



Public Relations as a Function of Creating the Identity of a Tourist Destination

Nina Kepeska¹
Lidija Simonceska²

Received: December 20, 2024

Accepted: May 14, 2025

Published: June 2, 2025

Keywords:

Public relations;
Tourist destination;
Ohrid;
North Macedonia;
Sustainable tourism



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission.

Abstract: *This paper is in the context of identity creation as a key factor for tourist destination attractiveness. The theoretical research is supported by empirical research, that includes many respondents on several aspects of the current situation of Ohrid, thus determining just how much this most important tourist destination in North Macedonia is recognizable and attractive on the global market. Through constructive criticism and friendly advice, upon determining the strengths and weaknesses, recommendations for future actions will be given, i.e. where and in what manner should the tourist entities and related fields be motivated to implement modern PR solutions.*

The ultimate goal is building a globally better image, reputation and branding of Ohrid, which will result in creating a more quality, segmented tourist offer that will be well placed, easily accessible and valorised on the market and will have multiple positive effects on the destination, the tourist and community entities, with long-term sustainability.

1. INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this paper is to utilize the large number of elements, possibilities, forms and tools available to public relations to establish a distinctive and recognizable identity for the tourist destination, which will improve its visibility in the highly competitive global market and increase its appeal to potential tourists. The goal is aimed at profiling selected-segmented tourism, and not mass tourism, to introduce and develop responsible, long-term sustainable tourism.

Our purpose is to determine the effectiveness of public relations (PR) in the context of modern mass media, with its ever-growing and inexhaustible possibilities, in creating a recognizable and positive image, as well as to generate greater interest in the diverse natural, cultural-historical, spiritual, traditional, and other values and tourist attractions of Ohrid.

The subject of this paper is the research of the correlation - the mutual relations and influences, of public relations and the identity of Ohrid as a tourist destination, the largest and most famous tourist center in North Macedonia and beyond.

The focus is on the thorough research of the role and impact of public relations in creating, defining, and promoting Ohrid's identity as a tourist destination. This includes enhancing Ohrid's positive image and developing a recognizable brand that showcases what the destination has to offer.

The paper is realized with two methodological approaches. The elaboration of the theoretical foundations of the connection between public relations and the identity of the tourist destination

¹ University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bitola, Faculty of the Tourism and Hospitality, Kej Makedonija, 6000 Ohrid, North Macedonia

² University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bitola, Faculty of the Tourism and Hospitality, Kej Makedonija, 6000 Ohrid, North Macedonia

is supported by empirical research. With survey questionnaires on the subject of the research, it was conducted with 100 foreign and domestic tourists in Ohrid, as well as 54 employees involved at different levels, branches and entities, in the tourism industry in the Ohrid tourist destination.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The enormous competition in the modern tourism market presents numerous challenges for tourist destinations and business entities offering tourism services in determining strategies on how to maintain their competitiveness in the market. One of the strategies that is increasingly attracting attention today is the creation of a recognizable identity for the tourism product and establishing an international image as an attractive tourist destination.

According to Melucci (1965) “That identity refers to permanence in time, to the notion of unity, to the continuity of the subject and to distinguishing the subject from others to the so-called ability to recognize and be recognized”.

For a tourist destination, identity is defined as a set of distinctive features that characterize it and set it apart from other destinations, giving it its unique stamp of recognition among tourists and the public. This is especially important for tourist destinations that are within the same regional framework and have similar key features, which imposes the need to create a unique, recognizable identity that will ensure diversity in relation to competing destinations.

According to Simoncheska (2020), identity unites all the resources of the destination, such as natural resources, cultural values, history, architecture, legends, myths, events and manifestations, gastronomy, and local products and services. This set of material and cultural values creates the perception of the destination as a whole.

Reading (2002) found “The purpose of the identity is to position a positive image of the product (the tourist offer – ed.) in the minds of tourists, because a positive perception is worth a million dollars in terms of realized values and achieved performances. Products with a strong positive identity generally have higher prices and much better financial results than their competitors”.

According to Gregorić and Skendrović (2013), creating a distinctive, strong identity is the creation of a tourist destination brand. A destination brand includes the authentic natural and anthropogenic values of the destination, as well as defined visual elements such as the name, logo and slogan of the destination. In tourist destination branding, the name is permanent and expresses the geographical name of the destination, and the slogan must adapt to it.

O’Leary and Deegan (2005) state that “The identity and branding of a tourist destination should create an image, i.e. a positive picture of the destination and its offer. The image is a psychological construction of formed attitudes, opinions, ideas, representations, prejudices and acquired experiences of tourists regarding the tourist destination as a whole. The image is a product of the perceptual set, shaped by the influence of all external stimuli to which the tourist and potential tourist are exposed. Since the tourist product on the market cannot be presented in the form of a sample, and potential tourists cannot see and try it before deciding to buy it, promotional activities through multiple means and media are the only way to present the tourist offer to potential buyers. The primary goal of presenting the offer is to build a positive image of the destination with all its values. The intangibility of the tourist product makes the image the only tool that the potential tourist has in comparing and choosing the potential destination”.

When a recognizable identity has been built, in order for it to be recognized and seen by tourists, first, through public relations as a means of communication, the image of the identity must reach tourists, attract their attention, leave an impression on them with an attractive story that is recognizable and separates itself from the competition as well as arouse a desire to visit. Therefore, public relations are intrinsically linked to identity; without positive feedback and effects, the benefits of a well-defined identity would be diminished.

According to Kotler (2001), a definition of image is “An image is a set of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has, which is related to a certain object. People’s attitudes and activities towards a certain object are largely conditioned by the object’s image”.

AMA (n.d.) found that “Image is the consumer perception of a product, institution, brand, business or person, which or may not correspond with reality”.

According to Zolak (2024) “The issue of image, personal, organizational, brand, destination, is one of the most important issues that attracts the attention of the social, business and scientific public. This paper draws attention to the need for a comprehensive treatment of the image, the mechanisms of its formation, and especially to the difficulties of considering the image phenomenon in isolation, separated from its basis - identity. Numerous studies of the image of tourist destinations in the past decades, mostly of an empirical nature, remain on the surface of this phenomenon. Their results do not contribute to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, primarily due to the absence of an appropriate conceptualization and theoretical framework. Regarding the image of the destination, the most important thing is, of course, its result, but the analysis of the image phenomenon, the separation of one into its constituent factors, different, opposite and contradictory, reveals levers whose shaping and use can influence the result - the image. The role of mass media in this process, especially in the digital era, is very significant, but not decisive”.

In the digital, internet era, public relations, with the help of numerous instruments, forms and tools, such as social media, search engines and internet platforms, very quickly and at quite low costs, reach millions of potential tourists. Thus, a good combination of identity and public relations, built with knowledge, professionalism, experience, honesty, dedication and love, will certainly have positive effects on the recognition of the tourist destination, valorization of its values and advantages and the realization of a series of benefits for tourists, as well as for the tourism industry. From the above, the essential role and importance of public relations, along with their correlation and functional connection to identity, become clear.

3. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND RESULTS

In order to understand the attitudes and opinions of the entities in the tourism market (supply and demand) regarding the identity and communication of the tourist destination Ohrid, we conducted empirical research by surveying tourists on the one hand, and tourism operators, on the other. The survey included 100 tourists, of which 70 are foreign, reflecting the research’s focus, which is geared towards the international tourist market, and 30 are domestic guests from North Macedonia. The questions are largely the same, tailored to suit the respective target group of respondents.

For both foreign and domestic tourists, we focused on the age group from 25 to 70 years, 50% of the respondents are women, 50% are men. According to the educational structure, 65% of the respondents have higher education, while 35% have secondary education. The survey for foreign tourists includes respondents from European countries: Serbia, the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden, Turkey, Great Britain, Switzerland, countries in the Middle and Far East, the USA and Australia.

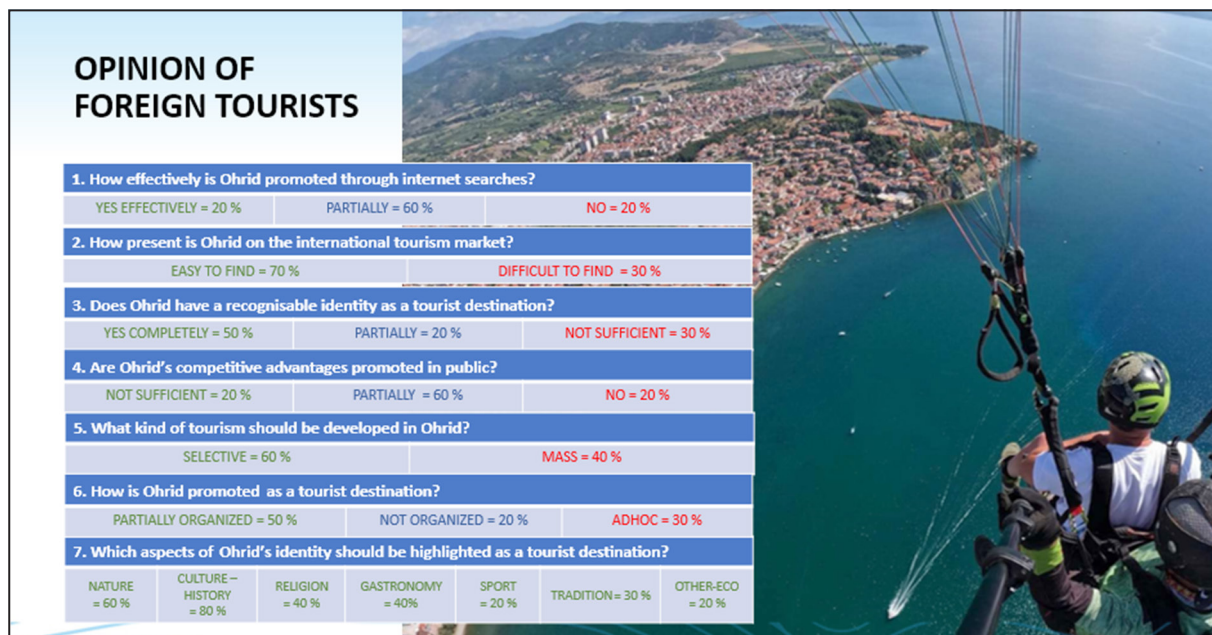


Figure 1. The results of the survey of foreign tourists

Source: Own research

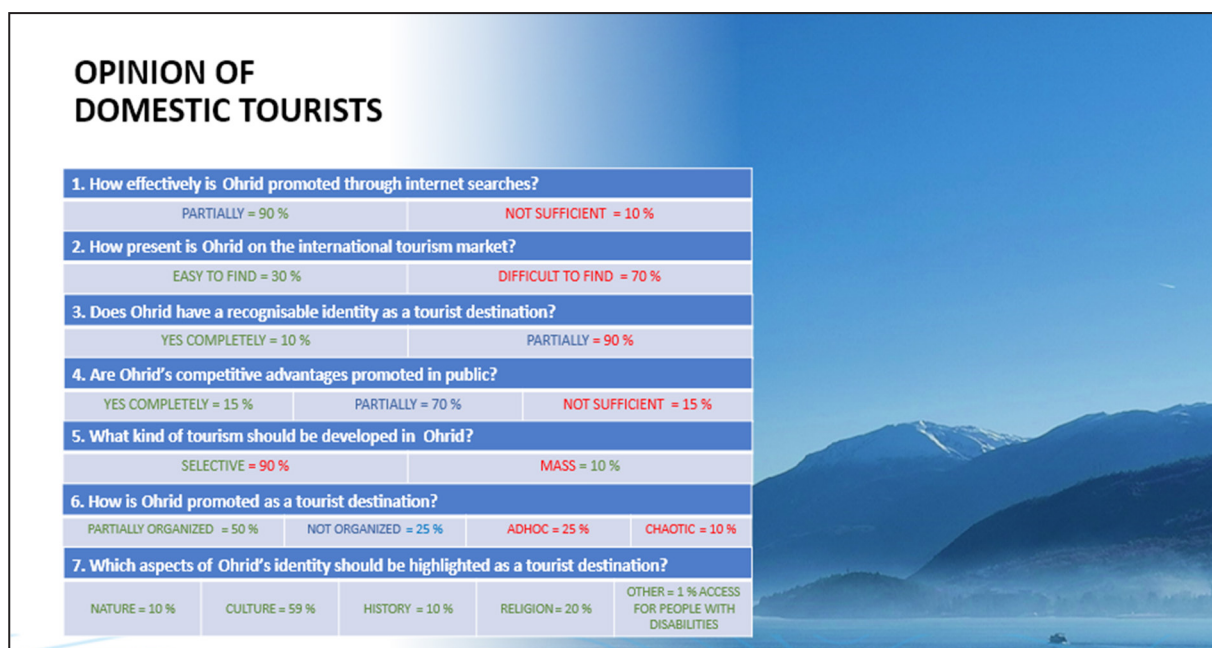


Figure 2. The results of the survey of domestic tourists

Source: Own research

The questionnaires were also answered by 30 domestic tourists, from different cities and regions in North Macedonia.

The survey was conducted with 54 providers of tourist services in Ohrid, 60% of them being owners and managers of hotels, restaurants, cafés, boat operators, souvenir shops, Ohrid pearl and jewelry shops, vacation rental owners, and tour guides, while 40% are employees in the tourism industry. Among the respondents from the tourism industry, 50% are women and 50% are men, with 60% having higher education and 40% having secondary education. The questions were tailored to suit the target group.



Figure 3. The views of the surveyed business entities in tourism in Ohrid

Source: Own research

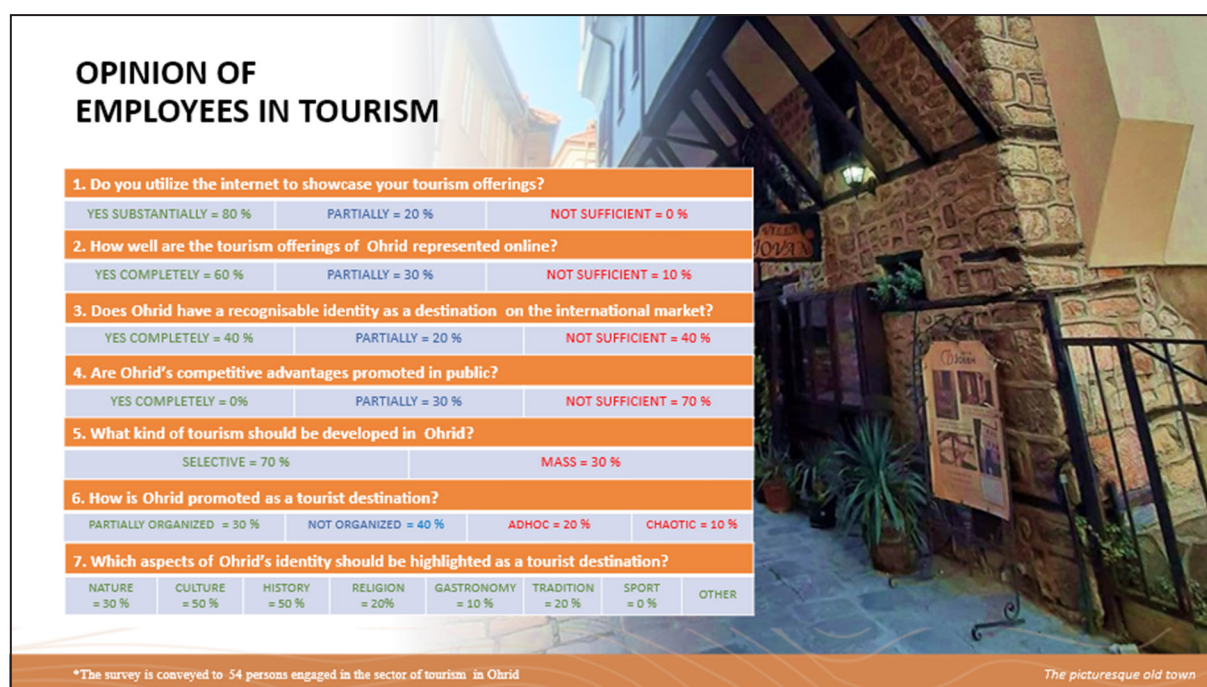


Figure 4. The views of the surveyed employees in the Ohrid tourism sector and other complementary activities

Source: Own research

To identify the right path for achieving this paper's goal, we conducted a SWOT analysis of Ohrid's tourist offer, detecting its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and risks, that require thorough attention and work.

The SWOT analysis is designed to help us understand and identify factors that enable us to achieve our goal and also identify what has a detrimental impact on achieving the desired goal.

The determinants from the analysis should guide us in effectively utilizing public relations in the function of creating a recognizable identity for Ohrid as a tourist destination and enhancing the competitiveness and valorization of Ohrid's tourist offer on the international market.



Figure 5. SWOT analysis of Ohrid's tourist offer

Source: Own research

Ohrid, as a tourist destination, boasts a long list of strengths, with its unique natural potential, rare cultural and historical heritage, UNESCO protection, the local airport, and a variety of cultural, sports, and other events ranking highest. However, it also faces weaknesses, such as an unrecognizable image and undefined tourism due to disorganized public relations and sporadic promotions, along with poor infrastructure, pollution, litter, urban encroachment, and space devastation. A large number of risks threaten the Ohrid tourist destination, but it also has many opportunities as a still “undiscovered” location on a global scale, offering “everything in one place.” With well-planned and managed public relations, centered on a recognizable identity, Ohrid can become even more attractive to tourists.

4. CONCLUSION

- Public relations are of essential importance and PR is the “most powerful weapon” for creating the identity of the tourist destination.
- There is a great space and need for strategic, organized, professional management and improvement of PR in Ohrid.
- Ohrid's tourist offer is promoted partially. For some tourists, Ohrid is easily accessible, and for other tourists, it is difficult to access.
- Ohrid has a partially recognizable identity, partially promoted competitive advantages and a disorganized approach to creating public relations.
- The majority (60 to 90% of all respondents) believe that segmented-selective tourism should be developed in Ohrid, not mass tourism.
- The results of the research indicate that cultural-historical, spiritual, geographical, eco, traditional and gastronomic identity should be favored in the offer and in the promotion of Ohrid as a tourist destination.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia and the local authorities in the Municipality of Ohrid, in conjunction with science and the tourism sector, should build a long-term strategy for organized, thoughtful promotion of Ohrid through modern means of public relations, on the global market.
- The focus in the PR should be on the affirmation and communication of the recognizable, unique, rare tourist potentials, values and attractions that are part of the brand identity of Ohrid as a tourist destination.
- The state and the city of Ohrid should provide the necessary, professional human resources, budgetary and technological means and institutional forms, such as the establishment of a ministry of tourism, tourist organizations and information points, for serious, interesting and modern promotion of tourism.
- An urgent focus on the improvement of infrastructure, roads, and above all, overcoming (solving) the problem of unhygienic conditions and waste management issues.
- It is necessary to ensure a stronger presence of Ohrid in the digital world, through an easily accessible, comprehensive, detailed tourist offer, with a well-packaged, attractive story and a proposal of elaborate programs for the stay of tourists, served directly, in the hands of tourists.
- With serious and dedicated efforts, implementation of recommendations and sanctioning of non-compliance, Ohrid must prevent itself from acquiring the status of an endangered area, halt the trend of negative promotion through bad news, and shift its focus toward affirmation as a region with integral protection on the UNESCO list.
- Through public relations, we should work on raising awareness among the local population, the tourism sector, local authorities, and the state. We have been blessed with a piece of paradise on Earth called Ohrid, and instead of destroying it by cutting the branch we sit on, we need to mobilize everyone in their respective fields toward a common goal. A well-defined and well-packaged narrative about Ohrid should reach and attract tourists from around the world. In this context, by maximizing the use of and enhancing public relations, we can establish a recognizable identity on Ohrid, fostering an environment that leads to satisfied guests who will spread positive energy about this tourist destination, ultimately benefiting everyone involved.

References

- AMA (American Marketing Association). (n.d.). *Image*. <https://marketing-dictionary.org/i/image/>
- Gregorić, M., & Skendrović, Lj. (2013). Uloga poduzetništva i cjeloživotnog učenja u brendiranju turističke destinacije. *Visoka škola za ekonomiju, poduzetništvo i upravljanje "Nikola Šubić Zrinski"*, 2(2), 46.
- Kotler, F. (2001). *Upravljanje marketingom: analiza, planiranje, primjena i kontrola* (9. izd.). Mate.
- Melucci, A. (1965). *The construction of the collective identity*.
- O'Leary, S., & Deegan, J. (2005). Ireland's image as a tourism destination in France: Attribute importance and performance. *Journal of Travel Research*, 43(3), 247–256.
- Reading, C. (2002). *Strategic business planning: A dynamic system for improving performance & competitive advantage* (p. 109). Kogan Page.
- Simoncheska, L. (2020). Identity as a factor for the affirmation of the tourism product of Prespa.
- Zolak, V. (2024). The role of the media in creating the image of a tourist destination. *Sport Media and Business*, 10(1), 25–44.

