THE IMPORTANCE OF COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN CONSTRUCT DIMENSIONS IN DESTINATION BRAND BUILDING

VAŽNOST DIMENZIJA KONSTRUKTA ZEMLJE PODRIJETLA U IZGRADNJI MARKE DESTINACIJE

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Abstract

Purpose – The primary purpose of this paper is to analyze the relationship between the country-of-origin (COO) construct and destination brand building (DBB) to reveal whether the COO construct and its dimensions are important for DBB. More specifically, the paper explores whether COO construct dimensions can impact destination branding.

Design/Methodology/Approach – The research was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire on a sample of 409 respondents from the United States and Croatia. SPSS was used for data analysis.

Findings and implications – While the COO is relevant for DBB, it cannot be used in the same manner as in product/service branding. Certain COO dimensions which are extremely important for product/service brands (e.g., level of technological development, standard of living) are not as critical for DBB. The political situation and perceived safety are COO dimensions that have proven to be important in the context of DBB.

Limitations – The main limitation of the paper arises from sampling, relying on Facebook and LinkedIn for questionnaire distribution.

Sažetak

Svrha – Glavna je svrha ovoga rada istražiti odnos između konstrukta zemlje podrijetla i izgradnje marke destinacije kako bi se saznalo jesu li konstrukt zemlje podrijetla i njegove dimenzije važni za izgradnju marke destinacije. Znači, ovim radom se istražuje utječu li dimenzije konstrukta zemlje podrijetla na marku destinacije.

Metodološki pristup – Istraživanje je provedeno uz pomoć upitnika na uzorku od 409 ispitanika iz SAD-a i Hrvatske. Za analizu podataka korišten je SPSS.

Rezultati i implikacije – Zemlja podrijetla važna je za izgradnju marke destinacije, ali se ne može koristiti na isti način kao za izgradnju marke proizvoda/usluge. Neke dimenzije zemlje podrijetla koje su izrazito važne za marku proizvoda/usluge (npr. razina tehnološke razvijenosti, životni standard) nisu toliko važne za marku destinacije. Politička situacija i percipirana sigurnost dimenzije su zemlje podrijetla koje su se pokazale važnima u izgradnji marke destinacije.

Ograničenja – Glavna su ograničenja ovog rada prigodni uzorak te korištenje Facebooka i LinkedIna kao platformi za distribuciju upitnika.

Doprinos – Ovim istraživanjem raščlanjujemo zemlju podrijetla kao konstrukt i istražujemo utjecaj njegovih sastavnica na izgradnju marke destinacije.

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Originality – With this research, we are decomposing the COO construct and investigating the impact of its dimensions on DBB.

Keywords – country of origin, brand building, destination brand

Ključne riječi – zemlja podrijetla, izgradnja marke, marka destinacije

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism, as one of the fastest-growing industries globally (www2.unwto.org), has become important even for countries that were not traditionally considered to be tourism-oriented. To maintain growth in a highly competitive global market, countries, cities, villages, and man-made resorts, or destinations (Pike, 2004), need to differentiate themselves. Apart from the traditional forms of differentiation such as accommodation, restaurants, entertainment facilities, etc. (Tasci, Gartner & Cavusgil, 2007), the destination's country of origin (COO) might be an essential factor in the tourist decision-making process.

Destination brand building (DBB) is a highly complex activity. It requires an integrated approach to branding, encompassing expectations, experiences, and memories in the minds and hearts of tourists (Boo, Busse & Baloglu, 2009; Blain, Levy & Ritchie, 2005). According to Ritchie and Ritchie (1998), a destination brand is a promise of an unforgettable feeling that will remain in the mind and heart of a tourist having consumed the destination and after return to their hometown. Therefore, destination brand image is a critical factor influencing tourist attitudes toward a destination (Veasna, 2013; Jalilvand, Samiei & Dini, 2012).

This paper focuses on the relationship between the COO construct and DBB to analyze whether different COO dimensions can have an impact on DBB.

COO is usually defined as an extrinsic product/service attribute indicating the country where a product/service was made/provided, assembled, or both (Meng, Nasco & Clark, 2007; Han & Terpstra, 1988; Bilkey & Nes, 1982). As a marketing construct, COO has been the subject of numerous studies for more than 50 years (e.g., Schooler, 1965; Nagashima, 1970; Erickson, Johansson & Chao, 1984; Ozsomer & Cavusgil, 1991), most of which deal with its influence on the consumer decision-making process and product evalua-

tion (e.g., Diamantopoulos, Schlegelmilch & Palihawadana, 2011; Piron, 2000). In the area of destination branding, Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly, and Luk (2008) studied the overlapping of product-country image and destination image within the broader country image context. To the best of the authors' knowledge, there has been no research of the importance of the COO construct and its influence on DBB. Hence, this paper attempts to fill the research gap.

The theoretical background and hypothesis development follow the introductory part of the paper. Then, methods applied for data collection and analysis are presented, followed by a discussion of the results of hypothesis testing and key findings. In the concluding part, theoretical and managerial implications are outlined, together with the research limitations and an identification of possible future research streams.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Many attributes are used in building destination brands, for instance, natural wonders, climate, nightlife, pricing, history, accommodation, destination accessibility, shopping possibilities, hospitality, and gastronomy (Batat, 2021; Tóth, Dávid & Vasa, 2014; Kinley, Forney & Kim, 2012; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). In line with Balakrishnan, Nekhili, and Lewis's supposition (2011), we assume that the COO construct (as in the case of products/services) can also be considered one of those attributes.

COO and its image are measured through the dimensions of the economic and political situation (Martin & Eroglu, 1993), the level of technological development and industrialization (Allred, Chakraborty & Miller, 1999; Lin & Chen, 2006), the standard of living and the country's popularity (Lin & Chen, 2006), product quality (Martin & Eroglu, 1993), and perceived safety

(Marting & Eroglu, 1993; Chowdhury et al., 2017). In order to achieve its intended purpose to analyze whether and to which extent the dimensions of the COO can impact DBB, this paper considers the evaluations of those dimensions by tourists themselvers.

Economic situation

A country's economic situation shows how efficiently the government manages its resources (Pappu, Quester & Cooksey, 2007), but more importantly, it reveals the country's economic stability (Lin & Chen, 2006). Indicators of economic stability, including GDP per capita, the unemployment rate, public expenditure, public debt, imports/exports, exchange rate stability, etc., influence the creation of the COO image (Stutely, 2007). However, it is not known how many tourists explore and familiarize themselves with those indicators before visiting a particular destination and to what extent the country's economic stability is a critical factor in their decision making. As Martin and Eroglu (1993) have proved, supported by findings of Kaynak, Kucukemiroglu, and Hyder (2000), a favorable economic situation has a positive effect on the COO image building. Accordingly, we propose the first hypothesis:

H1: Favorable economic situation of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.

Political situation

Political situation refers primarily to the country's political structure, and whether it operates under a capitalist or a centrally planned market system (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). Allred et al. (1999) posit that the stability of the political situation is assessed with respect to politicians, potential conflicts, the level of a country's openness, membership in international organizations, relations with neighboring countries, etc. As the country's political situation, i.e., whether it is stable or not affect the COO image, it represents one of the most critical factors together with the economic situation (Pappu et al., 2007). Political instability increases the risk of terrorist at-

tacks (Saha & Yap, 2014). Furthermore, extreme indicators of political instability such as conflicts contribute to the decrease in the number of tourist arrivals in the country, so its tourism potential is not fully exploited (Alvarez & Campo, 2014; Morakabati, 2013). In the context of DBB, the question of the importance of the political situation for tourists arises irrespective of whether they are first-time or repeat visitors of a destination. Therefore, the second hypothesis is formulated:

H2: Favorable political situation of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.

Level of technological development

Although life without technology is unimaginable for most consumers nowadays, when the first COO scales were developed, technology did not play such an essential role in the daily lives of people and companies (Allred et al., 1999). However, Allred et al. (1999) pinpoint the level of technological development, such as the development of the Internet and communication media, as an essential factor in creating the COO image. The importance of technology in tourism development has been observed in the last 30 years (Navío-Marco, Ruiz-Gómez & Sevilla-Sevilla, 2018; Buhalis & Low, 2008; Buhalis & O'Connor, 2005) and, according to Xiang (2018), its impact on tourism and society can generally be classified into two periods: a) the era of digitalization (1997-2006), and b) the age of acceleration (from 2007 onwards). Although almost the entire world is technologically connected and there are no communication boundaries, there are still tourist destinations (primarily located in less developed countries) in which activities such as car rental, booking of accommodation, or excursions pose a challenge to tourists due to the low technological development of the countries concerned (Jadhav & Mundhe, 2011). Therefore, the importance of technological development in DBB arises as a question, leading to the following assumption under H3:

H3: Favorable level of technological development of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.

Level of industrialization

The level of industrialization was initially viewed within the constructs of social desirability or technological development (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). However, Allred et al. (1999), and Lin and Chen (2006) consider it to be a separate factor in observing COO. The level of industrialization is often emphasized in the context of socially responsible business and indirectly through environmental pollution (Cherniwchan, 2012), which affects the quality of life and the number of tourists in a destination (Brahmasrene & Wan Lee, 2017). According to research conducted by Lin and Chen (2006), a higher level of industrialization affects the COO image positively. However, it can be seen as a negative factor in attracting tourists when the adverse environmental impact is considered. Based on the above, the fourth hypothesis posits:

H4: Favorable level of industrialization of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.

Standard of living

The perception of how people live in a country affects the country's image (Pereira, Hsu & Kundu, 2005), and ultimately its attractiveness as a tourist destination. In addition to GDP per capita, which is the most common indicator of the standard of living (Bérenger & Verdier-Chouchane, 2007), other variables which are not included in the GDP per capita also serve as indicators. According to Dowrick, Dunlop, and Quiggin (2003), these fall under the Genuine Progress Indicator or GPI (consisting of the crime rate, divorce rate, volunteering percentages, existence of social classes, etc.) and Human Development Index or HDI (including life expectancy, literacy level, cultural diversity, immigration, emigration, etc.). Following the research of Martin and Eroglu (1993), and Lin and Chen (2006), GDP per capita, destination population, cultural diversity, labor costs, and the existence of social class-

es are taken as variables in this study to measure the standard of living. Moreover, research conducted by Gartner (2004) showed that the brand equity of a tourist destination is also affected by the standard of living. Therefore, the fifth hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H5: Favorable standard of living of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.

Product quality

Unlike the economic and political situation or the level of industrialization which represent macro indicators of the COO, product quality acts a a micro indicator (Listiana, 2015). Pecotich and Rosenthal (2001) state that the COO image refers to an opinion of a country as the place where the brand/product is created/produced and depends on the country's ability to support innovative companies producing technologically advanced and prestigious products (Pappu et al., 2007). In addition, Roth and Romeo (1992) define the COO image as the consumers' overall perception of the quality of products from a particular country. The problem that may arise is the subjectivity of quality as a category. The same product/service does not have to represent the same level of quality for different consumers (Kirchler, Fischer & Hölzl, 2010). Therefore, the question to be answered is whether (and in what manner) experience with products from a particular country can influence DBB. In view of the foregoing, the sixth hypothesis posits:

H6: Favorable product quality of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.

Popularity

Popularity as a factor in creating the COO image was singled out by Lin and Chen (2006), who defined it as the level of confidence consumers have in using products/services from a particular country and the desire to reuse and/or own them. Accordingly, Listiana (2015) cites popularity as an essential element of creating loyalty to a specific brand, which is also applicable when building a destination brand. The ranking

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of countries by popularity is published by the World Tourism Organization (www2.unwto.org), with the main ranking criterion being the number of tourist arrivals within a year. Although the number of tourists is changing globally, there have been no significant changes in the list of the most visited countries. Since COO influences the brand building of products/services (Yasin, Noor & Mohammad, 2007), we believe that it also affects DBB, which leads to the following hypothesis:

H7: Favorable popularity of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.

Perceived safety

As a factor in the existing COO literature, safety is often mentioned in the context of the political situation (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). However, if we consider a continuous increase in the number of tourist arrivals, along with a rise in terrorist attacks and political instability worldwide, safety is becoming an essential factor for building the COO image and, accordingly, one with a potentially tremendous impact on DBB (Chowdhury, Raj, Griffin & Clarke, 2017). Terrorist attacks and political instability undermine the number of tourist arrivals, the economic situation, and the standard of living in terms of leading to rising unemployment and inflation rates, reduced production, psychological problems of the population, etc. (Baker, 2014; Araña & León, 2008). In addition to uncertainties arising from terrorism and political instability, it is important to look at safety in the context of the products/services consumed in the destination and the security of information, which has become a major issue nowadays (Zou & Meng, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the importance of safety for DBB, so we hypothesize as follows:

H8: Favorable perceived safety of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.

Knowledge

Finally, this paper investigates the way in which the level of knowledge about a destination in-

fluences the importance of the destination's COO. According to Lee and Ganesh (1999), higher brand familiarity of the consumers means that their ability to assess its quality will be based on its characteristics more than on the external factors that may affect their impression. Furthermore, Ozretic-Dosen, Previsic, Krupka, Skare, and Komarac (2018) found better informed consumers to be more critical of the destination than those who are less informed. According to Han's (1989) "halo effect", the greater the knowledge about the product/service, the lesser the influence of COO on consumer behavior (Balakrishnan et al., 2011; Maheswaran, 1994). Hence, we posit that the same effect will be achieved in the case of a destination brand. Therefore, the ninth hypothesis claims:

H9: Greater knowledge of the destination brand reduces the importance of the destination's COO for DBB.

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The paper relies on the quantitative method approach. The research was conducted on a convenience sample of 409 respondents from the United States (199) and Croatia (210), with data collection taking place in June and July of 2018. It has been proven (Ar & Kara, 2014; Godey, 2012) that COO, for instance, affects consumer perception of product quality differently depending on whether the consumer comes from a developed or a developing country. Therefore, a heterogeneous sample of respondents was chosen for this study, in which respondents from the U.S. represented a developed country and those from Croatia represented a developing country. This is a similar methodological approach to that applied in the research conducted by Muhamad, Leong, and Isa (2017), and Klein, Ettenson, and Krishna (2006).

The respondents were approached through the social networks Facebook and LinkedIn. A self-administered, highly structured questionnaire consisting of 37 statements and 6 demo-

graphic questions was applied in English and Croatian. For Croatian respondents, statements were translated into the Croatian language using back-to-back translation (English-Croatian-English). The sample characteristics are shown in Table 1.

with 37 statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – Strongly disagree; 5 – Strongly agree). Measures regarding the economic and the political situation, as well as product quality, have been adopted from Martin and Eroglu (1993), those regarding the level of technological development

TABLE 1: Sample characteristics

	Number (%)
Sex (n=409)	
Male	123 (30.1%)
Female	286 (69.9%)
Age (n=409)	
<18	6 (1.5%)
18-24	160 (39.1%)
25-34	130 (31.8%)
35-44	48 (11.7%)
45-54	31 (7.6%)
55-64	26 (6.4%)
>65	8 (2%)

	Number (%)
Education level (n=409)	
Primary school	3 (0.75%)
Secondary school	83 (20.29%)
Bachelor's degree	161 (39.36%)
Master's degree	141 (34.47%)
Ph. D.	21 (5.13%)
Monthly income in USD (n=409)	
<500	70 (17.1%)
501 – 1,500	102 (24.9%)
1,501 – 3,000	83 (20.3%)
3,001 – 5,000	42 (10.3%)
5,001 – 10,000	58 (14.2%)
>10,000	54 (13.2%)

In addition to the basic demographic characteristics presented in Table 1, the respondents were asked about their frequency of travel. According to the data provided, 15 (3.7%) respondents travel less than once every five years, 16 (3.9%) of them travel once every five years, 22 (5.4%) once every two years, and 104 (25.7%) of them once a year. Most of the respondents, 232 (56.7%) of them, said that they travel several times a year, with 14 (3.4%) of them indicating their travel frequency to be once a month, and 6 (1.5%) more often than once a month.

In order to test the hypotheses, the respondents were asked to express their level of agreement

from Allred et al. (1999), the level of industrialization and popularity from Lin and Chen (2006), the standard of living from Martin and Eroglu (1993), and Lin and Chen (2006), perceived safety from Martin and Eroglu (1993), and Chowdhury et al. (2017), and finally, those regarding knowledge from Lee and Ganesh (1999), and Maheswaran (1994).

SPSS was used for data analysis, with results presented in tabular form as well as descriptively. The results for each of the 37 statements for which respondents were asked to express their level of agreement are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Hypothesis testing

Statements	t-test
Economic situation (S1 – S3)	
S1. Before my first visit to a destination, I research the current economic situation of the country in which it is located.	m.v.=3.1394 (t=2.466; df=408; p=0.014)
S2. The unstable economic situation of the country in which the destination is located will negatively affect my decision to choose that destination.	m.v.=3.0318 (t=0.570; df=408; p=0.569)
S3. When revisiting a destination, the economic situation of the country in which it is located is not important to me.	m.v.=3.3447 (t=6.385; df=408; p=0.000)
Political situation (S4 – S8)	
S4. I prefer to visit countries with a lower unemployment rate.	m.v.=2.6993 (t=-5.966; df=408; p=0.000)
S5. On my first visit to a destination, I research the current political situation of the country in which the destination is located.	m.v.=3.3545 (t=5.837; df=408, p=0.000)
S6. The unstable political situation of the country in which the destination is located will negatively affect my decision to choose the destination.	m.v.=3.6112 (t=10.559; df=408; p=0.000)
S7. I would rather visit a country with a democratic regime than a country organized in some other way.	m.v.=3.2543 (t=4.300; df=408; p=0.000)
S8. When I revisit a destination, the political situation of the country in which it is located is not important to me.	m.v.=2.8411 (t=-2.890; df=408; p=0.004)
Level of technological development (S9 – S11)	
S9. Before my first visit to a destination, I research the current level of technological development of the country in which it is located.	m.v.=2.3936 (t=-11.814; df=408; p=0.000)
S10. I would rather visit a technologically advanced destination than a technologically underdeveloped one.	m.v.=2.6870 (t=-5.432; df=408; p=0.000)
S11. If the destination is technologically underdeveloped, there is a high probability that I will never visit it.	m.v.=2.0440 (t=-19.119; df=408; p=0.000)
Level of industrialization (S12 – S14)	
S12. I believe the countries which are more industrially developed to be more polluted.	m.v.=3.4694 (t=9.449; df=408; p=0.000)
S13. Before my first visit to a destination, I research the current level of industrialization of the country in which the destination is located.	m.v.=2.3252 (t=-14.035; df=408; p=0.000)
S14. I prefer to destinations that are less industrialized.	m.v.=2.7286 (t=-5.221; df=408; p=0.000)
Standard of living (S15 – S19)	
S15. I prefer to visit destinations with a higher GDP per capita.	m.v.=2.5159 (t=-9.671; df=408; p=0.000)

Statements	t-test
S16. I would rather visit a more populous destination than a sparsely populated one.	m.v.=2.5037 (t=-9.577; df=408; p=0.000)
S17. I prefer to visit destinations that are culturally diverse from my country.	m.v.=3.8704 (t=18.895, df=408; p=0.000)
S18. I prefer to visit destinations with less emphasized social classes.	m.v.=3.0733 (t=1.426; df=408; p=0.155)
S19. I would not visit destinations with low labor costs.	m.v.=2.1785 (t=-18.042; df=408; p=0.000)
Product quality (S20 – S21)	
S20. If I have experience with products that come from a certain country and I am satisfied with them, I am more likely to visit a destination located in it.	m.v.=3.0293 (t=0.494; df=408; p=0.621)
S21. I prefer to visit destinations that I associate with quality products.	m.v.=2.9291 (t=-1.208; df=408; p=0.228)
Popularity (S22 – S25)	
S22. I prefer to visit destinations that are popular among tourists.	m.v.=3.0831 (t=1.423; df=408; p=0.155)
S23. I would rather visit destinations that a lot of my friends and acquaintances have visited than those they have not visited.	m.v.=2.9315 (t=-1.132; df=408; p=0.258)
S24. I spend less time researching destinations that are advertised a lot.	m.v.=2.8924 (t=-1.932; df=408; p=0.054)
S25. I'd rather visit a destination that is more heavily advertised than the one that isn't advertised.	m.v.=2.5550 (t=-8.636; df=408; p=0.000)
Perceived safety (S26 – S27)	
S26. It is very important to me that the destination I intend to visit is safe.	m.v.=4.4108 (t=33.783; df=408; p=0.000)
S27. If I felt safe in a destination, I would visit it again regardless of the general image of the country in which it is located.	m.v.=4.0513 (t=22.701, df=408; p=0.000)
Knowledge (S28 – S37)	
S28. It is much easier for me to decide to visit a destination that I have heard a lot about.	m.v.=4.0538 (t=24.738; df=408; p=0.000)
S29. When I visit a destination again, I spend much less time researching the characteristics of the country in which it is located.	m.v.=3.8509 (t=17.295; df=408; p=0.000)
S30. When I visit a destination again, the characteristics of the country in which it is located are not so important to me.	m.v.=3.3912 (t=7.268; df=408; p=0.000)
S31. For well-known destinations, the image of the country in which the destination is located is not important to me.	m.v.=3.1638 (t=3.061; df=408; p=0.002)
S32. The experience and knowledge I gained about the destination during the visit itself will have a much greater impact on my decision to revisit it than information gathered through the media.	m.v.=4.3814 (t=35.513; df=408; p=0.000)

Statements	t-test
S33. If there is not much information available about a destination, I rely on the knowledge I have about the country in which it is located.	m.v.=3.7237 (t=17.132; df=408; p=0.000)
S34. If I have a poor opinion of the country in which a destination is located, I am less likely to visit the destination.	m.v.=3.7800 (t=16.047; df=408; p=0.000)
S35. I think that I am generally well informed about the offer of tourist destinations (most popular, most affordable, having the best entertainment…).	m.v.=3.3667 (t=6.874; df=408; p=0.000)
S36. I rely more on my own knowledge and information about a destination than on information provided to me by others.	m.v.=3.2469 (t=4.798; df=408; p=0.000)
S37. When evaluating a new destination, I usually rely on knowledge of the country in which the destination is located.	m.v.=3.2983 (t=6.205; df=408; p=0.000)

According to the results presented in Table 2, the respondents agree with the statements regarding the political situation and perceived safety and their importance in DBB. Therefore, H2 and H8 can be accepted. Also, the results indicate that a higher level of consumer knowledge about the destination reduces the importance of COO as a factor of DBB. H9 can, therefore, also be accepted.

On the other hand, the respondents do not think that the economic situation, level of technological development and industrialization, the standard of living, product quality, and popularity of the destination's COO are important in DBB. Because of this, hypotheses H1, H3, H4, H5, H6, and H7 cannot be accepted.

Table 3 lists the hypotheses with corresponding designations of the statement used to test them and presents the results of the hypothesis testing.

TABLE 3: Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Testing result
H1: Favorable economic situation of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.	Rejected
H2: Favorable political situation of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.	Accepted
H3: Favorable level of technological development of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.	Rejected
H4: Favorable level of industrialization of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.	Rejected
H5: Favorable standard of living of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.	Rejected
H6: Favorable product quality of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.	Rejected
H7: Favorable popularity of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.	Rejected
H8: Favorable perceived safety of a destination's COO is important for favorable DBB.	Accepted
H9: Greater knowledge of the destination brand reduces the importance of the destination's COO for DBB.	Accepted

4. DISCUSSION

COO does not influence DBB in the same way it influences product/service branding. In the case of DBB, the results indicate that the COO of a destination is important in terms of stability of the political situation and safety. No other COO dimensions seem to have a substantial influence as tourists seek the authentic local experience. Therefore, most of the COO dimensions, which are important for the product/service brand, have no such value in the case of DBB. For example, although previous research (Piron, 2000) shows that the perceived product quality of a COO will affect the product brand positively, it is not significant in the case of destination branding (H6).

Political situation (H2) and perceived safety (H8) were found to be the only two COO attributes relevant for DBB. When visiting a destination, one needs to be "in situ", so everyone seeks destination safety. The importance of political stability also proved relevant as it can be seen as a precondition for safety, which is in line with the previous research results of Samitas, Asteriou, Polyzos, and Kenourgios (2018), and Buda (2016). This implies that the destination whose COO image is one of a politically stable and safe country should use this as a building block in destination branding to gain a competitive advantage.

Regions around the world all recorded tourism growth in the last several years (www2.unwto.org), which means that developing countries and countries in transition have also become attractive tourist destinations. Therefore, it is not surprising that the economic situation, level of technological development and industrialization, and, consequently, the standard of living were not found to be essential attributes for DBB. However, those attributes are related to political stability and safety (Uddin, Ali & Masih, 2017; Georgioua, Kyriazisb & Economouc, 2015), which are in fact important for DBB, so those countries should not ignore them in the long run. Also, some developing countries and countries in transition tend not to have continuity in terms of political stability and safety, which implies that their destinations (e.g., cities, resorts) should not use COO as an attribute in brand building.

An unexpected finding is that the popularity of the destination's COO is not important for the local destination brand. We found justification for such a finding in over-globalization and consumers' growing desire for unique experiences. Tolkach and Pratt (2021), and Stalmirska (2021) observed the impact of the globalization process on lessening cultural differences and food specificities, while Yu, Byun, and Lee (2014) found that a high level of globalization leads to fewer hotels reflecting local culture. With this in mind, and based on the finding that tourists are looking for unique and unexpected personal experiences in a destination (Park & Santos, 2017), we posit that the popularity of the destination's COO may not be important for DBB.

Finally, knowledge about the destination diminishes the role of the COO. According to Schaefer (1995), COO is not as critical for consumers who are familiar with the brand through education, personal experience, or people they trust. This is supported by the results of this research study. Namely, the respondents exhibited the most positive attitude with respect to the statement that the information and experience they gained as tourists during their first visit will influence their decision to repeat the visit to the destination most (m.v.=4.3814). This implies that destinations with an unfavorable COO image should facilitate positive experiences and their sharing, focusing primarily on fostering positive word-of-mouth regarding the destination's stability and safety. They should also provide detailed information to enhance tourist knowledge about the destination, thereby diminishing potential negative influences on the COO.

Additionally, we tested for the difference between the attitudes of Croatian and U.S. respondents, the results of which are presented in Table 4 in the Appendix. A statistically significant difference was found between Croatian and U.S. respondents with regard to 27 out of

the 37 statements. Nevertheless, most of the statements resulted in a different level of agreement but still in the same direction. Differences regarding the statements with the opposite direction were found only in the case of economic situation and product quality as COO dimensions. More precisely, economic situation and product quality were found to be important for DBB among U.S. respondents, while this was not the case for Croatian respondents. This finding highlights the importance of analyzing the COO influence on DBB at country level, pointing to possible differences resulting from the motives for travel and habits of tourists from different economic, cultural, political, and geographical environments. As such, these results may also serve as a suggestion and starting point for future research streams.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Building a positive, long-lasting COO image is a task that is faced by every country engaged in international business. A favorable COO image has a positive impact on greater market recognition and perception of the country's products or services. Therefore, the goal of every country must be to build and maintain the best possible image as a COO, which can be quite a challenge in the constantly changing and unpredictable environment nowadays. As tourism becomes an essential industry for many countries, building a recognizable and unique destination brand has become crucial. Leaving the formation of the destination brand image to the market and not managing it in the hyper-competitive current environment is destined to failure. It is, therefore, essential to consider and research the factors that influence DBB. Given that a destination, or a specific place, is the subject of exchange in international marketing, just as a product or service is, it is advisable and necessary to investigate how the destination's COO influences the DBB.

Although much prior research has shown that the COO influences the product/service brand image, this paper contributes to the marketing theory by revealing a limited effect of the COO on DBB. In this study, the COO construct was decomposed into building blocks, with the research results showing that only the political situation and safety impact the DBB. In contrast, the economic situation, product quality, and the level of technological development did no tprove to be so important. These findings lead to the conclusion that it is the COO factors which can directly affect consumer experience in a destination, such as the political situation, cultural diversity, security, etc., that are critical for DBB.

Another contribution of this paper consists in the finding that consumer knowledge about a destination (whether subjective/objective knowledge or brand awareness) reduces the importance of the destination's COO as a factor in DBB. This has a crucial managerial implication for the stakeholders in charge of DBB, implying that an unfavorable COO image does not necessarily mean the destination brand image will automatically be negative. It is important to have a strategy to deal with such a situation and present such information to potential tourists that will enhance their knowledge and positive attitude toward the destination and, in turn, help reduce the impact of any unfavorable COO image.

Although many dimensions of the COO construct seem to be less relevant for DBB, the dimensions of safety and political stability must not be overlooked. Since these two dimensions represent fundamental precursors in considering a destination at all, this is where the COO plays a vital role for DBB. Furthermore, the two dimensions are increasingly important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as tourists rely on the COO to cope with the high ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic situation.

The convenience sample applied represents the main limitation of the research. Also, the questionnaire was distributed solely to digitally literate respondents through Facebook and LinkedIn social networks. Thus, the sample con-

sisted of persons with similar characteristics and interests, which increased the possibility of similar attitudes among the respondents.

With regard to future research, it would be interesting to explore the importance of the elements of the COO construct in DBB for different types of tourism, e.g., health tourism, religious tourism, gastro-tourism. In addition, exploring whether consumers' financial or cultural background influences the perception of COO importance in DBB would be beneficial for destination brand management and destination offering.

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Appendix

TABLE 4: Comparison of Croatian and USA respondents' attitudes

Statements	Croatia (m.v.)	USA (m.v.)	t-test
Economic situation (S1 – S3)			
S1. Before my first visit to a destination, I research the current economic situation of the country in which it is located.	2.8972	3.3865	p=0.000
S2. The unstable economic situation of the country in which the destination is located will negatively affect my decision to choose that destination.	2.7523	3.3188	p=0.000
S3. When revisiting a destination, the economic situation of the country in which it is located is not important to me.	3.5607	3.1256	p=0.000
Political situation (S4 – S8)			
S4. I prefer to visit countries with a lower unemployment rate.	2.5093	2.8744	p=0.000
S5. On my first visit to a destination, I research the current political situation of the country in which the destination is located.	3.0467	3.6908	p=0.000
S6. The unstable political situation of the country in which the destination is located will negatively affect my decision to choose the destination.	3.2617	3.9517	p=0.000
S7. I would rather visit a country with a democratic regime than a country organized in some other way.	3.0981	3.4155	p=0.012

Statements	Croatia (m.v.)	USA (m.v.)	t-test
S8. When I revisit a destination, the political situation of the country in which it is located is not important to me.	3.0888	2.6329	p=0.000
Level of technological development (S9 – S11)			
S9. Before my first visit to a destination, I research the current level of technological development of the country in which it is located.	2.3065	2.5217	p=0.241
S10. I would rather visit a technologically advanced destination than a technologically underdeveloped one.	2.1682	2.9072	p=0.000
S11. If the destination is technologically underdeveloped, there is a high probability that I will never visit it.	1.7757	2.6522	p=0.225
Level of industrialization (S12 – S14)			
S12. I believe the countries which are more industrially developed to be more polluted.	3.2383	3.7923	p=0.000
S13. Before my first visit to a destination, I research the current level of industrialization of the country in which the destination is located.	2.4514	2.2493	p=0.316
S14. I prefer to destinations that are less industrialized.	2.7785	2.7406	**p=0.683**
Standard of living (S15 – S19)			
S15. I prefer to visit destinations with a higher GDP per capita.	2.5194	2.5031	**p=0.795**
S16. I would rather visit a more populous destination than a sparsely populated one.	2.8196	2.1353	**p=0.648**
S17. I prefer to visit destinations that are culturally diverse from my country.	3.7196	3.9894	p=0.089
S18. I prefer to visit destinations with less emphasized social classes.	2.9346	3.3420	p=0.000
S19. I would not visit destinations with low labor costs.	1.8738	2.2222	p=0.000
Product quality (S20 – S21)			
S20. If I have experience with products that come from a certain country and I am satisfied with them, I am more likely to visit a destination located in it.	2.7196	3.3575	p=0.000
S21. I prefer to visit destinations that I associate with quality products.	2.6542	3.2077	p=0.000
Popularity (S22 – S25)			
S22. I prefer to visit destinations that are popular among tourists.	3.1028	3.0435	**p=0.609**
S23. I would rather visit destinations that a lot of my friends and acquaintances have visited than those they have not visited.	2.8271	3.0145	p=0.116
S24. I spend less time researching destinations that are advertised a lot.	2.9112	2.8737	**p=0.874**
S25. I'd rather visit a destination that is more heavily advertised than the one that isn't advertised.	2.5374	2.5556	**p=0.859**

Statements	Croatia (m.v.)	USA (m.v.)	t-test
Perceived safety (S26 – S27)			
S26. It is very important to me that the destination I intend to visit is safe.	4.3037	4.5121	p=0.011
S27. If I felt safe in a destination, I would visit it again regardless of the general image of the country in which it is located.	4.0421	4.0628	**p=0.818**
Knowledge (S28 – S37)			
S28. It is much easier for me to decide to visit a destination that I have heard a lot about.	4.0140	4.0773	p=0.452
S29. When I visit a destination again, I spend much less time researching the characteristics of the country in which it is located.	3.8271	3.8551	**p=0.772**
S30. When I visit a destination again, the characteristics of the country in which it is located are not so important to me.	3.5654	3.2029	p=0.001
S31. For well-known destinations, the image of the country in which the destination is located is not important to me.	3.4112	2.9179	p=0.000
S32. The experience and knowledge I gained about the destination during the visit itself will have a much greater impact on my decision to revisit it than information gathered through the media.	4.4159	4.2995	p=0.141
S33. If there is not much information available about a destination, I rely on the knowledge I have about the country in which it is located.	3.6822	3.7585	p=0.0360
S34. If I have a poor opinion of the country in which a destination is located, I am less likely to visit the destination.	3.7710	3.7874	**p=0.863**
S35. I think that I am generally well informed about the offer of tourist destinations (most popular, most affordable, having the best entertainment…).	3.4813	3.2560	p=0.030
S36. I rely more on my own knowledge and information about a destination than on information provided to me by others.	3.3084	3.1787	p=0.200
S37. When evaluating a new destination, I usually rely on knowledge of the country in which the destination is located.	3.2944	3.2995	**p=0.957**