a significant amount of this image-building becomes the responsibility of the national administration of tourism promotion, as well as local tourism agencies seeking to make a profit by providing tours of the country's attractions. To analyze this process, this thesis will investigate the approach of Slovakia's primary national DMO – Travel to Slovakia, Good Idea. The goal will be to find out the overall image this organization promote, whether it is based on authenticity/stereotypes and how much it relies on these concepts. To incorporate such data into this study, a section of the thesis will be focused on analyzing the pictures and photographs these parties display on their website and conclude the image they are attempting to promote.

Thus, this culminates into the third and final question of the Thesis:

3. How is Slovakia marketed to the rest of the world?

2 Theoretical framework for authenticity and stereotypes

As mentioned above, the tourist's decision to visit a given destination is influenced by a wide variety of factors. One of the most crucial factors for this process is the destination's identity, comprising both its characteristics and a general reputation to form a comprehensive image with which the tourist associates the destination. The following two chapters of this thesis, will provide a framework for factors that the author believes are crucial for constructing a destination image, mainly authenticity and stereotypes.

The first chapter will cover an introduction into these terms alongside their definitions both from academic and non-academic viewpoints. Additionally, some mention will be made of the processes how they are created and maintained, while acknowledging the participants of these processes. The second chapter aims to put the established terms into real-world situations, showcasing their direct impact on a destination's image.

Together, these chapters will conclude into a coherent response to the first research question:

How do authenticity and stereotypes influence the image of a destination?

2.1 Authenticity

First, a detailed description of the concepts on which this study is based will be provided. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: "The term 'authentic' is used either in the strong sense of being "of undisputed origin or authorship", or in a weaker sense of being "faithful to an original" or a "reliable, accurate representation" (2020). However, a simple dictionary explanation is not enough. For this piece of work to be successful, it is necessary to discuss which aspect of the terms will be focused on alongside their context. Authenticity as a concept is not relevant in every form of tourism. Rather, it largely exists in forms of ethnic, historical, cultural and heritage tourism (Wang, 1999; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Park et al. 2019). Authenticity as a concept can also come from many variable sources. More commonly, from a specific object or the environment in which the object is located and the state of being where the individual is in touch with the local atmosphere (Handler and Saxton, 1988; Wang, 1999). Wang attempted to differentiate these into the categories of Object-related/Objective and Activity-related/Existential authenticity. (Example: Being in Paris to witness the original Eiffel Tower as a local symbol which given the

later constructions of duplicates in other locations around the world can be perceived as authentic only in Paris – Object-related. Being in Paris to engage in local activities and experience the true atmosphere of local culture – Existential).

Given the prevalence of authenticity terminology in tourism destination management, alongside the amount of research this concept has received by various studies, one would hope that it is a well-researched concept with concrete definitions and universal principles.

However, the prospect of authenticity is that research and analysis around the world still struggle to settle on a comprehensive definition (Zhu, 2012; Thompson, 2004). Its meaning is interpreted in a multitude and sometimes contradictory manner which causes some researchers to argue that the concept of authenticity should be scraped altogether (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). But despite this, the concept is very much prevalent in the minds of the public who seek it out in their travels with little regard for scientific definitions. This mindset is often referred to as constructive authenticity, which refers to projections of authenticity onto objects and activities, based on the society's beliefs and preferences (Wang, 1999; Zhang and Yin, 2020). Research shows that perception of a destination offering authentic experiences increases the likelihood of tourists visiting (Cong et al., 2022), being satisfied (Park et al. 2019) and revisiting (Zhou et al. 2022). As such the term is frequently used in destination marketing strategies by DMOs.

2.2 Staged Authenticity and disconnect in perception

It is also important to examine how authenticity is recognized by an average tourist, and what impact these perceptions have on the choices a destination makes in its marketing and image. "Authenticity is acknowledged as a universal value and an essential driving force that motivates tourists to travel to distant places and cultures" (Kolar and Zabkar 2010). As such, it is important to understand what people are looking for under the concept of authenticity when choosing their destination. A common argument in many articles about authenticity (Kaufman, 2019; Wang, 1999) is that what the public perceives as authenticity does not always carry traits that are truthful but rather traits that evoke a feeling of personal satisfaction. Essentially, if it feels correct, the consumer perceives it as authentic despite a lack of scientific evidence to support such perceptions. Furthermore, this condition of pursuing authenticity without regard for its validity is making tourists particularly influenced by commercialized attractions. This inspired Wang (1999) into

arguing for the concept of constructive authenticity, an instance where a subject's feelings about happiness and satisfaction take priority in identifying authenticity as opposed to objective factors.

One such example might be the rise in popularity of dog-sledding in the Lapland regions over the past few years. People planning a trip to the region will undoubtedly include this activity on their list since they are under the impression that it is an entertaining and authentic part of the Sami culture that can only be experienced in the Arctic regions such as Lapland. This is despite the fact that this activity has little to no historical precedence in the Sami culture, arriving there very recently in the 1980's (Gardiner, 2021).

The most popular aspect of a destination in the public consciousness is also often deemed the most authentic. The more authentic it is perceived the more attractive it becomes to visit leading to it being more aggressively marketed and thus creating a vicious cycle. The large influx of visitors in turn threatens to create over-tourism, erode the destination's original authentic value by morphing it towards the needs of the tourists. The most famous example of this phenomenon is the case of Venice. The romanticized image of the city attracted 5,5 million tourists in its pre-pandemic peak in 2019 (Statista, 2022). To accommodate their needs, a culture of cosmopolitan consumption and staged authenticity has been set up to maintain and expand on the stylized image of the city held in the general public's perception. In the process of doing this, the native residents have been forced out to the outskirts of the city due to rising living costs even when the local population is arguably one of the primary sources of any destination's authentic self (Minoia, 2016).

As previously referenced in the section above, a tourist's enthusiasm for discovering authenticity on his travels can in many cases be tainted by flashier and more appealing imitations designed to lure the consumer into a false sense of authentic convictions. Boorstin (1992) argues that a regular tourist is by nature gullible and subconsciously willing to be fooled by these reproductions because they often reinforce the subject's image of authenticity and it is far more convenient to do so. The act of the tourist believing he is receiving an authentic experience whilst the source of it can reasonably be considered as inauthentic is called staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999; Zhu, 2012). Here, a disconnect occurs in how authenticity is interpreted. Namely, it is between objective perspective where undisputed originality is at the forefront (commonly present in museum environments) and Wang's (1999) description of constructive authenticity. Staged authenticity occurs when a tourist regards something as authentic in a process that is triggered from an object or experience of authenticity, regardless of whether it has basis in

objectivism. The atmosphere has been staged to evoke authenticity according to what the tourist is most likely to perceive as authentic.

Depending on what the tourist seeks, the impact of staged or symbolic authenticity might vary dramatically. If it is objective and undisputed authenticity that is pursued, then presenting an object/experience of symbolic status may be considered fraudulent. However, if it is a constructivist performance meant to simply evoke the spirit of authenticity, which is what the vast majority of participants of mass tourism subscribe to, then the consumer is receiving what he sought and the subject of authenticity is serving its purpose correctly. The concept of performative authenticity as opposed to objective/subjective is further discussed by Yujie Zhu (2012).

Since it was established that staged authenticity often crosses the line between what is truly authentic and what is merely given an identity of authenticity by outside parties, it should be discussed what happens when these projections reach a threshold of potentially causing harm and defamation. When a belief about a person, culture or destination becomes stronger than a regard for validity behind such belief, it might fall victim to the concept of stereotypes.

2.3 Stereotypes and idealization

Stereotyping is frequently characterized as one of many types of bias. In the context of this thesis, it can be understood as a phenomenon inducing subconscious generalization of a certain social group or a concept, assigning them characteristics with little regard for truthfulness or individuality (Cuza, 2015; Key et. Al., 2013; Owsianowska, 2014).

Despite the term “stereotyping” usually being used in the context of characterizing social or ethnic groups, these groups can in some cases be interwoven with the identity of the destination in which they reside. As such it is a valid point of discussion in the context of destination marketing and identity (Owsianowska, 2014). They can be categorized into Neutral, Positive and Negative with the last one being the most prevalent. Common sense would dictate that positive stereotypes bring positive outcomes to its target group and vice versa. But the truth is a little more complicated than that. Even if the subject is facing positive bias, they are still under pressure to perform accordingly to the expectations of such stereotypes. This can have implications on their behavior, life choices and overall mental wellbeing (Czopp et al., 2015). An example of such phenomenon might be the association of Asian Americans as a “model minority” (Shih et al., 2019)

For the remainder of this thesis, the concept of positive stereotyping will be categorized as “idealization”.

Regarding negative stereotypes, given their name and position, it would be expected that the average consumer would attempt to dismiss them. However, this process requires a state of self-awareness and critical thinking which is not common in the majority of cases. Even when these factors are present and the subject tries to apply them, stereotypes can still function as “self-fulfilling prophecies” since our internal analysis of them can make us more observant towards aspects that solidify them as accurate (Cuza, 2015). There are many studies bringing attention to stereotypes leading to imminent loops of bias based on social standing, race or sex. These loops arise in topics such as performance at school (Jussim et al., 1996), at work, and overall desirability in other topics (Snyder, 1989).

Regardless of which category does somebody’s stereotyping stem from, they are a key component in influencing the image of a destination, a vital factor each tourism consumer considers before travelling.

2.4 Social media and power of narrative images

As mentioned in previous sections, to reliably acquire a number of foreign visitors a destination considers adequate, it is in its’ interest to design a campaign highlighting the primary positive features, thus convincing the potential wayfarer to visit and experience it. A proven method of success for drawing in the visitors is to construct a narrative that serves as a projection of the travel experiences speaking to the traveler on a deeper level than solely listing objective facts about the destination. A destination with its history, culture and other characteristics that participates in the tourism business long enough will have developed a certain image of itself. This image is then gradually developed by the travel experiences of its visitors creating a cognitive narrative with strong tendencies to be viewed favorably, as it adds experiential value to the destination (Owsianowska, 2014). When a study was conducted about the most effective way to market a skiing resort for example, Kim and Purdue (2010) concluded that while affective images (i.e. emphasis on the quality of snow) mattered greatly to the experienced skier’s demographic, the vast majority of respondents were positively affected by cognitive images (i.e. emphasis on fun and enjoyable atmosphere).

Additionally, these narratives are further propelled by modern technologies through the influx of pictures, videos, sounds and music available via social media (Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Douyin, Wechat...). They are manufactured by billions of people every day, don't require any significant effort and are instantly available to be seen by every internet user regardless if he was actively searching for them or not. Even all the way back in 1985, Feifer characterized the contemporary tourist as being able to amass a large amount of travel knowledge via media representations.

This ability of immediate capture and production of these "in the moment" experiences by mobile devices such as phones and cameras are a trend not overlooked by the marketing and PR departments across the world. The concept of consumer generated marketing is gradually becoming one of the primary tools for brands and destinations to reach out to create and strengthen the relationships with their consumers as it is convenient for both sides and is widely regarded as more truthful and authentic (Papasolmou and Melanthiou, 2012). Nevertheless, while it is often perceived as more authentic, authenticity itself may not always be the top priority for creation of this content. Considering its overwhelming amount, the content creators are at risk of feeling the temptation to pass up from authenticity for increased exposure instead (Audrezet et. Al., 2020). This might be crucial information since the very same data that serves as "customization of services is replacing the traditional view of mass production" (Bigné and Decorp , 2019).

2.5 Postmodern tourist

Before moving forward with the effects authenticity and stereotypes have on the tourism industry, it is worth exploring the common traits of its consumers. This chapter focuses on identifying today's common behavior of tourists, describing their needs and how has the market adapted to these behaviors.

Just like the preferences of individual consumers constantly shift with the latest trends, so do the preferences of the masses change with different eras. Beginning in the 70s of the 20th century, the term "postmodern" has been gaining traction in identifying the society's sociology of tourism (Uriely, 1997). Around the same time, tourism started to be studied more closely as a unique subject of study and with it came the realization and rejection of previous standards of tourism. The standards in question is referred to as an era of "modern" tourism and was characterized by mass-consumption and singular tourism preferences (packaged holidays and holiday camps)

(Lash and Urry, 1994, as cited in Dujmović and Vitasović, 2015). “Postmodern” tourism on the other hand is often characterized by the rejection of the “modern” status quo and prefers to seek “other,” (Uriely, 1997; Munt, 1994) unique and exotic encounters referring to MacCannel’s (1973) argument of seeking authenticity by pursuing exotic and unconventional destinations and experiences. Bigné and Decorp’s (2019) article further states that this shift was characterized by the rising cultural transformation of that time into anti-establishment attitudes and embrace the ideas of relativism and thinking for oneself.

There are arguments that the current trends in tourism consumption are just as or even more characterized by postmodernism than before (Sharpley, 2014). This correlation is especially prevalent when you consider that in both postmodernism and current societal identity, consumption is a tool for consumers to shape their identities around the objects and experiences they choose to pursue. The modern tourism industry has also become “prefiguratively postmodern” (Urry, 1990 as cited in Bigné and Decorp, 2019) with the way it is marketed towards consumer mentality which is “omnivorous, insatiable” and full of paradoxes (Bigné and Decorp, 2019). Among few of the mentioned paradoxes are the need for both nomadic adventures and homely comfort, authentically old products on par with modern standards and seeking “real” experiences whilst being satisfied with hyper-simulated ones.

In his 1994 article, Munt came up with two distinct frameworks of postmodern tourism. The previously mentioned “other” framework characterized by a search for real and natural authenticity and the “simulational” framework characterized by hyperreality.

Hyperreality is generally defined as a blurry experience between reality and imagination. It serves as a primary catalyst for developing tourist experience of the destinations which in turn is propelled by appealing to the visitors’ feelings, cognition and emotions among other things (Chen, 2020). In general, the essence of postmodern tourism in its quest for authenticity is often a preference for experiences. This gives it a characteristic of not needing to rely solely on direct confrontation with the original culture, but rather capturing the essence of the culture in said simulations (Zhang and Yin, 2020). This has opened debates about whether hyperreal simulations, like for example augmented reality (Zhu, 2022) and social media (Owsianowska, 2014), have the capacity to sufficiently satisfy the postmodern demand for authenticity. This is where marketing holds a key strategic position in a postmodern society, being able to strongly influence the meanings and identities of objects, subjects, and experiences to their own benefit (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993). A prominent example of this process occurs in Disney parks where the attractions and

atmosphere are largely created from fantasy and imagination (Fictional Arabic city of Agrabah in the movie Aladdin based loosely on Arabic culture) (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006).

Firat and Venkatesh (1993) also list five conditions of postmodern consumption in total: hyperreality, fragmentation, the reversibility of consumption and production, the removal of the subject from the center, and the juxtaposition of opposites. These conditions combined result in the postmodern era of tourism consumption characterized by commercialization of culture to the point where the need for actual authenticity risks fizzling out into “contrived depthlessness” (Upadhyay, 2019).

Given the established need for consumers to express their identity through their choice of often paradoxical purchases, travel also becomes a way of expression one’s authentic self. It would make sense then that the consumer prefers the choice of those destinations that correlate with one’s image of the “authentic self” which marketers provide at the expense of tour’s authenticity itself.

3 Authenticity and stereotyping as a result of tourism marketing

Now that the concepts of authenticity and stereotyping were given adequate research, it is now time to try and simulate their influence when used in tourism marketing strategies. In addition, a concept of idealization will be introduced as an extension of the argument regarding public perception of destination images.

3.1 Culture shock as a result of Idealization

Globalization has made the trend of cultural exchanges more frequent than ever before. This is paralleled alongside the idea multiculturalism slowly gaining traction in increasing number of countries and societies. Most often however, it is the appeal of pop-culture that propagates cultural identity to all corners of the world to such traction that it can find footing in societies that otherwise share very little cultural values by default. This is largely because access to popular culture as compared to regular culture research is more easily available and more convenient/appealing to consume. "Representations of tourist destinations constructed by popular cultural forms of media such as films, television, and literature play a significant role in influencing people's vacation decision-making process" (Iwashita, 2008). There is a notable difference between how situational and enduring involvement with pop-culture impacts the affective and cognitive image of various countries and destinations. Nevertheless, the overall influence of pop-culture is capable of building a positive image of the destination to which it is attached (Whang et al., 2016). Because pop-culture naturally tends to present a more idealized and less representative image compared to the default culture, its impact on the world stage can often carry more weight in how it is viewed and how it connects to the world around it (da Fonseca, 2021). The most frequently cited example is the so called Hallyu or "Korean wave" which saw the spread of Korean music and filmography to gather strong followings in every continent of the world. (Min et. al., 2018)

When idealized images of certain destinations are created either by general population, DMO's, or more commonly pop-culture, there will inevitably be a group of people without the critical thinking necessary to see through the presentation as an idealized marketing tool. These individuals are in danger of accepting these idealizations as an objective truth and are set up for disappointment when they arrive at the destination in question.

This phenomenon is more commonly known as the Paris syndrome which is commonly experienced by Japanese travelers upon visiting Paris and meet the realization that it is not the romantic, dream-like paradise that was portrayed in many pieces of media (e.g. the movie *Amelie*, 2001). This is a serious form of culture shock that can apply to any destination and to all kinds of individuals. This term and its meaning were largely given a name by media news agencies and it is not present in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Phelan, 2022). It is however easy to imagine a troubling collision between Japanese society known for its politeness and the city of Paris which was reportedly voted the rudest city of Europe in 2020 by public poles (Miller, 2020).

An interesting footnote to mention is that this phenomenon is likely more common in a reversed situation. Most commonly, it occurs with foreign exchange students who upon returning from the country of their exchange experience a reverse culture shock. Upon their arrival home, they are suddenly faced with the realization that their often-favorable image of home residence does not hold up to the reality. They start noticing imperfections that did not bother them in the past due to having no other frame of reference that they gained abroad. They may also have forgotten about some of these shortcomings while abroad and reminded upon returning home (Christofi and Thompson, 2007).

Either way, there is enough evidence confirming that inordinate idealization of a travel destination of any kind can lead to culture shock and other problems when critical thinking and realistic expectations are not implemented to a certain level. (Christofi and Thompson, 2007).

3.2 Authenticity

Having defined authenticity and how it is represented, it can be concluded that the tourist plays an important role in identifying what is authentic about a given destination. This can sometimes motivate locals to adapt their cultural identity to focus on an aspect of their culture that is more appealing to the wider public.

This may sometimes result in a positive outcome of reviving a culture that was already forgotten and in decline such as the Cajun culture of New Orleans in USA (Van den Berghe and Keyes, 1984; Esman, 1984). Tourism reviving and reinforcing ethnic identities is a story occurring in many other cultures such as in Seychelles, Bali and the Native Americans communities. It is a project where the tourist interpretation of authenticity can become the status quo due to acculturation blurring

the line between the original culture and the dominant culture in the area. In those instances, the tourist's interest in the culture is the reviving force and has an active say in what aspects attract the most attention in reconstructing the cultural identity of declining communities.

Other times however, a narrow focus on cultural aspects based on outside appeal may result in "cultural degradation" or cultural decay, by forgoing parts of cultural identity because they are either unpopular or not popular enough compared to more mainstream attractions. A common example of cultural erosion would be the westernization of Bali by forgoing the indigenous culture for becoming a lavish tourism destination (Sujarvo et. al., 2014).

Japan is a famous example of the preferences for particular cultural aspects over others. Here, the interest of foreigners lies in the appeal of Japanese pop-culture namely animation, manga and music, while the traditional culture of Japan is often regarded as a secondary interest (Okazaki et. Al., 2010). Similarly, the popular elements of culture can be slowly degraded and estranged from their original function and symbolism. An example would be the famous Hula dance of Hawaiian culture (Hajibayova, 2017) or the original styles of karate before it was introduced to the Western world (Meyer, 2008).

Zhang and Yin (2020) have ultimately concluded that the current postmodern preferences of authenticity can in fact damage the relationships between other branches of authenticity (objective and existential). More specifically, according to the research of Yi et al. (2018), the postmodernist mindsets' preference for intangible elements reduced the value of tangible architectural authenticity of given cultural heritage sites if those sites failed to be incorporated into the general experience.

3.3 Stereotypes

It is relatively self-explanatory that stereotypes are not a desired feature to DMO's, as they pose the danger of impeding the appeal of a destination due to perceptions that may not be truthful. (Reisinger, 2009 cited in Albu 2015, p.9). No matter if the stereotypes are considered negative, neutral or even positive, using and embracing them in destination marketing is not harmless in either scenario, as it poses risks in degrading the integrity of these places. When an image is built on deceit and dishonesty the "result is a superficial and trivial identity for places which increasingly pervades all our experiences of places and which can only be transcended by a considerable intellectual or social effort" (Smith and Relph, 1978). This is especially dangerous for less-

developed countries (Britton, 1979) but can also apply to places like Slovakia that is a developed but relatively unfamiliar nation to the wider public.

A country may attempt to combat a wide variety of stereotypes and employ a bigger margin of strategies to combat them. A study by Avraham (2018) has analyzed a large number of tourism promotion advertisements in regards to a category of stereotypes these promotions attempted to discredit.

Type of stereotypes	N	%
Narrow/grey image, boring, unfamiliar	36	47
Lack of safety, violence, danger	17	22
Primitive, lack of development, backwards	11	14
Positive stereotypes	3	4
Tough, unkind, unfriendly	3	4
Other	7	9
Summary	77 ^a	100

Fig. 1. A pool of 70+ advertisements from 47 countries designed to combat stereotypes and their categorization. Some countries attempted to combat more than one type of stereotypes in their advertisements (Avraham, 2018).

Type of strategy		Techniques	N	%
Source Strategies	Witnessing personal testimony, Witnessing firsthand – Come see for yourself, Blaming the media.			
	Sub-total source strategies		39	13

Message Strategies	Expanding the image beyond stereotypes, Acknowledging the stereotypes, Delivering a counter message, Ridiculing the stereotypes, Using celebrities...	Underdevelopment, Less familiarity		
	Sub-total message strategies		222	77
Audience Strategies	Emphasizing similar values/cultural symbols/geography, Changing the target audience	Country's physical characteristics, Audience's values/language/ cultural symbols, Addressing external audiences, Addressing local audiences		
	Sub-total audience strategies		27	10

Fig. 2. Strategies implemented to combat different kinds of stereotypes (Avraham, 2018).

It is important to uncover which type of stereotype is a given country/destination facing and choose the appropriate strategy for disproving them and create an attractive public image to market for local tourism to thrive. The above research established that the largest amount of the selected advertisements were produced by mainland Europe which also encompasses Slovakia. Furthermore, the most common type of stereotype attempted to be disproven was the image of a gray, boring and unfamiliar place which collides with the hypothesis that Slovakia is often seen as an unfamiliar destination and is stereotyped accordingly. This parallel will be further discussed in the later sections of this thesis.

There are also situations when negative stereotypes about a destination come about in a wake of a disaster be it a natural (earthquake and tsunami) weather-related (floods and hurricanes) or various others (pandemic, terror attack) marking the destination as an unsafe and threatening place to travel to. These connotations originate outside anyone's control and relief efforts for their inversion must be put forward as soon as possible via relationship marketing, communication and collaboration with local media and tourism agents to repair the image of the destination (Mair et al., 2014).

In some instances, stereotypes considered negative function the opposite way as usual and actually increase the interest in visiting their place of origin with the common arguments that there is no such thing as bad publicity (Kouchakji, 2018). and that negative spotlight is preferable to no spotlight at all. The most famous case of this phenomenon is the movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. The movie depicted the country as a “backwater ghetto” main character engaging in deranged and outrageous activities as a result of his upbringing in the country. While there was an unforeseen positive outcome from the increased number of tourism visits to the country (Pratt, 2015), it came at the cost of being largely associated with negative stereotypes effectively trading one category of associated stereotype (Narrow/grey image, boring, unfamiliar) for another (primitive, lack of development, backwards). It is to be noted that a considerable percentage of those who watched the movie were aware that its depictions of the country were fake and dramatized. Nevertheless, the Kazakhstan government’s outraged response arguably exacerbated the notoriety of the entire phenomenon. A parallel situation also exists for Slovakia with the horror movie *The Hostel* (2005) where the country is also depicted as a backwards society with high criminality. Although neither the film’s success nor the country’s response reached quite the same level of spotlight, it can undoubtedly influence a significant amount of people who have seen the movie to hold themselves back from ever visiting Slovakia. Especially in a situation when due to the country’s unfamiliar status, it might be one of the only exposures many people come into contact with.

Destinations lacking in general recognition are more vulnerable to being stereotyped and experiencing prejudice which can ultimately impact its public image (Tasci, 2008). When faced with negative stereotypes its tourism figures may understandably suffer accordingly. One of the more prominent ways for battling this stereotyping is through message strategies where you use the exposure gained through the movie and turn it into an opportunity inviting tourists to see the real face of the destination as Kazakhstan supposedly did according to Pratt (2015) and other countries who engaged in counter-message marketing (Avraham, 2020).

4 Marketing and Image-building of Slovakia

Previously, we have explored the manners in which people's perception of a given destination can be affected as well as the potential results of such influences. The subjects of these considerations (in this case the destination and its promoters) should contemplate about such effects and how they impact their goals (a.k.a. destination image and growth). When attempting to build a destination image for the purpose of securing its growth, it is a delicate balance between managing the image aspects that are the most faithful to the destination, and those which may be most favorably looked upon by the target audience.

In this study, a major part of research will be dedicated to finding and identifying the image of Slovakia as a tourism destination. The goal of this section is to answer the established research question:

How is Slovakia marketed to the outer world?

To do this, a method of qualitative research related to the primary Slovakian DMO – Travel to Slovakia, Good Idea (TSGI) will be used. The method in question will involve an analysis of pictures presented on the main website of TSGI: www.slovakia.travel. Through this process, we will determine what themes are the most prevalent and identify what kind of Image does the channel want to display to its audience.

4.1 Content Analysis

The TSGI website is a collection of content meant to portray an appealing image of Slovakia, as well as provide its visitors information about its attractions. Since it has been established that consumers have a wide variety of different interests, the website's content is equally as divergent and expansive to try and appeal to these interests. As a result, it can be difficult to recognize the identity of Slovakia in the bigger picture, as every person notices those aspects that appeal to him the most, and paying little attention to everything else. Thus, to accurately analyze the big picture of the website's material, it will be necessary to reduce the amount of information into a collection of categories and seek to better understand them (Bengtsson, 2016).

The above described process this thesis will partake in is expertly called content analysis, which serves as a way to “identify, enumerate, and analyze occurrences of specific messages and message characteristics embedded in texts” (pictures in this case) (Frey et al., 2000: 236 as cited in Winter, 2009).

Specifically, it belongs in the category of qualitative content analysis since its role is to help in the “provision of both cultural and contextual description and interpretation of social phenomena” (Vaismoradi et al., 2019) rather than quantitative content analysis whose role is to objectively create generalizable predictions with a large quantity of content (Bock, Isherman and Knieper, 2011).

The power of visual communication over verbal communication is a concept that has been thoroughly researched in many aspects and is often referred to as the picture-superiority effect (Singh and Formica, 2007; Whitehouse, 2010). In tourism, images are an essential driver in building an image of a destination (Page et al., 2006), and carry deep meaning in how the tourist/observer interprets them (Zhang et al., 2014) but also how the destination aims to present itself (Picazo and Moreno-Gil, 2017). This process of communicating through idyllic images in crafting a destination image is what Picazo and Moreno-Gil (2017) called Projected Image on Photographs (PIP)

Especially in the age of digital media, where incalculable number of images float through the sight of billions, the pressure to capture and maintain the viewer’s attention is of the utmost importance as discussed in chapter 2.3. In order to attract as many people as possible, the destinations resort to identifying as many potential attractions available in their vicinity and subsequently assort them into diverse categories, in hopes of attracting customers of different preferences.

4.2 Process of picture analysis

According to Bengtsson (2016), there are three primary steps in conducting any kind of content analysis: Planning, Data collection and Data analyzing.

For the Planning phase, it is important to clarify the objective of the whole process. In this case, it is to look closely at the main website of Slovakia’s marketer TSGI, observe the placement and prevalence of the displayed illustrations and determine the most predominant themes the country is attempting to present itself with. This process falls under the category of inductive

reasoning, since the analysis and its results will provide data used to help answer the research questions. The unit of the analysis will be the 1000+ pictures available to be seen at the TSGI website.

The Data Collection process has been described thoroughly, but it is important to address that according to Lindkvist, (1981) (as cited in Winter 2009) “the meaning of a text can be identified with the producer, the consumer, or the interpreter of a text”. As such the data will be analyzed from the position of an interpreter to try an understand the intended message of the producer, as well as the potential impact it has on a consumer.

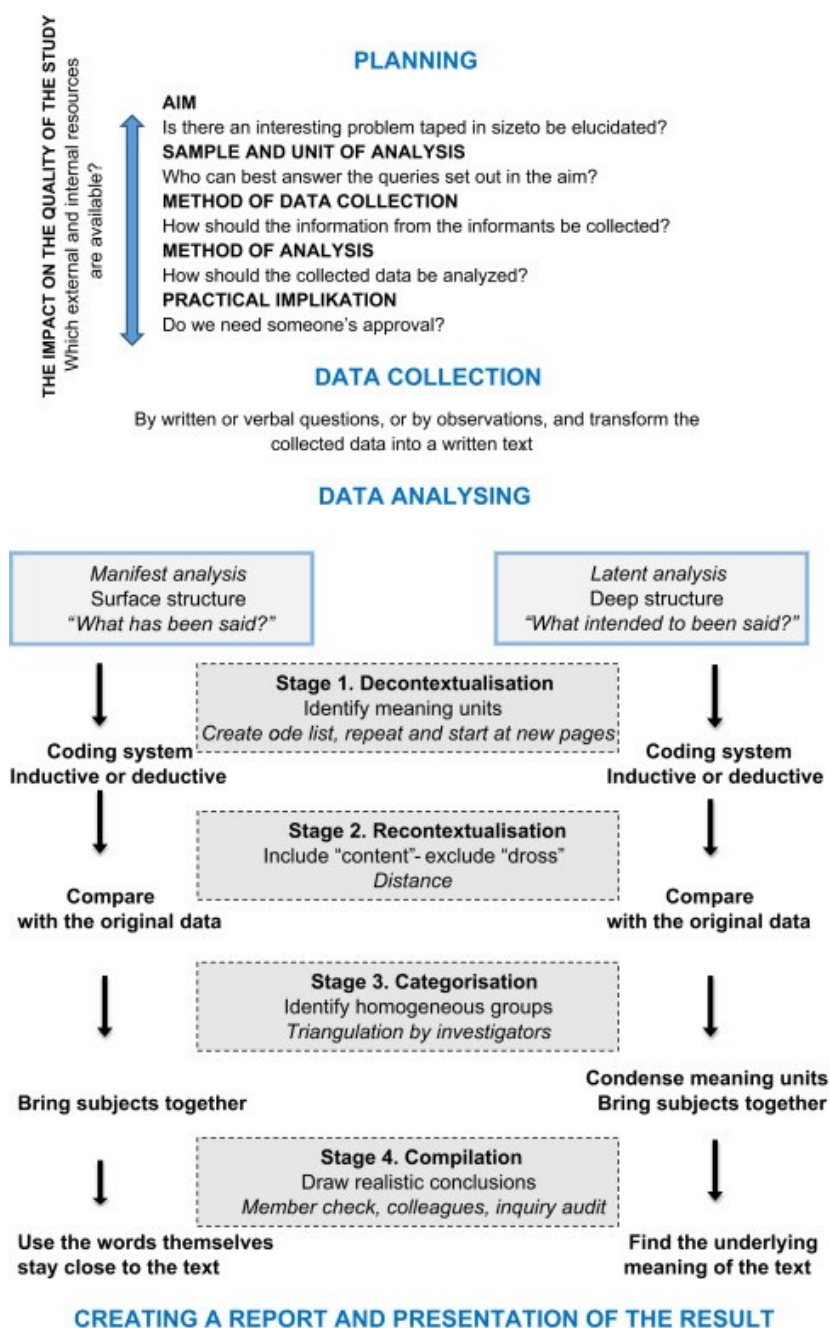


Fig. 3. An overview of the process of a qualitative content analysis from planning to presentation (Bengtsson, 2016)

Finally, for the Data Analysis phase, the stages through which the process will take place are to be introduced and utilized. These being: *the decontextualization, the recontextualization, the categorization, and the compilation.*

1. Decontextualization: Before putting the pictures into several different categories, it is necessary to ignore their original position and purpose and solely focus on their core subject matter. To put it simply, upon seeing a picture of a forest, it will be reported as a picture containing a forest. (Concrete representation)
2. Recontextualization: The main step for this task is to go through every picture available and apply the process from step 1.
3. Categorization: Once every picture has been assigned a concrete representation, all that remains to be done is to start grouping them into categories by the themes they share. While it is mostly an easy process, there are instances where a picture might fit into multiple categories at once and potentially create an inflated category. That is why there should be an effort to decentralize these and create as many different individual categories as possible. Each category will be given an apt description and explanation for its choice of inclusion.
4. The Compilation: After following through with each of the previous steps, the following list of categories has been compiled: 1. Cultural landmarks, 2. Natural landmarks, 3. Castles, 4. Recreational activities, 5. Outdoor activities, 6. Winter activities, 7. Urban Exploration, 8. Folklore and traditions, 9. Cultural activities, 10. Other.

These categories will each be given an identity through detailed description of criteria necessary to qualify for the given category along with the most reoccurring picture subjects these categories entailed. Some pictures were more difficult to categorize than others due to being interpretable into more than one category or not having clearly identifiable subjects and content. There will be more rules of interpretation for this analysis in the upcoming section. Next chapter will grant insight about the general structure and functions of the website in which the analysis has taken place.

4.3 Layout and structure of the TSGI website

For this study, the choice has been made to conduct the analysis of the English version of the website as it is able to reach the highest number of potential viewers. Other options for the website's language are: Slovak, German, Polish, Hungarian, Russian and Chinese. This article also acknowledges that there are some differences in the website's layout and picture selection when choosing to view the website in an alternative language. However, these differences are ultimately minimal and the writer concludes, that the marketed categories and viewer's experience of the website is by and large the same in any language. Therefore, the consideration of the website's English version being the most influential and far-reaching is justified. The overall analysis of the website took place with the version available at 15th of February 2023.

To understand the categorization of the website's pictures that will be conducted by this thesis, it is also necessary to analyze their initial layout and placement. Most of the pictures available serve as either promotional or esthetical material for every location, activity or experience available in Slovakia that TSGI deems worth showcasing to potential tourists. These are all broken down into many sections scattered throughout the website. Their placement can tell us which of them are prioritized by TSGI, as some are available immediately at the first page, while others require clicking through multiple layers of the website to be accessible.

TSGI Logo	Language selection, Social media Links	
	Navigation Bar	
<div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Winter lanscape picture, Slogan (Link to local winter resorts)</p> </div>		
<div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Unique Slovakia <i>Category link and Picture</i></p> </div>	<div style="text-align: center;"> <p>On wanderings through Slovakia <i>Category link and Picture</i></p> </div>	<div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Sports and activities <i>Category link and Picture</i></p> </div>
Flavor text, Social media links	Promotional Video	

Slovakia book promotion and description		Book photo
UNESCO <i>Category link and Picture</i>	National parks <i>Category link and Picture</i>	Culture and sights <i>Category link and Picture</i>
Sports and activities <i>Category link and Picture</i>	Spa and relax <i>Category link and Picture</i>	Gastronomy <i>Category link and Picture</i>
Book quotation		
On the trail of photogenic places <i>Category link and Picture</i>	Top bike paths <i>Category link and Picture</i>	Natural curiosities <i>Category link and Picture</i>
Category summary, Newsletter, Terms of use, Contact info		

Fig. 4. Model showcasing the layout of the first page of the TSGI website, (Note: The Sports and activities category occurring twice is an accurate recreation and likely a mistake on TSGI's part) ([Slovakia.travel](https://slovakia.travel), 2023)

Apart from clicking on the category links available on the first page, the navigation panel in the upper portion of the website serves as the most useful tool in browsing every section of Slovakia that TSGI displays to raise interest. Besides the standard information about Slovakia's demographics and travel conditions, TSGI markets every possible activity into sections under *Places to go* and *Things to see and do*. Upon clicking on these sections, the website branches out into all categories of available attractions, along with those categories that are visible directly on the first page. Their placement can partly tell us which themes does TSGI believe are of the biggest interest to potential viewers.

1 st page categories						
Under link <i>Things to see and do</i>	Sports and activities	Spa and relax	Gastronomy	Culture and sights	Top bike paths	Sports and activities
Under link <i>Places to go</i>	Unique Slovakia	On wanderings	UNESCO			

		through Slovakia	
Through extra category under <i>Things to see and do</i>	Natural curiosities	National parks	
Only available through the main page	On the trail of photogenic places	Winter resorts	

Fig. 5. Location of all categories visible from the front page ([Slovakia.travel](https://slovakia.travel), 2023).

Since the pictures located under some of these categories were purposefully brought from an otherwise obscure background into a better spotlight, they will deserve a special mention during the final discussion.

4.4 Results of the analysis

Before showing the results of the analysis, it is crucial to first establish a number of rules that were created to provide clear guidance for a consistent progression of the task:

While there is a substantial number of pictures available on the website, the choice has been made not to include every individual picture into the analysis. This is due to the overwhelming amount of content available on the website as well as the difficulty of accessing all of it reliably. Specifically, the analysis will follow a “three clicks” rule, which states that any content that is only available to be viewed after going through three layers of website will not be included in the analysis to avoid unnecessary complication of the task. Additionally, any pictures displayed under the website’s “nearby” section (which is available at the bottom of the Slovakia region description page of the *Tourist regions* category) will also be excluded due to their infrequent visibility and convoluted layout.

For the categorization itself, the criteria for each category will be disclosed in the following figure:

Category	Description	Subjects
Natural landmarks	Pictures showcasing natural landscapes, animals and plants with humans being out of focus	Local fauna/flora, Mountain ranges, Forests, Caves, Waterfalls
Cultural landmarks	Pictures showcasing manmade structures with strong cultural/historical significance	Churches, Fortifications, Museum buildings, Mines, Old businesses,

Outdoor activities	Pictures showcasing people engaging in an activity taking place outdoors or a facility for such activity	Hiking, Cycling, Water sports, Golf
Recreational activities	Pictures showcasing places where the primary goal is relaxation and entertainment	Spa's, Water reservoirs', Cafés, People being comfortable
Winter activities	Pictures with visible winter environment meant for activities exclusively available during winter season	Skiing centres, Skiing, Winter landscapes with reference for skiing
Castles	Pictures showcasing historical fortified residences of higher-class residents	Castles, Mansions, Chateau's
Folklore and archaic traditions	Pictures showcasing objects, people and activities related to old traditional Slovak culture	Houses with folklore motifs, Traditional outfits, Traditional crafts
Urban exploration	Pictures showcasing settlements legally recognized as cities or villages	Big cities, Smaller cities, Places of residence
Cultural activities	Locations and events where the main goal is to experience cultural insights	Festivals, Museum visits, People engaging in, and experiencing Slovak culture unrelated to folklore.
Other	Pictures not fitting into either of the previous categories	Miscellaneous, Bridges, Minerals, Food

Fig. 6. Established categories with their descriptions for pictures published by the TSGI website (Slovakia.travel, 2023)

Along with the figure, further elaboration on some features of categorization remain to be disclosed. Primarily, there is the matter of pictures having components that potentially qualify them for more than one category. To resolve this, there are two fundamental principles in deciding what aspect takes precedence. Firstly, the subject that attracts the most attention of the viewer in the picture will be the decisive factor in its categorization. In a picture where there is a small visible building enclosed in the vastness of nature, the nature is the dominant part of the illustration and it takes priority during categorization. But secondly and more importantly, if an image visibly illustrates people performing an activity, such as hiking through nature, it is in this case considered as an *Outdoor activity*. The same principle applies when deciding between *Cultural landmark* and *Cultural (or other) activity*. (People involved = activity, no people involved = landmark).



Fig. 7. (Method of categorization for the picture analysis) (Picture on the left categorized as *Natural landmark*, picture on the right categorized as *Outdoor activity*.)

Nevertheless, the author recognizes that due to the extensive amount of available material, the total count conducted with the set criteria may still not be 100% accurate. Even through the best of efforts, some pictures could have been counted twice since they could be viewed in more than one of the website's categories, while some may have been skipped altogether because they looked identical to a picture already counted (there are only so many pictures of forests one can look at before they all start to look the same). Despite this, the author still supports the credibility of the result since the main purpose of this task was not to disclose the exact number of pictures in each category (which would fall under quantitative research), but instead identify the general themes of the website's promotional material and their share of prevalence.

After the task was completed, the results of the TSGI's content picture analysis are as follows:

Category	Total number	Percentage share
Cultural landmarks	341	25,4%
Natural landmarks	242	18,1%
Castles	156	11,6%
Recreational activities	144	10,7%
Outdoor activities	118	8,8%
Winter activities	87	6,5%

Urban exploration	79	5,9%
Folklore and traditions	75	5,6%
Cultural activities	51	3,8%
Other	47	3,5%
<i>Total</i>	1340	99,9%

Fig. 8. Results of the conducted picture analysis

Following this, each of the submitted categories will be given a brief overview about its numbers and website placement and overall relationship with Slovakia's demographics.

4.4.1 Natural landmarks

Slovakia is a country with a considerable natural wealth and diversity. More than 40% of Slovakia's landmass covered by forests, and about 60% of the country is comprised of mountainous terrain. It boasts 9 national parks, 14 regional landscape parks (which together cover 22% of the country's territory) and over 6 thousand caves have been found in the country so far, of which 18 are open for tourists (Zatko, 2018). This data checks out with the findings of the analysis as pictures consisting of caves, hillsides, forested areas and mountain ranges comprise the vast majority of the *Natural landmarks'* 18,1 percentile (second most prevalent category). TSGI appears to recognize this potential appropriately by displaying the Tatra mountains and several national parks in the "best of" section of the website and highlighting local fauna as unique and unspoiled. With the exception of sea access, Slovakia possess varied types of ecosystems in its mild climate including mountains, lowlands, meadows, forests of all kinds, water reservoirs and even a desert, all of which are accounted for in TSGI's gallery. It is important to note however, that these ecosystems are not given equal representation with mountains and forests being displayed in very high frequency. While it is truth that they indeed represent the majority in the country's ecological identity, it risks painting Slovakia's landscapes as more homogenous than they truly are and it is recommendable to highlight the remaining ecosystems more frequently and in clear sight.

4.4.2 Cultural landmarks

Despite being a very young country with only 30 years of sovereignty, Slovakia still possesses rich and cultivated cultural wealth. Two out of the eight total UNESCO heritage sites are cultural landmarks with four others being towns and villages full of cultural assets themselves. Since castles were put into a separate category, most of these landmarks consist of medieval and enlightenment period constructions, old businesses, mines, museums etc. Many of these are given sufficient attention and are shown as one of the primary appeal factors on the TSGI website. One of the more unique and well-based attractions in Slovakia are the featured open-air museums or “skanzen” which offer a superb opportunity of a deep, in-person experiential tour through a well-preserved area of strong historical and cultural significance.

By far the biggest contributor to this category were churches which can be found in almost every settlement, with its total number in the country allegedly reaching over 4000 (Dzujanin, 2015). Gothic, classical and especially wooden churches which are presented with its own special section are all presented in a varied and attractive manner. Religion and its traditions are still a solid part of Slovakia’s identity with more than 80% of citizens being religious, 62% of which belonging to the Roman catholic church. It also has a considerable position in the country’s educational institutes (Kaščák and Danišková, 2022). A potential utilization of this aspect might be a development of religious tourism both for Catholic believers engaging in pilgrimages and non-Catholic individuals seeking to explore its culture and foundations.

Despite this, there is still much to be improved upon in making these cultural landmarks a fertile ground for tourism. It is both the authors’ personal experience as well as other experts’ opinion that there is a noticeable lack of infrastructure, marketing and decentralization in almost every tourist region of Slovakia with the quality of services also being inconsistent (Zatko, 2018; Vaňová et al., 2020; Čuka, 2017). The key ways to move forward would be improved marketing to generate investments and increased arrival numbers along improving coordination between ministries, municipalities and the cultural sector.

4.4.3 Castles

One of the most significant contributors to Slovakia’s cultural heritage are the castles. TSGI claims on its website that there are more than 100 castles and at least twice as many manor houses. This

makes Slovakia a castle superpower with Spiš and Bojnice castles being among the most popular. This exceptionalism has warranted them to be put into a separate category from other cultural landmarks. This decision is enforced further by a claim stating that the top 5 most visited attractions in 2021 were all castles (TASR, 2022). The first place has been claimed by the Spiš castle which along with its surroundings has been deservedly put into the UNESCO World Heritage List. They are a hub for experiencing the historical centuries through the galleries, events and other cultural recreations taking place here.

As such, the section for these castles on the TSGI website is one of the more transparent ones with convenient placement of *Culture and sights* section on the first page featured with an illustration of a castle (see Figure 4 in 4.3). A castle is showcased in multiple other sections of the website including the *Best of* list, *Unique Slovakia* list, or a place worth exploring during your *Wonderings* through the country.

4.4.4 Recreational activities

Every image showcasing people engaging in a relaxing activity (along with facilities for such purpose) has been classified under this category. These occasionally included social gatherings in a natural or F&B settings, but by far the most common one (being the sole subject of the website's relaxation section) were water-based activities. Despite having no oceans or sea access in its borders, Slovakia offers an abundance of water-based activities in its many lakes, rivers, reservoirs, and spa facilities. Spa tourism specifically, is one of the most emphasized and influential markets in the country. With up to 94 places with thermal and healing springs, 21 of which offer unique properties, "the Slovak Republic is one of the most advanced European countries in the spa industry" (Štefko et al., 2020) with spa cities Piešťany and Bardejov being internationally recognized. Apart from spas, an honorable mention in the country's recreation repertoire are aquaparks. These are largely open year-round and are known for being some of the better case-studies for tourism infrastructure. All these activities are well represented and promoted at the TSGI website, with a visible presence on the front page.

4.4.5 Outdoor activities

While the total number of pictures registered by this analysis as *Outdoor activities* is leaning towards the lower end, many images located in other categories had been indirectly influenced through this category. It maintains great representation on TSGI website's first page and occupying a few of its own separate sections for hiking, cycling and other adrenaline sports.

Hiking especially, is an activity referenced in the majority of pictures in this category, including the main page. It is in a good alignment with prior categories as it is one of the primary methods to experience the multitude of natural and cultural landmarks in the country. Surprisingly enough, the hiking section itself is devoid of any graphic representation (only a video). The popularity seems to vary between individual trails as some suffer from neglect while some in the Tatra mountains face over-tourism year after year.

Cycling is another well-established activity with approx. 16000 km of marked cycling routes (including EuroVelo routes) and plethora of highland terrain for mountain biking.

4.4.6 Winter activities

As a country with a mild climate, Slovakia cycles through four seasons of which winter is a key factor for certain activities. It is from the very first link visible on the main page of TSGI where you can view some of the most popular hubs for winter vacation with skiing being the most iconic activity available. Although a small country, Slovakia possesses some of the best conditions for skiing in Central Europe with a varied selection of ski centers, decent infrastructure and utilizing the mountainous terrain common for the country (Čuka, 2017; Gajdošíková, 2019). On further note, TSGI website contains about 99 illustrations (7,6% of the total analyzed) referencing winter landscapes and activities.

4.4.7 Urban exploration

Besides the overwhelming number of natural pictures, there is a great attention paid to the representation of cityscapes and regions they are part of. Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia, is a major cultural center of the country and among the first places to be shown when viewing the

Places to go sections. Its proximity to other Central European capitals makes it a popular gateway attraction into the country from its neighbors and other travelers. This can then transfer into an interest of visiting other such as Trnava, Žilina, Košice, and others. UNESCO also considers the historic towns of Banská Štiavnica, Bardejov, Levoča and village Vlkolínec as world heritage sites. Meanwhile, Košice was named the European capital in 2013 with Trenčín selected as a contender for 2026 (European Commission, n. d.). Outside the cities, the identity of Slovakia is also represented in the many villages and settlements where more traditional culture is present and preserved. It is mainly represented through folklore, which will be discussed in the next section of the thesis.

4.4.8 Folklore and traditions

Folklore holds a special position for any country since it is often the thing that gives each nation its unique identity. It is no different for Slovakia. TSGI represents this through several sub-sections under the *Traditions* section such as traditional handicrafts, clothing, dances, customs and countryside. These elements and many others not mentioned by TSGI are the core of Slovakian culture, but what almost every one of them share is that most of these are present in rural areas. While these areas are a natural preserver of the country's traditions, they usually do not have the amount of economic development, infrastructure and promotion necessary to be a major tourism contributor (Habán, et al., 2012; Bitušíková et al., 2021; Hutárová et al., 2021).

4.4.9 Cultural activities

The last category of the analysis was one whose subjects were the most difficult to define. It took on the rules of the previous categories in that to be considered an activity, it should reference people engaging in that activity be it museums, cultural routes, events or others.

Events are the indeed the subject that define this category the best. Unfortunately, almost all the possible events that the TSGI website showcased where in the *Nearby* sections. These were removed from the overall analysis largely due to their inconsistent placement throughout multiple sections of the website as well as their inconsistently visible content they displayed. This is ultimately a design that should be improved upon by TSGI through giving it a separate accessible

position on the website. As such, it would give more transparency into where are these events being held and what time of the year do they take place.

The only other section that reliably provided pictures for this category were those of cultural routes. Namely, the suggested wineries and breweries a person should visit during their stay which are given good preview and representation through the *Gastronomy* section also visible on the main page.

5 The Perception of Slovakia

The previous section has showcased the ways Slovakia markets itself and engages in portraying its image in a positive manner. This however, is only one part of the whole picture. If one is to imagine tourism marketing as a dialogue between two parties, the marketing department plays the role of the speaker, with its goal being transmitting useful information that presents the destination as an appealing place to travel to. Following through and checking how the receiving party interprets this information is an equally crucial task. With the potential billions of unidentifiable receivers, this process is often very difficult to track reliably. One of the most common ways of measuring the success of the marketing campaigns is analyzing the numbers of arrivals with comparison to previous years and certifying it as a favorable outcome if an increase in these numbers is spotted. While undoubtedly a crucial piece of information, it fails to tell us the important context behind these numbers. If one were to determine success of Slovakia's marketing campaigns solely from general statistics like the one in Figure 9, the conclusion without context would indicate successful improvements of the tourism sector until 2019 and afterwards becoming obsolete out of nowhere.

Visitors in tourist accommodation establishments in years 2018 to 2022

(thousands of people)

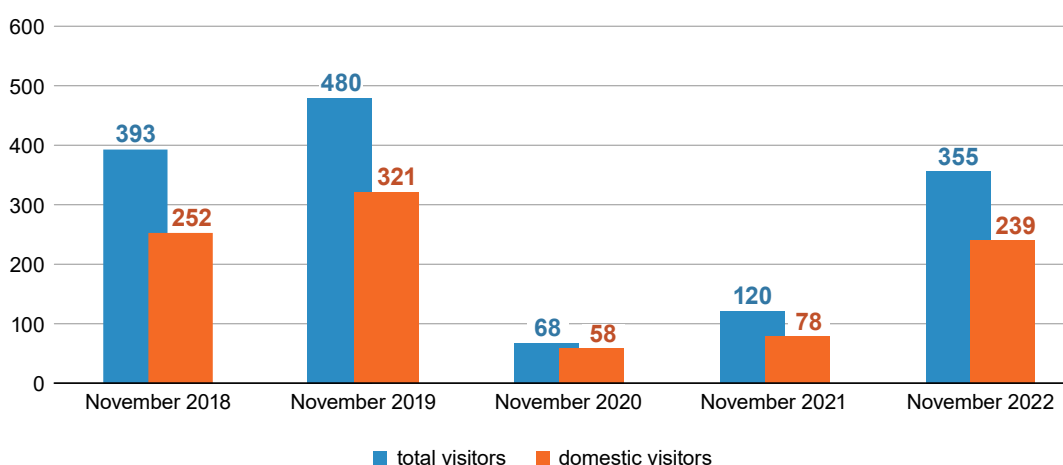


Fig. 9. Total number of domestic and inbound tourists for November 2018-2022 (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2022)

The context behind the decline in 2020 was understandably the Covid-19 pandemic but to further state the point, understanding the details of statistics such as what are the major contributors and subtractors for the numbers' total value may matter more than the number itself. For tourism, the most discussed factors for its growth often involve questions like: "What attractions receive the most tourism traffic?" and "What is the main appeal of visiting the chosen destination as a whole?". Finding the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats the contributor (in this case a potential tourist) considers before deciding to visit the given destination is key. Any destination promoter must understand which aspect of the destinations should be promoted and how effective their promotional strategies shall become. This all concludes to the last remaining research question that this thesis needs to address more closely:

How is Slovakia generally perceived by the wider world?

5.1 Hypothesis

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, a portion of the research will be directed to test a hypothesis providing a tentative answer for the above-mentioned research question.

From the personal experience of the author, the worlds' perception of Slovakia is rather hazy, as many populations around the world are not even aware of the country's presence. A sizable share of those who have heard about Slovakia, do not seem to know any details about the country beyond its existence. In many ways, due to its undetermined reputation, a common phenomenon for achieving familiarity with Slovakia is associating it with former Czechoslovakia, and its identity as a former socialist state in the Eastern Block during the Cold War. There are also the occasional incidents of mistaking Slovakia for another Slavic country of Slovenia with their similar sounding names, location and socialist history. These associations with Slovakia's past identities that no longer carry weight in the present day can be classified as stereotypes since it fits the established definition of "subconscious generalization of a with little regard for truthfulness." To sum up, this section would like to confirm that Slovakia's public image is largely lacking and as a result, the gaps in knowledge are frequently filled in with stereotypes. By looking at the research and results of the interviews, it will be possible to conclude this hypothesis as truthful or false, and to what extent.

The hypotheses states that due to Slovakia's location and history, many people intuitively categorize it as being Eastern European. At first glance, this arrangement seems justified both from geographical and cultural perspective. However, it is important to note that the term Eastern Europe often carries a rather unflattering association with underdevelopment from both financial and political point of view. Rather than being a concrete definition, "Eastern Europe" is these days mostly a symbolic term with no specific guidelines dictating which country does and doesn't belong under it. As a result of this, some countries mostly from the V4 (Czechia, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary) prefer to describe themselves as Central Europe instead. That term however is not yet widespread enough to be used as a substitution so knowing what category Slovakia is associated with by the tourist bodies.

An opinion poll set up by a channel TLDR news on YouTube asked its viewers how would they categorize the European continent into Western and Eastern Europe. Out of the 403,843 respondents, 84% categorized Slovakia as belonging under the Eastern Europe category with the factor of revealing Slovakia's geographical location being of little consequence (TLDR News, 2021). The conclusion is subject to disputes due to undisclosed sources and potential biases from the channel's regular audience. Nevertheless, it does provide an insight as to how widespread the country's association with the term Eastern Europe can reach. Even if these categorizations are based on possible stereotypes with little to no objective value, reputations are mostly based on subjective understandings. These can in turn majorly influence the decision-making process of tourists choosing their destination. It remains to be seen not just how widespread but also what priority is given to this association of Slovakia with Eastern Europe over other fundamental aspects that make up its complete destination image.

5.2 Conducted research

To help answer the final research question and apply its data to the discoveries of this thesis, a decision has been made to conduct a survey. While the argument can be made that the ideal subject of these surveys should be the foreigners in question, this thesis decided to opt for the opposite direction. As established in the introduction, there is no singular type of tourist with universal requirements for a tourist destination. The same applies for foreigners and their perception about a country, which can derive from a wide range of different cultural values and backgrounds. So rather than try to find sample size from different kinds of cultural backgrounds, the target of these queries will be Slovakian people with active experience of interacting with

different kinds of foreigners and Slovakian tourism in general. While this target audience might also produce certain biased results and not paint the full picture, it has been chosen due to proximity and familiarity with these parties by the author. Namely, the parties participating in this survey are representatives from local tourist agencies Authentic Slovakia and Trip in Slovakia specialized in providing tours of Slovakia to foreigners, Development agency BBSK specializing in tourism development of Banská Bystrica region in Slovakia, and lastly several employees of the commissioning party BUBO travel agency with experience of living and interacting with diverse assortment of foreign communities. The questions these participants were asked are as follows:

1. In your opinion, what is the current state of Slovakia as an inbound tourism destination?
2. In your opinion, what aspects make Slovakia unique? What would you emphasize?
3. In your opinion, what aspects of Slovakia are promoted the most?
4. Which aspects of Slovakia are foreigners familiar with the most?
5. What stereotypes does Slovakia face on the world stage and what method should be used to counteract them?
6. Through which communication channels do foreigners learn about Slovakia?

The survey was designed in a semi-structured manner to encourage comprehensive testimonies and produce qualitative data. These surveys were all conducted throughout March 2023. In addition to collecting the answers from these surveys, the representatives from Trip in Slovakia and Authentic Slovakia was also willing to participate in a short online interview to discuss their answers in further detail. Some of their comments were also incorporated into the final discussion.

The purpose of these surveys was to take the provided data and analyze the pattern of responses in correlation to other aspects of the thesis. Firstly, all questions 1-6 ask about the image of Slovakia for the outside world in which it is able to deduce whether the participants rate the image either as favorable/unfavorable and as coherent, lacking or absent. Furthermore, all questions will be analyzed for mentions of Slovakia's image in the context of Eastern Europe, and whether it is mentioned with either a positive, neutral or a negative outlook. Secondly, the discussion will focus on finding correlations between aspects of Slovakia's image mentioned in the surveys and the categorization results of TSGI website's picture analysis. Questions 2,3 and 4 will be the most essential for this comparison. Thirdly, the results of question 5 will be used to determine the most

commonly-held stereotype about Slovakia as a destination and study the suggested methods of subverting them.

Most of the answers given by these experts were translated from Slovak language to English. However, some participants were able to give their answers in English without the need for translation. While some liberties may have been taken during the translation process for better clarity, the original meaning of the answers remains the same.

5.3 Discussions

Once every written interview has been collected and translated, the final step consisted of analyzing their correlations with previous research of the thesis. All answers from the interview participants along with the forms of the questionnaires are available in the appendix.

5.3.1 Correlations between TSGI picture categories and interviews

As mentioned in previous chapters, Slovakia possesses a wide array of attractions in a relatively small area which can be largely divided into several categories. These categories were established based on the conducted picture analysis of Slovakia's primary DMO: Travel to Slovakia, Good Idea (TSGI) in chapter 4. Its task was to determine which category is being promoted the most, and in doing so, establishing an image of Slovakia with which it is able to stand out from its competitors (i.e. what makes Slovakia unique). Since survey questions two to four directly ask these questions and most answers refer to the pre-established categories, a comparison between the two pieces of research is to be conducted. After reviewing every survey response, each instance in which the categories were directly or indirectly mentioned was marked down. Although some of these mentions were cited shortly after one another, there were certain countermeasures to avoid giving any category inflated points. As long as the citation was located in a distinct question or in a different context, it was allowed to be counted. After going through this process, the final count came up with the following results:

Category	Keywords	Citation Frequency
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Cultural landmarks	European heritage, History, UNESCO heritage	IIIIV/5 = 7%
Natural landmarks	Tatras, Nature, National parks	IIIIIV, IIIIV, IIIIV, IIIIV, IIII/24 = 33%
Castles	Spiš, Orava castle	IIIIIV, I/6 = 8%
Recreational activities	Piešťany, Spa	IIIIIV, IIII/9 = 13%
Outdoor activities	Hiking, Golf	IIIIIV, /5 = 7%
Winter activities	Skiing	III/3 = 4%
Urban exploration	Bratislava, Košice,	IIIIIV, IIII/9 = 13%
Folklore and traditions	Folklore, Folk songs, Folk culture, Traditions	IIII/4 = 6%
Cultural activities	Wine/Beer tours	IIII/4 = 6%
Other	Mentions of other regions, cuisine, proximity	III/3 = 4%

Fig. 10. Number of references from the questionnaires matching the categories from the conducted picture analysis.

From the results, it is apparent that the experts find natural landmarks as the most influential part of Slovakia's image with 33% citation frequency. Specifically, the references to the Tatra mountains were by far the most prevalent along with emphasizing the country's national parks and general references to nature. This is consistent with the TSGI analysis having second highest share of references on the DMO's website. While the Tatra mountains are undoubtedly a national symbol in many aspects of the nation, the experts failed to identify a cultural landmark of the same level of significance. No specific cultural landmark was cited, instead primarily referring to the country's history, presence of UNESCO heritage sites and an overall European heritage. The category with the most references on the TSGI website was largely inflated with churches and museums that don't enjoy the same level of recognition to be considered a national symbol crucial to Slovakia's image. The exception to this rule lies in the landmarks that were put in a separate category, i.e. castles which were mentioned more often and more directly than cultural

landmarks in general. Castles as a whole enjoy a respectable amount of representation in the DMO promotion strategies and the surveyed experts seem to agree. The Spiš castle is being the most identifiable with its surroundings also labeled as a UNESCO heritage. Other mentions refer to castles tied to the country's history, culture and traditions.

When it comes to the recognizable activities available in Slovakia, recreational ones with spas in particular are being the most represented with fourth place in the TSGI analysis and second place in the survey. Outdoor activities being close behind with golf and hiking being praised for its easier availability compared to other countries. Winter activities on the other hand are surprisingly given scarcer representation even when the infrastructure for such activities is one of the more advanced ones in the country. This might be explained by both the analysis and the survey being conducted right after the end of the winter season. This means its representation is currently not actively considered and low priority until the season arrives again. Cultural activities and events are given by far the least amount of representation. However, the experts mentioned in great detail that wine and beer brewing culture are well-established entities of Slovakia that deserve acknowledgement. The experts also admitted that it is regrettably an industry in its infancy when it comes to its promotion as a tourism attraction.

The remaining categories to discuss are Urban exploration and Folklore. The experts referenced Slovakia's cities rather frequently making it the second most referenced category in the survey. The capital city of Bratislava is often cited as the most recognizable and reachable due to its close proximity to Austria, Czechia and Hungary, making it a feasible stopover destination. Other cities cited include Košice, Banská Štiavnica and Piešťany (but mainly in reference with its spa). Folklore and its associated traditions are often mentioned as features that make Slovakia unique, but not as features that foreign tourists see as recognizable. An interesting insight has been identified while conducting a supplemental in-person interview with the representative from Authentic Slovakia. It was discussed that authenticity in Slovakia is perceived differently by the locals who place folklore as a key component of their country's authentic identity, compared to the perception of foreign tourists where it has little to no impact. In their perception of Slovakia's authentic image, folklore played little role as opposed to exploration of the capital city and its former socialist architecture and culture (which is Authentic Slovakia's most sought-after tour). This is consistent with the theme of the previous research which establishes that authenticity as a concept has multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations.

5.3.2 Overall themes and thoughts about Slovakia from the interviews

The respondents of the interviews each have a slightly different backgrounds, but the answers provided have largely been consistent in their themes. The first question was about the state of Slovakian tourism. The respondents have used keywords such as poor, weak, low recognition and grey zone. Although most have expressed their hopes for future improvement alongside mentioning some of Slovakia's successes, nobody was feeling confident in how the local tourism scene acts today. It is a brand that needs a lot of development to reach equal tourism status to its immediate neighbors (Czechia, Hungary, Austria). It is a reoccurring theme in many studies focused on Slovakia's tourism development from agritourism (Habán, 2012), regional development (Hutárová et al., 2021), winter tourism (Gajdošíková, 2018) and many others (Čuka, 2017). (Zatko, 2018).

Questions two to four have been created to establish the core aspects of Slovakian tourism. Besides the mentions of Slovakia's common attractions there were frequent references to the former socialist/Czechoslovak regime which will also be discussed with reference to the hypothesis. Furthermore, recurring acknowledgments of Slovakia's price affordability for services and goods (especially alcohol) should also be noted.

Price level index for personal transport equipment, transport services, communication and restaurants & hotels, 2021, EU=100

	HFCE	Personal transport equipment	Transport services	Communication	Restaurants and hotels
Switzerland	167.0	105.1	139.5	154.8	168.1
Iceland	151.7	116.2	184.6	152.6	162.6
Norway	144.7	126.2	164.5	185.5	166.0
Ireland	143.8	113.4	144.1	150.1	129.3
Denmark	143.1	138.7	131.2	100.7	154.0
Luxembourg	136.4	95.8	96.6	142.3	125.8
Sweden	129.7	96.7	178.8	141.8	136.7
Finland	126.7	104.4	142.1	101.3	132.3
Netherlands	116.1	121.8	123.8	127.2	109.9
Belgium	113.1	101.0	109.8	170.9	123.2
France	112.0	99.4	116.3	99.9	121.4
Austria	110.8	106.3	121.8	101.2	116.1
Germany	107.8	101.3	122.4	115.4	104.8
EA19	105.9	101.5	107.6	109.3	102.6
Italy	100.6	102.3	89.5	87.9	103.1
Spain	97.4	96.4	89.0	119.6	88.4
Cyprus	90.6	85.6	101.3	107.7	90.4
Portugal	89.8	107.2	83.6	117.8	72.8
Slovakia	89.7	82.2	66.8	107.6	88.3
Slovenia	88.0	90.3	99.4	106.1	87.1
Greece	87.8	92.9	76.2	169.8	84.6
Malta	87.7	100.4	78.3	116.5	89.0
Estonia	86.9	86.4	73.6	85.7	94.8
Latvia	79.9	88.4	67.6	81.3	86.3
Czechia	79.1	88.1	60.2	117.8	67.2
Lithuania	71.8	88.3	78.2	76.4	76.3
Croatia	71.4	93.3	87.6	107.7	81.2
Hungary	68.3	87.6	66.8	92.8	61.4
Albania	60.3	85.3	48.9	110.5	46.2
Poland	60.0	80.7	59.6	52.6	78.1
Serbia	59.6	85.2	68.1	76.4	54.7
Montenegro	58.7	78.7	68.4	93.4	56.5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	55.6	82.5	79.1	94.7	54.7
Bulgaria	55.6	86.1	52.6	76.1	46.3
Romania	54.9	84.5	55.9	35.3	53.5
North Macedonia	49.6	87.8	49.6	65.2	46.2
Türkiye	40.9	100.6	45.3	52.8	41.0
Coefficients of variation					
EA-19	18.5	10.1	23.7	23.0	18.0
EU	26.1	13.1	32.4	28.3	27.3
All 36	34.6	13.9	38.8	31.4	37.9

Notes: countries are sorted according to their overall price level for household final consumption expenditure in the first column.

The shaded fields indicate the highest and lowest PLIs among all 36 participating countries.

The highest and lowest PLIs per product group among the 27 EU Member States are marked in bold.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: prc_ppp_ind)

eurostat 

Fig 11. Price level index of EU countries for public transportation services, restaurants and hotels. Slovakia scores 66,8 on transportation and 88,3 on hotels and restaurant services (Eurostat, 2022).

The costs of transportation and accommodation is indeed lower compared to the more conventional destinations in the EU such as the Netherlands, France or Austria. However, it still cannot compare to the affordability levels of other countries. These are located mainly in Southeast Europe, some of which have far bigger investment into tourism infrastructure (i.e. Croatia, Greece) (EU data, 2021). While price affordability can be a sufficient factor for attracting tourists, it alone does not constitute successful tourism development and is no guarantor for the overall quality of

tourism services. Another common point about Slovakia's tourism is its close proximity to other popular destinations such as Prague, Vienna or Budapest. Having the convenience to visit Slovakia from any of these popular destinations is a great benefit for Slovakia's tourism numbers. The challenge lies in convincing tourists to utilize this "convenient" option with marketing campaigns and an appealing tourism image. Lastly, Slovakia has been labeled as favorable for having a diverse array of attractions concentrated in a relatively small area.

The fifth question regarding stereotypes provides the most references for the established hypothesis of this thesis. To summarize, the hypothesis claimed that Slovakia is a country with low international recognition. As a result, it is often being labeled alongside its neighboring countries as Eastern Europe. That label often carries negative associations with underdevelopment and history of communist rule during the existence of Czechoslovakia which ended 30 years ago as of writing this thesis (Britannica, 2023).

Upon inspecting the answers of the surveyed experts, they almost universally agree. The reference to stereotypes of Eastern Europe are scattered everywhere along the survey even outside of question five. When asked about stereotypes that foreigners carry with Slovakia's image, every single respondent barring one has mentioned the associations with Eastern Europe. This association was further linked to the themes of Eastern bloc, soviet/communist rule, cheapness and an overall image of underdevelopment. Furthermore, two experts have noted lack of recognition and absence of profiling Slovakia in terms of establishing a singular destination image. These were cited as the primary characteristic, before mentioning links to the theme of Eastern Europe. While this survey may not explicitly state that stereotypes of Eastern Europe are directly caused by the lack of recognition, the correlation between these two themes is too strong to ignore. When asked, the representative of Authentic Slovakia responded affirmatively about this theory in his in-person interview.

Type of stereotypes	Citation frequency	Details
Narrow/grey image, boring, unfamiliar	IIII	Confusing Slovakia with Slovenia or former Czechoslovakia. Uninteresting/absent for the world.
Lack of safety, violence, danger	-	-

Primitive, lack of development, backwards	III	Cheap alcohol/women
Positive stereotypes	I	Hospitality/gastronomy alongside accomplishments of local countrymen.
Tough, unkind, unfriendly	-	-

Fig. 12. Categories of mentioned stereotypes of Slovakia in the context of association with Eastern Europe

When asked about countermeasures, most experts advocated for raising awareness on a more global scale about Slovakia's image as a tourism destination. Suggestions revolved around presenting the country as an alternative destination with a variety of unique, largely unexplored attractions, all within available distance. Furthermore, a proposition for branding Slovakia as a Central European country instead of Eastern European has been mentioned. This might be an effective way to distance the country from the negative associations with underdevelopment and create a more appealing image for the tourists.

The final question about Slovakia's communication channels has produced the most varied answers. While social media appears to be the most prevalent answer, a few other respondents opted for different explanations including word of mouth, the work of DMOs and the successes of the country's sportsmen. While all of the mentioned answers can be equal contributors to raising awareness of Slovakia's tourism, the survey was not able to reliably identify a primary benefactor to focus on. This may indicate Slovakia's struggle for a comprehensive tourism image strategy. It may be a symptom of inability to determine which communication channel is the most effective for raising awareness about the country.

6 Conclusion

Firstly, this thesis was focused on characterizing the interpretations of authenticity & stereotypes along with their significance for forming a destination image for the tourist. In regards to authenticity, it has been established that it is not possible to classify authenticity with a single definition in the context of tourism. The standing characterization of authenticity has evolved according to the preference of the tourist. Originally, the interpretation of authenticity for tourism has primarily focused on seeking a unique and exotic destinations free from the status quo of the tourists' place of residence (Van den Berghe, Keyes, 1984). A trip to experience the culture, landmarks and attractions of an unfamiliar and unique destination qualified as authentic for the tourist. Nowadays however, research showed that in order for a destination or attraction to be successful, it cannot solely rely on the objective authenticity of its landmarks and location regardless of how unique they might be. The tourists who are the main component in the success of destinations put huge emphasis on the overall experience of the attraction in order to be satisfied. Experiences now constitute the representation of authenticity in the tourism industry and destination are forced to adapt to this trend. Focusing on creating experiences satisfying for the tourists, these destinations may include objects and activities that improve the overall experience for the tourist, but have little in common with the original authentic identity of the destination. These actions can be classified as staged authenticity and they are becoming a reoccurring factor in tourism. The present-day generation of postmodern tourism takes this even further by treating authenticity as a mere afterthought. Postmodernists understand authenticity primarily as a tool for marketing and enhancing the atmosphere of a destination in which the tourists enjoy themselves (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). Tourist satisfaction through experiences is now at the forefront of present-day tourism with little regard for objective authenticity. This allows hyperreal simulations create environments where anything could be presented as authentic through tools such as social media. This poses a concerning potentiality for disregarding objective facts to such extent that the image and appeal of a destination derives almost exclusively upon misrepresented sentiments of its culture and stereotypical associations.

A destination image created by stereotypes or general disregard for objective authenticity can become detrimental to the overall reputation of a destination. It can be viewed as defamation and research found that it is especially threatening to destinations generally unfamiliar to the

public who have few opportunities in presenting an alternative image of themselves. They can become stuck with the image projected by postmodern tourism which often carries negative connotations such as underdevelopment, hostility or lack of safety for the tourist. The solution for this dilemma largely revolves around determining the details of this postmodern/stereotypical image and finding out how widespread it is. The destination is then able to use this publicity to recreate a destination image more in line with objective authenticity and how the destination wishes to be viewed.

Not much research has been found about postmodern authenticity significantly harming the integrity of destinations. However, the identified role of postmodern authenticity in forming and perpetuating stereotypes is a cause for concern.

For this purpose, it was decided to combine this theory with a case study of Slovakia as a tourism destination. It is a country in the EU with a stable economy, same environment, favorable geography, decent tourism infrastructure in some areas, but still with a rather underdeveloped destination image. To figure out more details about the tourism capabilities of this country, a picture analysis from Slovakia's primary DMO website (Travel to Slovakia, Good Idea) was conducted. The goal was to investigate which aspects of the country's tourism are promoted the most. The results showed that references to local nature are the most prevalent, followed by promotion of cultural landmarks (primarily castles and churches) with branches of spas, ski centers and hiking also being emphasized. The most underdeveloped aspect of Slovakia's tourism was promotion of cultural events. Events in general did not have a separate dedicated category on the website and were very difficult to navigate. These events are a crucial factor in constructing an appealing destination image and it is TSGI's main deficiency that needs to be addressed.

Overall, the analysis showed that Slovakia possess many diverse attractions that may appeal to tourists. However, it was very difficult to identify a unique enough aspect that would make tourists choose Slovakia as their destination compared to its neighboring competition.

The last part of the thesis conducted research into identifying the prevailing destination image of Slovakia for foreign tourists. Several owners and representatives of various local tour agencies and DMOs were interviewed through a written questionnaire. The questions focused on topics about their experiences with foreign tourist perceptions and thoughts about local tourism in general. These provided a reference from foreigners of varied nationalities as well as varied preferences based on the location and type of service these agencies provide.

Every single respondent has on some level categorized Slovakia's destination image as weak to non-existent. Many also referred to the strong regional variance in Slovakia's tourism development with some experiencing abundant visitor numbers, while some experience a strong decline with little cooperation between each other. Few have managed to voice their optimism for future development and emphasized the country's price affordability, proximity to other influential destinations and objective authenticity. Many studies published about the country's tourism ultimately conclude that Slovakia has great potential to be an influential tourist destination. Nevertheless, very few of them present a concrete plan of building an image of the country that would appeal to the potential tourists. Rather, they advocate for improving infrastructure, increased public and private investment and stronger communication among the different attractions of Slovakia. The surveyed experts have also voiced their support for this approach both in questionnaires and in-person. While all of these factors combined present a crucial element in the country becoming a successful tourist destination, experts agree that there is still the matter of destination exposure strategies which Slovakia also lacks. In this case, the research of this study showed that a poor and underdeveloped destination image strongly correlates to the formation and embracement of stereotypes to bridge the knowledge gap about the destination. This is an example for a single specific destination and may not apply everywhere. Nevertheless, further studies on the subject can prove that this phenomenon can apply to any destination or attraction.

The responses submitted by the experts concerning Slovakia's public image thus confirmed the author's hypothesis. In it, it was argued that due to general unfamiliarity by foreigners and the gaps in Slovakia's exposure initiative, most of the world fills in this knowledge gap with stereotypes as mentioned above. Furthermore, it was proven that these stereotypes were based on Slovakia's geographical location commonly referred to as "Eastern Europe" by many foreigners (TLDR News, 2021), which was historically under soviet/socialist sphere of influence. It was further proven, that this association largely bears impression of underdeveloped in Slovakia that carries over from the country's former system of governance that ended over 30 years ago as of writing this thesis. Impressions of underdevelopment naturally do not do Slovakia's tourism industry much good and as such, the country has to put effort into dismissing these assumptions.

Due to this prevailing destination image of Slovakia, some tourism agencies are utilizing this demand of what most foreigners view as authentic (classifiable as postmodern). It is done through organizing tours focused on exploring the historical socialist thematic, an approach adopted by one of the surveyed tour agencies - Authentic Slovakia. It is then argued that this initial insight into Slovakia's tourism can inspire the visitors for future tours of Slovakia with an approach more

focused on objective authenticity. While this approach may prove successful in disregarding the originally stereotypical views of Slovakia, it does not solve the problem of insufficient exposure campaigns for the wider world.

The pursuit for a favorable destination image that is capable of attracting a desired number of tourists is a constant effort. It relies on successful communication between the destinations and the tourists to create a proper demand for the destinations' supply of authentic attractions. If destinations with underdeveloped tourism industries like Slovakia aim to succeed, they should focus on balancing the two features of authenticity. Not only displaying their objectively authentic identity, but also establishing an atmosphere in which the tourists can relish in experiencing the "existential state of being within the liminal process of tourism" (Wang 1999). If done properly, the destinations will enjoy a healthy flow of engaged tourists without having to deal with the perilous exposure that stereotypes provide.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire form in Slovak and English

Questionnaire about the state of tourism in Slovakia

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gain data about the overall state of tourism in the Slovak Republic as well as gain insight about Slovakia's perceived image as a destination for inbound tourism.

The questionnaire contains 6 open-ended questions in total, which the recipients can answer to their best knowledge in as detailed manner as possible. The questionnaire is available in either Slovak or English language.

Following that, the recipient acknowledges that the data gained will be processed and publicized for a Bachelor's thesis for Kajaani University of Applied Sciences (KAMK) and will give his/her consent about this process with a signature below.

Completed questionnaire should be send to the email Filip.bobek8@gmail.com as soon as possible until 15.3.2023.

Details and signature of the recipient

Name (voluntary):

Organization I work for:

With this signature I give consent that I was informed and that I agree with processing the contents of this questionnaire for the publication of a Bachelor's thesis in written and digital form.

Signature.....

Thank you for participating!

Filip Bobek
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20.2.2023

English

7. In your opinion, what is the current state of Slovakia as an inbound tourism destination?
8. In your opinion, what aspects make Slovakia unique? What would you emphasize?
9. In your opinion, what aspects of Slovakia are promoted the most?
10. Which aspects of Slovakia are foreigners familiar with the most?
11. What stereotypes does Slovakia face on the world stage and what method should be used to counteract them?
12. Through which communication channels do foreigners learn about Slovakia?

Slovensky

1. Aký je podľa Vás dnešný stav Slovenska ako turistickej destinácie pre turistov zo zahraničia?
2. Aké aspekty Slovenska ho podľa Vás robia unikátnym pre svetový cestovný ruch? Čo by ste zdôraznili?
3. Aké aspekty Slovenska sa podľa Vás propagujú najviac?
4. Aké aspekty Slovenska sú podľa Vás pre cudzincov najznámejšie?
5. Akým stereotypom čelí Slovensko vo svete, a aké protopatrenia by mali byť nasadené?
6. Prostredníctvom akých komunikačných kanálov sa podľa Vás cudzinci dozvedajú o Slovensku?

Appendix 2: The published answers of the respondents to the survey concerning the state of Slovakia's tourism

Authentic Slovakia (Tour agency)

1. In your opinion, what is the current state of Slovakia as an inbound tourism destination?

Slovakia is unfortunately still a brand with low recognition, but the services are improving and we have things to offer. Quality of tourism infrastructure is regionally unbalanced – some regions have it very good to the point of over-tourism (Liptov, Tatras). While elsewhere, there are basic services missing such as accommodation and restaurants (Záhorie, Gemer). Clients who wish to avoid mass tourism and appreciate authenticity of cities and services have something to find here.

2. In your opinion, what aspects make Slovakia unique? What would you emphasize?

Countryside, castles, nature – from our perspective landmarks of 20th century / Cold war. Symbols – Chamois and Panel flat blocks.

3. In your opinion, what aspects of Slovakia are promoted the most?

*Folklore, Tatras, nature, hiking. Castles – just like in TSGI's promotional videos.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbMPwnaB3KQ>*

4. Which aspects of Slovakia are foreigners familiar with the most?

Besides Bratislava it is mainly Tatras, Orava castle (Nosferatu movie), Čachtice castle (Bathory), Czechoslovakia, post-communism, eastern Europe.

5. What stereotypes does Slovakia face on the world stage and what method should be used to counteract them?

Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia, overall brand absence. It would be nice to position Slovakia as a small alternative destination with pretty nature, experiences, castles and unexplored sites – something like a rawer Slovenia.

6. Through which communication channels do foreigners learn about Slovakia?

Documentaries, media articles, being a part of EU, thanks to our location in central Europe we receive tourists on a short exploration trips from Vienna/Budapest/Prague/Krakow. We shouldn't forget our sportsmen who represent and make our country visible with their achievements.

Trip in Slovakia (Tour agency)

1. In your opinion, what is the current state of Slovakia as an inbound tourism destination?

Depends on the perspective. Slovakia long held the so-called Eastern Europe stereotype. And it still stands in a sort of gray zone for an American or Asian tourist. A zone that many Americans and Asians don't consider in their visits to Europe. In this context, Slovakia is outside the primary destination sectors of Europe (e.g. cities like Paris, Rome or countries like Switzerland and Norway).

When it comes to European and now also Middle-Eastern visitors, Slovakia is in my opinion on the rise. More and more tourists from these regions arrive to get to know Slovakia specifically. Which brings along many opportunities and perspectives for the tourism enterprise.

2. In your opinion, what aspects make Slovakia unique? What would you emphasize?

For a country with small landmass, we possess large and diverse lands and cultures. We can certainly also peak interest in many aspects we can divide into a few categories:

A: Beautiful nature rich with green forests, waters and caves.

We have 9 national parks situated in the mountains with the 10th in the lowlands being on the way.

In terms of nature, we still have places along the Carpathian mountain span that can be considered as wilderness which is often a rarity in the scope of Europe's culture. In terms

of great beasts, there are protected populations of bears, wolves and lynxes still living here.

B: Slovakia: History and castles

Region of today's Slovakia is full of interesting history, with plethora of castles and very unique and interesting UNESCO heritage sites.

C: Slovakia is also a wine country

Traditionally, the Carpathian/Below Carpathian region of Slovakia was one the northernmost location in Europe where wine was able to be produced. The wine was famous at the Emperor's court. A unique thing about Slovakia is the amount of wine varieties we produce on such small land area in a "small" country. Meaning that our varieties are more diverse compared to France or Italy which is also an interesting aspect. Many don't consider Slovakia as a wine country and are very pleasantly surprised when they try it.

D: Folklore and folk culture

In the UNESCO world heritage list is also the unique music instrument - Fajara. We also have beautiful folk songs, dances and culture as a whole.

E: Waters: Spas and healing springs

We have wide resources and wealth in healing and thermal springs.

3. In your opinion, what aspects of Slovakia are promoted the most?

Presently, it is in my opinion cities like Bratislava, Košice, the northern regions and the national parks (Low and High Tatras). It is fair to say that the where there is enough bus/train/plane traffic, those places continue to thrive and be promoted. Also, spas and spa stays.

4. Which aspects of Slovakia are foreigners familiar with the most?

Mountains (Tatras)

Capital city

Spas (Piešťany in particular)

Price affordability

5. What stereotypes does Slovakia face on the world stage and what method should be used to counteract them?

Main stereotype: Eastern Europe country.

According to the "traditional" western views, we are an Eastern European country (Since Czechoslovakia was under Soviet influence). East European block is a stereotype for the generation that experienced the division of the world into Eastern block and the Western world. Slovakia is realistically in the heart of Europe. It is Central Europe.

Countermeasures: When presenting ourselves on the world stage, the constant use of the term Central Europe is vital. The image of an Eastern European country will also fade away with new generations.

6. Through which communication channels do foreigners learn about Slovakia?

Today, it is mainly social media. Videos and photos of the country can thankfully be shared anywhere in the world. In European area, it is in my opinion the references from friends that do the trick.

Expos (Low impact)

Experiential trips in cruises through Donau river (Low impact)

BBSK Development agency (DMO)

1. In your opinion, what is the current state of Slovakia as an inbound tourism destination?

Negative impacts of the pandemic, the war in neighboring Ukraine, energy prices and inflation: It all has negative impacts on visitor numbers and the slowing down the "return to normal" everybody expected after the pandemic. People are forced to save money –

vacation is the first thing people give up. The war in Ukraine has a very negative impact for foreign arrivals – worries about the safety of the country.

2. In your opinion, what aspects make Slovakia unique? What would you emphasize?

- *Nature potential – national parks, natural reservations but also natural springs (healing and mineral), the share of green spaces per capita, high concentration of European heritage in a small country.*

- *Proximity – center of Europe, connectivity of V4 – Prague, Budapest and close proximity of Vienna and its airport*

- *Unexplored Slovakia – Slovakia is not well known, which is an asset these days (exploration of the unexplored trend – but the country requires more attention to itself.*

3. In your opinion, what aspects of Slovakia are promoted the most?

From the national standpoint mainly High Tatras and Bratislava. There is still an overall absence of profiling Slovakia in terms of a common idea/ it is still presentations of complex offers for the most part – mountains, spas, caves, history, cities, nature, golf, folklore) for the general public, there is a general absence of a long-term vision to be presented and its subsequent implementation not just from the position of resorts but also others (Ministry of foreign affairs)

4. Which aspects of Slovakia are foreigners familiar with the most?

- *For the neighboring markets/countries (V4) we are a known and familiar country, they know what to expect from us and have their own motives for visiting (mainly a stay in the mountains – ski vacation, spa etc.)*

- *For more distant markets, I fear we have no clearly defined aspects with which they associate us. Maybe a bit of the following:*

- *Former Czechoslovakia – associations with Prague which is world-famous.*

- *Tatras (mountains)*

- *Spas (Piešťany)*

- *Internationally known representatives: Ms. President and sportsmen (Sagan, Vlhová but for a small group only)*
 - *Lastly, low-profile topics like being a wine superpower but this characteristic does not resonate with the wider public.*
5. What stereotypes does Slovakia face on the world stage and what method should be used to counteract them?

We are mostly uninteresting for the world rather than being associated with some stereotypes. If anything, then being a former communist country with little development. Positive stereotypes might be hospitality, gastronomy and ingenuity/creativity of our countrymen.

6. Through which communication channels do foreigners learn about Slovakia?

- *Recommendations from close friends*
- *Online activities (Slovakia.travel and other destination marketing organizers such as Liptov, BTB, high Tatras) and offline campaigns (prints, billboards, expos, exhibitions, presentations)*
- *Activities of upcoming tourism agencies and operators*

BUBO Travel Agency

1. In your opinion, what is the current state of Slovakia as an inbound tourism destination?
- I. *Slovakia has a very weak state of tourism right now. We have so many things to offer as a small country such as great hiking options, skiing and wellness in thermal pools but all of these things are still underdeveloped with undeveloped potential to make them world class standard.*
 - II. *Poor – Information is often only available in Slovak language. A foreign tourist is often unable to find out elementary information such as bus/train departures, language barriers are almost everywhere. In my opinion, nobody is doing inbound*

tourism the correct way. If thousands of tourists can go to Prague, Vienna or Budapest, why would they not come to Slovakia as well. When people go to the Alps, Caucasus or Pyrenees, why not the Tatras? And safari as well. The number of animals observable in eastern Slovakia is impressive.

III. I think that Slovakia cannot in this aspect be considered equal as a whole. The situation in big cities is especially very good, while smaller areas mainly lack the necessary language skills.

2. In your opinion, what aspects make Slovakia unique? What would you emphasize?

I. Our great advantage over countries with mountains like Austria is that we are situated much lower on the sea level which makes the hikes easier for many people. Also, the size of Slovakia plays an advantage here since moving around is easier.

II. Mountains, spas, UNESCO heritage sites, safari, cities, communism memoirs, wineries, breweries...

III. History, Nature, Traditions.

3. In your opinion, what aspects of Slovakia are promoted the most?

I. Wellness and Hiking

II. Ski vacations and that is about it.

III. Culture and nature, History.

4. Which aspects of Slovakia are foreigners familiar with the most?

I. I think it is the athletes that compete on the world level. Outside of that, I would say cheap alcohol and mountains.

II. Alcohol and Bachelor's/ Stag parties

III. Nature – Tatras, History – Banská Štiavnica, Košice, Castles – Spiš Castle.

5. What stereotypes does Slovakia face on the world stage and what method should be used to counteract them?

- I. *From my interaction with foreigners, its usually the fact that we are post communism eastern Europe country so we are clumped into the stereotype of being behind in culture or technology etc. the biggest way to counteract this is to promote the country on a global level more to show that it is not as bad as it seems.*
 - II. *Slovenia vs Slovakia, association with former Czechoslovakia, cheap women, cheap booze, skanzen of communism.*
 - III. *Slovakia should improve their education sector.*
6. Through which communication channels do foreigners learn about Slovakia?
- I. *I believe it is usually word of mouth right now.*
 - II. *Social networks and the Internet*
 - III. *Internet and social networks*

