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## THE IMPACT OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND ACCOMMODATION CAPACITIES ON THE BRANDING OF FRUŠKA GORA AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

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**Abstract:** Tourism is a global process based on social and economic human freedoms. The branding of a tourist destination cannot be imagined without the cooperation of the private and public sectors. Today, most destinations have hotels, conference capacities, unique cultural heritage, attractions, entertainment, or other forms of tourist offerings. In this way, they aim to attract attention and increase the number of tourists. Success depends on the ability to create a unique identity and differentiate from the competition. The development of tourism is conditioned by the quality of the environment, its natural and cultural values. The impact of natural resources depends on the degree of preservation and attractiveness of the environment, which directly reflects on the development of the tourist destination as a brand. Natural resources provide a unique feeling of being in open spaces and the isolation that tourists increasingly seek. Branding is the process of distinguishing and individualizing certain destinations as specific products and creating associations in the minds of consumers with a country as a tourist destination. Today, branding is one of the most popular topics. Branding itself is significant, not only to make an impression on customers or users but also to inform them of what they can expect. The idea of developing a brand comes from the desire to add value with the aim of differentiating from competitors. Branding a destination is not just part of a marketing strategy; it is actually the foundation that creates a positive image of every place. A destination brand is based on tourist communities and marketing organizations that identify the best advantages of their destination in order to appeal to certain values, cultures, and the overall mindset that people experience when visiting a particular place. The subject of this paper is the analysis of tourists' attitudes toward Fruška Gora as a tourist destination. The aim of the paper is to examine tourists regarding their perception of the recognizability, quality, satisfaction, loyalty, and image as elements of branding a tourist destination such as Fruška Gora. An empirical study was conducted using an online survey questionnaire. The statistical methods used for data processing and analysis in the paper are descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and correlation analysis. The responses of 57 participants were analyzed using the statistical program IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. The research results indicate the recognizability of Fruška Gora for its natural resources and the high quality of its accommodation offerings. Additionally, the obtained results show a strong correlation between loyalty and satisfaction, as well as image and quality, while the number of visits to Fruška Gora affects the level of tourist loyalty.

**Keywords:** tourism, Fruška gora, natural resources, brand, tourist destination.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For tourism, mountains are always significant in many ways. Mountains are challenging and attractive to visitors seeking adventure, sports, and adrenaline activities. Tourists are increasingly searching for some form of peace and connection with nature, which mountains and rural areas can provide. The cultural characteristics of neighboring valleys in high mountains can be entirely different, further enriching their tourism offerings. Today, tourism significantly changes the economic opportunities of many mountain regions and their natural environment. The World Tourist Organization (WTO) defines sustainable tourism as a principle that, on one hand, meets the needs of tourists and tourist destinations, and on the other, protects and enhances tourism opportunities for future generations (Cimbaljević et.al., 2023).. The Fruška Gora National Park represents an extraordinary natural and cultural value, creating a duty for the state, institutions, and every individual to take care of it. In today's market conditions, competition among tourist destinations is constantly increasing. Brands have become an omnipresent part of our lives and are used as a focal point for formulating corporate strategies, establishing a new direction toward brand orientation (Khan, 2009). Many authors have explored the branding of tourist destinations in their research (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017; Perić & Mandarić, 2019; Chen & Wu, 2022). Branding is vital; it is a technique to distinguish yourself from the competition by clearly stating what you have to offer that makes you a better option

(Batan, 2021; Radivojević et. al., 2024).). According to Vengesai (2003), a destination is defined as a combination of two factors: attractiveness and competitiveness. Attractiveness is seen as the destination's ability to offer benefits and represents a factor of appeal for potential visitors, while competitiveness is related to its ability to provide a better experience than other destinations. A destination is also defined within geographic boundaries and a management system, allowing it to compete with other locations or destinations (Morgan et al., 2011). It is essential to create and promote a brand as a destination, which helps enhance its positioning and highlight its uniqueness. The idea behind brand development is to create added value aimed at distinguishing a product from competitors (Cvijanović and Mihajlović, 2011). The concept of destination branding is crucial for creating a consistent identity and uniqueness to differentiate one destination from others (Chen & Wu, 2022). According to (Cvijanović et al., 2019), brands "permeate all spheres of our lives: economic, social, cultural, sports, and even religion." Therefore, it is crucial to understand that a destination brand exists in the eyes of the observer, not the creator. Destination branding is driven by three main factors, which represent the foundations of a destination brand: reputation, identity, and perception. The subject of branding can vary, from purpose-built areas to villages, cities, regions, or countries. What they all share is that they are places (areas) that attract visitors to stay temporarily for tourism purposes, with the common name for such a place being a destination. The focus of this research is Fruška Gora. Although Fruška Gora is isolated in Vojvodina, it is considered an inexhaustible source of enjoyment and the benefits it offers. It is necessary to highlight its comparative advantages and differentiate it from other competitive destinations in the tourism market. The subject of this paper is the analysis of tourists' attitudes toward Fruška Gora as a tourist destination. The aim of the paper is to examine tourists' perceptions regarding the recognition, quality, satisfaction, loyalty, and image, as well as the branding elements of Fruška Gora. Veljković (2010) emphasizes that the goal is for people to become aware of a specific location and to develop positive associations with it, as well as a desire to visit it. Based on the subject and aim of the research and a review of the relevant literature, research was conducted to explore the branding of Fruška Gora as a tourist destination. The research results aim to present tourists' attitudes regarding the mentioned branding elements.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The subject of this paper is the analysis of tourists' attitudes toward Fruška Gora as a tourist destination. The aim of the paper is to examine tourists' perceptions regarding the recognizability, quality, satisfaction, loyalty, and image as elements of Fruška Gora's branding. Of particular importance is the analysis of the interconnection and impact of these variables in the context of branding Fruška Gora as a tourist destination. Based on the established subject and aim of the research, the following research hypotheses have been formulated:

**H1:** Fruška Gora is recognized for its natural resources.

**H2:** The quality of accommodation offerings in Fruška Gora is at a high level.

**H3:** Healing mineral springs have an impact on the overall image of Fruška Gora as a tourist destination.

The paper includes empirical research based on an anonymous survey questionnaire. The survey was conducted in July and August 2024. The questionnaire was distributed online through Facebook, Instagram, Viber, and WhatsApp networks. The questions were formulated and adapted based on the previous research by Perić & Mandarić (2019), who in their study analyzed the challenges of branding Prolom Banja as a health tourism destination, based on the perception of Prolom Banja in the minds of tourists. In addition, for the purposes of this study, the claims were expanded based on the work of Aziz & Friedman (2012), who examined the perceptions of visitors to Turkey regarding the branding of Turkey as a tourist destination, and Ghafari et al. (2017), who in their work explored specific dimensions of destinations, brand value, their interrelationships, and proposed a model for developing the brand value of tourist destinations. The survey consists of three parts. The first part relates to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second part focuses on the respondents' characteristics based on their stay in Fruška Gora. The third part addresses variables such as awareness, quality, satisfaction, loyalty, and image. A total of 57 respondents participated in filling out the online questionnaire, all of whom met the condition for completing the survey (the condition being that the respondent had visited Fruška Gora). The statistical methods used for data processing and analysis in the study include descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and correlation analysis within the IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 software. The responses of the 57 participants were analyzed and presented in the following sections of the paper.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The basic condition for participating in the survey was that the respondent had visited Fruška Gora. The control question was, "Have you visited Fruška Gora?" to which all 57 respondents answered affirmatively, and only their responses were analyzed. Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

**Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents**

Variables		Frequency	%	M	SD
<b>Gender</b>	Male	12	21,1	1,73	0,449
	Female	45	78,9		
<b>Education</b>	High school	8	14,0	3,15	0,731
	Faculty/Higher Education	40	70,17		
	Master/Doctor of Science	9	15,8		
<b>Age</b>	Less than 20	1	1,8	3,08	1,357
	21-30	14	24,6		
	31-40	12	21,1		
	41-50	21	36,8		
	51-60	8	14,0		
	Over 60	1	1,7		
<b>Have you visited Fruška Gora?</b>		57	100,0	1,00	0,000

*Source: Processing by the author based on SPSS 26*

In the research 78.9% of women and 21.1% of men participated. The largest part - 70.17% of the respondents have completed the Faculty or Higher Education, while the smallest part of the respondents have completed secondary school - 14%. In terms of age, the majority of respondents (36.8%) belong to the 41-50 age group, while the smallest number of respondents (1.7%) are over 60 years old. Table 3 shows the characteristics of respondents based on their stay in Fruška Gora.

**Table 2: Shows a descriptive statistical analysis of the Consciousness variable - Descriptive statistical analysis - Awareness**

Awareness		Frequency	%	M	SD
How did you find out about Fruška Gora?	Tourist agency	2	3,5	5,18	1,394
	Tourism fair	2	3,5		
	Media	6	10,5		
	Internet/social networks	12	21,1		
	Recommendation of a friend	13	22,8		
	Personal experience	17	29,8		
	The rest	5	8,8		
When planning your trip, what source of information did you use?	Tourist agency	7	12,3	3,51	1,019
	Tourism fair	5	8,7		
	Internet/social networks	16	28,1		
	Personal experience	21	36,8		
	The rest	8	14,0		
Have your friends heard of Fruška Gora?	Yes	57	100	1,02	0,224
	No	0	-		
	Not sure	0	-		

*Source: Processing by the author based on SPSS 26*

The second part of the paper refers to the examination of the attitudes of visitors to Fruška Gora in relation to the aforementioned variables. When it comes to respondents' awareness of Fruška Gora, the largest part of respondents (29.8%) found out about Fruška Gora based on personal experience, while the smallest percentage of respondents learned about Fruška Gora through the Tourist Agency and the Tourism Fair (3.5%) . To the question When planning your trip, which source of information did you use?, the largest part of the respondents (36.8%) used information obtained on the basis of personal experience. To the question, Have your friends heard of Fruška Gora? 100% of the total number of respondents gave an affirmative answer. (Table 2).

Respondents had the opportunity to rate the offered elements of Fruška Gora's tourist offer on a five-point Likert scale (1-very bad, 2-bad, 3-average, 4-very bad, 5-excellent). The elements for evaluation were (natural resources, pristine environment, accommodation offer, gastronomic offer, indigenous products). Based on the data obtained, we can say

that the average rating of the elements of the tourist offer of Fruška Gora ranges from 3.77 to 4.50. The elements: natural resources (M=4.30) have the highest rating, which confirms the hypothesis **H1**: Fruška gora is recognizable by the existence of natural resources.

**Table 3: Shows the descriptive statistical analysis for the Quality variable - Descriptive statistical analysis - Quality**

QUALITY	M	SD
Fruška gora has a quality offer of accommodation.	4,22	0,788
Fruška gora has a high quality gastronomic offer.	4,01	0,847
Service providers on Fruška Gora organize tourist events.	3,87	1,000
The level of cleanliness on Fruška Gora is high compared to other destinations.	4,16	0,946
I am satisfied with the ratio of quality and price at Fruška Gora.	3,84	1,172

*Source: Processing by the author based on SPSS 26*

Using a five-point Likert scale, respondents had the opportunity to express their degree of agreement/disagreement with the statements offered (1-absolutely disagree, 2-disagree, 3-not sure, 4-agree, 5-absolutely agree). The data from table 5 show that the statement Fruška gora has a high-quality offer of accommodation has the highest value of the arithmetic mean, where the highest rating of the offer of Fruška gora is precisely the Accommodation offer (M=4.22), whereby the hypothesis **H2** is confirmed: The quality of the offer of accommodation in Fruška it burns at a high level.

Table 6 shows a descriptive statistical analysis of the variable Satisfaction. Using a five-point Likert scale, respondents had the opportunity to express their degree of agreement/disagreement with the statements offered (1-absolutely disagree, 2-disagree, 3-not sure, 4-agree, 5-absolutely agree).

**Table 4. Descriptive statistical analysis - Satisfaction**

Satisfaction	M	SD
I am satisfied with my stay at Fruška Gora.	4,45	0,843
Fruška gora is better than I expected.	3,80	0,894
Fruška gora is better than other competing destinations.	4,26	0,946
Fruška gora is one of the best destinations I have visited.	3,75	1,157
The decision to travel to this destination was a good one.	4,31	0,867

*Source: Processing by the author based on SPSS 26*

The results in Table 4 show that the statement I am satisfied with my stay in Fruška gora (M=4.45) has the highest value of the arithmetic mean, as well as the decision to travel to this destination was good (4.31), while the statement Fruška gora has the lowest value is one of the best destinations I have visited (M=3.75).

Table 5 presents a descriptive statistical analysis for the Image variable, during which the respondents had the opportunity to express the degree of agreement/disagreement with the offered statements (1-absolutely disagree, 2-disagree, 3- not sure, 4-agree, 5-absolutely agree).

**Table 5. Descriptive statistical analysis - Image**

IMAGE	M	SD
Fruška gora has healing mineral springs.	4,60	0,746
Fruška gora has other natural resources (relief, favorable climate, hydrographic network, etc.)	4,42	0,968
Fruška gora has a rich cultural and historical heritage.	4,21	0,995
Fruška gora has a high degree of preserved rural landscapes.	3,99	1,028
Fruška gora is a safe destination to stay.	4,39	0,893
A stay in Fruška Gora is pleasant because the local population is hospitable.	4,25	0,948
Fruška gora offers opportunities for sports and recreational facilities for tourists (sports activities, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, horseback riding, cycling...	4,05	0,980

*Source: Processing by the author based on SPSS 26*

Table 5 indicates that the highest value of the arithmetic mean has the fortress Fruška Gora with healing mineral springs (M=4.60), on the basis of which the hypothesis **H3** is confirmed: Healing mineral springs have an impact on the overall image of Fruška Gora as a tourist destination.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Today, brands find a place in all spheres of our lives. It can be said that the importance of the brand is a factor in the creation of additional values, and by branding the destination, healthy competition is achieved in the tourist market. The field of this research as well as the subject of the work was Fruška gora as a tourist destination, while the aim of the work was to examine the attitude of tourists in relation to their perception of recognition, quality, satisfaction, as elements of the branding of Fruška gora, as well as to analyze the mutual connection between these elements. Based on the analysis of the obtained data, the conclusion is reached that the visitors of Fruška gora believe that Fruška gora is recognizable by the existence of natural resources. Also, the quality of the accommodation offer in Fruška Gora is at a high level, while the healing mineral springs have an impact on the overall image of Fruška Gora as a tourist destination. When it comes to the correlation between the observed variables and their statistical significance, the greatest correlation exists between loyalty and satisfaction, as well as image and quality. The results also show that the level of loyalty of tourists towards Fruška Gora as a tourist destination varies in relation to the number of visits to Fruška Gora, where the respondents who have visited this destination more than three times show the highest loyalty. The obtained results have the possibility of conducting future research that can be conducted on a larger sample of respondents. The scientific contribution of the paper is the recognition of the key elements of the branding of Fruška Gora as a tourist destination. In addition to examining the tourist demand, it is necessary to include the carriers of the tourist offer in the entire process of branding Fruška Gora. From this arises the possibility of a future direction of research with the aim of including the actors of the tourism offer of Fruška Gora in the process of its branding. The practical contribution of the work is related to observing the perception that visitors have towards Fruška Gora, which can be useful for the holders of the tourist offer, and serve as motivation for involvement in the improvement of tourism in Fruška Gora and its branding on the tourist market.

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