Branding as an Essential Element in the Creation Process of the Image of the Brand in National Tourism Destinations

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Abstract:

Purpose: Presentation of branding as an important element in the creation process of the brand image of national tourism destinations on the example of the operation of 39 National Tourism Organizations (NTOs) in Europe.

Design/Methodology/Approach: For the selection of NTOs the following criteria were taken into account. 1. The functional criterion: the main functions attributed to NTOs were accepted as the grounds for the verification, firstly, it was considered whether the promotion of a given country on foreign markets is included among these tasks. 2. The economic criterion: possession of an autonomous financial budget by a given organization (regardless of the percentage share of funds from the budget of the state or from the private sector, or from any other sources) was accepted as the grounds for verification. 3. The organizational criterion: a separation of a given organization in the structure of a superior body was accepted as the grounds for verification. The research methods used include a method of diagnostic survey including a questionnaire technique, a direct interview and a statistical analysis.

Findings: The analysis demonstrated among others that the vast majority of the NTOs examined (92.3%) implement the objectives of branding in practice. At the same time, a significant part of these organizations (86.1%) recognized the activities taken within branding to be very effective. Moreover, the vast majority of the NTOs analysed (91.7%) undertake the initiatives realized as part of branding on the global tourist market.

Practical Implications: The conclusions following the study can be used by various entities which are responsible for an effective realization of the management process of the brand of tourism destinations on the different levels of administration.

Originality/Value: The study constitutes an entirely new insight into the functioning of NTOs while presenting a substantially broader spectrum of the areas of interest for this type organizations as compared to those presented in the source literature till now.

Keywords: Branding, image, National Tourism Organization.

JEL code: L83, M31.

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1. Introduction

On the present tourism market, the brand constitutes one of the main determinants of the competitive position of those entities that offer various goods (including services) for consumers. From the point of view of the perception of the brand as an added value, its idea comes down to building relations with customers, owing to which it is possible to maintain and increase the value of the sale of the products (including services) offered by a given company. In a broader meaning, this phenomenon is also reflected in the case of the so-called products of a place (an area, a territory) although two main research conceptions, which are opposite to one another, can be found in the source literature. The first of them questions the sense of the creation of territorial brands, while the other one assumes that places may be given a brand, and this may be managed in a similar way as in the case of consumer goods (services). The authors of this study are the proponents of the other concept while agreeing with the view that a given area (e.g. a state's territory) should be recognized in the categories of the so-called mega-product of the place which, owing mainly to its compound structure and the functions performed, is perfect for the creation of a brand for it, one which makes it distinct from the competitive brands of destinations.

The statement that national tourism organizations are responsible for the implementation of the brand management process in the national tourist reception area is one of the main assumptions accepted in this study. Taking the aforementioned assumption into consideration, it may be found that the brand management process in the tourist reception area on the national level implemented by national tourism organizations can be defined as any activities of a planning, operational, tactical and strategic nature undertaken by the national tourism organization of a given state aimed at the determination of the most important attributes of the brand of the national tourist reception area, an increase of its recognition and competitiveness, obtaining the desired level of its strength and the desired position on the market. This is a process that includes both short-term activities (tactical, operational) and long-term activities (strategic) that are undertaken to create the brand of a given tourist reception area, and later for the purpose of an effective management of this brand until the expected effects have been obtained in the form of a strong market position in relation to competitive brands (Marczak, 2018).

It is the authors' opinion that the creation of the image of the brand of tourist destinations constitutes one of the key aspects of a comprehensive brand management process in the national tourist reception area. In this area, branding plays an essential role. It is recognized by National Tourism Organizations as the most effective area of their activities in this scope. Nowadays, the "brand" and "branding" terms function within the framework of the so-called "market symbiosis". The tourist reception are a brand and all the elements which define it

constitute grounds, a certain point of departure to take activities within the framework of branding.

The main purpose of this study is to depict branding as an essential element in the creation process of the brand image of national tourism destinations on the example of the operations of 39 European National Tourism Organizations (NTO).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Image of the Brand of Tourist Destinations

On the present-day global tourist market, fight for the tourist requires permanent building of the brand awareness in a given tourist reception location (a tourist reception area). In the first place, tourists when choosing their place of destination take into account specific space and then the offer of those providers that operate in this area (Gryszel and Nawrocka, 2011). The brand image of the tourist reception area constitutes an important tool to build the competitiveness of the destination, which is mainly due to the fact that a positive image of the final destination is a deciding factor in the selection of the final destination for summer holidays (Cooper *et al.*, 1993). According to some authors (Goodal, 1991; Kozak and Mazurek, 2011), the image of the tourist reception area brand is a multi-dimensional and very compound notion, whose overall assessment and measurement are exceptionally difficult and complicated. Nevertheless, the brand image is particularly important in the context of operations taken by the tourist reception area, e.g. within the framework of branding (Pike, 2008).

In the literature on the subject, the "brand image of the tourist reception area" notion is quite frequently identified with the "image of tourist reception area" notion. Nawrocka (2008) aptly defined the relationships between these notions when stating that in the case of building one brand product by a given destination, the image of the area will be identified with the image of the brand. However, when many brand products are created addressed to different groups of purchasers in a given area, the positive image of the area is becoming a peculiar "umbrella"[3] for these, and each of these products has a positive impact on the overall image of a given destination among its recipients. This author also provides an example of comprehending a given destination as an independent tourist mega-product (Nawrocka, 2008). In this case, the image of the brand in a given destination should be identified with the image of the destination. However, in the literature on the subject, other approaches may be found to the definition of these notions, for example:

— brand image: defined as an "image that occurs in the awareness of purchasers concerning the benefits provided" (Anholt, 2007); "a set of features associated by consumers with the brand product existing in the

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[3]Offering various products and services under one brand.

consumer's awareness and subconsciousness as something exceptionally valuable" (Fedyk *et al.,* 2014);
— the image of the brand of the destination: defined as a "set of associations to which tourists refer in their awareness when evaluating the brand of a given area" (Previšic, 2011); a mixture of knowledge, feelings, imaginations, opinions, ideas, expectations and impressions presented by people in relation to a given place" (Kozak and Mazurek, 2011).

The system used of visual identification plays an important role in the creation of the image of the destination. On the example of specific states, Błaziak (2000) defines this system as a "strong strategic tool which allows one to distinguish a given state in an attractive, unique and original manner, thus effectively contributing to the achievement of, among others, a market success". The system of visual identification serves the purpose of revealing the idea of the image due to the fact that susceptibility to images with an average recipient is significantly stronger than susceptibility to word argumentation. From the point of view of the perception of the tourist reception area by recipients, the logo plays the key role in the system of visual identification. Blain *et al.* (2005) emphasize that the logo performs numerous functions in the scope of the creation and reinforcement of brands. Particularly in the present times, full of standardizations and globalization, the logo has a key role in the creation of a readily recognized image (Henderson *et al.,* 2003). An essential significance of the logo is also attributed to particular destinations. In a situation where consumers have thousands of destinations to choose from, the logo may stimulate awareness, emphasize specific attributes of an area (van Riel and van den Ban, 2001). However Keller (2000) claims that every time a marketing specialist is creating a certain name, a logo, a symbol for a new product (from the technical point of view), they are simultaneously creating a new brand.

The promotional slogan is another important tool used when building a strategy for the branding of a destination. It should be constructed based on the guiding idea connected with the uniqueness of the brand in the tourist reception area, that is the so-called unique selling proposition. The connection between the destination brand perception on the market by recipients with "the unique selling proposition" that characterizes a given brand is emphasized among others by Saraniemi and Ahonen (2008). The leading idea of the brand of the tourist reception area should be real, positive, strong and expressive, difficult to copy by other countries, valid and attractive over a long period of time, so that it could constitute the basis for a long-term strategy of promotion and also be universal enough to be useful for all the participants of public life (Supphele and Nygaardsvik, 2002).

The current USP formula is more and more frequently evolving into the so-called unique emotional proposition (UEP) conception. This results from the fact that emotions are a factor that distinguishes experiences in tourism and, in addition to this, they constitute defined and measurable benefits to customers, and they have direct relations with the product which they purchase. In the context of the

significance of UEP for the tourist reception area, it is practically impossible to be used by competitive areas. Therefore, they are considered to be the base of the strategy of communication and competition (World Tourism Organization, 2007).

The individual elements of the system of the visual identification of the destination may also be created with the use of non-standard promotional instruments. This results among others from the constantly changing tastes and preferences of the potential recipients of the message and from the dynamism which the tourist market is characterized by. In today's world, in which media and marketing ubiquitously reign, there are many different methods to gain target markets and recognition among recipients. However, despite the abundance of multimedia materials that are available on the market, it is sometimes necessary to redefine the methods to provide information to tourists with the use of innovative carriers (Marczak, 2014). For example, instruments of ambient marketing, the so-called ambient media, may offer such an innovative solution (Poninthawong, 2012). Generally, their significant role on the modern tourist market is emphasized. This concerns especially non-standard forms of promotion which are very essential for tourists taking decision (e.g. in hotel industry where the products offered are of an intangible nature, and it is difficult to assess these before use). Therefore, essential role is attributed here to the interpersonal contact with the person of the tourist and to the so-called unofficial communication (the word of mouth– WOM). Blurring the boundary is also more and more frequently emphasized between commercial promotional messages and the use of WOM, chiefly owing to the increasingly more frequent use of the so-called viral marketing (Litvin *et al.,* 2006).

2.2 Branding

Building the desired image of a tourist reception area is one of the key objectives of branding. This element was recognized as one of the main factors having an impact on the individual subjective perception by tourists and, as a consequence, on their behaviours resulting in the selection of a specific area as the final destination (Gallarza *et al.,* 2002).

Present-day branding constitutes a powerful and effective tool in the marketing of tourist reception areas, thus contributing to an increased competitiveness between destinations (Kozak and Mazurek, 2011). This is true especially of the creation and building process of the brand by tourist reception areas, where the construction of a proper message, fulfilling promises and obtaining the desired image is the key objective (Berry, 2000). It is a universal tool as it may concentrate on companies as well as on towns, regions, countries and also entire nations (Dinnie and Fola, 2009).

Generally speaking, the assumptions of branding come down to taking activities in the scope of widely understood building the awareness and knowledge of the brand in the minds of recipients and preserving its positive image in their memory.

Nevertheless, in the literature on the subject, branding is defined in a variety of ways, among others as:

— the process of the creation of combinations between a symbol, a subject, emotions, perception and a product to build loyalty, diversification of offers, among others through the packaging and promotional materials (Assael, 1998);
— a well though-out strategy to build the image of the brand using various elements presented in the marketing activities of the entity including all the opportunities of an intercourse with the product (service) (Lindstrom, 2009);
— the core of marketing, the core of marketing strategies and aiming at an increase of the value of the brand in the awareness and minds of recipients (Pike, 2004a);
— connection of the perception of the brand by the recipients of the brand on the market with the "unique selling proposition" (USP) that characterizes a given brand (Saraniemi and Ahonen, 2008).

Despite the fact that the majority of the authors quoted emphasize a wide use of branding in the process of brand management, the definitions presented primarily point to its instrumental nature, while bringing the activities taken within the framework of branding to the dimension of tools serving the purpose of a differentiation of brands and their creation (among others: Dinnie and Fola, 2009; Kall, 2001; Kotler and Gartner, 2002; Mazurek, 2008). The authors of this study do not completely agree with this approach while believing that the impact of branding on recipients definitely goes beyond instrumental frameworks, and thereby it may constitute a kind of "the company's philosophy" in the area of the whole process of building the awareness of the brand and a positive impact of its image on perception by potential consumers. The position accepted Pike (2004a; 2004b), who emphasizes the rank of branding, seems to confirm this assumption. According to this author, branding is the core of marketing and the core of marketing strategies as well as a process aimed at an increase of the brand's value in the awareness and minds of its recipients. Therefore, this is a kind of the main axis of marketing activities, in accordance with which particular initiatives connected with the comprehensive process of the brand creation are realized.

Rausch (2009) also emphasizes the rank, complexity and a wide scope of the functions which branding may perform. This author has proposed a division of activities taken within the framework of branding based on three levels, i.e.:

— creative level: where new products and symbols are created;
— managerial level: where new products and symbols connected with them are selected and launched on the market;
— communication level: where symbols are disseminated and it is ensured that information reaches the recipients.

Therefore in accordance with this approach, it is to be assumed that branding is present in the entire process of the creation of products (services), launching them on the market along with specific symbols being attributed to them, and also in the communication process with recipients. In terms of the cohesion of the message, it combines the stages connected with the production of goods and services with the stages of their launching on the market and communication with the environment.

The arguments presented in this part of the article may confirm the assumption accepted that branding is not only a tool for building the awareness of the brand in the minds of recipients but a kind of a philosophy of activity for those who manage a destination, whose main purpose is to build the desired level of the awareness and knowledge of the brand in the tourist reception area and strengthening it in the minds of recipients through the stimulation of a positive perception its image while using unique attributes. Tan (2008) is also of a similar opinion; according to him, branding constitutes a combination of philosophy in the scope of the destination brand management and the manners of its implementation.

2.3 The Idea of National Tourism Organizations

National Tourism Organizations (NTO), apart from National Tourism Administrations (NTA), are included among the basic entities which are responsible for the implementation of the tourist policy in particular states (Borzyszkowski, 2005). Their history is over 100 years now; it is estimated that the first NTO was established in New Zealand in 1901 (McClure, 2004). In the subsequent years, they were formed in European countries, among others in 1910 in France, in 1919 in Italy (Osti and Pechlaner, 2001). Most of organizations of this type were formed after the Second World War (among others Germany, Austria, Denmark), and in post-communist countries, they were established in 1990s (Borzyszkowski, 2005; Marczak, 2018).

There is a compliance in the literature as to the definition and at the same time the determination of the basic objectives of NTO. What is mentioned among others is an entity with overall responsibilities for the marketing of a state or a tourist destination (Pike, 2008), an entity which is responsible for the formulation and implementation of the national tourist policy (Jayapalan, 2001), a public organization financed by the state where the majority of activities taken are according to non-commercial rules (Witt *et al.,* 2013) or an authority with a public, semi-public or private status with competences in the scope of marketing and, in particular, the promotion of a given country on foreign markets (Jeffries, 2007). Generally speaking, attention in paid to the operational nature of NTO's operations, mainly in the context of marketing undertakings, including chiefly promotional ones.

Considering the nature of the activity conducted, the NTO treats itself as the so-called DMO[4], i.e. those entities which, depending on the approach accepted by particular scientists, should be understood as *destination marketing organizations* (among others: Kamann, 2008; Ford and Peeper, 2008; Pike *et al.,* 2011; Xiang *et al.,* 2010; Zach, 2012) or *destination management organizations* (Batarow *et al.,* 2008; Brodback *et al.,* 2008; Elbe *et al.,* 2009; Woodside and Sakai, 2009). Depending on the accepted formulation (*marketing* or *management*), these organizations are referred to as those entities which are responsible for the promotion of the region in order to increase the significance of tourism (Morrison, 1998), marketing of the defined tourist reception area (Pike, 2008) or more broadly: management and/or marketing of individual tourist reception areas (Survey…, 2004).

National tourism organizations are characterized by quite a significant differentiation in the scope of legal and organizational forms. Let us consider non-profit organizations (Gretzel *et al.,* 2006) but also government agencies, private entities aimed at making profits or organizations that operate within the framework of public and private partnerships (Kamann, 2008).

The diversified system of legal and organizational forms has a significant impact on the ways of financing NTOs. In European states, nearly 30% of NTOs use European Union funding programmes (share from 1% to 90%); 60% declare various external funding sources (over 50% perform their tasks based on their own incomes); and over 23% declare additional external funding sources (Polska Organizacja Turystyczna, 2017*)*.

2.4 National Tourism Organizations and Branding

It is assumed that the issue of branding is relatively new for national tourism organizations (or more broadly: DMOs). While the topic of destination image has been popular in the academic literature since the 1970s, destination branding did not emerge as a field until the late 1990s (Pike and Page, 2014).

Every national tourism organization's purpose is to find and bring out a destination's most attractive characteristics (features, attributes) and to build up an image based on a positive, well-deserved reputation (brand equity) (Vazou, 2014). What is more, destination branding becomes a fairly active area of NTO/DMO (Huo, 2017). It is even stated that the DMO is an organization that is perceived as conducting local branding initiatives associated with a given place (Hanna and Rowley, 2015). What is more, branding has become a key pillar in destination marketing for most DMOs (Pike and Page, 2014).

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[4]*Some authors also include national tourism administrations (NTA) among the forms of DMO (Morrison, 2013).*

In the literature, one may also find statements that branding constitutes the DNA of every tourist destination (World Tourism Organization and European Travel Commission, 2009). In turn, Morgan and Pritchard (2000), when emphasizing the significance of modern branding for tourist destinations, stated that in the present times, the fight for the customer in the tourist sector does not take place based on the price but based on the hearts and minds of tourists. Therefore, functioning of brands in tourist destinations will be a key to success. The opinions presented seem to confirm the significance of branding for the functioning of the modern areas of tourist reception and thereby entitle one to state that branding as an element of the brand management process in the national tourist reception area constitutes an important part of the operations of national tourism organizations (Marczak, 2018).

These opinions are confirmed by the fact that the promotion of a state as an attractive tourist destination still remains the most important objective of the NTO, yet it is the activities of these entities where a departure is being observed from the so-called classical promotion. The causes of this state of affairs are to be seen among others in the fact that the activities of this type are regarded by the NTOs examined as little effective, which in practice means more and more frequent realization of promotional activities with the use of non-standard forms of promotion (including ambient marketing) (Marczak, 2018). This thesis is also confirmed by the results of research conducted by Borzyszkowski (2015) who, when analysing the promotional activities of 25 national DMOs, demonstrated that a decreased share of classical forms of promotion is accompanied by an increased share of non-standard forms of promotion, whereby the increase rate of the significance of non-standard instruments is significantly higher than the decrease rate of the significance of classical instruments. This means that NTOs more and more frequently (and at the same time more and more quickly) point to the need of an implementation of the modern forms of promotion; on the other hand, they do not resign from those forms that have been used so far. Therefore, it should be assumed that the traditional forms of promotion will still play a significant role in the activities of many DMOs even though their significance will be decreasing while they are replaced by non-standard and modern forms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample Structure and Size

The main criteria which were taken into consideration in the selection of NTOs for the purpose of the research include the following:

- the functional criterion: the main functions attributed to national tourism organizations were accepted as the basis for the verification; in the first order, attention was paid as to whether the promotion of a given state on foreign markets is included in these objectives;
- the economic criterion: possessing an independent financial budget by a

given NTO (regardless of the percentage share of funds from the state budget or a private sector or any other sources) was accepted as the basis for the verification;

— the organizational criterion: separation of a given NTO in the organizational structure of the institution that it is directly subordinate to (e.g. ministries or any other state institution that supervises a given NTO) was accepted as the basis for the verification.

In the verification of the number of NTOs that took into the abovementioned criteria into account, the main assumption was accepted that it was only those entities which meet at least one of these criteria were to be covered by the research, whereby in this case, the implementation of objectives by a given NTO in the scope of a widely understood promotion of a given country on foreign markets must be this criterion.

This activity should be entered in the statute (or any other official document) of this organization. It should also be emphasized that any failure to comply with the remaining criteria by particular NTOs does not mean that these organizations do not possess their budgets or that they do not function within the framework of specific organizational structures. This may be caused among others by difficulties in obtaining official and reliable information in relation to this issue.

Based on the criteria accepted, it was demonstrated that currently 111 typical NTOs function in the world, which operate on the central (national) level and implement the main objectives attributed to organizations of this type (including promotion of a given state on foreign markets). 46 national organizations of the NTO type that operate in Europe and 65 NTOs that function on the remaining continents should be included in this group. 39 European national tourism organizations (84.7% the of population)[5] were finally covered by the analysis.

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[5]*States whose NTOs were covered by the analysis: England (Visit England), Austria (Österreich Werbung), Belgium (Visit Flanders), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Tourism Association of FB&H), Croatia (Croatian National Tourist Board – CNTB), Cyprus (Cyprus Tourism Organization – CTO), Montenegro (National Tourism Organization of Montenegro), Czech Republic (CzechTourism), Denmark (Dansk Turistrad), Estonia (Enterprise Estonia), Finland (Visit Finland), France (Atout France), Greece (Greek National Tourism Organization –GNTO), the Netherlands (Holland Marketing – NBTC), Ireland + North Ireland (Tourism Ireland), Ireland (Failte Ireland), North Ireland (Norther Ireland Tourist Board – NITB), Iceland (Promote Iceland), Lichtenstein (Lichtenstein Marketing), Luxemburg (Luxembourg National Tourism Organization), Latvia (Latvia Tourism Development Agency – LTDA), Malta (Malta Tourism Authority – MTA), Monaco (Department of Tourism and Conferences – DTC), Germany (Deutsche Zentrale für Tourismus – DZT), Norway (Innovation Norway), Poland (Polska Organizacja Turystyczna), Portugal (Turismo de Portugal), Romania (Romania Tourism), Serbia (Serbia National Tourism Organization), Slovakia (Slovak Tourist Board – STB), Slovenia (SPIRIT), Scotland (Visit Scotland), Sweden (Visit Sweden), Switzerland (Switzerland Tourism), Wales (Visit*

3.2 Data Collection

In a prevailing part, the article was based on the results of the author's own research. The research process was primarily realized in the years of 2016-2017 and partly in the first half of 2018 (including direct interviews with the representatives of individual NTOs during the ITB Berlin tourist fairs). The following were used as the main research methods:

- ─ a diagnostic survey method with the use of a questionnaire technique;
- ─ a direct interview method.

The distribution of the questionnaires was carried out in two ways. Firstly, they were sent out by electronic means to the e-mail addresses of those responsible for marketing in individual NTOs[6]. Secondly, they were distributed at the stands among those representing specific national tourism organization during the international ITB Berlin Tourist Fairs in the years of 2016-2018, who were requested to fill them out accurately. The questions included in the questionnaire primarily concerned the main aspects of the functioning of individual NTOs and activities taken in the area of branding.

3.3 Research Hypothesis

In the article, the assumption was accepted that the activities taken by the NTOs examined within the framework of branding have a direct impact on the image of the national tourist destination, while they indirectly contribute to the development of foreign inbound tourism in these countries. For this purpose, an attempt was taken to verify this assumption. The number of tourist arrivals in the countries represented by the NTOs examined in the year 2017 was accepted as the main measures of the assessment of potential dependences between the branding activities taken by the NTOs examined and the degree of the development of foreign inbound tourism.

Therefore, the purpose of the statistical analysis carried out was to demonstrate that branding realized by the NTOs examined, when contributing to an improved tourist image of a given destination, has a substantial impact on the level of the development of foreign inbound tourism. At the same time, two research hypotheses were accepted in the study, i.e.:

> *H1: Branding is an important element of activities taken by national tourism organizations aimed at the creation of the brand image of national tourist*

Wales), Hungary (Hungary National Tourism Organization (HNTO), Great Britain (whole) – Visit Britain, Italy (Italian Government Tourist Board – ENIT).

[6]*E-mail addresses were obtained from the official Internet websites of National Tourism Organizations and during the direct interviews with the representatives of individual NTOs which took place during the ITB Berlin in the years of 2016-2018.*

destinations;
H2: Tourist movement in individual countries is dependent from branding activities conducted and their assessment according to national tourism organizations.

3.4 Statistical Analysis

In the article, in order to carry out a statistical analysis of the individual categories and phenomena, tools were used which can be divided into two main groups i.e.:

— measurements of statistical description: including an arithmetic average ($\bar{x}$), standard deviation (S_x), median (M_e), first quartile, third quartile, value of maximum, value of minimum, fraction, medium-term rate of changes, *Pearson's* coefficient of linear correlation (*r*), statistical significance (*p*);
— statistical tests: including a test of independence(χ^2), a test to compare average values.

At this point, the selection of the measures accepted needs to be substantiated. The creation process of the brand image of tourist destinations is one of the most important elements of a comprehensive brand management process in tourist reception areas on the state's level. It involves numerous aspects of the NTO's operations (including marketing, image, organizational, planning, economic and financial, legal as well as geographical aspects). This study focuses solely on the image aspect of the brand management process in the tourist reception area. Therefore, a decision was taken to verify whether the activities taken by the NTOs examined within the framework of branding have an impact on the number of tourists coming from abroad.

In the case of real activities undertaken by the NTOs examined in the scope of brand management in the tourist reception area on the national level, their final effectiveness (the effects achieved) can be assessed only once they have been completed. Therefore, following the position accepted by Middleton (2011), Florek and Janiszewska (2015) as well as by Case (2003), the assumption was accepted in the article that the effectiveness of the brand management process in the tourist reception area brings about many benefits, out of which the most important ones include the attraction of external investments, the attraction of growing numbers of tourists, increased incomes from inbound tourism, credibility and trust on the part of investors and an increase both of national and international political influences.

Therefore, by accepting the point of view proposed by the abovementioned authors, it seems that apart from the obvious image related purposes and positive associations with the area, and persuasion of the greatest number possible of tourists to come (the development of inbound tourism) should be one of the main goals of the brand management process in the national tourist reception area (including the creation

process of the area's brand image) and thereby the final effect which the NTOs examined intend to achieve.

4. Results and Disscusion

The first of the research hypotheses accepted in the article is as follows: *branding is an important element of activities taken by national tourism organizations to create the brand image in national tourism destinations*. To prove it, a statistical analysis was conducted. Therefore, the first element of the analysis was to determine which of the organizations examined conduct activities in the scope of branding and, owing to this, finding how these activities are assessed (Table 1).

Table 1. *Rank and assessment of the level of branding according to the NTOs examined*

Feature	N	Yes	No
Conduction branding activities	39	92.3	7.7.
Effectiveness of branding in the NTO's opinion	36	86.1	13.9
Taking activities to assess the quality of branding	36	44.4	55.6

Source: *Own study.*

The analysis carried out demonstrated that among the NTOs examined, a vast majority (92.3%) use branding in practice. However, only 7.7% of the organizations analysed do not undertake any activities in this area. Thereby, an analysis was carried out further in relation only to those NTOs which conduct adequate activities (36 NTOs examined).

The investigations demonstrated that the vast majority of the NTOs examined (86.1%) acknowledged that the activities taken by them within the framework of branding are effective. As stated by Panasiuk (2003), the notion of the brand in the tourist reception area is to be understood as a comprehensive tourist product, which is readily identifiable for potential tourists and which is distinctive in the market from the offers of competitive areas, and which constantly represents a high level of quality. It is a continuous improvement of the quality that is the key issue for a tourist brand to come into being. The same author perceives a noticeable change in the approach to quality as a tool that is used to compete in tourism; at the same time, he also points to a strong connection between quality and the brand, and he emphasizes that both attributes of tourist products mentioned are receiving more and more appreciation (Panasiuk, 2008).

The analysis conducted made it possible to indicate those national tourism organizations which make efforts aimed at an assessment of the quality of activities taken within the framework of branding. It was demonstrated that the majority of the NTOs analysed (55.6%) do not undertake such activities in spite of the fact that in

the vast majority, they assess their own initiatives to be effective. It also is worth pointing out other additional elements of the activities conducted. Owing to this, the following were determined:

— the territorial coverage of the activities conducted: continental (8.3% of indications) and global (91.7%);
— identifying branding with other elements which are characteristic of the brand management process: the image (50% of indications), demonstration of differences between competitive tourist reception areas (27.8%), identification of the tourist reception area as well as visual elements (25% indications each), the idea of the tourist reception area and promises fulfilled by a given tourist reception area (22.2% indications each), communication and marketing campaigns (19.4% each); the product (16.7%); a set of values (13.9%) and other (19.4%)[7];
— main areas of the use of branding: functioning of an audio-visual identification system (72.2%); conducting promotional campaigns (63.9%); brand positioning (58.3%); definition of USP (52.8%); monitoring of the position of the brand and cooperation between the public sector and the tourist industry (50.0% each); awareness campaigns (47.2%); definition of UEP (44.4%); coordination of marketing activities (41.7%); brand licensing (36.1%); involvement of state institutions (33.3%); creation and management of tourist products (27.8%); other (19.4%)[8];
— the expected effects of branding in the opinion of the organization: obtaining the desired image of the national tourist reception area in the awareness of potential tourists (77.8% of indications), a strong national brand (66.7%), a strong brand of the national tourist reception area (61.1%); identification of unique emotions (44.4%); an increase of the feeling of loyalty among recipients (41.7%); differentiation compared to competition (30.6%); better recognition of graphical signs (25.0%); identification of tourist products (22.2%); other (19.4%)[9].

The results presented above explicitly confirm that branding is an important aspect of activities taken by national tourism organizations. This is in compliance with the research results by Padurean (2010), who additionally finds that 74.2% of all national DMOs (NTOs) point to branding as the most important sphere of their activities. According to the opinion voiced by the organizations examined, this is the only element that is entirely under their control. Furthermore, the research carried out by the World Tourism Organization (UN-WTO) indicates that out of among 43 organizations, 82 % of the DMOs examined possess their own branding strategies, 37% of DMOs are engaged in the branding process jointly with other tourist

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[7]*It was possible to indicate several answers.*

[8]*It was possible to indicate several answers.*

[9]*It was possible to indicate several answers.*

reception areas and nearly 63% of DMOs do not hire a branding or brand manager (World Tourism Organization and European Travel Commission, 2009).

It also is worth noting the fact that the organizations examined point to the problem of branding as an essential issue. This is also confirmed by the research carried out by the World Tourism Organization (UN-WTO), according to which the most frequent activities taken by NTOs include: "promotion of the state as an attractive tourist destination", "promotion of recreational tourism" (100% of indications each), "promotion of business tourism" (93%), "national (internal) promotion" (73%) and "support of the development of national tourism" (63%) (UNWTO, 2010).

At the same time, the results concerning the identification of branding with other elements that are characteristic of the brand management process are in compliance with the results of the previous studies (including Blain *et al.,* 2005) which demonstrated that the notion of branding is not explicit.

The second research hypotheses accepted in the article is as follows: *tourist movement in individual states is dependent on branding activities conducted and their assessment by the national tourism organizations examined.* The features accepted above were used in a statistical analysis, whose purpose was to correlate these with the volumes of tourist movement in the year 2017. These features include the following:

  — conducting activities in the scope of branding,
  — assessment of the effectiveness of activities conducted,
  — undertaking activities in relation to an assessment of the quality of branding realized (Table 2).

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics for dependences between the features examined and the number of tourist arrivals in the states analysed in 2017*

Characterization	Yes	No
Use of branding by European NTOs and the number of tourist arrivals in 2017 ($p = 0.2232$)		
N	36	3
Average	15 102 767	649 000
Standard deviation	19 854 863	651 887
Minimum	329 000	61 000
Median	8 972 000	536 000
Maximum	83 700 000	1 350 000
Effectiveness of activities taken within the framework of branding and the number of tourist arrivals in 2017 ($p = 0.3694$)		
N	31	5
Average	16 403 462	6 648 250
Standard deviation	20 968 857	6 055 998
Minimum	329 000	988 000

Median	8 972 000	6 733 000
Maximum	83 700 000	12 139 000
Assessment of the quality if activities taken within the framework of branding and the number of tourist arrivals in 2017 (p = 0.0269)		
N	16	20
Average	21 830 133	7 087 667
Standard deviation	25 135 234	9 008 822
Minimum	988 000	61 000
Median	9 323 000	2 161 500
Maximum	83 700 000	32 613 000

Notes: p – statistical significance of independence test; N – number of states covered by the examination.
Source: Own study.

The study carried out enabled the calculation of descriptive statistics for the correlation between the use of branding by individual NTOs and the number of tourist arrivals in those states where these organizations function. It was demonstrated among others that the number of tourist arrivals to those states where NTOs use branding is clearly higher than in those states where the organizations do not undertake such activities. Nevertheless, this dependence cannot be recognized as statistically significant. For the NTOs examined, the value of $p=0.223$ was obtained. It should also be emphasized that an additional observation of the average values and medians confirms the conclusion on the statistical dependence of the number of tourist arrivals from the activities taken within the framework of branding. In the case of the NTOs examined, the average values of the number of tourist arrivals for those states where the organizations use or do not use branding were 15.1 million and 0.6 million respectively, and the medians were 9.0 million and 0.5 million. The differences to the advantage of those states where the organizations examined undertake activities within the framework of branding are quite noticeable.

The analysis conducted also made it possible to define the dependence between the (positive or negative) assessment of the effectiveness of the activities taken by the NTOs examined within the framework of branding and the number of tourist arrivals in the states represented by the organizations examined. In the case of the NTOs analysed, no statistically significant dependences between the variables examined ($p=0.3694$) were demonstrated.

However, certain differences were demonstrated in the descriptive statistics between those states where the activities taken within the framework of branding are defined by NTOs as effective or non-effective. For example, the average number of tourist arrivals to those states where NTOs assess branding as effective is over twice as high as in those states where the organizations examined negatively assess the branding activities conducted. Therefore, this situation may prove that the number of tourist arrivals to a given states depends to a certain degree from the fact whether the activities taken by the NTOs analysed within the framework of branding are

effective or not, although as it has already been mentioned that no statistical significance in the correlation between these variables was demonstrated.

Furthermore, the investigation carried out made it possible to determine the statistical dependence between the activities taken by the NTOs examined related to an assessment of the quality of branding and the number of tourist arrivals in those states where these organizations function. For the organizations analysed, the statistical significance (p=0.0269) was demonstrated (Table 2). It was demonstrated among others that statistically more tourists arrive on average to those states where NTOs assess the quality of activities taken within the framework of branding than to those states where the organizations do not conduct such an assessment.

In the study, an attempt was made to demonstrate a dependence between taking activities within the framework of branding by the NTOs examined and the number of tourist arrivals in the states represented by these organizations. The results obtained clearly demonstrate that the realization of branding conceptions determines to a significant degree the level of foreign inbound tourism in the destinations analysed (despite the fact that these dependences are not statistically significant). The fact should also be emphasized that taking various activities aimed at its monitoring is an essential element of branding realized. Above of all, it is about making an assessment of the effectiveness and quality of the activities realized by the NTOs examined. This, in a longer perspective, may bring measurable benefits in the form of an intensified tourist movement.

Therefore, the results obtained confirm the position accepted by many authors (including Buhalis, 2000; Hankinson, 2009; Kozak and Mazurek, 2011; Panasiuk, 2014), i.e. that an effective brand of tourist reception areas should go with its message beyond the usual transmission of the image, thus causing the feeling of the promise of reality with the recipients. Possessing a qualitatively strong, recognized and effective brand by a given destination brings about many benefits, with the following being the most important: an increased awareness and recognition of a given tourist reception area, an increased number of tourists arriving from abroad, an increased number of the so-called loyal tourists, an increased investment attractiveness of a given tourist reception area and an increased competitiveness of a given tourist destination.

The analysis presented in the article is of a pioneering nature as it is related to the determination of dependences between the effectiveness and quality of activities related to the image and the level of the development of foreign inbound tourism. So far, no analyses of this type have been widely conducted for such a large number of national tourism organizations. The investigations conducted to date have focused on the promotional activities which are recognized as the main areas of the activities conducted by NTOs and that are typical of NTOs. Meanwhile, as demonstrated by the investigations by the authors, taking effective image related activities, ones that

are competitive in terms of quality, which undoubtedly plays a key role, is equally important.

5.   Conclusions

The main purpose of the present study is to depict branding as an essential element of the creation process of the brand image of national tourism destinations on the example of selected national tourism organizations that operate in Europe. The analysis of research literature, of the research results available and of the investigations conducted by authors explicitly confirm that NTOs play a significant role in the creation process of the brand image of national destinations. Thereby, the article provides a lot of important information and data in relation to two issues, i.e. the role of the national tourism organization in the building process of the brand and the significance of branding activities in undertakings on the part of NTOs.

In the article, it is especially the importance of branding that was emphasised as one of the main areas of the activities of the present-day NTOs, which is perceived by the organizations examined not only as a tool to build the awareness of the brand in the minds of recipients but as a type of a comprehensive philosophy of activity for those who manage a given tourist destination. Therefore, the purpose of modern branding in the tourist reception area is to build the desired level of the awareness and familiarity of the brand in the tourist reception area and its strengthening in the minds of recipients through the stimulation of a positive perception of its image, while using the unique attributes of an area set out against competition.

The research results presented above may certainly constitute valuable guidelines for other national tourism organizations, which should take into consideration undertakings aimed at the creation of the brand image in the plans of their activities; thereby, they should take into account branding in these activities. It also is worth noting that the results obtained may point to the form of future activities to be pursued by numerous national tourism organizations, which may perceive branding as a significantly important area of the undertakings conducted. It is difficult to explicitly state that it will in fact become the most important aspect of NTO activities, yet it will certainly play (and in many cases it has already played) an important role. At this point, it should be clearly emphasized that branding should be realized alongside with typical promotional activities, ones that constitute the statutory area of the activities of modern NTOs. Therefore, branding and promotion have become activities of a complementary nature.

It is also limitations that need to be pointed out in the investigations and analyses carried out. The empirical research was related only to the functioning of those organizations which may be referred to as rightful NTOs, i.e. those entities which meet the basic criteria for the organization of this type (including the realization of the main objective: promotion of a given state as an attractive tourist destination). Thereby, no other entities (e.g. the proper ministries for tourism, non-governmental

organizations etc.) were taken into account in the article, which are frequently also responsible for the issue of tourist marketing, including branding. Furthermore, the research covered a greater part of the European organizations and, hence, NTOs outside of Europe were not taken into consideration. This, obviously enough, should be a contribution to the further research and analyses, whose effect should be the determination of the significance of branding in their activities. At the same time, the significant degree of the subjectivism of the research results obtained needs to be emphasized. The research was mainly based on the assessments of individual NTOs.

Depending on the limitations occurring, it should be emphasized that the analysis carried out fulfils to a significant degree the current research gap in the scope of branding activities undertaken by national tourism organizations. On the one hand, it emphasizes the rank of these undertakings, which is in accordance with the opinions of many researchers and, on the other hand, it highlights other aspects connected with this, including among others the problem of the effectiveness of activities taken, the need to conduct a qualitative assessment of branding initiatives or the potential dependences between the activities conducted in the area of branding and the volumes of inbound tourist traffic.

The statement that NTOs are primarily responsible for the brand management process in the tourist reception area on the national level was one of the key assumptions accepted in this study. It is them that realize the basic objectives and tasks related to the creation of the tourist brand of a given state and its perception by potential recipients. Thus, the image constitutes the most visible element of the brand in the tourist reception area; an assumption needs to be accepted that its creation also depends on the quality of activities taken by organizations of this type. Therefore, based on this assumption, it may be found that this article presents the areas of the activities of present-day NTOs in a new light, to a significant degree emphasizing the wider spectrum of undertakings realized by organizations of this type.

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