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BRANDING THE CITY OF ŠIBENIK AS A SUSTAINABLE TOURIST DESTINATION USING SOCIAL NETWORKS

Abstract

Sustainable tourism, as a fast-growing cultural and economic activity, offers great opportunities for steady development of branded regions and cities. Branding is an integral part of marketing, aimed at raising awareness and creating loyalty among customers. Recent trends show the growing impact of social networks in brand creation.

Croatia has one of the shortest tourist seasons in Europe, which affects the sustainability of tourism. Therefore, a pilot study of the Dalmatian town of Šibenik has been made in order to examine whether there is room for development of a sustainable tourism model through strengthening its brand with the help of modern technology, predominantly the social networks.

The rich tourism potential of Šibenik has not been sufficiently exploited for sustainable tourism through a recognizable tourism brand, and the official development strategies neglected to examine the use of social networks in achieving both goals. Therefore, an online survey has been conducted in order to determine whether Šibenik is recognized as a tourist destination through social networks.

The results should help in developing a systematic approach to the branding of Šibenik. It should simultaneously address the issue of its seasonal attractiveness to tourists, thus contributing to the extension of the season and increasing sustainability of tourism activities. In that way, the branding of the city will not turn into a traditional marketing strategy to promote its market, and may contribute to its sustainable development as well as serve as a model to similar cities.

Keywords: Branding of Šibenik, tourist destinations, social networks, sustainable development, social marketing strategy

1. Introduction

In comparison with the other 32 European countries, the tourist season in Croatia is the shortest (Roland Berger Strategy Consultants - RBSC, 2008). It starts in May, ends in September, and is unevenly loaded (with its peak in July and August), which has a negative impact on the sustainability of tourism. Furthermore, the off-season period is insufficiently exploited for development of different types of tourism (for example, there is almost no winter tourism season). In assessing the biggest business problem of Croatian tourism, earlier findings show (RBSC, 2007) that the use of new media has been assessed as the *smallest problem*, and the lack of knowledge of foreign languages as the *biggest*. In addition, RBSC's research confirmed that brands of tourist destination are insufficiently developed. Consequently, several gaps were identified, and thus formed the field for addressing the following research questions, summarized as: *how social media may influence brand development of a tourist destination in support of sustainable tourism*.

In search of a tourist city to be investigated in the pilot study, several criteria were considered, including the existence of (a) obvious tourism potential, (b) tourism development strategy based on the development of a brand, (c) web presence, and (d) recent shift/improvement of some tourism indicators compared to the previous years.

The city of Šibenik was chosen, as a blend of local culture, environment, and experience of spatial and public policies that create a sense of adventure of the visited city. The city has its strategy for the development of tourism. Furthermore, the *Situation Analysis for Strategy Development of the City of Šibenik* (2011) stresses the launching of the project on exploitation of cultural and other resources for the further development of tourism and a city brand. Another argument for focusing research on sustainable tourism and the branding of the city of Šibenik is found among the economic opportunities of the Šibenik-Knin county (2011), where the need for the extension of the tourist season was identified.

According to the Ministry of Tourism (2014), the city of Šibenik recorded a significant increase in both, the number and consumption of tourists in 2013 and 2014, which is attributed to increased investments in the development of the tourist offer (including accommodation, upgrading of the public beach, various tourist attractions, etc.).

While an improved result during peak season happens *"on its own,"* the problem of the short tourist season still remains, as well as the question of how to communicate this new, enhanced offer to tourists, and to extend the season. One of the objectives listed in the document *"Strategic orientation - Development Strategy of the City of Šibenik 2011-2013"* is *"3. Sustainable tourism,"* with an associated priority goal *"8. Further development of the tourist offer with a strong promotion on the world market."* The part of the document with a description of the respective projects that are addressing these priorities, exclusively provides the information on *developing* the offer, without tackling the issue of development or strengthening of the *brand*, or the *use of social networks* to achieve the required global or, at least, European visibility.

Also, the fact that Šibenik was in 2010 the worst ranked city among 33 Croatian cities in the calculation of the Open City Budget Index (OCBI), as a general measure of the budget transparency for each of the 33 cities included in the research, gives room for improvement in the use of social media (Bronić, Ott and Urban, 2012).

Therefore, a pilot study of the Dalmatian town of Šibenik has been made in order to examine whether there is room for development of a sustainable tourism model by strengthening its brand with the help of modern technology, mostly social networks. Since there are a large number of tourist sites, which also continue to struggle with the problems of the short season, a lack of a recognizable brand and inadequate use of social networks for this purpose, there is a possibility for further development of the project addressing these issues on a larger sample.

2. Literature review

In this chapter the following issues will be presented through literature review: (1) sustainable development and tourism, (2) branding of cities and its future and (3) social networks. In addition, an overview of some characteristics of the city of Šibenik will also be presented.

2.1 Sustainable tourism

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) definition of sustainable tourism is *"tourism that respects both local people and the traveler, cultural heritage and the environment. It seeks to provide people with an exciting and educational holiday that is also of benefit to the people of the host country"* (UNESCO, 2004, http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme_c/mod16.html).

The United Nations World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) guide describes around 50 major sustainability issues, grouped as socio-cultural, economic, environmental, management and global issues. They cover a wide range of topics from the satisfaction of local communities and tourists, through the management of natural resources (e.g. water, energy, waste), land use, seasonality, employment, health and safety, planning process (Yunis, 2004). While developing a system of indicators for assessing and monitoring the sustainability of tourism in Croatia, Kožić and Mikulić (2011) examined *the United Nations World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO)* basic indicators of the sustainability of tourism. One of the indicators is the *seasonality of tourism*, which is measured by the following parameters: (a) Tourist arrivals by months and quarters; (b) Occupancy rate registered (official) accommodation by month (peak season compared to the off-season period) and percentage of total occupancy in the highest occupied quarter or month; (c) Percentage of companies that operate all year; (d) Total number and percentage of jobs in tourism which are open all year (compared to temporary jobs, open only during the season).

An additional area for research should include the study on *responsible tourism* as tourism *"that creates better places for people to live in, and better places to visit"* (Gonzalo, 2013). Responsible tourism exceeds three pillars of sustainable tourism (economic, social and environmental) by including industry role-players in the tourism sector and their responsibility for achieving sustainable development through tourism. Clearly, the determinants of sustainable and responsible tourism provide enough space for better and effective use of new technologies, social media, mobile devices and the collaborative economy.

Numerous challenges of tourist destinations should be facilitated in order to allow both travelers and locals to have a stronger voice and power, to take initiatives and enable a higher potential for meaningful connections that may lead to better use of resources, and sustainability of the tourist destination.

2.2 Branding of cities

In order to become globally competitive in comparison with other tourist destinations, cities need to become recognizable and thus develop their brands. The most important factor for creation of a brand of a city is visibility. According to the American Marketing Association, brand is defined as *a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that contributes to a sale of goods or services different from goods or services of other vendors*. According to Vranešević (2007), a brand is made *from the name and/or brand characteristics, and other elements and activities that producers allocate to any product, service or idea that would thus inform the market about their uniqueness in general and/or in comparison to other competitive products.*

Selection of brand elements depends on six criteria: memorability, meaning, attractiveness/likeability, transferability, flexibility and protectability. The first three are used, according to Vranešević (2007), in *building brand equity and exploitation in other markets in other product categories*. The elements of building a brand should be such that they can be easily noticed and remembered. They should refer to the value of the product and therefore they are more important if the product does not have some extremely easily recognizable distinctive advantages. The last three criteria for choosing brand elements and utilizing their values (transferability, flexibility and protectability) are important for brand management over time and for expansion to different markets and different product categories.

In the globalized world each country, and thus their cities, want to establish themselves and prosper in the global competitive market. Therefore, the creation of brand strategy for the future development of a city should comply with the strategic objectives of the city authorities and the prosperity of the community in the future.

However, the strategies depend on the key specific advantages of cities, and therefore can be based on the following predispositions (Paliaga, 2008): (1) historically dominant and famous cities (Rome, Berlin, London, Paris); (2) capital cities; (3) cities with an important position within their own country as a financial or transportation center (Milan, Shanghai, Sydney); (4) cities which play a significant role in the context of the EU or other transnational associations (Brussels, London, New York); (5) cities - organizers or hosts of special sports or other social events (Athens, Barcelona, Atlanta, London), and (6) highly specialized cities (Singapore, Shanghai, Dubai, etc.).

The ultimate goal of city branding is to make a brand out of the *name* of the city and as a result create favorable conditions for investors, the economy, tourists and the citizens themselves, who must be a part of such a project. Implementation of marketing programs is needed in order to increase the market value and visibility of the city brand. Branding should refer to the creation of the brand of the city as a whole, and not as part of the city or part of the *tourist product*. Both, the brand and the creation of the city brand may be considered only upon implementation of the basic concepts of urban marketing (Clifton and Simmons, 2003).

It is, therefore, necessary to develop urban marketing (Chevrant-Breton, 1997) as the concept of the city that determines the local goals and ways of their implementation within a particular city. It becomes an opportunity and possibility for every city in Croatia to highlight some particular elements of urban places, whether these are socio-cultural, historical, natural, tourism or economic elements. Therefore, it is necessary to advance the urban quality of the basic components that make up the city's positive image and develop its brand. The city should be both, successfully managed and active in organizing various activities, including promotion, lobbying for the city, attracting the capital, and using effective communication channels and tools (including social networks).

Major opportunities, threats, strengths and weaknesses will define the attractiveness and the appeal of a particular city. That analysis can be performed within several categories (Kotler, Heider and Rehn, 1993). An ideal city is the one which, based on the SWOT analysis, indicates the greatest opportunities and least threats in its environment. There are also: (a) speculative cities (cities that indicate a high degree of opportunity, but also just as many threats), (b) mature cities (cities with a low level of opportunity, but also the low level of threats), and (c) problematic cities (cities with low level of opportunity and a very high degree of threats) (Paliaga, 2008).

Finally, the developed city brand will allow the respective city government better planning of budget revenues, better management of real estate, rational environmental management, achievement of better tourist turnover, more successful local economy, which ultimately results in a more stable political management of the local government. It also provides an impression that the development of the city as a successful brand is a result of good governance.

2.3 The future of city brands

The future and completeness of the brand stems not only from an emotional connection with the product; as a "fine-packaged" product it has a function in the lives of consumers. Like all other brands, in order to become *preferred brands* and remain as such in the future, cities must possess the (a) energy, (b) innovation, and (c) be well connected. A good example of the *energy* that doesn't mean only *managers who launch the brand with their ambition and vision*, but the complete effort that *makes desirable the whole product category by encouraging competition in action, innovation and high-quality marketing communications* (Babić, 2013) are Apple and iPhone, which triggered the entire IT and communications industry. Another determinant is *innovation*, which must have a useful purpose. Products that have created an imposed, artificial (non-existent) purpose, will eventually be uncovered by consumers. Useful innovations, as a segment of branding cities, are particularly relevant to the creation of cultural events in the cities. Such events cannot easily be copied by other cities, which make them very specific and rare among them. Therefore, they are of high value.

An example of a good use of useful innovation is the city of Perugia in the Italian province of Umbria, which offers two special events: the World Festival of Jazz (addressing an exquisite audience) and the World Festival of Chocolate (the biggest festival of that kind in the world by the number of visitors). In 2012, the festival was visited by over 1.5 million visitors in ten days (www.eurochocolate.it). During the

festival, the whole town lives with one word - chocolate. All shops and restaurants introduced events on the theme of chocolate.

A bad example of attempts to brand cities through events that bear the *sign of innovation* are many old crafts fairs, wanted by almost every place in Croatia. However, this is not about branding the city, but branding the *need of tourist* boards to meet the local inhabitants' wishes to have a memory of old crafts. In doing so, they forget that the city should be developed for tourism, not for the locals. Potential visitors should see a particular kind of destination, and be attracted by the unique and differentiated content and its brand.

The third determinant of the creation of a desirable brand is *good connections*. It's not just about the connections with the target group, but with certain segments or even fragments of consumers within these target groups (Wood, 2000). As an example of such a branded city, the city of Munich should be mentioned, as it established itself through the *Oktoberfest* as the "event that is awaited all year round." In addition to the entertainment that is offered for visitors of all ages, the majority of the attention addresses beer consumers.

2.4 Social networks and tourism

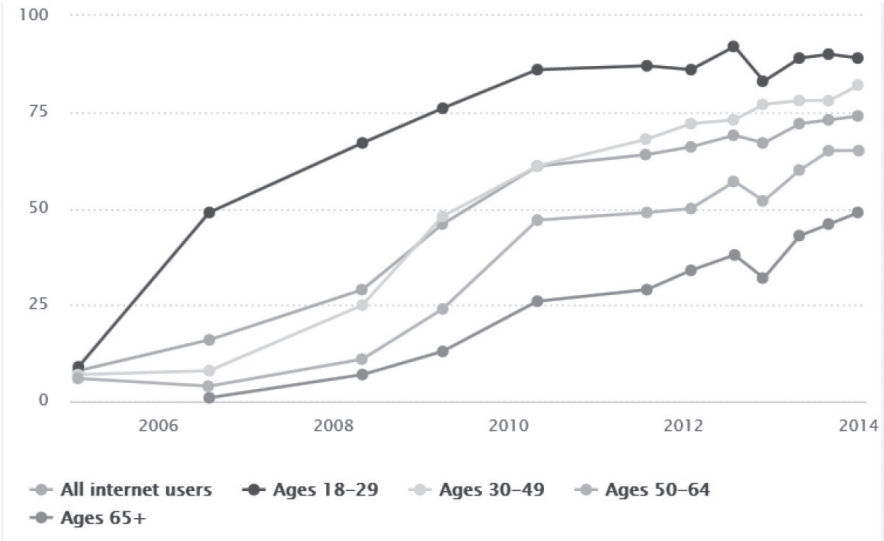
Weis (2010) claims that the Internet has been the incubator for new network technologies, far surpassing the expectations of worldwide network suppliers. He also claims that the two basic reasons for the success of the Internet are: (1) the Internet satisfies the needs of its users and (2) its technologies were developed by solving real problems. The Internet is a large network that almost instantly connects computers and users around the globe. This definition provides the groundwork for describing Social Networks as one of the defining factors of the Internet as both the Internet and Social Networking Sites (SNS) share a similar appearance. Boyd and Ellison (2008) define Social Networking Sites as *web-based services that allow individuals to (a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system*. Armstrong and Hagel (1996) claim that *these social networks serve the consumers' needs for communication, information and entertainment*. As a technology which satisfies the needs of the users, SNS have changed the Internet and the world, becoming one of the fastest growing Internet applications in the past two decades, attracting millions of users and existing in numerous forms (such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, LinkedIn etc.).

Using SNS in marketing and tourism is, therefore, a necessity, as users and brands can shape their personal networks and encourage action of others by performing actions on sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels (2009) suggest that SNS help produce positive outcomes such as attracting new members to web sites. Effective traditional Word-of-Mouth (WOM) marketing can be linked to SNS as it is a particularly prominent feature on the Internet. Major categories of the WOM marketing activities on the Internet include viral marketing, referral programs and community marketing. The results of the study show that WOM referrals strongly affect new customer acquisitions at the social networking site.

SNS can, therefore, prove to be a very influential communication channel as it effectively utilizes WOM and advanced technology to transmit messages anywhere and anytime. The positive effects of WOM can even be boosted as a single user can instantaneously transmit his message mainly for free to many people, thus influencing them. The same applies if the opinion leaders share negative thoughts about brands, tourist destinations or any other factor. In the end, the understanding of the factors that create effective WOM can be very helpful for marketers (Van Doren, Fechner and Green-Adelsberger, 2010).

The percentage of online adults who are becoming active users of social networking sites is continuously rising. Report on *Social media use by age groups over time*, provided by the PewResearch Center (2014), in the section "Older Adults and Technology Use," in January 2014, indicates that around 74% of all online adults use social networking sites (see Figure 1 indicating that 89% of adults ages 18-29, 82% of adults ages 30-49, 65% of adults ages 50-64, and 49% of adults ages 65+). In addition, 27% of older adults use social networking sites such as Facebook, but these users socialize more frequently with others compared with non-SNS users.

Figure 1 Social networking site use by age group, over time



Source: PewResearch Center, http://www.pewinternet.org/data-trend/social-media/social-media-use-by-age-group/

The number of passengers, whose travelling is guided by information obtained from the Internet, is continuously growing. Relevant tourist institutions in Croatia have recognized the potential of new media and are effectively using it in advertising. In 2013, the Croatian National Tourist Board allocated substantial funds to be invested in online communication, especially Internet advertising (Čolić, 2013).

2.5 The city of Šibenik as a brand

As a fast-growing economic and cultural activity, tourism offers plenty of opportunities for the development of regions and cities. The cultural, historical, and natural potential for tourism in the Dalmatian town of Šibenik is not sufficiently exploited to create a recognizable tourism brand for that city. Branding is a serious process that forces all participants from the bottom to the top of the organization (the city) to work hard from the very beginning of the branding process until its successful completion and creation of a city as brand. Ultimately, the viability of each brand depends on the management of all relationships between the company (the city), and both existing and potential clients (Keller, 2003). Therefore it is necessary to measure (1) brand development, (2) brand refinement and improvement, (3) brand effectiveness and (4) brand protection (UNWTO, 2004).

In the strategic document *Situation Analysis for Strategy Development of the City of Šibenik* (2011) the need to exploit cultural resources for the further development of tourism and branding of the city has been underlined. Since the *Analysis* advocates for the use of traditional tools and resources, and there is a lack of research on the impact and significance of the Internet and social networks in identifying the city's recognition as a tourist destination, an online survey has been conducted in order to determine whether Šibenik is recognized as a tourist destination through social networks.

3. Methodology

In May and June 2013, online research was conducted on a sample of 450 respondents, identified through the channels of the Croatian Ministry of Tourism, authors' networks, and student and entrepreneurship associations. The questionnaire had 55 questions grouped into 4 sections addressing: (1) general questions (including demographic data, travel preferences, social network presence, etc.); (2) the city of Šibenik; (3) Croatian tourist destinations; and (4) linkages between the branding of cities and respective sustainable development.

In the beginning of the questionnaire, the participants were offered the following definitions: *brand* (set of tangible and intangible characteristics of a product or service), *sustainable development* (development that meets the needs of today's generation and without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs), *tourist destination* (organized and market recognized spatial units, with tourism product/s as a result of original and derivative travel deals that have actual or potential marketability of the tourist market), and *social networks* (web-based services that allow individuals to (a) build a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) watch and use their own list of links and lists other connections within the system).

4. Research

In the following pages, the analysis and the results of the research are presented. They are divided into 4 sections: demographics, the city of Šibenik, comparison with other destinations, and branding of the cities and sustainable development.

4.1 General questions: Demographics and attitudes of respondents towards travel and social networks

In the first part of the research, general questions regarding demographic data and travel preferences are addressed. Most respondents (69%) are aged 18–24. The second largest group (23%) is aged 25–30 with the older age groups accounting for the remaining 8%. As the research was conducted online, it was expected that most respondents are young. The respondents are mainly female (66%), with male respondents accounting to a lesser extent (34%). The majority of respondents are *students* (62%), followed by *employed non-students* (19%), *employed students* (13%), and *unemployed non-students* (5%). In total, a majority of three-fourths (75%) are students, employed or unemployed. The issue of limitations on the ability to travel due to study obligations was not examined, and was not mentioned as a constraint.

The question concerning the income class is important as it often defines the traveling habits of an individual or a group. The majority of respondents (36%) stated that they are in the lowest income class, with less than HRK 1,500 per month, which corresponds to the status of students. The second largest income class (15%) is HRK 1,501–2,500, and the third and fourth have the same number of responses (11%) for amounts of HRK 2,501– 4,000 and HRK 4,001–7,000. The two last categories both have the same number of responses (2%) and are for amounts of HRK 7,001–10,000 and over HRK 10,001. One fourth (24%) decided not to answer the question.

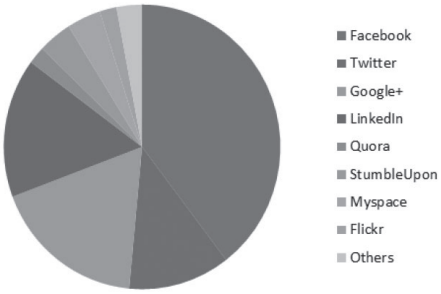
The respondents are mainly from Zagreb (42%) and Šibenik (17%). However, there are respondents from every part of Croatia ranging from Osijek (3%), Bjelovar (2%), Dubrovnik (2%), etc. The geography of the demographic is very diverse, thus giving a different perspective on Šibenik as a tourist destination.

When asked about the frequency of business trips, 68% of respondents stated that they do not travel, one fifth (21%) travels less than ten days per year, few respondents (8%) travel 11 to 60 days per year and the least (3%) travel more than 61 days per year. These answers were to be expected as most of the demographic are younger students that still do not travel for business.

When asked how often they travel for private reasons, the majority (60%) responded that they spend 11 to 60 days per year travelling, contrary to the previous question. The second largest group (28%) travels less than ten days per year. Some (9%) travel more than 61 days per year and the least (4%) do not travel at all. The conclusion from these two questions is that most of the respondents travel at least once a year for several days. The respondents (77%) travel more often inside Croatia, not abroad (23%), which is logical due to the low income power of students in this research.

In the following part of the research, the scope and way that social media is used is considered (Figure 2). The majority (97%) use some channels of social media, with most respondents using Facebook (40%). Others include Google+ (18%), LinkedIn (16%), Twitter (12%), Stumble Upon (4%), MySpace (4%), Quora (2%) and others (3%). It is important to note that the users had the option of selecting multiple social media channels, thus Facebook was selected by 99% of all the users of social media, making it the platform with most users.

Figure 2 Distribution of used social media channels



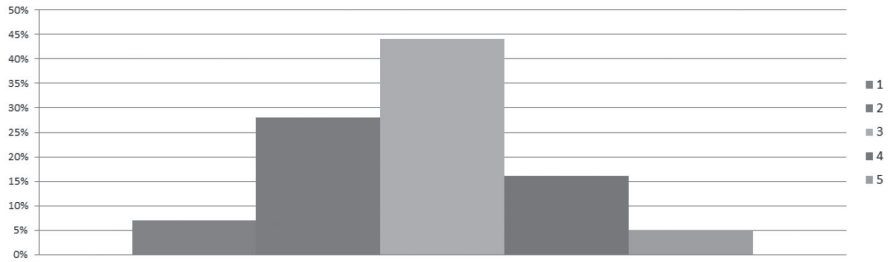
Source: Author

Of all the users of Facebook, the majority (86%) use it very often, whereas a smaller percentage (11%) uses it occasionally. This is expected as it is the network with the most users and activity. Twitter users either have an account, but do not use it (33%) or use it occasionally (28%). Some respondents use it rarely (26%) whereas a smaller percentage use Twitter often (12%). This social network is still not strong on the Croatian market. Google+ is mostly not used (56%). Other respondents use Google+ rarely (27%), occasionally (15%) and a very small percentage uses it actively (less than 1%). This result is expected because most users create a Google+ account since they already have a Google mail account.

Half of the LinkedIn users use the site occasionally (50%). Many use it rarely (29%). It is also used often by some respondents (13%) or not used at all (8%).

This social network is business-oriented and does not require frequent checking as it is mainly used for creating an online CV. The remaining three social media channels, StumbleUpon, MySpace and Flickr, are mostly used rarely or not at all (the user has an account, but does not use it). This is understandable as their popularity on the Croatian market is much lower than that of the previously stated. Respondents were also asked about their perceived perception of the social media channels, more specifically, regarding the amount of content served by the software and the security of the channels, which is mostly related to privacy issues. The users of social media channels have a mixed perception, but generally a good one (Figure 3). Most show a medium level of satisfaction (44%), whereas the second largest number of respondents is more satisfied with the channels (28%). The next ranked group is satisfied with the social media channels less than at the medium level (16%) with only a small amount of respondents who are fully satisfied with the social media channels (7%) and those who show no satisfaction at all (5%).

Figure 3 Overall satisfaction with social media channels



Source: Author

The conclusion regarding social media is that most of our younger demographics (97%) use some form of social media. Almost every response included the use of Facebook, and it also reported on the most intensive use of this social media channel. LinkedIn, the second social network by the frequency of use, is followed by Twitter.

4.2 The city of Šibenik

The section of research regarding the city of Šibenik deals with how respondents perceive Šibenik, based on their previous experiences. Most of the respondents (83%) visited Šibenik at least once in their lifetime, mostly in summer (44%), followed by spring (23%), fall (17%) and winter (16%). This makes it clear that Šibenik is a summer tourist destination, with most of the respondents having some personal connection with the city.

Reasons for visiting Šibenik included tourist visits (46%) and staying with a friend (17%), whereas others answered that they were in Šibenik for educational (10%), business (6%) or other (7%) purposes. Some respondents are from Šibenik (14%). This makes it clear that Šibenik is mostly visited as a summer tourist destination, with no other specific branding.

Most respondents stated that their awareness (knowledge) of Šibenik is based on their personal experience (48%). Some have a deeper insight about Šibenik based on recommendations (16%) and TV reports (16%). Other responses included reviews (9%), promotional materials (6%) or other (5%). This is important input as social media is mostly about sharing good personal experiences.

When asked about familiarity with the promotional materials of the city of Šibenik, most respondents (74%) stated that they did not come across any. It indicates that Šibenik may not be investing enough in promotional materials. Making use of social media to boost the word-of-mouth of personal experience may prove crucial in the future of Šibenik.

Respondents are familiar with the promotional materials that range from social media (25%), online ads (21%), flyers (22%), billboards (20%), advertorials (10%) and others (2%). It was not specified whether the materials were official or unofficial, what the materials were and if they resulted in changing the perception of Šibenik. This question was intended only to test the respondents to see which channel they feel influences them the most.

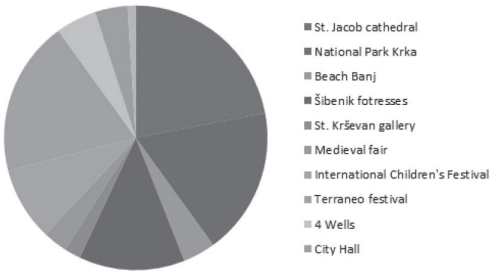
The following question was a matrix of choices in which respondents were asked to discern how important they find various factors that define the tourist attractiveness of Šibenik based on their personal knowledge. The given options were the cultural sites, cultural events, natural sites, beaches and the sea or the islands. As the beaches, the sea, and the islands are actually natural sites, the responses can be seen as a kind of a similar group of answers.

Most respondents find *cultural* and *natural sites* to be very important factors in defining Šibenik as a tourist destination. While *the islands* are also very important, *the beaches* and *the sea* are not important tourist attractions (most probably due to the fact that the city of Šibenik did not have a beach in the city until the summer 2012). Therefore, the respondents do not associate Šibenik with the beaches and the sea as much as they may associate it with other tourist destinations. There are several important *cultural events* in Šibenik, such as festivals for various target groups throughout the summer. Šibenik was even promoted as "the city of festivals" in 2013. The answer that *cultural events* are less attractive than *natural beauties* is a finding that may influence future branding efforts. On average, 10% of the respondents cannot evaluate what is the most important factor of the tourist attractions in Šibenik. The respondents were then asked to give "top of mind" answers on "what they think of when they think about Šibenik as a tourist destination." This was a descriptive question so quantification is impossible and the answers were very diverse. Most included obvious answers such as specific *cultural* or *natural sites* that are offered in the next question. Some answers included *famous athletes*, *musicians* or *certain parts of Šibenik* (bridge, alleyways). It is important to note that a lot of respondents also find the city to be "rude," "boring," "dead" and "not worth visiting" because there are no other "top of mind" associations.

The next question was a sum of the most popular tourist attractions in Šibenik (Figure 4). The users picked the ones they found to be the most popular. The top three results were St. Jacob's Cathedral (22%), the Terraneo festival (19%) and National Park Krka (18%). Following are the Four Fortresses (13%), the International Children's Festival (9%), the 4 Wells Restaurant (5%), Banj (4%) and others. This question indicates that there are three main tourist attractions in Šibenik, while others are less known and may require further promotion.

After this question, the respondents were asked if they find Šibenik internationally recognizable. Most responded that they find Šibenik *less recognizable than many other destinations* (63%). One fifth finds Šibenik *equally recognizable as other cities* (22%) whereas a small number (4%) finds Šibenik *more recognizable*. One ninth (10%) are not sure whether Šibenik is recognizable internationally.

Figure 4 Popular tourist attractions in Šibenik



Source: Author

To further research the use of social media regarding Šibenik, the respondents were asked if the tourist attractions of Šibenik are well represented on the communication channels. The responses are very negative, as most respondents (40%) claim that the *tourist attractions are mostly not well represented*. The next ranked group (24%) answered that *tourist attractions are not at all represented on social media*. There are (5%) more optimistic respondents who stated "mostly yes" as an answer, and a small number (1%) that stated the answer "yes." Also, some respondents (13%) stated that they did not know. This is a clear indicator that the respondents who follow social media (mostly Facebook) are very critical of the way social media channels are used for the promotion of Šibenik. Also, the responses to this question are in a way contrary to the previous question in which 25% of the respondents found that they are familiar with Šibenik using social media as a promotional tool, which may make that question irrelevant.

The last question in the section was a general one to find out what kind of promotional tools respondents find important in today's world; whether they believe the conventional offline methods are still the imperative, or that the shift to digital channels (including social media) is necessary. Most respondents (64%) answered the top three values in favor of the digital channels. Medium values were selected less (35%), and only a small percentage (1%) finds that traditional channels are more effective than the digital in today's world.

In conclusion of this part of the research (the city of Šibenik), we find that most people who visited Šibenik did so in the summer or spring, mostly for tourism. Also, the answers were mostly based on personal experience. The existing natural and cultural sites are most important in defining Šibenik as an attractive tourist destination, with cultural events falling short. Šibenik is perceived as not a very competitive city in international tourism and as a very traditional one, because of its inability to promote itself through social media. Also, it is important to note that many respondents believe that digital channels are necessary in promoting a city.

4.3 Comparison with Croatian and international destinations

In this part of the research, the respondents are asked to evaluate tourist destinations in Croatia. Most respondents (42%) feel that Croatian cities are *very recognizable* to tourists, or more simply put, that they are *distinctive* from one another. Fewer (32%) respondents feel that they are *neither distinctive, nor undistinctive*. Even less (15%) think that the cities are *not at all distinctive* and a small percentage (12%) finds *every city unique.* Since not all cities in Croatia are well branded, this might prove to be a very important finding for the future of branding.

When asked which three cities they find most recognizable to tourists, the answers were somewhat expected. Dubrovnik is by far the first (28%), Zagreb follows (20%) and then Split (19%). The next are Opatija (8%), Zadar (8%) and Rovinj (4%). Šibenik has fewer responses (1%). It is important to note that Vodice, the tourist city near Šibenik, has more votes that Šibenik (3%).

A comparison with international destinations was made in the following questions. Respondents were asked to answer if they feel that the 6 offered destinations from 6 European tourist countries (selected by similarity in size and targeted groups of tourists) are *less*, *equally* or *more* recognized as a tourist destination than Šibenik. The results find that Valencia, Porto and Bordeaux are much more recognized as tourist destinations than Šibenik. The answers regarding Bari and Epidaur point to the fact that Šibenik is equally or more recognized as a tourist destination than these two cities. The answers regarding the tourist destination of Kotor, however, are very diverse and point out that it is less, equally and more recognizable than Šibenik.

4.4 Branding of the cities

In the final stage of the research, the respondents were asked if the branding of the cities can help in sustainable development. As previously stated, *sustainable development* was defined at the beginning of the research and all respondents were familiar with the given definition. Most (91%) feel that branding is the right way, whereas a minority (2%) states that branding cannot help in sustainable development. The rest (7%) does not know what to answer.

If the respondent answered "Yes," he/she was taken to a specific series of questions. If the response was "No," he/she was taken to a different series of questions. The following are the results of both series of questions.

4.4.1 Response "Branding helps in sustainable development"

The respondents, who have stated that "branding does help in sustainable development" (91%), were asked to select one of the four answers defining what is the *sustainable development,* to be sure that they fully understand the term. The majority (59%) responded: it is *growth that keeps pace with the responsibility towards the environment and the society*. The next answer (19%) was *growth that employs more than 80% of the population*. The third answer (12%) was *growth that finds that all inhabitants must equally participate in ecology* and the final (10%) that *it is growth that considers city government as an encouraging factor of green economy*. The correct answer is the one that had the most responses, which is an indicator that majority of respondents understand the term *sustainable development*.

The respondents were then asked if they find that *branding of cities can help in their development*. As it was a descriptive question, the answers were very diverse, with many people finding branding to be an important part of boosting the number of tourists visiting a destination and improving the quality of promotional activities. Many respondents even tried to think about it practically, showing their ideas of using culture or nature as a basis for branding the city. The respondents feel that hype can be created and used for boosting sales, especially for well segmented target groups. That observation is very important as some respondents find that many cities lack a well-developed strategy and/or tourist offer.

Regarding the time frame in which branding can help a city, most (42%) answered that branding helps *within one or two years*. Some feel that this period is longer, ranging *five to ten years* (38%). As answers vary a lot, it is important to note that the size of the investment, creativity and many other factors influence the time frame in which branding proves to be beneficial.

When asked what they feel is the most important factor in recognizing a city, most respondents (29%) find that the *overall feeling* (not specified) is important, followed by the *tourist offer* (27%). It is also important if the *city appears beautiful* (17%) or if it is *advertised* (14%). The *name* (6%) and *logo* (3%) of the city are less important. These findings may also prove important in the practical process of branding.

In the final question, respondents were asked if they find using social networks a necessity in branding cities. Most respondents (85%) do, and a smaller number (15%) does not find social networks to be important.

In this part of the research, we have found that most of the respondents who feel that branding of cities is important, know what the real definition of sustainable development is, that most of them believe branding can be done in one to two or five to ten years and that the overall feeling and the tourist offer are considered the most important factors in recognizing a city as a brand. Also, the information that 85% believe that social networks are a necessity is very important.

4.4.2 Response "Branding does not help in sustainable development"

If the respondents answered that they feel *the branding of cities cannot help in their sustainable development*, they were asked to explain why. The answers were related to the fact that the respondents do not know how that can actually help, therefore proving that they are not fully aware of the possibilities of the branding of cities.

The final question was similar to the last question of the other poll, regarding the opinion on the necessity of using social networks in branding cities. In this case, the majority (67%) chose that they feel that social media are necessary in branding cities. When respondents found that branding helps in sustainable development, this answer was much higher (85%) which is an indicator that respondents

have a different perspective on the necessity of social media based on their beliefs regarding branding and sustainable development.

5. Discussion

The research aimed to provide an answer to the following knowledge gap: can (and how) social media influence the development of a tourist destination as a brand, in support of sustainable tourism. This research is made on the example of the city of Šibenik, as an attempt to examine whether there is room for development of a sustainable tourism model through strengthening its brand with the help of modern technology (social networks). An online survey was conducted, and provided research material regarding travel habits, social network presence, tourism potentials of the city of Šibenik, comparison with Croatian and similar international tourist destinations, and feedback on the connection between the branding of cities and their sustainable development.

Most of the respondents were students from all over Croatia, mainly from Zagreb and Šibenik. They spend their holidays on the Adriatic Sea, travelling within Croatia. They are in the lower income class and travel on average 11–60 days per year by own arrangements, mostly in Croatia. Since the majority cannot spend a lot of money on traveling and very carefully chooses the travel destinations, social media is considered as a very important factor.

As most respondents do not travel on business, this study didn't further research the possibilities of business or conference tourism. Therefore, the area for further research should include the potentials of MICE tourism (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions). In 2013, Croatia was ranked 41st in the world (22nd in Europe) with 69 meetings a year, with the following ranking of cities: Zagreb (world rank 79th, European rank 42nd, 32 meetings), Dubrovnik (world rank 117th, European rank 70th, 20 meetings) and Split (world rank 328th, European Rank 164th, 6 meetings), so it should certainly be examined for development of sustainable tourism and building a city brand (ICCA 2014), with an inclusion of business-to-business (B2B) systems.

The response that almost all respondents (97%) use some channels of social media (Facebook 40%) is highly relevant, as it stated that promotion is mostly done through social media. However, it is not clear if the promotional materials originated from the official social media profiles of the city of Šibenik, or are they simply shared as personal stories and read by friends on social networks. This should be further researched, in order to design smart, overreaching promotional materials.

Due to the fact that around 10% of the respondents could not single out the most important factor for tourist attractions in Šibenik, and almost two thirds of the respondents find that Šibenik is *not internationally recognizable and recognized*, there is obvious room for improvement of the process of building a brand. Furthermore, this process should include the necessity to promote through social media the boosting of the word-of-mouth of personal experience, since digital channels are earmarked as crucial in promoting a city.

According to the comparison with international destinations, Šibenik is not recognized among the listed top destinations, but might have a chance in achieving better regional recognition/visibility, compared with the destinations in Italy, Greece or Montenegro. This finding can be interesting for future branding.

In search of social innovations that will address the issues of sustainability in tourism and the development of *smart cities of the future*, this paper advocates for small steps on the concrete example of the city of Šibenik: to increase its visibility with better use of social media and thus reduce seasonal dependence of incoming tourism.

The issue of social media use is researched on the sample of the young population in order to receive an educated feedback of *actual* users (not of *to-be* users, or *recent* users). The behavior of social media users in tourism has no significant difference with regard to age. (However, there are some gender differences on how men and women use social media differently, but that was not the object of this particular research).

Measuring brand value of cities is still in its beginnings, and it is clear that the intangible value increasingly makes the total value of these cities. Brand carries most of these intangible values. Since brands today require large investments (both financial and market investments), they need to be constantly systematically monitored, evaluated and checked to continue to meet the expectations of all stakeholders. Measuring brand equity provides an answer to the question *"whether our consumers continue to buy our brand."* Unlike traditional me-

dia approaches (Paliaga, 2008) in the construction and promotion of the brand, the advantage of using social networks to build and strengthen the brand of the city is in its simplicity and low maintenance costs, and is far-reaching.

Learning from lessons available through the best practices in city branding, and taking into account gaps identified in branding the city of Šibenik, more efforts should be made in developing innovative and efficient city brand management. As indicated in the Urbact City Logo's "Innovative Place Brand Management" there are several themes in moving forward integrated city brands: management (re-thinking organizational models), building (beyond the market approach), revisiting channels and communication tools (impact of the digital shift), and segmentation strategies (towards visitors, business, talent, locals, etc.). Also, further steps should include in-depth research and mapping of stakeholders in the field of (a) sustainable tourism development, and (b) city branding, with regards to the stakeholders involvement in sectoral city brands (cultural, natural, entertainment, etc.) and integrated ("umbrella") city brand.

The strategy which recognizes social media, and encourages collaboration, knowledge sharing and tapping of field capabilities that can collectively create a competitive advantage (Deiser and Newton, 2013), has a better foundation to achieve all desired objectives.

6. Conclusion

The insufficient exploitation of tourism potential for sustainable tourism development through development of a recognizable tourist brand of the city of Šibenik can be alleviated by the use of adequate tools, including social networks in achieving both goals. Our research has shown the areas for improvement of branding the city of Šibenik and explored the need for use of social networks for building a brand for a tourist destination. It also explores why and how social media may act in support of sustainable tourism (the component of extended season) or precisely, how can the city benefit from the use of various forms of technology and social media in achieving the positive impacts of tourism and extending its quite short tourist season (Aly and Frew, 2014).

The branding of Šibenik must be approached systematically, with the goal to simultaneously try to solve the problem of its periodic (seasonal) attractiveness to tourists, and thus contribute to the extension of the season and, consequently, sustainability of tourism activities. In this way, the branding of the city will not turn into a mere marketing strategy to promote its market (local culture, environment, and experience of spatial and public policies that create a sense of adventure of the visited city), but will also contribute to its sustainable development.

Respondents believe that branding can help a city in becoming sustainable within a time frame of one to ten years, depending on the efforts and resources invested in branding. By comparing the sustainability of tourism activities of Šibenik and well-branded cities, there is a clear need to further elaborate a strategy of promoting and branding Šibenik through social networks. It is a simple, far-reaching activity. Šibenik should increase its presence on the international tourist market through social networks in order to strengthen its image of a tourist destination. Further plans on strengthening the city brand of Šibenik through social networks, and thus going towards desired sustainability, should include measuring brand development, its refinement, improvement, and effectiveness, as well as brand protection.

In conclusion, the results of our study indicate a high probability that the stronger visibility of Šibenik may contribute to extending the season, enhancing the range of reasons for visiting Šibenik, as well as increasing the number of visitors and the length of their stay. This should be further explored in-depth, and on a much broader pool of participants. Furthermore, the contribution of branding to sustainable development of the city should be measured and recorded in the next years, so the experience and results could serve as a model to addressing these issues in similar cities.

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Brendiranje grada Šibenika kao održive turističke destinacije korištenjem društvenih mreža

Sažetak

Kao brzorastuća gospodarska i kulturna aktivnost, turizam nudi velike mogućnosti za razvoj regija i gradova. Bogat kulturni, povijesni i prirodni turistički potencijal Grada Šibenika nažalost nije dovoljno iskorišten za stvaranje prepoznatljivoga turističkog brenda. Gradovi grade svoje brendove na posebnostima lokalne kulture, okoliša te prostornih i javnih politika koje stvaraju osjećaj avanture pri boravku u gradu. Brendiranje je sastavni dio marketinga s ciljem podizanja svijesti o brendu i stvaranja lojalnosti među kupcima.

U *Analizi stanja – Strategiji razvoja Grada Šibenika* (2011) naglašena je potreba pokretanja projekta iskorištavanja kulturnih potencijala za daljnji razvoj turizma i brendiranja grada. Budući da ova Analiza zagovara uporabu tradicionalnih alata i potencijala te da joj nedostaje istraživanje o utjecaju i važnosti interneta i društvenih mreža za utvrđivanje je li grad prepoznat kao turistička destinacija, provedeno je on-line istraživanje na uzorku od 450 ispitanika s ciljem utvrđivanja je li Šibenik prepoznat na društvenim mrežama kao turistička destinacija.

Brendiranju Grada Šibenika treba pristupiti sustavno s ciljem istovremenoga pokušaja rješavanja problema sezonske privlačnosti za turiste te time pridonijeti produljenju sezone i održivosti turizma. Na ovaj način, brendiranje grada neće se pretvoriti u običnu marketinšku ili promotivnu strategiju, već će dugoročno pridonijeti njegovom održivom razvoju.

Ključne riječi: brendiranje grada Šibenika, turističke destinacije, društvene mreže, održivi razvoj, strategija društvenog marketinga