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The influence of Lake Balaton's tourist milieu on visitors' quality of life

Abstract

The paper summarises Hungarian visitors' perceptions of the key components of Lake Balaton's tourist milieu and seeks to identify those components that influence the guests' quality of life. The study aims to analyse the relationship between the cultural landscape and the happiness of tourists, by investigating the contribution of the tourist milieu's various components to the development of tourists' positive attitudes and perceptions concerning their quality of life. In order to assess the notion and the perceived components of the tourist milieu of Lake Balaton, a survey was carried out with 800 respondents in Hungary in 2007. Based on the behaviourist approach of geography, respondents' perceptions are critically analysed in order to identify the specific components of the Lake's milieu, especially those connected with the quality of life. Although tourism started to develop in the region already in the 19th century, and the cultural landscape around the lake has been shaped by natural as well as social forces, the study findings indicate that the perceived destination milieu of Lake Balaton is determined by attributes related to summer and hedonistic consumption reinforcing the stereotypical position of the region as a short-season summer holiday destination. Those components of the perceived tourist that substantially contribute to visitors' overall sense of happiness are also seen as influential and memorable factors in the holiday experience. Consequently, the research results suggest that the creation of idyllic surroundings by conscious development measures may significantly contribute to an overall positive perception of the destination's milieu and may also have a major impact on visitors' experience and their willingness-to-return.

Keywords:

tourist milieu; happiness; quality of life; Lake Balaton; Hungary

Introduction

International tourism geography studies have been long treating the fact, rather adversely, that travel experiences and travel-related happiness are, to a large extent, rooted in the specificities of the place visited. Today, increasing emphasis is put on exploring the extent to which the physical essence of the tourist space, the associated ideas and experiences facilitate the enjoyment or, on the contrary, the sorrow of stakeholders

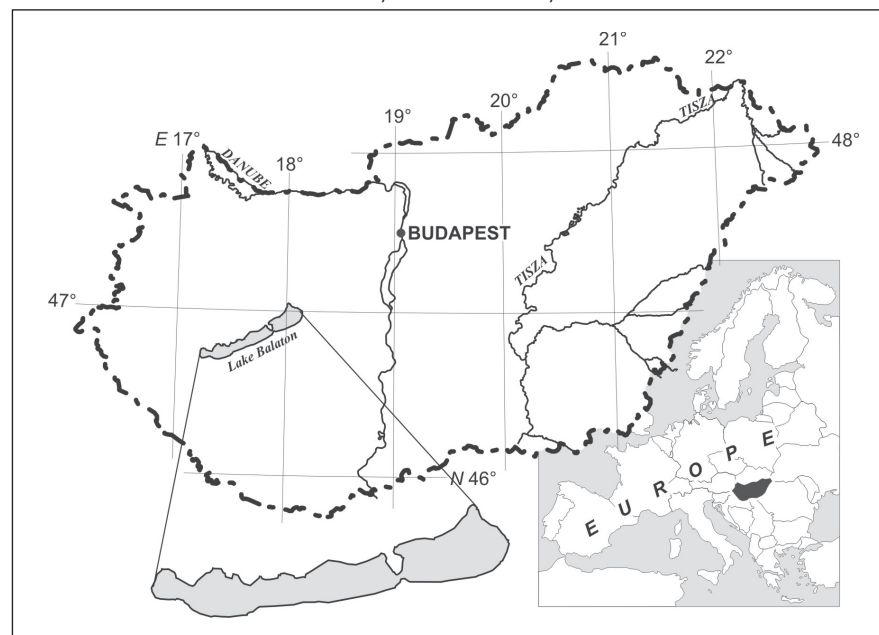
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(Jeffres & Dobos, 1993; Neal, Sirgy & Uysal, 2004). The sum of individual feelings alternating between joy and sorrow is reflected in the quality of life influenced by tourism as well (Milman, 1998; Richards, 1999). As Crompton (1979) suggests, a tourist destination is used as a medium through which the traveller's socio-psychological needs are satisfied. Thus, the components of the tourist space, mostly the cultural landscape of a destination, are suitable for improving or maintaining the individual's quality of life owing to a state of mind attributable to the consumption of the destination. The experienced entirety of the components of a landscape visited by tourists, i.e. the tourist milieu (Michalkó & Rátz, 2006a), is capable of generating changes in one's state of mind that affect one's quality of life. Due to the fact that landscape components are generally in close symbiosis with one another, a lakeside tourist milieu is particularly suitable for allowing the arising positive emotions to exert an impact on the quality of life. The consumption of the key attractions of a lakeside holiday, such as the sunlight and the water, as atavistic elements of life, facilitates the harmony of body, spirit and soul, which affects the individual's quality of life.

Figure 1
THE LOCATION OF THE STUDY AREA, LAKE BALATON, HUNGARY



In examining the milieu of a major tourist destination of Central Eastern Europe, the largest freshwater lake in Hungary and also in CEE (Figure 1), the economist, geographer and public administration expert authors of this study explored the relationship between the happiness component of the notion of quality of life, and the perception of experiences. Based on the findings of a perception survey of Hungarian tourists visiting Lake Balaton (with a sample size of 800), the components of the lake's tourist milieu were analysed on the one hand, and the interpretability of the milieu's components as a source of joy were highlighted on the other, ultimately focusing on the issue of the relationship between the tourist consumption of the cultural landscape and the quality of life. The survey findings disclosed here constitute part of a joint survey carried out by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Kodolányi János University College addressing the concept of the tourist milieu, as well as a core research programme facilitating the implementation of the national tourism development strategy focusing on the symbiosis of tourism and the quality of life (Magyar Turisztikai Hivatal, 2005).

Notes on the symbiosis of tourism and quality of life

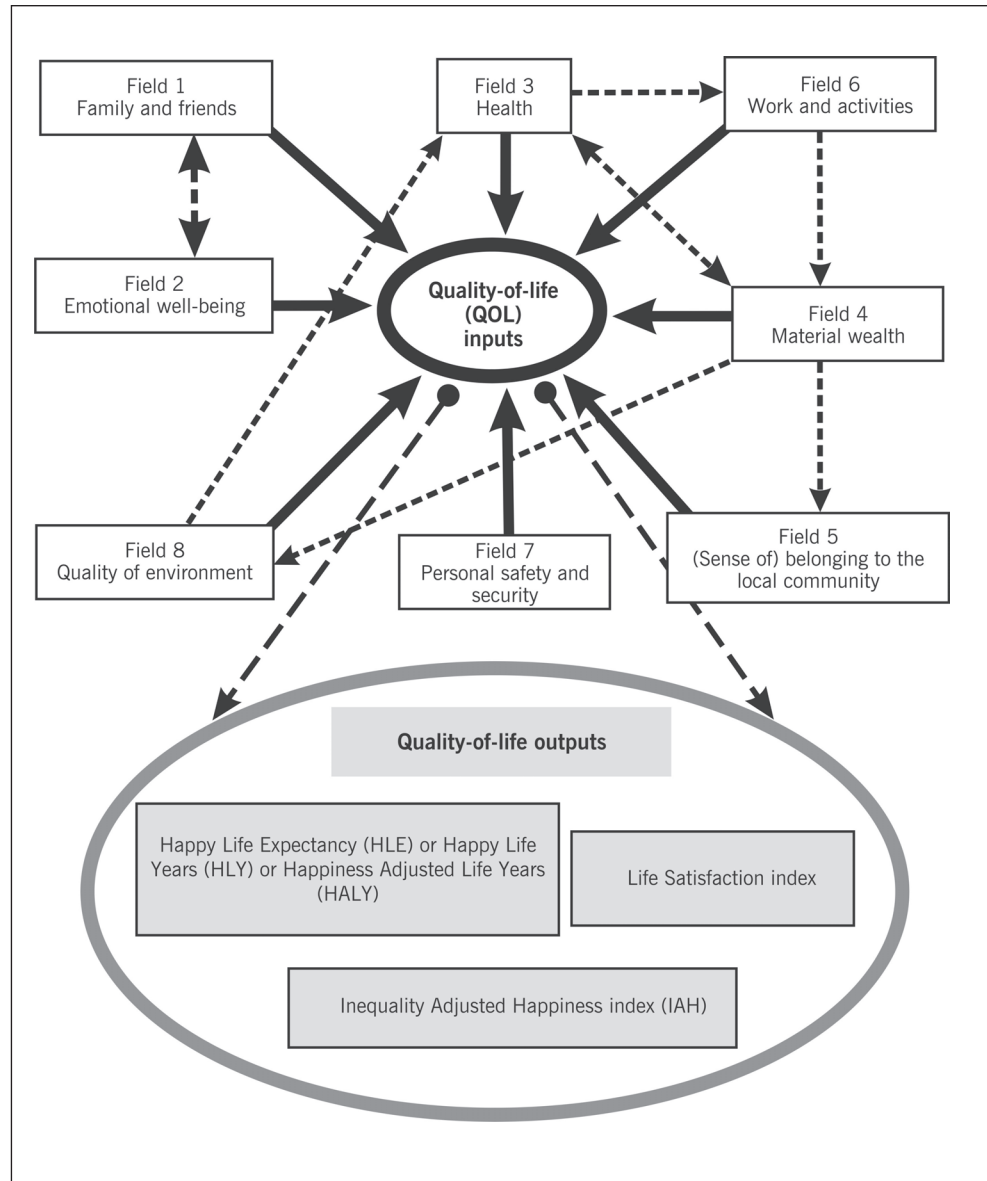
The tourist space, i.e. the crystallised points of global tourism-oriented mobility may be interpreted as spiritual resources, both, for tourists visiting certain destinations and for locals (Perdue, Long & Kang, 1999). The consumption of the tourist space is closely related to the quality of life since it contributes to a balanced and optimal state of the human organism and to the development of personality (Pomfret, 2006). Whether they be active or passive parties to the process, individuals are exposed to changes in their states of mind that make them happy and satisfied, or to the contrary, sad and dissatisfied. Ideally, the structure of the tourist space and its inherent qualitative elements facilitate the improvement of the quality of life of both tourists and locals. However, conflicts encoded in this symbiosis or the peculiarities of the consumption of a particular destination may also trigger adverse changes.

Although different geographical spaces contribute in different ways to the individual's perception of happiness, the common features of the tourism sphere such as the transport networks as well as material and human resources offered by a destination become part of the mental and emotional process of experiencing the given space. The commotion of a city, the silence of a village, the lakeside sand, the mountain air, the undisturbed nature reserve areas become ready for consumption due to the development of the tourist infra- and supra-structure. Thus, their quality levels adjusted to demand expectations are closely linked to the quality of life of the active consumers of the products, i.e. the tourists. In the meantime, locals who play a mostly passive role in their area's tourist consumption, are exposed to impulses due to mobility processes in their living space and changes in their surroundings that result in both positive and negative changes in their state of mind (Polat & Olgun, 2004).

In spite of the evident interrelationship of tourism and the quality of life, the scientific exploration of the interrelation between the two notions is still in infancy. Researchers more or less agree that the symbiosis of tourism and the quality of life may be interpreted with reference to both the tourists and the local community (Neal, Sirgy & Uysal, 1999; Perdue, Long & Kang, 1999; Richards, 1999; Jurowski & Brown, 2001; Neal, Uysal & Sirgy, 2007). However, the forms of expression and the extent of spiritual changes reflected in experiences are assessed by rather different methods. Since most related research concentrates on analysing changes in the quality of life, specialists focusing on the tourism aspects attempt to compile indices ensuring the measurement of these changes (e.g. Neal, 2000; Kim, 2002; Johan, 2004). Indices comprising various factors aim to grasp the reflection of social, economic and physical impacts of tourism on local communities on the one hand, and the tourists' state of mind as reflected by the changes in their quality of life on the other hand (Kovács, Michalko & Horkay, 2007).

The methods used for assessing the quality of life involve highly complex indicators whose design requires knowledge about the inputs and outputs determining the quality of life to reveal the correlations between them. For studying the quality of life, input data can be found in various statistics, usually in the form of time series. The collection of such data is primarily a matter of time and diligence. Measuring the outputs, i.e. satisfaction with life, is a much more complex task. After the development of an extensive range of reliable happiness indices, social and economic policy-makers should assume the responsibility for ensuring more careful development and implementation of social policy objectives based on the exploration of regular relationships between the input (indirect) and output (direct) parameters of the quality of life. The methods for measuring the quality of life are best summarised by Rahman *et al.* (cited by Sebestyén, 2005) in his approach based on inputs and outputs (Figure 2).

Figure 2
RAHMAN'S QUALITY OF LIFE MODEL



Source: Rahman *et al.*, 2005 in Sebestyén, 2005

It is likely that the 'programming' of the eight inputs in Figure 2, or the interaction thereof, will lead to a good quality of life. This is supported by a strong correlation revealed in a number of research projects (e.g. Bianchi, 2007; Peiro, 2007). Finding the correlation requires the measurement of the quality of life itself, i.e. the output which is made up of the programmed inputs. Experiences gained in the course of various tourist activities may be interpreted as inputs facilitating the improvement of the quality of life. Based on Rahman's model, it may be established that all eight fields correlate closely with tourism.

The demand for contacts with family and friends (field 1) appears in VFR tourism, which is a major segment of the tourism industry due to the global character of international migration (Lehto, Morrison & O'Leary, 2001). Emotional well-being (field 2) is related to travels to beloved surroundings, attention of co-travellers and increased time spent with each other, service experience and interactions with service providers, among others (Bigné & Andreu, 2004). Health (field 3) is a central element of travel motivated by the prevention of illness, cure of incumbent sickness and the pursuit of a health-conscious way of life (Hall, 2003). The generation of material wealth (field 4) is the background to travel aimed either directly or indirectly at increasing the individual's prosperity, e.g. shopping tourism, a significant part of which is related to the generation of material wealth (Timothy, 2005). The sense of belonging to the local community (field 5) manifests itself in diaspora tourism, for example (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2003), and in travels aimed at strengthening one's national ethnic and territorial identity (Timothy, 2002). Work and activities (field 6) are factors typically related to business tourism. Whether one embarks on a conference or a business trip, one is motivated by keeping one's job or building one's career (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001). Personal safety and security (field 7) are major elements in travel decisions; a tourist always considers whether the level of safety and security in a potential destination meets one's own personal expectations (George, 2003). The quality of environment (field 8) primarily covers the physical conditions of a tourist destination (Rátz & Puczko, 2002); the purity of air and water, the state of public areas and parks, the entirety of which is also reflected in the visuality of a place that is perceived strongly by the tourist.

The theoretical model used in the implementation of Hungary's national tourism development strategy relies on the findings of earlier international studies and describes the characteristics of the impacts of tourism on the quality of life through the following five factors encompassing both objective and subjective parameters (TUTSZ, 2007): travel seen as an activity, visitor motivations, travel features, tourism impacts and destination features.

This study focuses on one component within the tourist destination features, i.e. the relationship between the tourist milieu of a destination and the quality of life of visitors. The character of a tourist destination, the receptiveness of local political, economic and social stakeholders, tourism's infra- and supra-structure all have an impact on the milieu of the particular locality, the consumption of which may be reflected in the visitor's quality of life through complex psychological processes.

The characteristics and structure of the tourist milieu

Although the tourist milieu is shaped by a specific interpretation of perceptions and, as such, its existence depends on tourist demand, the emergence of the milieu itself is based on the supply-side components of a destination. Within the system of tourism (Inskeep, 1991), the tourist milieu comprises of elements of the place product, but its evolution is also strongly influenced by certain tangible and intangible components of the tourism system's wider environment.

In the travel decision-making process, the image of an area primarily influences the destination choice, while the milieu mostly affects tourists' behaviour and activities. In addition, image is a key factor in attracting first time visitors, whereas the milieu of a destination plays a critical role in generating repeat visitation. While prospective tourists often base their decisions on the range of attractions in an area, travellers' willingness to return is more strongly affected by their experiences and the particular destination's specific ambiance (Michalkó & Rátz, 2006a). Consequently, while the

tourist milieu may become an attraction by itself, generally only returning visitors and experienced travellers may be incited to choose a particular destination by the area's milieu elements. On the one hand, the development of the subjective milieu requires direct personal experiences on behalf of the perceiver, and on the other hand, first-time visitors to a destination are usually attracted by the area's landmark sights and major events (Lau & McKercher, 2004). It must be noted however that it is not necessary for the traveller to return to the very same destination: it is one of the key assumptions of the milieu concept that various destinations may represent the same milieu due to shared characteristics, thus favourable experiences gained in one destination may lead to demand generation in other places characterized by the same tourist milieu.

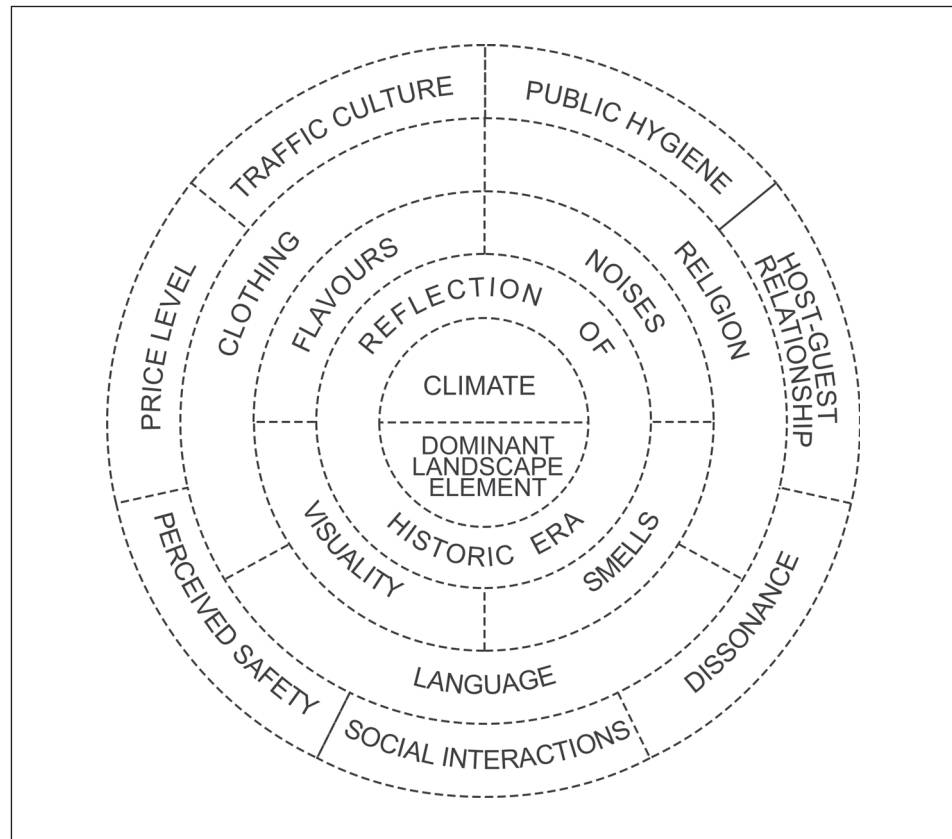
While being a component of the tourism system's supply side, the tourist milieu also incorporates certain elements of the social, economic, political, technological and natural environments of the system. Although any of these environmental components may prove to be decisive in creating the tourist milieu, it is the social environment and its physical representation, the cultural landscape that have the most intensive role in shaping the milieu.

A further assumption of the milieu concept is that the milieu of the same area is perceived differently by tourists with different cultural background; i.e. different aspects are perceived and different details are noticed. The closer the tourist's socio-cultural background and the milieu of their place of origin to the destination's milieu, the more meticulous observations are made, while in the case of greater cultural distance, the visitor is more likely to discern the significantly different, thus more easily distinguishable components of the visited destination's milieu (Michalkó & Rátz, 2006b).

The socio-cultural characteristics of the local community are embedded in a given destination's milieu. Therefore, its typical features will be reflected in tourists' experiences (Szarvas, 1998). Obviously, the perception of the milieu also strongly depends on the guest's personality. Similarly to the individual nature of travel behaviour, spatial experiences are also influenced by the socio-economic and socio-cultural characteristics of the visitor (Pizam & Sussmann, 1995). The extent to which tourists engage in communication with the local population, their familiarity with the place, the intensity of their participation in the activities offered by the destination, and their socio-cultural attitudes all influence their experience of the social components of the tourist milieu. The diverse milieu interpretations of tourists of different cultural backgrounds will in turn influence the milieu itself: consequently, highlighting target market-specific milieu elements in marketing communication may alter in the long term the actual tourist milieu of the destination (Butler, 1998).

The tourist milieu may be understood as a meta-level of the destination as a tourist product: "it contains the abstract components of tangible reality, and while each milieu element may be perceived individually during the routine consumption of the site, it is the elusive totality of all the elements that is able to create a feeling of attraction in visitors" (Michalkó & Rátz, 2006a, p. 100). Figure 3 presents the kaleidoscopic structure of the tourist milieu: it comprises of the destination's physical environment and heritage values, the tangible and intangible elements of the tourism supply as well as the site's human characteristics such as behaviour of locals and fellow travellers, expressions of religion or the tourist-host relationship.

Figure 3
THE STRUCTURE AND COMPONENTS OF THE TOURIST MILIEU



Source: Michalkó & Rátz, 2006a

One of the main assumptions of the authors' milieu concept is that the tourist milieu is generally not limited to a single destination - due to comparable geographic location or cultural backgrounds, larger regions frequently embody similar milieu elements. Consequently, while certain settlements may provide an absolutely unique milieu, resemblances are often experienced within domestic regions such as the Lake Balaton area, or even international regions including several countries such as the Mediterranean (Michalkó & Rátz, 2005).

Research methods

Since the milieu of a destination is based on personal perceptions and experiences, both a qualitative and a quantitative approach was used to explore the structure and components of Lake Balaton's tourist milieu, including an association analysis (Wong, Chen, Chung & Kao, 2006) and a nationwide questionnaire survey (Walle, 1997; Veal, 2006). In the first stage of the research the authors asked 170 students of the Kodolányi János University College to "fill in" the kaleidoscope of the tourist milieu of Lake Balaton, i.e. list those milieu elements that they perceive as characteristic to the Lake (all students involved had recent personal tourism or leisure experiences at Lake Balaton). In order to keep only the relevant milieu components, the milieu elements mentioned by at least 50% of the respondents were retained, resulting in 133 variables in 13 groups. The strength of each individual milieu element is partly reflected by the number of variables identified within the particular element. However, throughout the interpretation of the results it should be remembered that associations to a destination's milieu elements may

become irrelevant when the stimuli from the original environment fade or disappear (Michalkó & Minca, 2000).

In the second stage of the research, in order to empirically explore the structure and key components of the tourist milieu of Lake Balaton, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted in Hungary during spring 2007. A structured questionnaire based on the list of variables identified by the associative method was implemented through face-to-face interviews with 800 respondents, conducted by interviewers from the Kodolányi János University College who were selected according to their academic achievements and survey experiences. Since the notion of the tourist milieu is based on travellers' personal perceptions, participation was limited to adults (over the age of 14) who in the past five years actually visited the Lake Balaton region for tourism or leisure purposes. Respondents were asked to evaluate each variable's role and contribution to their holiday experience. Table 1 presents the demographic distribution of the quota sample that represents the Hungarian population by age and gender.

Table 1
THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS (%)

Age	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
14-35 years	21.6	20.4	42.0
36-59 years	17.1	18.4	35.5
60+ years	10.1	12.4	22.5
Total	48.8	51.2	100.0

In addition, the authors have attempted to separate happiness elements of a particular place that may be determined on the basis of subjective value judgement from the objective indicators of the quality of life related to tourism (such as quality of services utilised by tourists or duration of stay). Survey participants were asked to identify those elements of Lake Balaton's milieu that made them happier, more satisfied, that helped them perceive their lives more positively. Respondents were invited to identify those variables in a predefined list of 133 milieu elements that induced positive feelings about life during their stays at Lake Balaton.

Results and discussion

THE TOURIST MILIEU OF LAKE BALATON

Lakes are among the most popular tourist destinations all around the world, due to their natural features and cultural diversity (Baros, Patkos & David, 2007). The evolution of tourism plays a key role in influencing a lake's milieu: while the predominant milieu components of lake regions are initially natural, in the case of Lake Balaton, where tourism started to develop already in the 19th century, the natural features are partly overshadowed by man-made attributes. The cultural landscape that emerged from the symbiosis of natural forces, agriculture and tourism has become a product marketed to and consumed by visitors. Consequently, the area's tourist milieu perceived by visitors is shaped by natural as well as social forces, among which tourism – particularly summer holidays, due to the seasonal nature of the industry – is the predominant socio-economic activity.

Table 2

THE STRUCTURE AND COMPONENTS OF THE TOURIST MILIEU OF LAKE BALATON

Components	Total value	Mean	St.dev.
Dominant landscape element	107.4	3.2	0.4
Flavours/food	48.6	3.5	0.5
Climate/weather	36.8	3.1	0.7
Social interactions/phenomena	28.9	3.2	0.5
Visuality	28.8	3.2	0.7
Clothing	29.5	2.9	1.2
Smells	29.4	2.9	0.5
Sounds/noises	26.4	2.6	0.5
Language	20.8	3.5	0.7
Price level	12.9	3.2	0.8
Traffic culture	14.2	2.8	0.2
Reflection of historic era	10.5	2.6	0.6
Safety	10.0	2.5	0.2

Based on the kaleidoscope model of the tourist milieu, Table 2 presents the significance of the assessed milieu components within the total perceived milieu of Lake Balaton. As the Table shows, the largest number of associations was generated within the "dominant landscape element" and "flavours" group, which, combined with the relatively high mean value of importance of each attribute within the groups, resulting in the highest perceived significance of these two milieu components.

The least powerful components proved to be "safety" and "reflection of a historic era". The latter is not particularly surprising, since the area's dynamic development and transformation during the last centuries has made it devoid of a strong historical identity, although certain architectural styles of the past related to tourism development are well represented by 19th century villas and socialist realist holiday complexes.

As seen in Table 3, the strength of attributes related to summer and hedonistic consumption indicates the absolute determining role of summer holiday tourism in the destination milieu of Lake Balaton. Although tourism has developed around a lake (in fact, the largest lake of Central Europe), water does not appear among the most memorable elements of the respondents' experience, and the only natural attributes are sunshine and warm weather, both essential requisites of a pleasant holiday by the Lake. Moreover, the most dominant landscape component is not the water or the hills on the northern shore of Balaton, but the food stalls standing on the beach selling the typical holiday food items – ice cream, "lángos", fried fish, pancakes – that are, somewhat surprisingly, also seen as key attributes of the Lake's milieu. This combination of summer holiday food with holiday clothing – swimsuit, flip flops, and casual clothes –

clearly suggests that the region's milieu is almost exclusively seen as a summer milieu by respondents, reinforcing the common stereotype that Lake Balaton is "all about summer holidays and nothing else".

Table 3

THE MOST INFLUENTIAL INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE TOURIST MILIEU OF LAKE BALATON

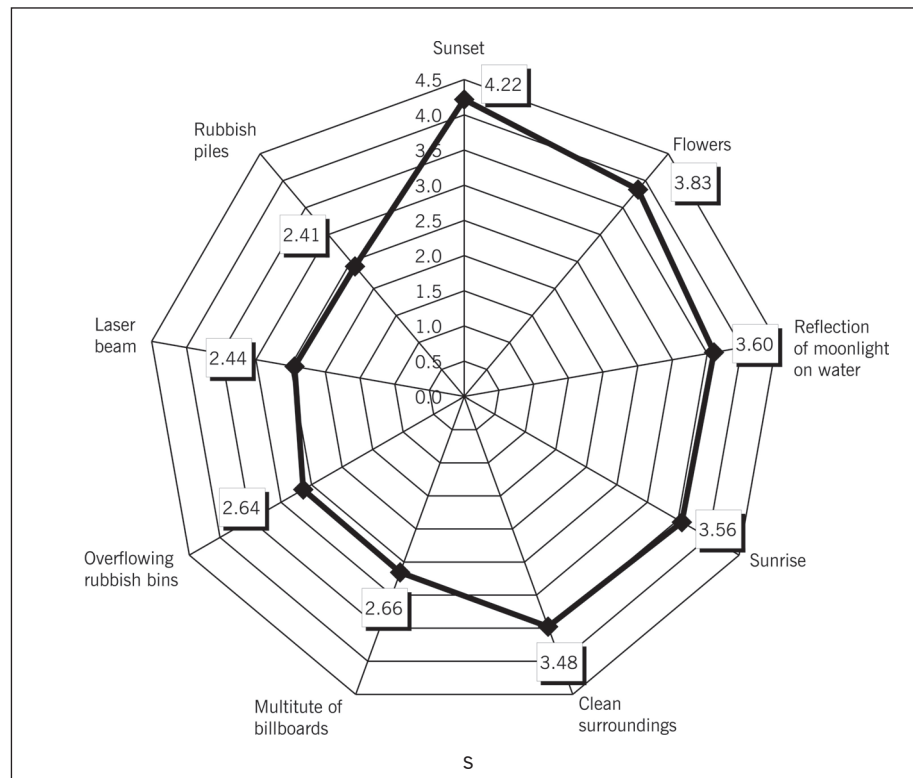
Attribute	Milieu component	Mean	St.dev.
Swimsuit	Clothing	4.4	1.0
Flip flops	Clothing	4.3	1.0
Warm weather	Climate/weather	4.2	1.0
Sunshine	Climate/weather	4.2	1.0
Sunset	Visuality	4.2	1.1
Ice cream	Flavours/food	4.1	1.1
Casual clothes	Clothing	4.1	1.0
Hungarian signs	Language	4.1	1.1
Hungarian-speaking tourists	Language	4.1	1.1
"Lángos"*	Flavours/food	4.0	1.1
Food stalls	Dominant landscape element	4.0	1.1
Fried fish	Flavours/food	4.0	1.1
Heat	Climate/weather	4.0	1.1
Pancake	Flavours/food	4.0	1.1

* A Hungarian food speciality, deep fried flat bread made of potato-based dough, generally eaten with garlic, sour cream or grated cheese.

THE TOURIST MILIEU AS THE SOURCE OF HAPPINESS

Considering that happiness is a rather complex notion, the majority of people probably seldom consider their own feeling of happiness. Pondering about what may be regarded as the source of happiness, to what happiness may be attributed, generally remains the privilege of professionals dealing with such issues. Happiness arising from travel experiences, as a subjective factor of the quality of life, has numerous components, the majority of which may be grasped in the milieu of the locality visited. As the survey results indicate, among the 133 variables included in the questionnaire, 10 milieu elements contributed to the happiness of minimum 30% of respondents. These 10 milieu elements belong to 6 milieu categories, among which those associated with "visuality" and "climate" were named the most often.

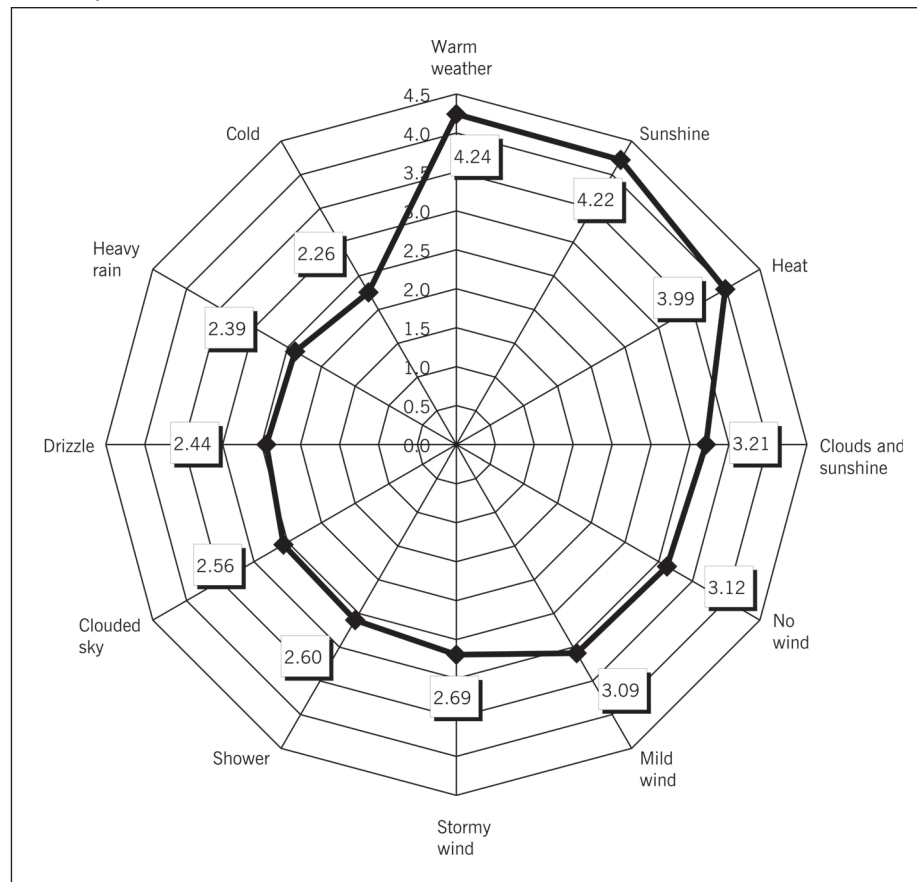
Figure 4
VISUAL COMPONENTS OF THE TOURIST MILIEU OF LAKE BALATON



Milieu elements of visibility include sunset (48.4%), sunrise (37.0%), the reflection of moonlight on the surface of Lake Balaton (31.0%) and the flowers in the settlements around the lake (31.0%) as factors found by respondents to be feeding into their happiness on the merit (Figure 4). Visibility, i.e. the segment of reality perceived by the human eye is capable of appearing as a source of joy feeding into happiness; which, of course, called for respondents to reach the level of satisfying aesthetic needs in Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. Accordingly, the participants of the survey found the spectacles of the landscape associated with celestial phenomena, the light reflected on the surface of the lake in the dusk and the dawn as the most important factors of enjoyment. In addition to intense marketing activities related to Lake Balaton, this may be associated with the socialisation and prior literary and other artistic experiences of respondents.

Considering that the climate of Lake Balaton benefits from rather advantageous air and water temperatures in the period between May and September, and particularly in July and August, the elements of climate as a milieu group feeding into the happiness of respondents also play a key role (Figure 5). Within the climate, warmth (49.0%) and sparkling sunshine (44.6%) attained values ranking them first and third among the 133 milieu elements surveyed in terms of contribution to happiness. In this case, once again a celestial factor, the Sun is the key to the feeling of happiness due to its role played in temperature increases.

Figure 5
CLIMATE/WEATHER IN THE TOURIST MILIEU OF LAKE BALATON

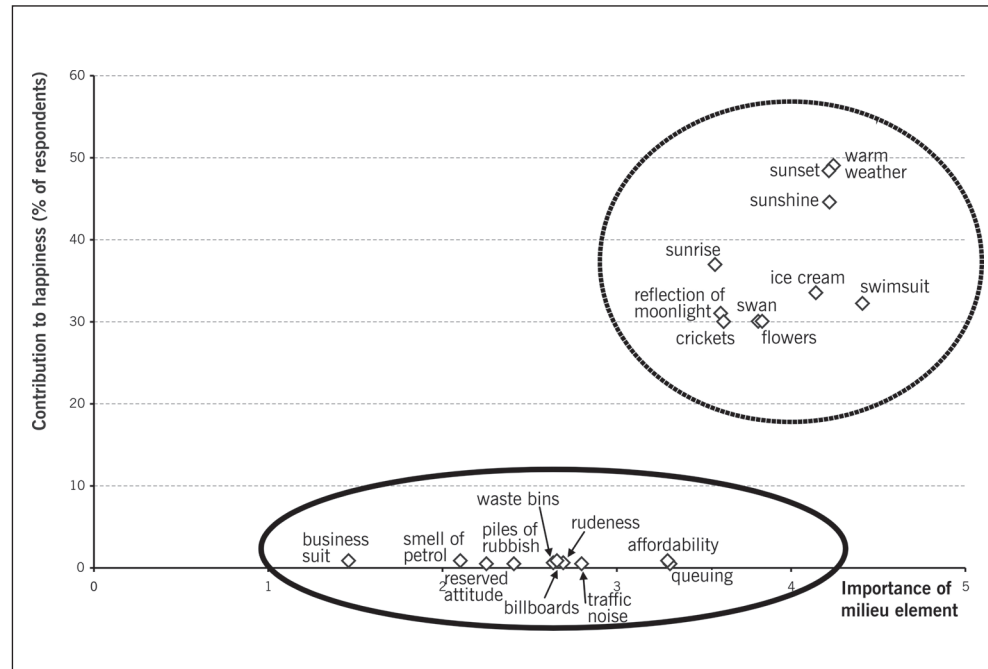


Lake Balaton's milieu has articulated and less articulated elements. The former (76 elements) received scores above 3.0 on a scale of 1 to 5 from respondents, while the latter (57 elements) received score below 3.0. Milieu elements regarded more articulated by respondents induce positive feelings, make participants of the survey more substantially happier than the less articulated ones. The elements of Lake Balaton's milieu that received scores between 3.1 and 5.0 from respondents induce happiness in 16.2% on average in all respondents, while those in the range of 1.0 to 3.0 in only 5.31%.

Examining this question from a reversed approach and focusing on the milieu elements associated with positive feelings of life, it may be established that factors regarded as positive milieu elements substantially inducing happiness were attributed high values of importance and complexity by respondents, i.e. they are seen as significantly memorable components of the holiday experience. At the same time, those milieu elements that are less likely to contribute to respondents' sense of happiness are also featured in the total image of Lake Balaton's milieu with lower values (Figure 6). Among the 133 milieu elements, those 10 that were perceived as happiness-inducing by the highest percentage of respondents (30% or above) received a significance value of 4.0 on average, while the 10 factors least seen as happiness-inducing (by less than 1.0% of participants) received a significance value of 2.6 on average. Milieu components that neither contributed significantly to respondents' happiness nor proved to be influential

in their holiday experience at Lake Balaton include the jungle of billboards, the smell of petrol, business suit, overflowing waste bins, piles of rubbish, impoliteness, traffic noise and residents' reserved attitude.

Figure 6
CONTRIBUTION OF LAKE BALATON'S TOURIST MILIEU ELEMENTS TO VISITOR HAPPINESS



Conclusions

International tourism studies tend to realise the fact that travel in general, and leisure mobility in particular, have an impact on travellers' quality of life. Whether we examine the role of guests or hosts, numerous objective and subjective factors may be identified that contribute to the improvement of the individual's quality of life. In the context of tourism, the factors affecting the general quality of life are without exception in symbiosis with travel and tourism consumption as well, and the imprints of various tourist activities are reflected in well-being and wellness summed up in the quality of life. Among the impacts of tourism on the quality of life, the factor of destination features include elements not limited to the living conditions of the local community, but arising from subjective value judgements based on the perceptions of tourists visiting a particular locality. Landscape elements, noise, social relations or visual elements often perceived selectively by tourists make up an image manifesting as an overall impression that may be regarded as the milieu of a tourist destination. Every tourist space has dominant elements the combination of which is perceived identically by the majority of visitors, resulting in a social consensus on the tourist milieu of the particular locality. The tourist milieu has an effect on the tourist's state of mind, and contributes to the induction of positive feelings in life, of joy and happiness.

In case of Central Europe's largest freshwater lake, Balaton, the elements related to climate and visibility as milieu sets proved to substantially induce happiness in respondents. The key elements of Lake Balaton's tourist milieu, perceived by visitors as the most memorable and influential components of the holiday experience, include warm weather, sparkling sunshine and sunset, variables that are able to generate pleasant

emotions manifesting in the subjective quality of life in most respondents. When examining Lake Balaton's tourist milieu, sunshine proves to be the most significant holiday attribute improving visitors' quality of life, both by ensuring favourable temperatures and romantically shaping the landscape.

Due to its complexity, the tourist milieu of a particular destination is hard to define and even harder to communicate; consequently, in most marketing messages it is only represented as the background to a few selected sites. However, the authors believe that an area's milieu plays an equally – if not more – important role in affecting travellers' satisfaction and willingness to return as the major tourist sights; visiting key attractions only occupies a certain amount of time during a trip, while the destination's milieu surrounds the visitors throughout their whole stay. The analysis of the structure and components of Lake Balaton's tourist milieu as well as the effects of the milieu on visitors' travel experience and their overall quality of life has important implications for decision-makers and local authorities working in the fields of destination marketing and product development. Although in recent strategic tourism development plans Lake Balaton is to be positioned as a high-quality, high value destination in the medium term (Magyar Turisztikai Hivatal, 2005; LT Consorg Kft, 2006), as long as the most memorable components of the perceived destination milieu include mainly "cheap and cheerful" holiday-related variables such as food stalls, flip flops and ice cream, this remains an almost impossible mission.

However, it shall also be acknowledged that those milieu elements that substantially contribute to visitors' overall sense of happiness are also perceived as influential and memorable components of the holiday experience. Although this may partly be explained by respondents' selective memory influenced by the pre-conceived idyllic image of a lakeside holiday, the research results also suggest that the creation of idyllic surroundings by conscious development measures (including such elements as flowerbeds, scenic photospots or romantic lake-side walkways) that may significantly contribute to an overall positive perception of the destination's milieu may also have a major impact on visitors' experience and their willingness-to-return.

Discussion and assessment of the survey findings during the data analysis process also highlighted the fact that while major environmental and personal changes may be necessary to create a substantial impact on the individual's overall level of happiness or perceived quality of life, typical holidays at Lake Balaton are generally relatively short (Mester, Polgar & Kiss, 2006), which means that their impacts on the tourists' quality of life are likely to be transitory. Consequently, future research on the subject has to include longitudinal surveys on the one hand, to assess the timeframe within which it is possible to recognise changes in one's overall level of happiness as a result of a holiday, and a more detailed analysis of the tourist milieu's contribution to holidaymakers' quality of life on the other hand, with respect to their length of stay in the visited destination.

Since holiday food items – both traditional Hungarian specialities such as "lángos", and internationally popular snacks such as ice cream – proved to be key attributes of the Lake's perceived milieu, further investigations of the subject may also include the exploration of visitors' culinary experiences in the region. Food and drink consumption is a core component of the overall tourist experience: the gastronomic richness of a destination and the variety and quality of holiday food items can make a significant impression on visitors, and may affect their satisfaction with their experience, their spending patterns.

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