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COMMUNICATING LITHUANIA'S DESTINATION BRANDING

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Abstract. Increasingly, academics and practitioners are turning their attention towards destination branding as a serious topic of research and enquiry. In an attempt to differentiate themselves from competitors, tourism authorities across Europe are developing unique and highly targeted advertising campaigns. However, research being conducted indicates that whatever the destination country, tourists make their decisions for very similar reasons. This research analyses how Lithuania brand communicates its campaign message to tourists, and the experience of those tourists who have visited the country, as well as gauge their response, i.e. expectations, opinions and recommendations about the campaign. Specifically, the research analysed the destination branding campaign "Lithuania. Real is Beautiful" and its corollary, i.e. nature ("See nature"), culture ("Explore culture"), food ("Taste food"), people ("Meet people") and activity ("Stay active"), and how (and in what ways) the campaign reflects the criteria that tourists used to make Lithuania their holiday destination, as well as the opinions they formed about our country.

The response from tourists clearly shows that Lithuania's current advertising campaign is failing to make the connection with, and leverage off, the country's highly symbolic national flag. The red, green and yellow of the flag demonstrate a visual uniqueness and act as signifiers for the country as a whole, and this is what tourists would like to see.

Keywords: destination brand, branding, brand communication, communication, tourism, place branding, marketing.

Introduction

Branding as a construct can be traced back to the late nineteenth century with the development of branded consumer goods such as Quaker Oats and Gillette (Low & Ronald, 1994). Today, destination branding has gained visibility as one of the major topics among academics and practitioners. A country's so-called brand is a multi-layered phenomenon, which is all encompassing, and the work of researchers and communication specialists highlights the fact that the tourism sector occupies one of the most significant places in the ongoing discussion of a country's image (Anholt, 2009, 2010; Blain et al., 2005; Dinnie, 2009). It is generally understood that consumers are offered various destination choices that provide similar features such as quality accommodation, beautiful scenic views, and/or opportunities to meet friendly local people. Yet, it is not enough for a destination to sit within a generic offering, but rather the destination must be unique or at least sufficiently different to be ultimately selected. From this perspective, the concept of destination branding is critical if a destination is to be identified and differentiated from alternatives in the minds of the target market (Qu et al., 2011). In short, the brand must highlight the essence and uniqueness of the destination as well as create a multi-layered impression whereby the consumer can experience the national culture, history, politics, geography, etc. The true aim of branding is distillation–– the extraction of concentrated and clear meaning from something complicated and complex. Thus, the brand is turned into something memorable and easy to remember (Anholt, 2010, Vinyals-Mirabenta et al., 2019).

This discursive interpretation of tourism can be identified with "place branding", namely the process of "establishing a stable link between a place and certain positive experiences" (Hanna & Rowley, 2008). The brand 'promise' offered to the tourist can be said to convey a clear message to the target user who knows that their expectations will be satisfied (Blain et al., 2005, p. 330). The process of developing a destination brand follows a typical pattern according to the following principles: recognisability, differentiation, experience, expectations, image,

enhancement and brand message (Blain et al., 2005, p. 336). Blain et al. (2005) indicate the set of marketing activities in destination branding. They "(1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently conveys the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk." Collectively, these activities contribute to the creation of a destination image intended to positively influence the destination choice of the consumer. Szondi (2006) holds the view that the aim of destination branding is "to attract tourists and to develop the tourism sector". During pre-visit planning, potential tourists perceive the information disseminated via the media as the "reality" of the place (Avraham & Ketter, 2008).

Anholt (2007) states that "bearing their close neighbours most people in the world really and only respect, occasionally think about, claim to know about, and generally admire a maximum of 14 or 15 countries apart from their own, and these are all major industrialised democracies in Western Europe and the English speaking world, plus Japan and Brazil. <..> The remaining 160 countries on the planet largely mind their own business and are consequently ignored by those who are not actively planning to emigrate or go on holiday there" (Anholt, 2007, p. 30)

Hence, creating the strategy of tourism destination as well as related campaigns in developing countries, the tourists' experiences, which force them to return to the country or to recommend it to their friends, need particular consideration. Moreover, the associations that travellers' make based on their knowledge of the country and which encourages them to visit the country again should not be ignored. Creating a country's brand needs It is not easy to highlight what makes a country interesting to foreign tourists when developing a country brand, as local campaigners are used to many factors for granted. This is why research is important. In other words, a brand campaign must establish an appropriate and unique destination branding and whether or not the tourism campaign is properly prepared and the underlying messages are encoded within both the brand and the tourist campaigns.

Lithuania is a small country in the Baltic region of eastern Europe with a population of just over 3 million and a land area of 65.300 km². It shares borders with Poland, Latvia, Belorussia and the Kaliningrad region. The country has a national strategy to promote tourism, the official plan being the *Lithuanian Strategy* for *Tourism Marketing* for *2016–2020 under the guidance of* the *Lithuanian State Department* of *Tourism*. The strategy sets out a clear case for branding and the marketing of Lithuania as a tourist destination in the international arena. It also called for a new brand campaign, such that the advertising agency, "New!" researched the brief and developed, "Lithuania. Real is Beautiful" which was officially approved and launched in October 2016. The information publication "The Brandbook for Lithuanian Cultural and Natural Heritage 2017" (2017) was presented as a result of the campaign.

This publication states that "communication noise in tourism is intensive – you will not be heard if you speak the way all do" (The Brandbook for Lithuanian Cultural and Natural Heritage, 2017, p. 4). The aim of this new campaign is to tell the world what makes Lithuania so different–and unique–as a tourist destination from other countries in the international market place. The notion of 'realness' underpins the campaign, and whilst this concept can be defined in different ways (and possibly is difficult to determine), the architects of the plan explain that Lithuania is a country where a sense of realness, though not necessarily perfection, is appreciated. Hence, "when you want to escape artificial smiles, concrete jungles, plastic architecture or the tourism conveyor line, Lithuania is a perfect choice" (The Brandbook for Lithuanian Cultural and Natural Heritage, 2017, p. 4). To this end, the slogan "*Lithuania. Real is Beautiful*" was created to express the idea of the campaign (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The brand name "Lithuania. Real is Beautiful" of Lithuania as destination (source: The Brandbook for Lithuanian Cultural and Natural Heritage, 2017)

From this central idea, the branding campaign expanded into five areas which are referred to as additional signals in the Brandbook for Lithuanian Cultural and Natural Heritage and represent a certain sphere in tourism communication. These comprise: nature ("See nature"); culture ("Explore culture"); food ("Taste food"); people ("Meet people"); and activity ("Stay active") (see Figure 2). These additional marks are used to emphasise the specific

Figure 2. The additional marks in the brand of Lithuania as destination
(source: The Brandbook for Lithuanian Cultural and Natural Heritage, 2017)

communication message, so that when placed next to the main brand the additional mark is used as a visual aid. Thus, tourism communication in Lithuania has a clear focus on five tourism areas, with the targeted audience invited to enjoy the country's natural beauty, or to learn about the culture by participating in cultural events, or to taste the best that local cuisine has to offer, or to meet local people, and finally to actively spend time in the towns or countryside.

From this, the following research questions were formulated: how do experiences and opinions of foreign tourists in Lithuania align with the brand of Lithuania? What aspects should be emphasised in the communication of Lithuanian destination branding by the developers of the nation's brand in the nearest future?

Thus, the aim of this research was to analyse the communication in branding Lithuania as a destination through the tourism brand, to identify the opinions of foreign tourists visiting Lithuania about the country and its brand, and to establish if the additional marks in the Lithuania-branding campaign are in line with tourists' opinions, experiences and recommendations.

2. Research methodology

The questionnaire survey collected empirical information which could be used to identify customs, needs, experiences and opinions of tourists in Lithuania. Random selections of tourists in the streets of Vilnius and at Vilnius Tourism Information Centres were invited to fill in a paper-based questionnaire. An online form was sent via the travellers' portal, CouchSurfing, to those foreign tourists who were travelling at the time the survey was being conducted or who had previously visited Lithuania.

Respondents were selected using non-probability targeted heterogeneous sampling, whereby attempts are made to acquire the widest possible range of opinions, experiences and attitudes. While selecting research participants two factors were considered: the respondents had to be foreign nationals and should have visited Lithuania at least once. The questionnaire sample included foreigners who had visited Lithuania at different periods and for different purposes, i.e. those travelling in Lithuania during the survey or had visited Lithuania one or several times before. Other categories of foreign tourists included those who had lived or were living in Lithuania, those who had studied or were studying in Lithuanian higher education institutions, those who had volunteered in Lithuania under the European Voluntary Service projects, and finally, business visitors.

The general survey population was calculated on the basis of statistical data provided by the Lithuanian Tourism Department, i.e. the number of tourists who visit Lithuania at least once a year and stay at least one night. Since tourist numbers are growing each year, the general survey population was calculated on the basis of the latest data provided by accommodation establishments before

the research in 2016, which amounted to 2 295 900 tourists (Statistics Lithuania, 2016). Applying the probability of 95% and the confidence interval of 8%, the research sample of 150 respondents was established, although we should note that during the survey 184 respondents who met the research criteria completed the questionnaire.

The standardized research questionnaire consisted of 21 questions of various types and content and included open-ended and closed-ended questions, as well as evaluation and ranking scales. To evaluate the content of questions we asked respondents questions about themselves such as their opinion about certain phenomena, or their behaviour and thoughts in certain situations.

The respondents represented 40 countries in all continents with 10 countries accounting for 61.4% accordingly: Germany 13%, France 12%, Italy 10%, Spain 8%, Austria 4%, the Czech Republic 4%, Sweden 4%. Respondents from the other 30 countries comprised 39% of the total research sample.

The Lithuanian State Department of Tourism distinguishes countries with the greatest number of completed questionnaires (Germany, France, Italy, Sweden and the United Kingdom) as "targeted" countries of inbound tourism communication.

Respondents between 19 to 24 years of age were in the majority (40.8%), with the second biggest group of 25 to 30 year-olds (26.1%). Other age groups were represented in the following age brackets: 8.7% of 31–35 years, 7.1% of 41–50 years, 4.9% of 51–60 year and 7.6% tourists aged 61 and over. The smallest groups were tourists in the 36–40 year old bracket (3.3%) and 18–25 year olds (1.6%). Consequently, tourists from 19 to 30 years constituted as much as 66.9% of all the respondents.

More than half of the research participants (51.6%) visited Lithuania on holidays, 35.9% of them arrived in the country to study, 3.8% went on business and 8.7% of the respondents indicated other purposes for their visit, such as volunteering, internships, cultural and sporting events.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Criteria for choosing destination

The questionnaire sought to identify those country factors most relevant for tourists choosing their destination, and comprised 12 variants of answers. Five of these answers focussed on communication areas in Lithuania's tourism brand campaign, i.e. national culture, beautiful nature, active entertainment, delicious food and people. Respondents were offered seven more variants and also invited to write their own comments. There was no limit placed on the number of question choices a respondent made. The average number of variants chosen by participants was 4–5 responses. The results revealed that the following predetermined the choice of destination: national culture (136 choices), beautiful nature (125 choices) and prices (105 choices) (see Figure 3).
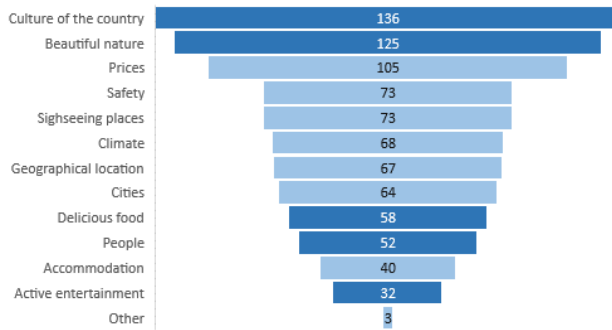
Figure 3. The major criteria for choosing a destination (source: Developed by authors)

Figure 4. The major criteria for choosing Lithuania as destination (source: Developed by authors)

Respondents indicated the following criteria for their choice: safety (73), places of interest (73), climate (68), geographic position (7) and towns (cities) (64). Analysis of the concordance between the criteria for choosing a destination and the five areas provided in the Brandbook for Tourism in Lithuania revealed that national culture and beautiful nature were among the most frequently mentioned criteria by tourists in the survey (see Figure 3 in darker blue), whereas food, people and activity were chosen considerably less frequently. Development of a particular destination is heavily dependent on that area's natural and cultural resources (Su & Swanson, 2017). This explains why small, developing countries encounter certain difficulties positioning themselves as a culture destination. It was interesting to analyse if the criteria for choosing Lithuania as a destination are consistent with the factors for choosing a destination in general.

3.2. Criteria for choosing Lithuania as a destination

The respondents were asked about the activities or any other factors which were most relevant to them during their visit to Lithuania (see Figure 4). On average, participants chose three variants of responses which correlated precisely with the areas promoted by the Lithuanian tourism brand, i.e. all five areas were indicated among the first and most important factors for choosing Lithuania as a destination and spending time there. The first and most relevant factors for choosing a destination in general and for visiting Lithuania coincide, i.e. the respondent's desire to learn more about the country's culture and history (122). The second most important factor among respondents relates to meeting and learning more about the Lithuanian people. Ranked third was their desire to familiarise themselves with the local cuisine (97) and to taste the local food (97). Also important were outdoor activities among nature and being active in the way tourists spent their time (72) (see: Pic. 4). Recreation, entertainment and shopping were the least significant factors for those who took the survey. Other reasons listed for visiting Lithuania were the need to transit through the country, the desire to learn the Lithuanian language, or to visit arts or cultural events. Such data are not surprising because
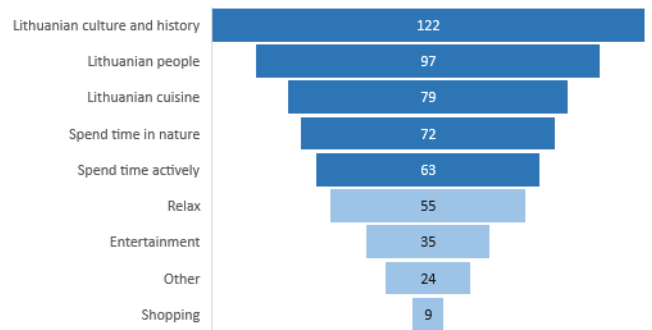
more than half of the respondents (51.6%) visited Lithuania for their vacation. Increasingly, tourists are looking for something unique in their travels and are better informed before deciding on a holiday destination. They prefer unique, memorable experiences, hence are willing to seek out destinations that can offer them something different (Solís-Radilla et al., 2019).

As can be seen, whilst culture remains the main priority for choosing a destination, tourists visit Lithuania for slightly different reasons compared to general trends in their destination choice. For example, Lithuania is chosen as a destination because it offers new experiences; not only do tourists want to visit towns and enjoy the architecture, but they also want to experience as much as possible such as tasting local food, or meeting the locals, as well as being active in the way they spend their time. Many researchers (Kim & Prideaux, 2005; Jönsson & Devonish, 2008; Falk & Katz-Gerro, 2017) emphasise that the criteria for choosing a destination differ among people of various nationalities. However, this study revealed that the nationality of the tourist visiting Lithuania made little difference. Their decision to visit the country was consistent with the research used by the State Department of Tourism in Lithuania to prepare their destination branding criteria, i.e. visitors want to experience Lithuania's national culture, beautiful nature, active entertainment, delicious food, and its people.

It is interesting to note that the factors for choosing Lithuania differed depending on how many times the respondent had visited Lithuania. For the majority of tourists (73%) this was their first visit, with about 10% visiting for a second time, 4% on their third visit, 13% had visited between 4 and 10 times, whilst a few had visited more than 10 times, or had been such a frequent visitor that they couldn't remember the precise number of visits. During the research attempts were made to identify if the tourists who return to Lithuania for the second and third time or more, would consider the same criteria again or if they had different reasons for travelling. Figure 5 shows how the criteria of Lithuanian tourism evaluated by the tourists change depending on the number of their visits. The results revealed that the respondents visiting Lithuania for
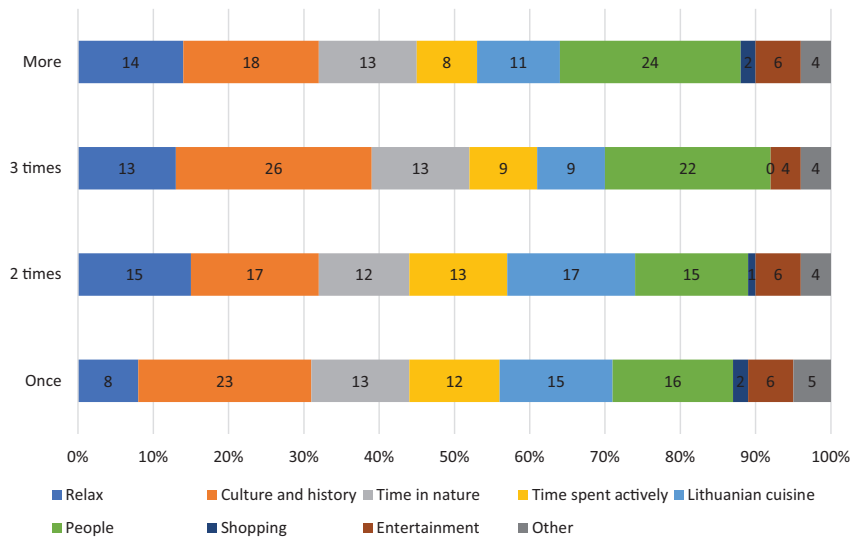
Figure 5. The significance of Lithuanian tourism criteria in accordance with the number of respondents visits to the country (source: Developed by authors)

the first time ranked their willingness to familiarise themselves with the national culture and history, local cuisine and Lithuanian food and Lithuanian people highest. They evaluated the time spent in nature, entertainment and shopping equally, regardless of the number of visits they had made to Lithuania. The more times the respondents visited Lithuania, the more likely they were to nominate relaxation and the desire to communicate better with local people. Active leisure time and local cuisine were regarded as less important.

3.3. Associations of tourists with Lithuania as a destination

The associations that individuals make with a brand influence how we evaluate brand evaluation and why consumers make their particular choice(s) (Aaker, 1996; Daye, 2010; Que et al., 2011). Respondents were asked to characterise Lithuania in three words and which words they associate with the country. Epithets with similar or identical meanings were grouped and attributed to the same category. For example, the epithet "beautiful" included all the responses containing the English words *beautiful, nice, pretty*. The concept, "an undiscovered country", included the terms *unknown, undiscovered, hidden*, and the criterion of "low price" was applied for such characteristics as *cheap, good prices, affordable,* and others.

The survey allowed respondents to specify 63 concepts to describe the country. Figure 6 contains the 10 most popular expressions characterising Lithuania. The most frequently used description, "beautiful", was used 67 times. The word "beautiful" and its synonyms were mentioned in reference to the country in general, as well as to describe its nature and architecture. The phrase "a cold country" (27 times) received similar attention with the emphasis on the age of the country and importance of history (26 times), as well as the emphasis on "nature" (25 times)

as a factor. Lithuania was characterised as a beautiful, cold, historical, green, rainy, clean and flat country. Such epithets as friendly, interesting, calm, modern, natural, authentic, safe, European and peaceful were mentioned, all of which are an appeal to the country's character, common features and atmosphere. While emphasising key elements the following nouns were provided – history, nature, culture, people, architecture, forests, food and 'Vilnius Old Town'. Marketers may find these results useful in order to optimize their communication messages. Certain vocabulary used might allow us to better understand the personality traits of potential tourists (Johar et al., 2005). In short, marketing specialists could strategically plan their brand campaigns for Lithuania as a holiday destination by reference to certain words known to attract tourists (Vinyals-Mirabenta et al., 2019), the following picture being an illustration of this point.

Only 9% of respondents had seen campaign advertisements for "Real is Beautiful" prior to their visit, the majority claiming not to have previously seen the advertisements. Their main epithet for Lithuania was "beautiful" which is consistent with the slogan of the abovementioned campaign. Other important associations with Lithuania made by respondents are closely related with communications areas in the researched campaign of country destination: history, architecture, Vilnius Old Town ("Explore culture"), nature, forests ("See nature"), people ("Meet people") and food ("Taste food").

The branding literature classifies brand associations into the following categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes, where brand attitudes are the consumer's overall evaluation of the brand and which form the basis for consumer behaviour (Keller, 1993). Respondents were asked what images, symbols, icons or colours they might associate with Lithuania. The most common associations were made with the colours of the national flag. In
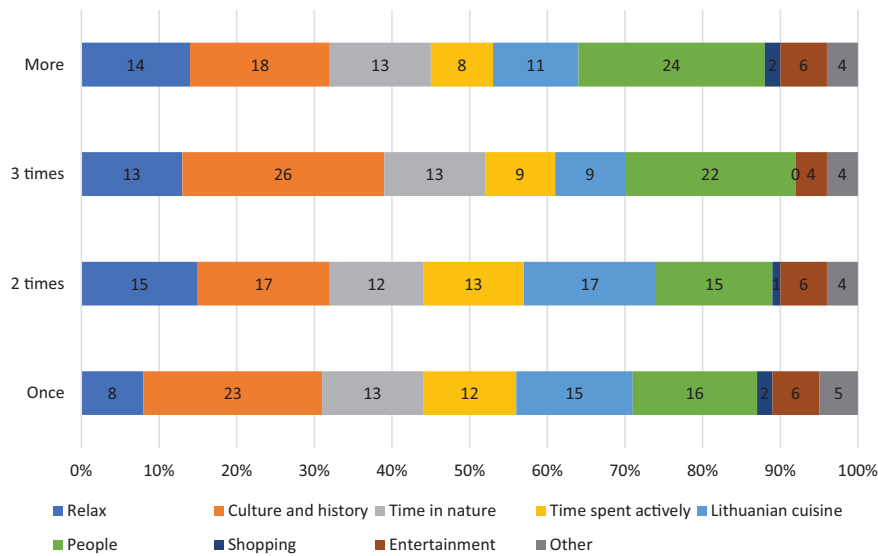
Figure 6. The 10 most popular terms used by the respondents to describe Lithuania (source: Developed by authors)

fact, the term "flag colours" or separate colours of yellow, green and red, was mentioned as many as 71 times. The second most frequently mentioned concept was "green" (35), which was used in connection with nature (or defining it as a colour) and this best reflects Lithuania visually. Ranked third at 27 was the game of basketball as the activity and interest that best represented the country. Next, were symbols and icons such as churches, crosses, religious motifs which were referred to 15 times, as well as the coat of arms of Lithuania, Vytis (12); landscape elements (trees and forests (11)); nature (10); amber (9); and the Gediminas Castle Tower which sits atop a hill (8). Whilst attempts are made to avoid this in communicating Lithuania's destination branding, a large number of respondents (9) mentioned Soviet associations and symbols.

It was interesting to analyse how the responses of participants matched the five areas communicated in the campaign of Lithuania's tourism brand. Trees are portrayed as symbols in the additional mark "See nature" and the respondents provided the following associations related to it: green (35), trees, forests (11), nature (10), amber (9), rain (6), sea (4), lakes, rivers (4), snow (3) and national parks (2). A wide range of cultural and public symbols, historical objects mentioned in the survey are related to "Explore culture": the flag itself, colours of the flag (71), basketball (27), churches, crosses, religious motifs (15), the Lithuanian coat of arms, Vytis (12), Vilnius Old Town (5), traditional fabrics, clothes (3), national dances (1). Reference was also made to a large number of proper names, which can be assigned to "Explore culture" as well as "Stay active". For example, the Gediminas hill (8), Trakai (8), Vilnius (7), the Curonian Spit (4), whereas Vilnius University, Druskininkai, Užupis, Kaunas were mentioned just once. Such responses as "potatoes" (7), "cepelinai" (potato-meat dumplings) (5) match "Taste food", whereas fair-haired people (3), president Dalia Grybauskaitė (1) are linked to "Meet people". Lithuanian nature, landscape symbols and

colours seem to evoke the biggest number of associations with Lithuania. Local cuisine and people call up associations with Lithuania least frequently.

3.4. Destination branding logos and slogans

The attractiveness of a destination depends on what other attractions are available, however attractiveness is also linked to an aesthetic value that we make with many associated symbolisms (De San Eugenio Vela, 2011). The country-linked images shared in the media (Hunter, 2008) or even the colours of logos (Séraphin et al., 2018) are important to tourists.

Respondents were asked to describe the Lithuanian campaign "Real is Beautiful" and provided various opinions and recommendations. Some were fascinated by the idea of a postage stamp, although the majority suggested changing the logo: "*The logo is too simple and it should be more attractive and more colourful. I like the way the name of Lithuania is written but the very idea of postal stamp is old-fashioned – we are not using postal stamps anymore and, therefore, it creates an impression of not a very modern country*". Sheng-Hshiung et al. (2020) state that tourism logos should match the destinations to represent their identity and uniqueness. The various colours of logos not only symbolize cultural implications, but also interpret concepts of aesthetic attraction to influence the formation of the destination image for international tourists (Séraphin et al., 2018). There are important implications of colour elements in tourism logos, which can reflect cross-cultural differences, but are often omitted (Gali et al., 2017; Séraphin et al., 2016; Ashton, 2018). The research results confirmed the aforementioned. Most frequently, tourists recommended using brighter, clearer colours to better represent Lithuania in the additional marks and the main logo: "*green is the colour that firstly associates with Lithuania for me (and most probably for the majority of others). But the chosen green looks unnatural,*

synthetic and not attractive at all". Tourists also suggested using the national colours of the Lithuanian flag in visual communication.

In national branding, the message clarity and the creativity of the tourism slogan both play a significant role to increase recognition and evoke a positive response from international tourists (Sheng-Hshiung et al., 2020). The slogan of the Lithuanian campaign "*Lithuania. Real is Beautiful*" also received a large number of comments, although many respondents failed to understand its meaning: "*it is not clear what this slogan means and what "REAL" means. There is a feeling that something is missing*". Others suggested changing it at all or adding additional explanations: "*it would be possible to add adjectives: "meet interesting people*", "*taste local food*" and others. There were also suggestions to add the word "*real*" everywhere – "*meet real people*", "*taste real food*", etc.

Respondents also noted that the campaign was not particularly exceptional and failed to fully reflect the many attractions that Lithuania had to offer. According to them, it could be easily used for other countries as well: "*the main focus should be laid on what can be found only in this country because the current areas can be applied to any country*"; "*all the countries possess nature, culture, people and food. But why do we talk about Lithuania comparing it with other European countries and capitals. Vilnius is still not crowded with tourists. It is polished and reasonably priced. Such aspects should be emphasised positioning the country in the market*". Other survey participants were emphatic that the strongest message should communicate the country's nature and culture since they make up exceptional features of the country. They also pointed out that tourism information and visual communication about Lithuania in particular are still scarce. Research conducted by numerous scholars prove that visual messages are the most powerful in terms of consumer acceptance. For example, Villamediana-Pedrosa et al. (2019) investigated how the use of Message Tools, an Appropriate Message Structure, Informative Cues and Persuasive and Emotional Cues would predict the desird effects – positive engagement of tourists. It was only found that Message Tools (mainly "videos") and three Informative ("topics", "links" and "product orientation") influence the levels of positive/negative engagement and some of its dimensions (positive popularity and virality) (Villamediana-Pedrosa et al., 2019). Further research by Marder et al. (2019) concluded that both professional photographs and those of non-professional photographers influence the choice of tourist destination, suggesting that tourism authorities should use the services of professional photographers for images posted on social media such as review websites, which help to drive booking intentions and sales (Marder et al., 2019). Other research also reveals that content shared via social media can influence tourists' decision-making in a number of ways, influencing their travel planning process by providing the reviews, virtual tours, and impartial information central to destination choice and itinerary development (Litvin et al., 2018; Morosan & Bowen, 2018; Sotiriadis, 2017).

Conculsions

The results of this research contribute to our understanding of why tourists visit Lithuania. The majority of them are people from other European countries, visiting for the first time and whose primary interest is Lithuania's culture, history and nature. Those who had visited on previous occasions wanted to learn more about the people of Lithuania and also to taste local cuisine. Typically, first-time visitors search for the artefacts of culture and history, whereas returning tourists have a more sophisticated understanding of Lithuania's people and enjoy the relaxed atmosphere. Their reasons for choosing Lithuania as a destination align with those factors (national culture, beautiful nature, active entertainment, delicious food and people) that were identified in the process of destination branding in the advertising campaign "Lithuania. Real is Beautiful". Global trends in tourism are evident in Lithuania, with visitors attracted by traditional factors (architecture, history, cultural attractions) which have replaced by factors of emotional attraction (people, culture, emotions, experience, energy, environment). This is of particular importance to tourists who make repeat visits. Although beautiful nature is one of the most significant associations with Lithuania made by tourists, nature is fourth among the most important criteria for choosing a country. However, tourists understand the need for Lithuania to emphasise these activities, which are cognitive experiences that differentiate our country from other destinations, as well as to use more visual information, particularly in social media.

Lithuanian people associate their country with the words: beautiful, cold, historical, green, rainy, clean and flat. In response to the country's character, common features and atmosphere, tourists used the following epithets: friendly, interesting, calm, modern, cosy, natural, authentic, safe, European and peaceful. While emphasising the most important elements of the country they used nouns to describe Lithuania, such as history, nature, culture, people, architecture, forests, food and Vilnius Old Town. In fact, the use of certain vocabulary contributes to the accessibility of personality traits by potential tourists (Johar et al., 2005). It is evident that marketing specialists should pay particular attention to planning campaigns for destination brand marketing that emphasise the aforementioned nouns, which clearly resonate with tourists (Vinyals-Mirabenta et al., 2019). Generalizing, we can state that nature, symbols and colours of landscape of our country evoke the greatest number of associations with Lithuania, whereas local cuisine and people are least frequently associated with Lithuania. The associations with Lithuania relevant for tourists are related to two communicative areas of the country destination campaign explored in the course of this research: mainly with "See Nature" (nature, forests) and with "Explore Culture" (history, culture, architecture, Vilnius Old Town).

The main principle of destination branding communication relies on the uniqueness of the message. Olins

(2000) describes a destination brand as that which "helps tourists develop a coherent, consistent and meaningful sense of place, and offers a "brand experience" (p. 56). Destination brands must be sufficiently unique to distinguish themselves from competitors, but also broad enough to encompass all the elements of a destination's appeal (Vinyals-Mirabenta et al., 2019). The respondents notice that the campaign "Real is Beautiful" may be easily applied to other countries and, therefore, it is not exceptional. It is generally acknowledged that the brand was understandable and clear. However, the attractiveness of the brand was given an average only evaluation, whereas its ability to attract attention was placed last in their evaluation. The tourists suggested linking the brand with the Lithuanian national colours more to reflect what tourists associate Lithuania with before visiting the country, i.e. its beautiful nature, interesting culture, safety, etc. In this regard, physical reality is the precursor of the image, which then becomes a symbol imbued with visual meaning; i.e. natural landscapes, historical relics, cultural accretion, or works of art (Avraham & Daugherty, 2012; Hunter, 2008).

Research limitations/implications

This paper is based on a single country case study; however, it provides a strong and empirically grounded framework for identifying essential elements in destination branding processes and activities.

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LIETUVOS KRYPTIES PREKĖS ŽENKLO KOMUNIKACIJA

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Santrauka

Šiandien šalies krypties ženklodara tapo diskusijų dėmesio centre tiek tarp šios srities mokslininkų, tiek tarp praktikų. Didėjant konkurencijai, šalys reklaminėse kampanijose siekia parodyti savo unikalumą. Tačiau tyrimai rodo, kad šalies kaip turizmo krypties pasirinkimo kriterijai dažniausiai yra panašūs ir galioja daugumai šalių. Tyrimo tikslas – išanalizuoti Lietuvos krypties ženklodaros komunikaciją remiantis turizmo prekės ženklu, nustatyti Lietuvą aplankiusių turistų nuomonę apie šalį ir jos prekės ženklą, išsiaiškinti, ar Lietuvos prekės ženklo kampanijos lydimieji ženklai atitinka turistų nuomonę, patirtis ir rekomendacijas. Atliekant tyrimą analizuota, kaip reklaminė turizmo kampanija „Lithuania. Real is Beautiful" ir jo lydimieji ženklai – gamta („See nature"), kultūra („Explore culture"), maistas („Taste food"), žmonės („Meet people"), aktyvumas („Stay active") – atspindi Lietuvos turistų (*visiters*) krypčių pasirinkimo kriterijus ir asociacijas, su kuriomis turistai sieja Lietuvą.

Tradiciškai turistai renkasi Lietuvą dėl kultūros ir žmonių. Nors gražią gamtą turistai nurodo kaip vieną svarbiausių Lietuvos asociacijų, vis dėlto gamta yra ketvirtas pagal svarbą pasirinkimo kriterijus. Reklaminėje šalies kampanijoje turistams trūko Lietuvą simbolizuojančių spalvų, unikalumo ir bendrai vizualios informacijos apie šalį.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: krypties ženklodara, prekės ženklas, prekės ženklo komunikacija, komunikacija, turizmas, vietos ženklodara, rinkodara.