

## DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS ABOUT TOURIST IDENTITY IN THE DANUBE GATE DESTINATION

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### Abstract

Thus, uncontrollable elements such as nice weather, nature/scenery, accessibility, transformed into controllable elements such as pleasant environment, relaxing atmosphere, infrastructure, can create a favourable artistic image that would determine the tourist to pick the destination. Uncontrollable elements such as local culture, diversity of sport activities, of restaurant, cafes etc. that can increase the value of a destination, transformed into controllable elements such as historical sites, events (cultural activities, festivals etc.) form an environment where “there are plenty of things to do” and can create a favourable psychological image that will make the tourist return to this destination. The transformation of these attributes into advantages for the tourist, so that a destination can be differentiated, takes places within a positioning strategy.

**Key words:** image, imagery, identity, tourist imagery, tourist destination.

**Classification JEL:** Z3, Z32, Z38, Z39

### 1. Introduction

The *image* of a destination is the “total of the information and impressions sent to potential consumers about the population, infrastructure, climate, history, attractions, personal security etc.”<sup>1</sup> As the sight is the most important sense in forming a positive image, the visual perception of a destination can be divided into *artistic image* and *psychological image*, to better understand the attributes/variables that form the atmosphere/ambiance.

Within the last years, tourism development meant *mostly conceptual creation of certain attractions/destinations* which, by means of the services and attractions rendered, can meet the needs and, moreover, the desires of the consumers.

The *image and identity* are the important values/characteristics of a tourist destination in marketing.

Thus, uncontrollable elements such as nice weather, nature/scenery, accessibility, transformed into controllable elements such as pleasant environment, relaxing atmosphere, infrastructure, can create a favourable artistic image that would determine the tourist to pick the destination.

Uncontrollable elements such as local culture, diversity of sport activities, of restaurant, cafes etc. that can increase the value of a destination, transformed into controllable elements such as historical sites, events (cultural activities, festivals etc.) form an environment where “there are plenty of things to do” and can create a favourable psychological image that will make the tourist return to this destination.

The transformation of these attributes into advantages for the tourist, so that a destination can be differentiated, takes places within a positioning strategy.

Besides the differentiation variables of “product” and “image”, *other variables* (for example *the personnel hired*, variable that can increase or decrease the value of the tourist product offered) are also used for a tourist destination.

When we practise tourism, we immediately imagine the location, we memorise, upon arrival, the moments and the images that have warmed our soul, we compare certain tourist destinations with others, having the legitimate right to eliminate images and feelings that we haven't liked.

Hence, the image of a tourist destination is a variable component aggregate according to the individual/tourist, his/her motivation, education and, why not, good taste.

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<sup>1</sup> Echtner C. and Brent Ritchie J.R. - “The meaning and measurement of destination image”, Journal of Tourism Studies, 1991.

We all know that we do not all like the same thing, the same destination, we guidedly practise the same form of tourism because the tourist phenomenon itself offers the freedom of choice, of rejecting a destination, aiming at what we call the tourist's satisfaction.

*The studies* performed for the image evaluation of a destination must have as a starting point the perception of several “public categories”, such as: the perceptions of the inhabitants (as participants in certain activities), the strangers (tourists or visitors, respectively temporary users), the one returning (the ones that preserve certain images that they further on compare with the existing image) and the professionals (the ones that find, analyse and create technical or humanist images and premises).

Moreover, these researches must be periodically performed, because the image can form and/or change (due to the multitude of factors - generally emotional ones - influencing it) every time when the tourist service consumer sees, hears, feels, interacts or interrelates with the destination “climate”.

The expression “a picture is worth a thousand words” is already prosaic. Setting aside its vulgarisation through its excessive use, it holds a considerable dose of truth.

The contemporary man often takes the important decisions of its complex life, based on image and reputation.

According to Dex, from an etymological point of view, the term “image” derives from “to imagine”. These are differently processed in the human, individual and collective mind. People shape their mental representations based on perceptions that they have on the constituting elements of the concrete, perceptible reality, mainly through senses.

We should mention that we should not underestimate the remarkable capacity of the human being of imagining fantastic, supernatural elements, related to the irrationality.

The once crystallised image has to be proved, felt, experimented, enjoyed, assimilated, many times reaching the identification of people with images that have fascinated them and that have shaped their evolution - the childhood, the aspirations, etc.

Nowadays, the concept of *tourist image* fills a central place in the vast and complex mechanism of the tourism studies. The image concept, which is a complex, multidimensional concept, having a rational, emotional and social side, the image constitutes a profoundly subjective portrait, with complex and varied psychological and cultural impregnations.

There are several notions associated to this concept:

- *reality*, in fact a part of it, is perceived based on a system of intrinsic values of each person or each group of persons;
- *image* – a mainly subjective portrait of reality - includes knowledge, experiences or auxiliary perceptions with an objective side of a tourist product offered by the tourist destination, etc.;
- our *perception* of the world does not represent the sum of the perceptions of component parts, but it is, mainly, a global perception; hence, the image of products is relatively stable and difficult to influence through sporadic messages referring to some of the tourist product or brand elements.

## 2. The tourist image or the tourist destination image

The tourist destination is any tourist space (country, region, city, village) at a macro or micro taxonomic level.

The perception of a destination is mixed with the perception of activities it proposes, with the type of accommodation structures, with the access means, natural anthropogenic attractions it has. The destination is a territory, as well as an assembly and a complex product comprising the most tangible and physical data with the immaterial features of the place.

A destination is at the same time a territory and an assembly of activities and structures proposed; the physical place is confused with its more or less tangible attractions.

Although, it is said that an image can replace a thousand words, the reverse is also valid - the mental images may be created through the words.

Within the ratio text - image, between the image that impresses and the text explaining it, the individual chooses, consciously (or at the most subconsciously), the image; hence, the televised messages, for instance, are not complex from the point of view of the argumentation, the image having a higher evocation power.

Numerous definitions of the tourist image have been formulated.

Hunt (1975) stated that “all the places have images - good, bad and indifferent - which must be identified, then changed or exploited”. *The general image of a destination is as important as the sub-images of activities, of accommodation structures, of services; thus, as a destination is a complex and composite product, it has a complex and composite image.*

The image of a destination shall be different according to the different categories of population or tourists: *foreign tourists*, for which a country has a global and unified image, *local tourists*, who shall be sensitive to the regional differences and who shall perceive a more separated image of a destination, *actual tourists* and *potential tourists*.

An extremely suggestive definition of the image is “the sum of emotional and aesthetic qualities such as experiences, beliefs, ideas, memories and impressions which a person has about a destination” (J.L. Crompton, 1978).

This definition reflects the complexity of the image, shows the constituting elements of the image and its research manner.

It reflects the main subjectivity of images, underlines the fact that each individual possesses its own series of beliefs formed and adopted starting from various experiences and personal sources and, thus, different for each individual in part.

It is worth mentioning that common elements may exist in the tendencies of forming the image within groups, and this thing allows the rigorous study of these images.

**The perception** is the key notion for understanding the actual meaning of the concept discussed, because the individual sees through filters, through its emotions, fears, prejudices, expectations, wishes, hopes, sympathies or antipathies.

Miossec considers the perception of place very important, believing that the image of tourist place is essential in attracting a significant tourist flow, claiming that the existence of a reversed proportionality relation between the level of knowledge of destinations and the distance factor (decreases at the same time with the increase of the distance), without excluding the distortions induced by the presence of exceptional tourist objectives, with a special resonance for the collective mental.

He associates to the quality of this image, the quality of a social-political-linguistic environment (existent/potential) which can become determining in some cases (Miossec, J.M. 1976, quoted by Cocean, P., and Dezsi, S., 2009).

The geographical bases of the tourist phenomenon are formed of the critical association of tourism with the geographical space.

Thus, the tourism geography operates three major concepts, among which one is important for this study: the spatial distribution, the spatial adequacy of the tourist activity and the tourist space production (imaginary - perceptions, as well as material - forms, fitting technical models, resulted landscapes). (Muntele, I., Iașu, C., 2003).

Images are built for a long period of time, are based on separated and diverse sources, and, most of the times, they comprise aspects that the individuals themselves consider irrational, unreasonable or inexact.

When they consult tourist brochures or any other information source, the future tourist develops, a priori (before starting), an image of the destination he/she shall visit.

Therefore, the images develop in the absence of the actual contact with the destination.

According to R. Lanquar (1985), “an image exists if minimum knowledge about a country and a sum of fractioned images specific of groups exist”.

**The tourist image** is not only but an aspect of the general image of a country; that is why it cannot be different from the reality of that country”.

This definition states that each group in part has its specific images of a place, “product of culture and subculture where they have been developed”. The image is, thus, the reflection of the culture of a group, of a public.

W. H. Reynolds (1965) describes the process of formation of the image as “a development of a mental construction based on several impressions, chosen from a bundle of information”. In case of a tourist destination image, the respective bundle of information has several resources.

**The “lived” image.** The mental spaces (the fundamental perceptions on “material” and “divinity”, the traditions, the customs of the “place”, the affective connections with it - topophilia, myths, legends, etc.) (*Ibidem*, p. 174).

*The territoriality* plays a decisive role in expressing the biunique relation of the man with the geographical space, representing the assembly of relations, individually and collectively, set within a human community, due to its belonging to a delimited geographical space.

G. Vâlsan has underlined with a lot of depth this close relationship: “The world does not show itself in slices of plants, animals, rocks etc.

All these life aspects gather their meaning through their combination, which can be reduced to the appearance of the land of a country and the personality specific to a people”. (Vâlsan, G., 1927, quoted Petre, D., 2005, op. cit., p. 174).

This fragment practically shapes the essence of the synergetic significance of the physiognomy of a territorial assembly, leading to the crystallisation of an own identity.

The “lived” image is the reflection of an internal organisation, the lived reality of the internal public. Characterised by diversity of interests and through an eclecticism of the placement, this type of image has as main feature the *plurality* and gives rise to an assembly of *representations*. It is the image transmitted and used by the residents, being varied and non-consensual.

In case of the Danube Bend, the existential “fusion” between people and the physical nature was shaped between a big, complex and diversified territorial entity, under the aspect of content, uniqueness and sustainability within the tourist destination constellations with a great development potential in perspective.

Practically, the regional territorial unity stands out through dominant identity shapes, inherited from nature and/or generated by people (Decebal's face from Mraconia), through varied processes and mechanisms carrying meanings and functions.

Thus, the following identity types are defining: horographic, cultural (including the bookish and the cinematographic, ethnical, spiritual, demographic, linguistic, economic, administrative, etc., including the landscape (as a regional synthesis identity).

Due to these identity elements, the Bend territory (see fig. 1) became in time, for its inhabitants, an emotional attachment space, a solidarity space (Petre, D., 2005, op. cit., p. 175) within the actions to assimilate the values and, sometimes, object of ethnical, political, administrative, economic and, last but not least, territorial dispute.

According to one of the most concise definitions, the concept of “place” means a part of the territory, carrying the meanings.

Operating a materialisation, being imposed in the given context, the conscious perception of the meanings making a (geographical and/or tourist) phenomenon be unique and irreversible, leading to the concept of place.

The place constitutes, thus, the territorial materialisation of each phenomenon in part, simple and complex, but also unique and irreversible, together with the mental, linguistic, (carto)graphical representations, etc., elaborated by people through the perception and the analysis of meanings.

The generalisation of any territory as a geographical “place”, being authentic and accepted as such, means, thus, a complex process of perception and representation at the level of the public (social) conscience. (Ibidem p. 176)

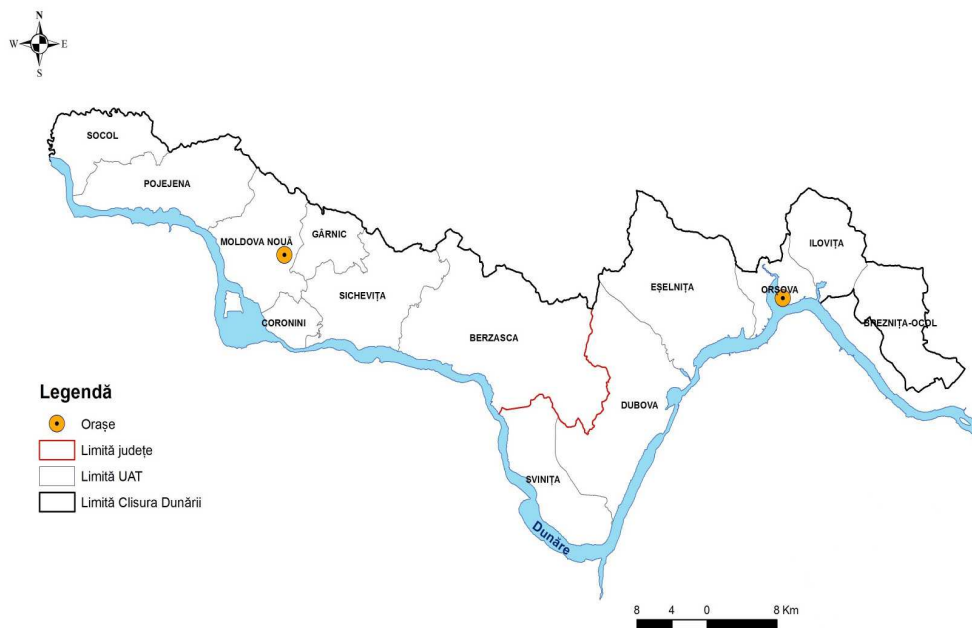


Fig. 1 The administrative map of the Danube Bend

The meanings, operating the differences leading to the “acknowledgement” of the places are extremely diverse: physical and geographical features, for instance, in the Danube Bend: The Danube itself, the unique landscape, the Danube canyon, etc., all being geographical places whose meaning is well-known mainly due to their prominent image, related to the surrounding places; anthropogenic features, shaped in traditions, architecture, customs, use of lands, “exception” activities, etc., such as: the settlements of the Czech from Eibenthal or Bigăr, Turkis Island Ada-Kaleh, (fig.1.), of the Serbs from Șvinița, the Festival of the Romanians from everywhere or the one of the Danubian villages, local events attributed to the Danube Bend, etc., are “places” according to the traditions, achievements or of the events with an exceptional meaning, etc.

Eibenthal village it is related to the evolution of the other Czechs villages from Banat (Bigăr, Gârnic, Sfânta Elena, Sfânta Elisabeta, Ravensca, Frauwiessen, Șumița), which are formed in the 20's of the XIX-th century; attracted by the tempting promises of the Austrian-Hungarian administration (monetary help, allotment of land for building and ploughing, exemption from land taxes, free attainment of wood for building and of grain for the whole year, etc.).

Approximately 35 families from the area of the cities Plzen, Příbram, Kladno travels by rafts from Vienna to Moldova Nouă and settle, during 1826-1828, the Eibenthal village (germ. „Tisa's valley”); 1773-1872 it belongs to the Romanian-Banat Border Regiment No. 13 and Community of Wealth (1872-1948); after 1995 the Czechs govern

supports a series of initiatives of the local community: the school, named after Alois Jrasek, classic of the Czech literature who wrote about the villages from Clisura Dunării, the road asphaltting, the digital telephone exchange.



Photo 1. Turkis Island Ada-Kaleh,

Often, a “place” associates several meanings combined: for instance the Trikule Fortress(see photo2), which was elevated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to stop the Turkish expansion to the west, its ruins being noticed near the Șvinița locality - at same time a geographical, historical, tourist, strategic place, etc.



Photo 2. The Trikule Fortress (author Gheorgheci Sabina)

Extrapolating the theoretical specifications above to our field of study, we can deduce that the places perceived by the individual/tourist as tourist destinations are represented in their spirit through the psycho-cultural references, and, thus, each individual shall attribute a personal meaning to the same place, there existing the same number of images as meanings given to the place.

**The image perceived.** It is configured by the representations shown by the persons interested by the territory, but who do not permanently live there.

The more homogenous and characteristic it is, the more operational it becomes, the more susceptible to exploit as a dynamic concept, within the promotion, the “visibility” of a geographical space gathering the attributes of a tourist destination.

To exemplify, we mention that for the collective mind from the Danube Bend the representation is often shown by the local people to the tourists, transmitting ideas, feelings, perceptions of the Danube bend space where they live their life.

Thus, we can speak of this space as a true cultural osmosis, as a consequence of the interferences, especially between Romanians (mainly Latin population, being the majority during all the historical ages), Serbs and Czechs, living exemplary.

However, we should not forget the other ethnical groups, such as, Germans or Gipsies, the last ones drawing the attention through their accelerated demographic increase, that shall lead in the near future to changes in the ethnical structure and to identity transformations within the Danube Bend space.

The intrinsic connection between *the images of a tourist destination* conferring it *identity*, while the destination sustainability must be supported, maintained, permanently promoted to ensure satisfying tourist flows.

Thus, innovation occurs, which is imperative in the two parts: as image, as well as identity, through the promotion of new tourist products, innovative, through innovative strategies of carrying out the tourist phenomenon.

The following image (Fig. 2) shows the elements favouring the innovation; these represent four variables, the most important ones being the strategic advantages (the market opportunities) and the employee competences (connected to the new technology, the professional training, control and relationship).

The decisional processes and the organisation abilities together with other company resources have a less significant influence on innovation.

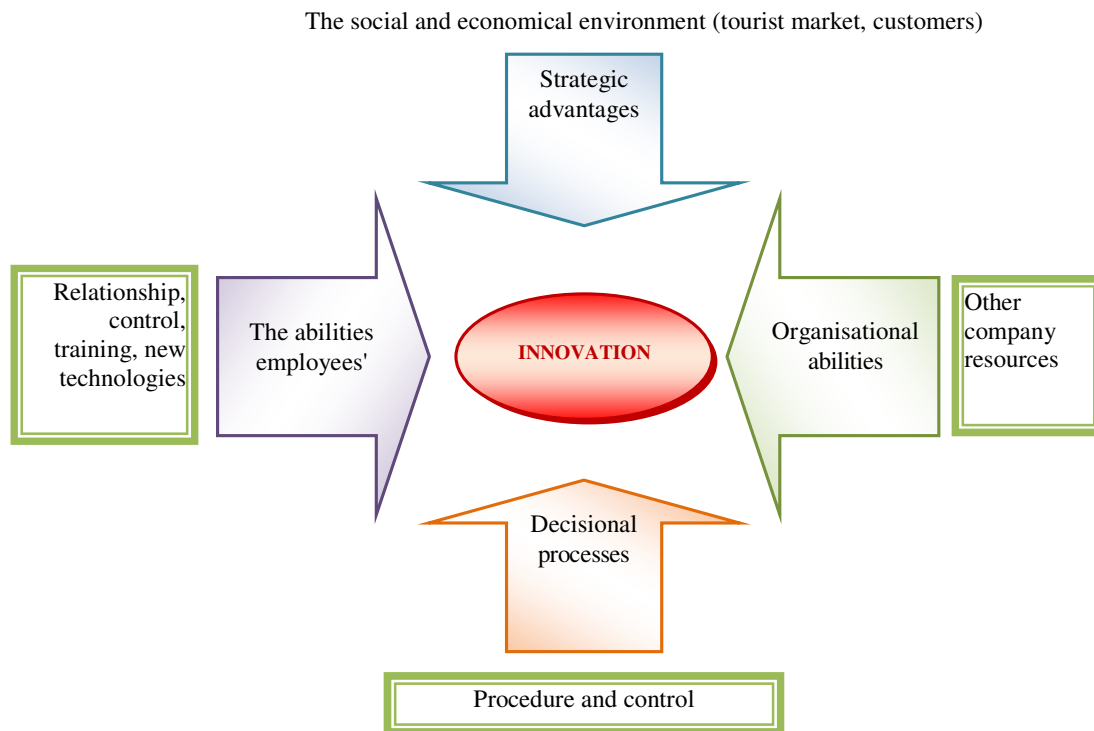


Figure no. 2. The main variables influencing innovation  
(Source: adapted from Julien P.A., Innovation et PME, 2003)

Basically, innovation in the Danube Bend tourism must be directed towards :

1. The imperative creation of innovative tourist products and packages
2. The diversification of tourist services and of the complementary innovative services in the region

Thus, elements from the cultural potential and ethnic mosaic from the Danube Bend may become unique innovative tourist products: local festivals, specific Gastronomy and Crafts fairs, local centres of traditions, the creation of innovative services for tourists, which are missing from the area: a first aid point, lifeguard services in the mountains, the caves and the river, children playgrounds and services, pet services, beauty services, SPA, common transportation services, social services (social assistance, clubs for the elderly, elderly centres).

The rural areas in difficulty (like Clisura or the Danube Bend) need the support through multinational programs in order to maintain and develop reliable rural communities. The development programs for the disadvantaged areas must comprise the following fields:

- ⊕ diversifying the activities from the primary sector;

- ✪ developing the non-agricultural sector;
- ✪ developing the agro-tourism;
- ✪ protecting and rebuilding the natural environment;
- ✪ developing the human resources by occupying and stabilising the rural work force;
- ✪ technical assistance (table 1).

These strong and weak points emphasise the partnership importance, as well as of synergies where the whole is larger than the amount of the individual parties.

Table 1. Levels in the Destination “Brand” Hierarchy

Level	Entity
1	<b>Country brand</b>
2	<b>Rural tourism brand</b>
3	<b>State tourism brand</b>
4	<b>Regional brands/Regional Macro</b>
5	<b>Local communities brands</b>
6	<b>Individual tourism brand</b>

Maybe, all these in collaboration with the specialist’s conscience, doubled by a real training to whom reality should prove once more that the well done thing will always last, will show us that Danube bend, as a tourist destination is not a ghost, but on the contrary a tourist area with unknown values which wait to be reevaluated by a trained hand and by an imperative Destination Management, rigorously elaborated, but especially rigorously applied.

On the other hand, the sustainable development can join us as an alibi, a utopia maintained voluntarily by the political and economic actors, preoccupied by justifying and proving their economic logic, but also by preserving and keeping the economic powers already acquired.

We believe that solving the problem, adapting the social, economic and ecologic systems to this fact of the globalisation: the sustainable development would be enough.

We should draw the attention towards the fact that the transformation/the change/the improvement in tourism need another strategy than the continuous improvement, because the success from the past can sometimes be a great obstacle.

But, are the foreign investors necessary, is a new strategy, or are the people prepared for a change, especially for the acceptance of the new and of the sustainable things in Romanian tourism? Or do we wait again for the good interventions of the state? These are more than normal questions which, we think, any person – citizen of this country – who feels useless when sees that the things do not go well at all in the tourism field asks one self, although we have tourism potential! This paper tries, briefly, to underline the various favourable elements which the Danube bend tourism can use in its favour ...

The rehabilitation of the civil heritage is achieved, while there is a tourist flow, mainly in two ways:

- ☞ The preservation or the restoration of the historical or cultural interest objectives may be obtained through practicing several access fees;
- ☞ The creation of an accommodation potential means the restoration and re-inclusion in the circuit of the deserted buildings, following the depopulation phenomenon, increasing the degree of comfort at the level of the buildings that have rooms available for rent, building motels, tourist villas, camping sites, the recreational infrastructure.

The attraction of new investments remains “the key for success” and the maintenance of any activity.

Therefore, I propose in this article, starting from these considerations, the disclosure of the regional brand elements, identifying those functions or tourism forms (recreational, curative and/or cultural) specific for a tourist micro-destination, such as the “yet unseen and unknown” Danube Bend.

### 3. Conclusion

According to DEX, the concept of identity represents “the feature of a person, object or phenomenon to show the individuality in time and space, through the fundamental features, which are relatively permanent, differentiating them from all the others and determining them to be themselves on the entire duration of their existence”.



We should, however, want to preserve the authenticity and the rural heritage elements, which are difficult to revive once they have been lost. I refer here to the ethnical multiculturalism, the traditional architecture, the traditional costume, the occupations, the traditions, the food types, the way of life.

We do not desire the transformation of the Danube Bend “into a Romanian Las Vegas”, that of the former ex-minister of tourism Elena Udrea, mentioned upon a visit in Mehedinți county. We truly would like that the Bend stays as it has been given by God, with a tourist potential and exceptional landscapes, a place with a different identity, with a lot of wild areas, with unique traditions and festivals, with people who show their identity and reclaim it through each action of theirs, meant to increase the international acknowledgement.

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