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REGIONAL BRANDING OF WESTERN BALKANS THROUGH SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Western Balkans (WB) is emerging from an unfortunate recent past which destroyed social structures and the uniform identity of the region. WBs is, historically, known as a region of diversity and impeccable natural beauty. Despite a visible need to take a holistic approach for WBs tourism marketing, a research-based strategy has yet to be defined and implemented for future action in the region. There are few current studies dealing with regional branding, brand identity and sustainable tourism in WB, and most of them do not offer a holistic approach in integrating the identification of tourism (through destination brand identity) and the

promotion of tourism (through destination brand positioning). This research, therefore, aims to reach a framework for a holistic tourism marketing effort for the region by focusing on how WBs should create a regional destination image for a stronger destination marketing in the future. As one of the pioneering research studies on the subject, the research holds an exploratory approach, and the research question is answered based on qualitative SWOT analysis data from experts in the region. Findings from the qualitative research point to strong tourism potential in the region, which supports a strong argument for a sustainable tourism agenda of the WBs. Interviewed experts considered the lack of big-branded hotels as a weakness, due to the low levels of accommodation capacities, while confirming a weak strategic positioning of the region as a unified whole. Other results demonstrate that the region can also offer unique agrotourism products. This study concludes with a proposed "Sustainability–SWOT-based Destination Branding Model" as a guide for future tourism development and promotion efforts.

KEYWORDS

Western Balkans; Regional Tourism Branding; Destination Brand Identity; Destination Brand Positioning; Sustainable Tourism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper delves into an untouched area of research for the Western Balkans (WBs) and discusses a plan of action for sustainable tourism development in the region. Previous research on WBs analyses countries in the region separately and, therefore, it is the case of a lacking holistic point of view on the marketing of this region (Duman et al., 2016). From this point of view, this research could be considered ground breaking, as it approaches WBs as a unit of analysis and discusses regional tourism development from marketing and sustainable development perspectives. The focus of this research are the six Western Balkan (WB) countries - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia - which, in spite of the conflicts with each other, share a common fate and complementary attributes for tourism development. Tourism, from this perspective, is a good common denominator for all these countries and beneficial for their people. The aim of the research hence is to propose a framework that can be used to develop a unified WBs destination image, based on destination brand identity, positioning, and sustainable tourism.

There are a number of reasons that indicate a need for a regional approach to tourism development for WBs. One of the main reasons is related with the fact that the countries in this region are on the verge of joining the European Union (EU) and,

therefore, have a historic chance of benefiting from the lucrative EU market for the tourism sector. Current accession talks indicate that joining the EU is a common agenda for all these countries (European Commission, 2019) and a unified approach to tourism development sounds a reasonable strategy for these countries to jointly benefit from the EU market, in near future. This shared goal is embodied in the form of an official entity as Western Balkans Fund (WBF), which serves to establish “the development of closer cooperation and strengthening of ties between the Western Balkans contracting parties” (<http://westernbalkansfund.org/mission/>). The mission of WBF states that the purposes of the establishment of the entity includes “the integration of the contracting parties into the European Union and common presentation of the WBF contracting parties to the third countries” (<http://westernbalkansfund.org/mission/>). In its objectives, the WBF identifies specifically that the fund aims to “take a sustainable development approach” in developing different sectors in the region. Figure 1 shows the Western Balkans map in relation to EU accession status of the countries in the region.



Figure 1. Western Balkans map showing legends in relation to EU.

Source: <https://www.oscebih.org/exploring-what-europe-can-do-for-western-balkans>

The aims and the works of WBF call for a “regional tourism development approach” that sits on the foundation of sustainable tourism development theory and practice (Liu 2003; Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez 2016; Mitchell, Wooliscroft and Higham 2010; European Commission, 2019). Since sustainable tourism is a quite comprehensive area of study, the discussion in this paper is limited with a macro-marketing perspective and the analysis of the role of sustainability in developing regional destination identity

and its positioning within a strategic perspective. For this to be attained, a holistic approach to WBs regional destination marketing is necessary. Therefore, it is proposed to start with the identification of national brand identities of the six WB countries to continue with the offering of positioning strategies based on economic, social and environmental analysis of destination attributes, by using tourism sustainability theory. Another reason for a regional approach to destination brand positioning in WBs (Ageeva and Foroudi, 2019) is the fact that the countries of WBs are either small or their capacity to offer value in their tourism offer is limited. A general outlook of destination size and tourism demand and supply of the six WB countries is given in Table 1.

Country	Official population 2020	GDP PPP in US Dollars (Dec 2020)	Overnight stays (2019)	Tourist Arrival						Change in % (2014-2019)
				2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Albania	2,837,848	13,412.1	24,022,643	3,672,591	4,131,242	4,735,511	5,117,700	5,926,803	6,406,038	74.4
Bosnia and Hercegovina	3,280,819	15,591.6	2,420,519	536,000	678,000	778,128	923,050	1,052,898	1,198,219	123.5
Kosovo	1,790,133	11,293.8	321,581	107,790	139,438	129,289	120,601	192,761	177,358	64.5
Montenegro	621,306	19,989.6	13,933,538	1,339,009	1,559,924	1,662,121	1,877,212	2,076,803	2,509,625	87.4
North Macedonia	2,072,532	16,925.5	1,577,771	425,314	485,530	510,484	630,594	707,345	757,593	78.1
Serbia	6,899,126	19,093.9	4,010,378	1,028,732	1,132,221	1,281,426	1,497,173	1,710,514	1,846,551	79.4
Total	17,501,764	96,306.5	46,286,430	7,109,436	8,126,355	9,096,959	10,166,330	11,667,124	12,897,403	81.4

Table 1. Percent Changes in Tourist Flow and Number of Nights Spent in the Six Western Balkan Countries. Sources: Official population data (World Bank Population Data by Country, 2020) GDP PPP (Trading Economics, 2020). Albania (Institute of Statistics Albania, 2020), Bosnia and Hercegovina (BiH Agency for Statistics, 2020), Kosovo (Kosovo-Agency-of-Statistics, 2020), Montenegro (MONSTAT, 2020), North Macedonia (State Statistical Office-North Macedonia, 2020), Serbia (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020).

Most tourism agencies in the region offer WBs tour packages, which combine the visits of several destinations in the region. Albania and Montenegro are seaside destinations that accommodate sea-sun-sand tourists. Both countries are weak competitors in comparison to other Mediterranean destinations, due to either weaker accommodation capacities or tourism value propositions. Other destinations in the WBs, on the other hand, offer culture and nature-based tour packages, which usually include the visiting of several neighbouring countries in the same tour package. An alternative to the country-based positioning and marketing strategy is the creation of a regional destination positioning strategy which can help these individual country destinations compete with others in the greater Mediterranean region.

Despite a visible need to take a holistic approach for WBs tourism marketing, a research-based strategy has yet to be defined and implemented for future action in the region. This research, therefore, aims to reach a framework for a holistic tourism marketing effort for the region, answering the research question: “how should WBs create a regional destination image for a stronger destination marketing in future?”. Considering that this is a pioneering research study on the subject, the research holds an exploratory approach and the research question mentioned above is answered based on qualitative SWOT analysis data, from experts in the region.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1) DESTINATION SUSTAINABILITY, TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE, AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: A MACRO-PERSPECTIVE

The devastating impact of recent historical experiences in the region calls for a discussion on destination sustainability. Destination sustainability is a precursor to sound destination development and marketing efforts. Since sustainability is context-specific (Hysa et al., 2016), analysing sustainability from a ‘destination perspective’ becomes almost physiological. Traveling is an important component that would contribute to the development of sustainable destinations. A residential area is also an arrival point of a traveller for personal or commercial purposes. Visitors can be either domestic or international. When tourists go to a destination, they must find sustainable conditions, reside responsibly, and leave the destination without prejudging its existence for residents and future travellers. Although the global tourism industry is not yet close to ideal sustainability (Buckley, 2012), studies have shown that sustainable tourism impacts the life quality of living communities in touristic destinations (Mathew and Sreejesh, 2017). Hence, destination sustainability is a core factor for the viability of a city, country, or region.

A planned approach to development is of paramount importance for keeping destinations sustainable. In other words, accountability mechanisms (planning, reporting, and so on.) and community involvement are necessary. Regarding the first, TBL and sustainability reporting in tourism have started to get the attention of scholars who offer conceptual and technical frameworks for planning and developing

sustainable tourism (Dwer, 2008; Stoddard et al., 2012). Also, recent applications of TBL are made in urban tourism research for regenerating the urban tourism through planning and development (Wise, 2016). From local actors' perspective, it can be said that the public understanding and awareness of citizens regarding sustainable tourism is still limited. They especially lack awareness of how tourism may affect environment (Miller et al., 2010).

Approaches on sustainable tourism in literature are various and several categorizations have been made in this regard. The contemporary understanding of tourism sustainability is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This means that tourism should build on core identity and should not be built on isolated aspects of life; in contrast, it must be eco-systemic, intersectoral, and regional. As McKercher (1993, p. 14) argues, "For sustainable tourism to occur, it must be closely integrated with all other activities that occur in the host region". Thus, sustainable tourism is destination oriented. In accordance with the aim of this work, destination sustainability refers to the identification of economic, social, and environmental attributes for the creation of destination brand identity and the promotion of those attributes for the building of strong destination brand positioning. Studies show that destination sustainability -both in terms of process and result - and sustainable tourism, as a mindset, are strictly related to each other. From an economic and socio-cultural perspective (e.g., expenditures, revenues, longer stays, social interaction with local population, higher levels of education and so on), Artal-Tur, Villena-Navarro and Alamá-Sabater (2018) explained the importance of profiling cultural visitors as a strategy to increase the sustainability of destinations and to promote a more sustainable tourism model. Through a stakeholder engagement view, Yang et al. (2019) found that corporate community involvement has a positive impact on environmental destination sustainability of rural tourism businesses. From an economic and environmental standpoint, Butler (2018) emphasizes the importance of tourism contributions on destination sustainability by analysing the case of golf tourism.

In compliance with the aim of this study, the entire region -WBs- is considered as a single destination. Although previous macromarketing studies about sustainable tourism have internationally been performed at specific regions (Bagnied and Speece, 2019; Gössling et al., 2018; Mai et al., 2014), the same does not apply to the WBs. The undertaken search through the flagship journals for sustainability in tourism (i.e.,

Journal of Sustainable Tourism) demonstrated that there was only one regional tangent research article dealing with the developments and transformations of sustainable tourism in Central and Eastern Europe (Hall, 2000); plus, another article, - quite interesting and ironically of the same author - considered only half of WB countries from a policy perspective (Hall, 2003). When the WB countries were taken separately, the database showed only three articles, which include Albania, Croatia and Serbia (Holland, 2000; Jordan, 2000; Petrovic and Markovic, 2013). Instead, there are reports of International Organizations which partially compensate the missing information. Part of their content is used also in this research to support the primary data.

2.2) DESTINATION BRAND IDENTITY

Branding a destination, starts from defining the strengths that differentiate that place (i.e., city, country, region) in the market, thus defining the destination identity. The importance of identity is strongly emphasized by the marketing literature, in which mainly all branding researchers unite to point to an identity-based approach in initiating the brand development process. Different authors rely on the works of Meffert (1974), Keller (2003) and Burman (1996) to originate their work on brand identity. They define brand identity as the starting point of branding process. By defining “who you are” determines the first step of creating meaning and achieving relationships with customers (e.g., citizens or visitors). Thus, brand identity needs to be well defined and communicated to create a strong image and an effective positioning strategy (Aaker, 1996). Different authors have suggested different identity models. The main brand identity models mentioned also by many brand management authors are the Vision and Culture Model (de Chernatony, 2001). Vision and Culture model includes six (6) brand identity dimensions: brand positioning, vision, culture, relationship, brand personality, brand presentation. Destination authors have applied this model in building the destination identity. (Konecnik and de Chernatony, 2013). Another model that has been applied by destination branding authors is Brand Identity Prism by Kapferer (Kapferer, 2008). Brand identity, in this approach, is placed in a schema with six facets, in the form of a hexagonal where 6 facets represent different elements; physique; personality; culture; relationship, customer reflection, self-image (Kapferer, 2008; Burmann et al., 2017). Berrozpe, Campo and Yague (2017) have explored the identity

of Ibiza, Spain, referring to the Kapferer's six dimensions of brand identity. Another model is that of brand leadership. In this case, brand identity is compound of 3 layers. Core identity reflects the values and strategy of the brand organization; extended identity reflects the brand personality; and brand essence, considered as brand DNA, represents the spirit of the brand (Crockett and Wood 1999; Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2012; Ghodeswar, 2008; Atmaja and Budi, 2016).

In order to achieve a competitive advantage, governments are making use of branding techniques to differentiate their places and create strong brands. Since it is believed that a strong destination brand contributes to the country's sustainable development by attracting tourists, stimulating exports, and attracting investments (Fetscherin, 2010), then building strong destination brand identity becomes of paramount importance for governments and travel agencies.

Nation branding and destination branding are complex phenomena (Dinnie, 2008; Pike, 2005). This is due to the brand configuration at country level, where the "brand" represents a place identity and a place image focusing on brand equity. The latter includes brand satisfaction and loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, and other preferable brand associations (Govers, 2013).

Destination branding as a strategy (Morgan et al., 2004) includes the identification, differentiation, experience, expectations, image, consolidation, and reinforcement, (Blain et al., 2005). As a process, the destination management model is composed of elements such as brand identity, positioning, and image (Pike, 2008). Brand identity which represents the brand image desired in the market by DMO (destination marketing organization). Brand Positioning includes the promotion mix, logo, and slogan. Brand Image represents the actual image in the market which can or cannot be in line with brand identity (Pike 2004, 2008).

Brand image at country level simultaneously affects and is affected by sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism needs the creation of a strong, positive internal and external country image (Dinnie, 2008). In this context, due to the importance of brand image, marketing communications must reinforce brand identity (Cotîrlea, 2015; Keller, 2003).

Branding a destination starts from defining the identity of that destination by determining the inner attributes and values of the city, country, or region. Destination identity incorporates the way a touristic place aims to identify and positions its offer

among competitors (Wheeler et al., 2011) and together with brand image it plays a crucial role in destination marketing (Baker and Cameron, 2008). Consequently, the need for a self-analysis by the internal stakeholder like DMO is deemed necessary to build a strong and unique destination brand identity (Mishra, 2010). The effective analysis of destination brand identity facilitates the creation of a unique identity in order to differentiate itself in the global competition (Mohd Yusof and Ismail, 2015; Qu et al., 2011). At international tourism context, while brand identity is universal and remains stable as communicated, image is perceived differently depending on country and culture (Konecnik and Go, 2008). Because WB countries have similar cultural background, it might be possible to build a unified image of regional tourism. Overall, destination brand identity studies, so far, have mainly focused on cities or countries by lacking attention of developing a regional destination identity, and this general tendency has also been applied in the region of WBs

Nonetheless, it must be noted that scholars in WBs started to research the area mainly by making use of a generalist approach to tourism, as a driving force for sustainable development (Gorica et al., 2010). Further studies have shown very wide perspectives addressing issues like tourist loyalty and satisfaction (Paunovic, 2014), tourism seasonality and ecotourism (Petrevska, 2013). While destination management is seen as a tool for the development of tourism (Qirici and Theodhori, 2013), ecotourism is considered as a driver for the repositioning of the destination (Teodorović and Popesku, 2016).

Given that the majority of WB countries have passed through a transition phase with ethnic conflicts in the past, and because social, economic, and political instability is still actual (Jones and Kubacki, 2014), then, tourism development and national identity become more significant for these places. Following the conflicts between former Yugoslavia countries and the long transition process, it became crucial to start establishing national tourism marketing strategies for national image rebuilding (Hall, 2002). The aim of rebuilding the image of the self-gave rise to the promotion of destination, because of the relationship that was created between national identity and tourism promotion. Together with the countries which were part of Yugoslavia, Albania also needed tourism promotion and image rebuilding. Albanian tourism has been more disadvantaged compared to other WB countries, due to the isolation of Albania from the rest of the world during its tough communism times (1946-1992), whereas

Yugoslavia pursued a more liberal policy by developing relations with other countries and allowing free movement and commerce.

After the fall of the respective dictatorial regimes in the region, each country started to individually develop destination branding strategies, by launching new slogans and promoting itself in the global arena. On the other side, academics focused their research in destination marketing (Paunovic, 2013) and destination branding (Reka, 2011, Rakita and Šipragić, 2014, Volcic et al., 2014). Even though there is a lack of research on destination identity for the countries in this region, the idea for creating a unified brand image for the WBs has been discussed in the summit of 'Western Balkans Tourism Network', held in Pristina in February 2012. (Balkans Tourism Network, 2012).

The building of a brand and a positioning strategy, based on a common regional identity, is not evident either in internationally funded projects, or in academic research in the WBs. Consequently, proposing a model for the building of the region's identity, based on economic, social, and environmental attributes, while differentiating the region among other successful competitors in the destination market, gains extraordinary importance.

A best practice for building a unique identity is pursued in the area of the Baltic Sea, where different nations have identified their common characteristics for the creation of a unified brand (Andersson, 2007; Policy Area Tourism, 2016). The concepts of "transnational branding" and "transnational cooperation", which stand behind the above initiative, can be a source of inspiration for WBs as well.

In considering the region as a sustainable destination, there is a need to develop a clear identity (Crockett and Wood, 1999), what the brand will present and communicate based on the values of place, indicating strengths and opportunities that a destination owns by relying on economic, social and, environmental dimensions. To succeed on destination branding, building a unique and clear identity that will appeal the targeted customers' desires is essential. The identity-based approach on triple bottom line (TBL), given the increased awareness of sustainability factors, may facilitate a tourism differentiation strategy of the region among its competitors (Maheshwari et al., 2011).

2.3) DESTINATION BRAND POSITIONING

In order to address the marketing of destinations, a systemic view must be implemented since the process itself is composed of different parts that need to be addressed systematically in order to influence travellers' perceptions (Wang and Pizam 2011; Hodovic 2014). According to Anholt (2005) and Pike (2004), positioning the destination requires overcoming perceptual challenges, which among others include extracting the points of difference from competitors, implementing proper communication strategies and slogans (Anholt, 2005; Pike and Ryan, 2004). Tourism industry is witnessing strong competition among destinations with the goal of attracting visitors and becoming sustainable touristic destinations in the long run. In order to succeed in this race, it is necessary to find the suitable positioning strategy for sustainable growth (Prayag, 2007). Despite the importance of branding for value proposition, it should be noted that branding and positioning a destination goes far beyond the tourism industry itself (Anholt, 2005). Thus, it requires a holistic and sustainable logic that involves different actors and sectors to foster value cocreation and open innovation (Rupo et al., 2018; Hysa and Themeli, 2022).

The difference among brand - the product, organization, destination- and branding - the process of designing, planning and communicating the name and the identity, in order to build or manage the reputation - is an important distinction which must be brought to attention for better understanding destination brand positioning as a process (Anholt, 2007). According to Chacko (2007), positioning is rated among the most valuable concepts and processes in marketing a destination.

Positioning a brand is a managerial concept (Kapferer, 2008). David Aaker (1996 p.176), states that "brand position is the part of brand identity and value proposition that is to be actively communicated to the target audience and that demonstrates an advantage over competing brands". Therefore, brand positioning aims to make the value proposition compelling to the target audience. Since positioning is based on the principle that "all choices are comparative" (Kapferer, 2008), it becomes essential and serves as a roadmap to the creation/development of the marketing strategy (Keller, 2013).

Addressing destination branding in literature started much after branding literature itself, which saw a rise during 1940s (Pike, 2008). However, developments in destination brand positioning offer valuable insight on how to conduct and conclude an

effective destination brand positioning. Pike and Ryan (2004) deem the following points relevant for having a successful destination brand positioning:

- Informing the target audience in the benefits when compared to competitor destinations.
- Focusing on the actual and real attributes (not factionary ones) of the destination.
- Monitoring the effectiveness of positioning with proper metrics over time.
- Constant communication with the target audience.

There is a set of that might require the repositioning of the destination. Inconsistent or unclear/blurred image change of the audience needs and wants, competitor positioning and new competitors are among the problematics that makes repositioning obligatory. Positioning not only enhances the attractiveness of a tourism destination (Chacko, 2007), but is considered also a source of competitive advantage (Pike, 2008; Pike and Mason, 2011), or, at least, it may form the ground for gaining and building competitive advantages (Agic et al., 2012). Positioning, as an important element of nation branding, thus, contributes in achieving economic goals (Domazet, 2013). One example from the Balkan Peninsula on how positioning can be a source of competitive advantage is offered by Dimitrov et al. (2017). Dimitrov et al put forth that Bulgaria could be turned into an around the year touristic destination with the appropriate positioning as a cultural destination. Such a positioning for Bulgaria would result also in increased competitive advantage compared to its competitors in the region (Dimitrov et al., 2017).

Obviously, destination brand positioning can be considered critical for the achievement of sustainability. On the other hand, sustainable elements and environment holds positive impact on positioning, too. Especially the ecological dimension of sustainability is a keystone in considering tourism from a sustainability viewpoint (Wang and Pizam, 2011). Destination brand positioning is the linkage between brand identity and brand image by bridging the internal and the external sides of a destination (Pike, 2008). Moreover, destination positioning is affected by different factors (i.e., media, traveling experiences and word of mouth) (D'Atous and Boujbel, 2007, 238). For instance, when competing on the mind of tourists for a luxury holiday in 'Albanian Riviera' sounds less luxurious than one in 'French Riviera' (Anholt, 2007).

Due to the importance of destination management, many countries have contracted experts and agencies to assist in this process. Bulgaria, for instance, collaborated with British Council, while Croatia established cooperation with the expert Simon Anholt. Kosovo, on the other hand, has collaborated with BBR Saatchi and Saatchi Agency (Rojas-Méndez et al., 2013). The usage of new techniques in destination positioning is also encouraged. Further advancements in the field have declared the importance of incorporating neuromarketing in developing destination positioning (Šerić et al., 2015). It is essential to compile a set of key points while considering destination positioning.

Western Balkan countries hold a very low tourism competitiveness profile when compared to the European Union average. Other tourism industry-related data, such as accommodation capacity and the number of tourist overnight stays, show a huge gap between Western Balkan countries and European Union member countries (Krstić et al., 2015). In Western Balkans and especially in the former Yugoslav countries, it is the case of a poor destination brand positioning, due to some factors, such as finance, expertise, experience and Yugoslav wars (Hall, 1999, 2002). Former Yugoslavia, once considered as the 'motor for Europe's overall tourism growth' together with other Central and South-eastern European countries (Bofulin et al., 2016), holds a positive image, building a strong positioning in the mind of western tourists, before 1989. Afterwards, the new states had to position themselves differently by considering their strengths, aiming to leave behind the communist past, and establishing their own identity (Hall, 2002).

Positioning Western Balkan countries is a challenge but when the whole region is taken into consideration, opportunities flourish. WB countries are considered as potential destinations for important audiences of tourists such as Chinese tourists (Bofulin et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to consider every single source that could enhance the competitiveness and viability of each country in the region. For instance, one source which should not be neglected while positioning Serbia as a destination includes its rural tourism opportunities. Revitalizing villages and agriculture is a strategic weapon that must be used when developing a positioning strategy for Serbia (Stetic and Simicevic, 2008). Such situation would cause other WB countries to exploit their opportunities, thus turning WBs into an attractive destination for rural tourism. Another opportunity that can be considered in destination positioning for WB

countries is health tourism (Sziva et al. 2017). By poorly monitoring its attractiveness and competitiveness, Serbia does not implement a fruitful positioning strategy. Therefore, Serbia needs to improve its current destination brand positioning (Teodorović and Popesku, 2016). For Bosnia and Herzegovina, unique identity and employing consistency among its elements as a touristic destination are critical in developing a sustainable destination brand positioning (Hodovic, 2014). When positioning Croatia, for instance, differences from its neighbours should be considered (Hall, 1999). When compared to other countries in the WBs, Croatia has the highest income generated from tourism (Bofulin et al., 2016). Part of Croatia's competitive advantage as a touristic destination in former Yugoslavia was due to its geographic location, which covered the major part of Adriatic coastline (Pike, 2008).

Visual elements should be considered while developing a destination positioning for WBs. Another element in destination positioning is the usage of powerful words. Hall (1999) mentioned visuals as parts of destination positioning for Croatia, after it became an independent state, and powerful messages such "Small Country for a Great Holiday". The same could be said for Montenegro., As country which has tourism as its main pillar of economy, while developing a positioning strategy for Montenegro, its actual situation should be taken into consideration. The main challenge for the interested parties is to position Montenegro as a whole year touristic destination, not only a summer one. In order to succeed, attention must be paid to visual elements. Therefore, wording and visual elements must be in harmony with each other (Jaksic-Stoyanovic and Seric 2018). Destination positioning seeks to make an association among the destination and the self of the tourist. That is why slogans such as 'Imagine your Korea'- South Korea, or 'Go your own way" - Albania are developed (Lever and Abbas, 2019). To reinforce this, the new slogan "Smile Albania" for the 2019 summer season, attracted the attention of dozens of tourists and popular media.

Another crucial point not to be left apart is the paradox and ambiguity during destination positioning. Branding the destination and developing a strong destination positioning must aim to build strong associations. It must not deepen the existing paradox. For Albania, Albanian Riviera, Alps, the traffic chaos of Tirana, the lack of infrastructure, the cordiality and hospitality of the population, the opportunistic behaviour of the politicians, the problems and possibilities of an emerging nation cannot and must not be blended in one (Dauscher et al., 2013). Anholt (2010) stated

that among the main problems with Albania is that it 'finds itself battling against a negative image'. It is strategic, therefore, to define the main strengths and opportunities that lead to sustainable tourism, and accepted destination positioning by visitors. In order to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, the same logic must be applied at a regional level. That is, classifying SWOT elements and sustainability dimensions of WBs, in order to identify and promote the strongest pillars of sustainable tourism and to build a unified brand image that can be sold as a "package".

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative methodology by employing Key Informant Interviews (KII) with tourism scholars to understand the destination branding of WBs. This is a useful method to gather ideas and insights regarding destinations and how they can position themselves as a unique region. The interviews were conducted in person by the authors making use of a semi-structured format. The interview guideline was build based on the SWOT framework. The interview questions aimed to investigate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats in relation to drivers of tourisms such as infrastructure, geographical position, tradition, climate, and tourism packages.

By the means of a convenient sampling procedure (relying on networking and accessibility), seven tourism and marketing experts from the Balkans who serve as representatives of tourism departments in universities belonging to the Western Balkans Fund were contacted. More concretely: Teoman Duman and Sonila Çela from EPOKA University in Albania; Zrinka Zadel from the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management in Croatia; Miroslav Vujcic and Alexandra Dragin from the University of Novi Sad in Serbia; Miha Lesjak from the Faculty of Tourism Studies – University of Primorska in Slovenia; Silvan Djurasevic from the Montenegro Tourism School – University Mediterranean in Montenegro. Each tourism scholar/expert was asked to provide insights in order to be able to build a SWOT table for each respective country based on their tourism expertise. The analyses of qualitative data produced a combined SWOT data which constitutes the data tank of this research. Therefore, the interviews were designed in such a way that could produce a mini-SWOT per each expert. Then, through content and thematic analysis, a unified regional SWOT was

created. In other words, the interviews were instrumental in creating the SOWT table (see table 2 in the Findings section).

From an ontological viewpoint, this enquiry relies on the interpretivist paradigm, constructivism and relativism, emphasizing the role of the observer: in this case, that of tourism experts. Hence, this study uses the qualitative methodology using the interview instrument and the methods of literature review and theory development through conceptual modelling.

The procedure of data gathering and data analysis are strictly based on the conceptual model shown in Figure 2. The sequential steps are as follows:

- a) Destination/tourism-related data gathered through the KII with the qualified experts in the region were analysed through the SWOT method. The SWOT table is the data tank of this research which supplies both sides of the conceptual model. Thus, the identification and promotion of sustainable tourism through destination brand identity and positioning is based on the SWOT analysis data which were further analysed by a sustainability framework and content analysis.
- b) Destination/tourism-related data were reshaped through the TBL (triple bottom line approach). After the data were gathered through SWOT methodology, the authors of this study classified the data into economic, social, and environmental attributes belonging to each country, obtaining a SWOT-TBL table as a result. So, the SWOT table was coloured with 3 different colours, each of them representing a sustainability dimension of each destination in the WBs region. For example, economic attributes were coloured with blue, social attributes with orange and environmental attributes with green.
- c) The construction of a unified holistic table that refers to WBs as a region was undertaken. Through a content analysis, the authors identified the common characteristics of the countries composing WBs. As a result, SWOT-TBL table representing the region was obtained. Accordingly, the previous deterministic analysis belonging to each country has been transformed into a holistic picture representing the region.

The outcomes of the aforementioned procedure are:

- i. The identification of economic, social, and environmental attributes for the creation of Destination Brand Identity, what the literature of the field refers

to as nation-built identity (e.g., culture, heritage, scenic, and so on.). Thus, for the identification of a regional sustainable tourism, identity elements were categorized into economic, social, and environmental ones

- ii. The promotion of economic, social, and environmental attributes, which are relevant for the building of a strong Destination Brand Positioning and, consequently, promote the regional sustainable tourism are also identified in the previous step.

4. FINDINGS

The research findings are displayed in Table 2. Starting with the environment dimension, the region is characterized by a variety of tourism resources. A combination of expert opinions and collections of SWOT components indicate that the region offers all aspects of tourism including 3S (sea, sun, sand), nature-based, historical and cultural tourism. Coupled with these strengths are the opportunities where a number of alternative tourism offers can be developed in the region for tourism markets. These offers include ecotourism, agritourism, adventure tourism, historical tourism and cultural tourism. The findings indicate that the regions' peoples are aware of the benefits of tourism, especially with respect to agritourism's potential.

These findings point to strong tourism potential in the region, which creates a strong argument for a sustainable tourism agenda at a regional level. Such a variety can be documented and used to create tourism products at regional level. A sustainability perspective is quite essential because findings indicate the weaknesses associated with these resources. For example, experts indicate that despite the abundance of pure water resources, these resources cannot be used in tourism service areas due to the lack of infrastructure. An associated finding relates to water and air pollution in the region, which needs to be resolved for tourism service provision. The Study findings, further, indicate the lack of harmony in tourism superstructure. Such a weakness results in difficulties in positioning because visual component of destination development seems to be missing in the region. Threats associated in the findings with the environmental component refer primarily to policy development and lack of planning due to political conflicts within countries or at regional level. Creating a sustainable agenda on environment in regional level in WBs seems to be a difficult

task because of internal and cross-country conflicts, the causes of which are deeply rooted in history (i.e., nationalistic feelings and territorial arguments).

As for the identity of the region, from an economic perspective, the most important characteristic seems to be its strategic location. Considering its peer tourism destinations as Greece, Turkey, Italy and Spain, WBs region sits on an area most tourists from lucrative European markets are familiar with. The experts which were interviewed, emphasize that the geographical location is not only a priority for the WBs but also as an opportunity for economic sustainability. In other words, by employing smart strategies, WBs can potentially enjoy a great demand from European markets. This finding is further supported by the fact that demand for WBs is increasing and region-wide tours are on the rise. Furthermore, experts identify that government spending for tourism investments and EU projects on this area are also on the rise.

Economy-related weaknesses of the region are related to poor infrastructure and superstructure for tourism supply. According to the findings, air travel opportunities are limited to the destination points and the road structure is still not ready for proper tourism activity. The lack of internationally recognized facilities, such as 5 s that would attract tourists to the region is also highlighted. Finally, economy-related threats are identified as the misuse of economic resources and authorities, due to corruption and mismanagement. Also, strong competition from more popular Mediterranean destinations is seen as a threat to the sustainability of tourism in WBs.

From a social perspective, the WBs region is characterized by cultural diversity and a hospitality culture arising from this cultural wealth. Throughout history, WBs has been a transition point, where various cultures blend and co-exist. This is also observed in the findings; local social structures that are made up of different religions and ethnic formations are an opportunity for the regional tourism. Such a strength lends itself on the possibility of creating niche tourism opportunities such as religious/faith tourism (Vargas-Sánchez and Perano, 2018; Vargas-Sánchez and Moral-Moral, 2022), ethnic tourism and educational tourism. In this regard, the region houses cultural assets for tourism (e.g., gastronomic tourism) which needs to be analysed at the regional level for a sustainable tourism agenda. The weaknesses and the threats regarding the social aspect relate to the human potential where qualified human potential either lacks adequate education or migrates from the region. Furthermore, the deterioration and,

at times, disappearance of cultural assets and artifacts are seen as important threats to sustainable tourism in the region.

		Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
REGIONAL SUSTAINABLE IDENTITY		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong 3S (sea, sun, sand) tourism resources (i.e., natural and unspoiled coastline). • Strong alternative tourism (e.g., historical, nature-based, hot-spa, mountain, health, mountain-sport) resources, gastronomic tourism with rich natural organic food. • Attractive and unspoiled nature in the mountains and coastal areas. • Unique archaeological and cultural heritage sites under the protection of UNESCO. • Concentration of a large amount of quality natural resources in just a small area/region. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of infrastructure and technology to make use of water resources (e.g., 24 hours' drinkable water supply for hospitality businesses and agriculture). • High air pollution due to carbon heating, low quality gasoline, high usage of private vehicles, poor waste management systems (lack of recycling technologies). • Elevated level of water pollution (rivers especially) with plastic and other residuals. • Lack of harmonic combination of physical infrastructure (e.g., accommodation buildings, roads, etc.) and natural environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness toward tourism development in rural areas (e.g., agritourism). • Opportunities for sustainable development of recreational and eco-tourism resources. • Potential development of agriculture for tourism (i.e., gastronomy tourism). • Growing demand for nature-based tourism and adventure programs. • Growing demand for exploring selva nature. • Ample water resources. • Strategic geographical location. • Historical tourism opportunities for regions' antiquity, medieval era, communist and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative effects of political conflicts on planning and policy development. • Risk of creation of negative environments for tourists due to local conflicts • Ineffective public administration and policy development toward nature resource conservation. • Low awareness of public with regards to environmental protection. • Unplanned construction and land devastation. • Political risk at both local and regional level.
	Environmental				

			post-communist era.	
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical position - close to European metropolises and tourism demand. • Increasing demand on tourism packages for the region. • High percentage of international tourism projects (IPA, INTERREG, ERASMUS+ CEEPUS, SUNBEN etc.). • Increasing percentage of government spending on tourism in the region. • Rising impact of tourism in GDP. • Value for money. • Flexibility of tourists to use international currency (euro or dollar) besides the national currencies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient development of road infrastructure and overall local tourism infrastructure. • Scarce access via air traffic. • Small number of beach resorts with high accommodation capacities (NB: it must be clarified that this is at the same time an environmental strength). • Inadequate tourism sector development at the local level. • Weak competitive positioning due to the lack of tourism product and service development, as well as its appropriate advertisement. • Sectoral weaknesses on seasonality. • Low service quality in tourism facilities due to the lack of strong tourism education and vocational trainings; lack of qualified labor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism demand potential due to curiosity of historical events in the region. • Development of technological infrastructure (e.g., Internet). • Establishment of DMOs for the development and support of a new system of destination management. • Opportunities to create regionally diversified tourism packages for tour operators. • Developing economies and young workforce. • Opportunities to reach strong EU markets due to geographical position. • Interest of international capital for investment in the sector of tourism. • Interest of branded hotel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political instability in the region (e.g., Ongoing regional conflicts). • Strong competition from Mediterranean destinations (e.g., Italy, Spain, Croatia, Montenegro, Greece, Turkey). • Economic instability in the region. • High levels of economic informality and corruption. • Unclear future in terms of EU integration and the risk of separatism. • Political risk at both local and regional level. • General perceptions for WBs as an underdeveloped region with poor countries.

		<p>force and low salaries.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of standards for improving service quality. • Weak institutions and difficult business environment (long legislative and administrative procedures for infrastructural investments). • Insufficient presence of branded hotel chains. • Financial constraints expressed in high interest rates on lending; inadequate loans for capital investments. • Problems with property law and excessive length of the privatization process. • High taxes for SME's. 	<p>chains for investing in the region.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentives given by the governments for foreign investments in tourism. • Growing demand for MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions) tourism. • Young population and labor force for tourism employment. • Niche tourism opportunities due to an ample tourism variety. 	
	<p>Social</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blended cultures due to a transitional nature of WBs region (a bridge between East and West). • Rich cultural tourism (e.g., rich traditions). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political issues and national conflicts. • Weak policy development for the training of employees for tourism sector. • Low level of local community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Western Balkans as a new destination for European tourist • Development of an integrated strategy for the protection of cultural heritage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threat of deteriorating cultural identity in time. • The destruction of cultural and historical heritage due to lack of maintenance or the

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of religion culture which can serve as an asset for faith tourism. • Hospitality tradition of the local populations (i.e., friendly locals). • Strong ethnic tourism (i.e., rich traditions and cultural heritage of ethnicities). • Mediterranean, oriental and European gastronomy with a strong identity of natural home-made cuisine. • Good security and attention toward foreigners (e.g., secure nightlife, no road assaults, etc.) 	<p>involvement in decision making.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image problems due to occasional safety and security problems in the region as a whole; this is not typical at the local level. • Lack of abundant public spaces for social interaction and recreational activities. • Autocratic societies with high masculinity, high power distance and low indulgence which negatively influences relationships between superiors and subordinates. 	<p>and the promotion of cultural tourism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential for creating niche tourism destination (i.e., culture, faith, and health tourism). • Encouragement of professional tourism studies in the region (i.e., study programs, professional courses). • Strong potential of society tourism (i.e., family visit tourism, ethnic tourism, peace tourism). • Strong will of locals to involve in tourism development. • Opportunities for academic collaborations with EU universities and institutions. 	<p>transformation of archeological sites into building plots.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety and security concerns of tourists (mostly as an opinion rather than fact). • Large number of experts migrating to work abroad (with brain drain consequences) and lack of HR in hospitality industry. • Continuous conflicts between local people and investors. • Very high nationalistic attitudes inside the region, which can impede development of regional tourism.
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Table 2. Research findings: regional sustainable identity.
Source: Own elaboration based on the interview data.

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to *identify* destination brand positioning strategies in order to achieve a unified image for the WBs from a sustainable development perspective. In synthesis, the main aim of this research is to propose a region (destination)-level tourism development framework for the WBs. The research proposes that WBs as an

entirety needs a “start over from scratch” approach to tourism development, due to the following reasons:

- The countries in the region went through devastating experiences in the recent past and this had a negative impact on national and regional assets and identities;
- Considering the shared past and common life experiences of the region” peoples, the WB’s identity needs to be defined and developed anew;
- A new and planned approach to positioning and image development is necessary for the countries in the region, because these countries have a blurred image in the eyes of prospective markets;
- A region (destination) level positioning and image development is currently missing, and it is necessary because the countries in the region are quite close to each other (i.e., offering regional benefits to tourists) and can only compete with strong surrounding destination such as Croatia, Greece, Italy and Turkey by taking a regional approach to sustainable tourism.

Research findings are conceptualized in a model (Figure 2) which summarizes a perspective to *identify* Destination Brand Identity and *build* Destination Brand Positioning for the WBs through a SWOT–TBL (triple bottom line) perspective at regional level. In this model, the *destination* refers to a *region*; more concretely, it refers to the Western Balkans. The model proposes that the exploration of WBs destination brand identity should be the initial action in the process. The whole process is presented within the parameters of sustainable development agenda for regional tourism. The presented conceptual framework relies on the methods of SWOT analysis and Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach. On one side, the SWOT is instrumental for gathering tourism-related data per each destination country in the Western Balkans. On the other side, the TBL serves as a tool for reshaping the data in accordance to economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

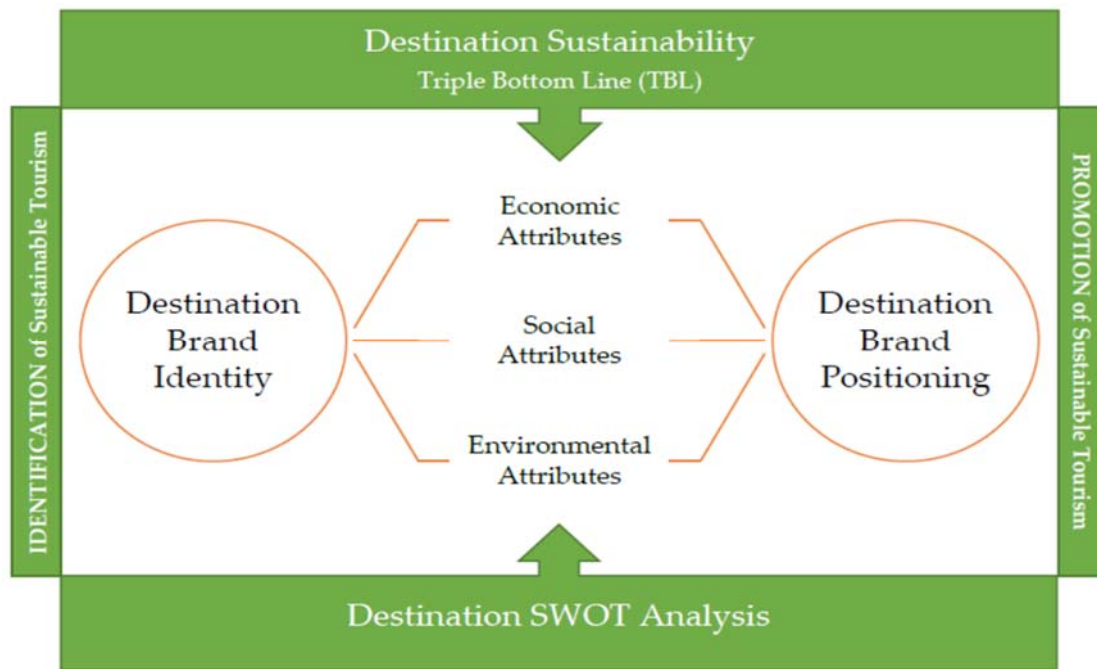


Figure 2. Sustainability – SWOT-based Destination Branding Process.
Source: Own elaboration.

The research at hand brings out several proposals. The first proposal is to start the process of tourism development in the WBs region by unearthing the regional destination brand identity. Brand identity is a precursor to destination positioning and image development (Aaker and Keller, 1990; Sani and Mahasti, 2012; Thomas, 1996; Zouganeli et al., 2012). Efforts on destination development in the WBs need to start with destination brand identity exploration. The WBs suffers from a “damaged identity” and “blurred image”, due to the conflicts that mark the recent past of the region. The five WB countries (the ones except Albania) presented in Figure 1 are offshoots of the former Republic of Yugoslavia, and they gained their independence following the war among these countries during 1990s (Duman et al., 2018). Albania on the other hand experienced turbulent times after the fall of communism, during early 1990s, a period which brought about a devastated destination image for the country. Identity problems continue even today, while all these nations must also deal with political problems, issues of national heritage, and territory ownership problems with their neighbouring countries. The obligatory renaming of one of the countries among them as “North Macedonia”, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s triple presidency system, and the ongoing issues between Kosovo and Serbia also demonstrate present national identity problems in the region. These complex national identity problems extend to tourism destination identity concerns. Hence, the negative image these issues produce affect

the potential tourist's tendency to visit WB as a single destination and jeopardize the expected benefits from tourism.

A second proposal of the paper is to take a sustainable development approach to regional tourism in the WBs. Sustainable approach to tourism development in the region is essential for the development of an improved regional image, mainly because destination assets are under threat, due to unstable political environments and weak governance. Sustainable development of tourism assets is a compulsory step to further product development and positioning efforts (Woodland and Acott, 2007; Zouganeli et al., 2012).

The final proposal is to recommend unified positioning strategies for the WBs region in order to differentiate the region in the potential tourists' eyes and compete successfully with strong regional competitors as Croatia, Greece, Turkey and Italy. Strong regional destination image is possible with strong positioning strategies of the regions' individual destinations (Kumar and Nayak, 2014; Rodríguez-Molina et al., 2019; Zouganeli et al., 2012). The current positioning efforts of individual destinations are dispersed and seems distant from creating an image for unified regional tourism offer (Duman et al., 2016; Vladi, 2014).

Findings from the qualitative research point to strong tourism potential in the region, which is a strong argument for a sustainable tourism agenda of the WB's. As tourism is considered one of the main pillars of the WB economies, also confirmed by the UNDP development agenda as a driver for sustainable development of this region, the need of a sustainable tourism agenda becomes even more eminent. On the other side, tourism ecosystem aims to create a sustainable destination by diversifying the tourism product (Vladi, 2014). Nonetheless, in order to create and also keep destinations sustainable, the promotion of sustainable tourism is indispensable. Although, prior to positioning WBs as a sustainable destination, it is important to identify the sustainability attributes or sustainable credentials (Hanna et al., 2018). Previous research confirms the importance of establishing the identity of a destination before positioning it in the tourism markets (Pike, 2008; Kapferer, 2008).

This study's initial objective was to define the sustainable regional destination identity, which is in compliance with several previously mentioned studies. Sustainable regional destination identity is a new term in the field literature which needs clarification. Considering the destination branding literature, destination brand identity

is “the brand image desired by DMO (Destination Marketing Organization)” as previously defined by Pike (2004, 2008). Regional destination defined by Frost (2011) reflects the values of the location. Applying these concepts, and the sustainability concept, sustainable regional destination identity represents the values, elements and attributes that differentiate the destination based on social, economic and environmental values.

The findings from the study indicate that WB countries possess every element that a tourist can desire, from being in a blameless geographical position to providing the tourist with unique destination offerings. Despite advantages, a strategic positioning approach is needed for the WBs to define the competitive advantage and choose a competitive market objective, as previously noted by Agic (2012).

This study’s novelty relies on the methodology it utilized. It uses the SWOT methodology for data collection and the sustainability approach to categorize the information. Building a SWOT table based on TBL (triple bottom line) approach is a new methodology in the field literature. SWOT methodology is used as a strategic framework to understand the current position of the WBs as a destination as well as to assess the sustainability of WB’s tourism. This methodology fills the gap in the literature, though, the business sector acknowledges a SWOT (sustainability SWOT) framework which helps companies to act towards environmental challenges and collaborate with stakeholders on strategies to create long term value (WRI, 2012).

The authors utilize sustainability approach to define the brand identity of a destination and suggest a brand positioning based on the sustainability attributes. Such an approach would be consistent with the study of Hanna et al. (2018) and Fjelstul (2014) who support the idea that the marketing of sustainable attributes can enhance destination competitiveness. This proposal complements the research conducted by Zouganeli et al. (2012), who consider sustainability as the involvement of local stakeholders in the marketing and management of the destination to achieve a sustainable tourism development. Hence, inclusiveness of the stakeholders in the process is a mandatory, because destination identity originates from the internal stakeholders’ lives and experiences (Morgan et al., 2004; Pike, 2004).

The findings show that WBs still hold big opportunities to create an environmentally strong destination. The strong 3S (sea, sun, sand), natural and unspoiled coastline and other touristic sites can diversify the offer of a strong alternative tourism based on

nature, mountain seaside and bio food. The growing demand for nature-based tourism and adventure programs in the region is an important finding that supports sustainable tourism development. It has been claimed that nature-based tourism is a basis for the eco-tourism motivation. Tourists who are willing to be close to nature are more motivated to preserve the environment (Luo and Deng, 2008). One interesting finding of this study shows that the region can offer unique agrotourism products. Agrotourism is confirmed as a development factor of rural areas, which have a big role in the preservation of the environment (Ciolac et al., 2017; Gronau and Kaufmann, 2010).

The Interviewed experts considered the lack of big branded hotels as a weakness due to the low levels of accommodation capacities. However, this position can also be considered to have a positive effect on branding, as the natural environment of the WBs – as a single destination - is not damaged. Indeed, considering that during the long time under the communist/socialist regimes, construction was limited, numerous touristic cities have been preserved with minimal changes, what makes room for environmentally friendly destination development. The literature of the field supports the results of this study, which considers cultural tourism as a strong opportunity for a sustainable tourism (Liang and Chan, 2018). The existence of WBs countries in the way between the East and the West has facilitated the blending of various cultures in this region. This is emphasized by the numerous unique archaeological and cultural heritage sites under the protection of UNESCO which are considered as worthy attractions for tourists. UNESCO's developmental agenda puts cultural heritage in the core of the development process (Wiktor-Mach, 2018) and promoting cultural heritage for the region may enable the development of sustainable tourism in the region.

The rationale for the present study was based on the idea of creating a unique identity based on the shared attractions of the region. The research results strong support this argument significantly. For example, Albania and Montenegro have a highly developed coastline tourism, while Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia have strong cultural heritage and nature-based tourism. Considering the region as a unique destination WBs becomes a stronger brand offering a product enhanced by diversity. The specific characteristics of each of the Western Balkan countries can serve as a strong point to complement and enrich the region's shared identity as a single destination. Bofulin et al. (2016) call for collaboration among destinations by arguing that small places with limited possibilities can join the efforts toward strong

competition. The current research findings are in line with such proposals in literature, creating further agenda of tourism development for regional authorities.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In summary, this paper attempted to highlight the importance of branding the WBs destination by putting sustainability in the centre of identity development and destination promotion. It proposed a new conceptual model for branding a region as a tourist destination founded on the SWOT-based sustainability approach. The process of branding a region with differences in tourism structure and tourism offerings can be challenging. However, literature supports the fact that different regions such as the case of the Baltic Sea area have managed to create a unique identity for their destination despite the obvious differences (Andersson, 2007).

This study offers a conceptual approach to how this process can be realized in the Western Balkans region, providing an opportunity for each of its countries to create sustainable tourism development. The authors suggest that the developed SWOT-TBL identity should be used for the positioning of the region as a sustainable destination. The proposed model is a conceptual framework for developing a Sustainable Regional Destination Brand, starting by building a WBs brand identity.

Some of the issues emerging from the study findings relate specifically to sustainable tourism literature. The findings of the current study indicate that destination sustainability should be considered as an integral element of regional destination branding. The WBs data presented in this research opens a clear channel of research for future studies which should consider destination sustainability as a factor between identity development and destination promotion. In this regard, the current research is a ground-breaking study because it discusses destination brand identity and positioning at regional level and because it does this in from the perspective of sustainable tourism. Future research studies need to analyse destination brand identity and destination positioning based on a sustainable SWOT perspective. The present study also raises the possibility of a new conceptual framework/model to be considered for further research inside WBs and beyond. Especially the relationship established between SWOT and the Triple Bottom Line model, by considering keystone branding

concepts like identity and positioning as contextualized in destination branding, would be quite useful for further studies in the field.

The model that is put forth contributes to brand identity and sustainability theories by analysing their link and consequences for regional destinations. This approach is unique in the sense that it can be applied to many destinations that suffered conflicts and which are either recovering or looking for new approaches to positioning. Many historical destinations of the Middle East and several environmental destinations in the Mediterranean can be considered in this domain. They would benefit from the practical implications of this study.

A new and planned approach to positioning and image development is offered in this study for policy makers and hospitality businesses in the WBs region. The proposed approach is necessary because these countries have a blurred image in the eyes of prospective markets, and creating stronger images and more effective marketing strategies are only possible by taking a scientific approach to tourism development. The combined framework SWOT-TBL proposed on the present study is a tool at hand for governing bodies which enhance and promote the identity of their places and the region as whole (Presenza et al., 2015). For the hospitality business, this paper unfolds an opportunity to consider regional tourism packages, also observing the sustainability goals of preserving the natural landscape and blended culture of the region.

In addition of promoting selvage nature and adventure programs, agritourism and ecotourism, the strategic location and varied history of the region also offers promotional opportunities for historical tourism, including antiquity, medieval, communist and post-communist era, for both governments and businesses. A unified WB destination identity and positioning supported by sustainability perspectives will strengthen the tourism development efforts in the region with such a perspective, the tourism offer will be easier to understand for the potential tourist and it can compete with other destinations in the continent more easily with its value offer. In other words, with such a regional identity and positioning, WBs can become a destination comparable to Greece, Italy, Turkey and even Spain. It can “steal” market share from these destinations which represent the biggest share in world tourism. Additionally, WBs destination image can help individual countries to collaborate more in EU membership efforts and serve to peace in the region. Through such a strategy,

conservation of natural and cultural resources can be possible with a unified approach among participating nations in the region.

It should be underlined that WB governments are strengthening their regional cooperation ties with their recent activities. Despite of still being a developing agenda, an Open Balkan proposal by WB countries (Cipa, 2019) indicate a search for cooperation and development at the regional level. The Western Balkans Fund and Open Balkan projects send a strong signal to local authorities and businesses for future cooperation opportunities at the regional level in the WBs, that is, with new investments in the field of VR, AI, and Metaverse, can build smarter and more sustainable destinations.

COVID-19 pandemic has damaged the tourism sector all over the world. Looking at the international tourism data, 1 billion fewer international tourists have reached any touristic destinations; thus, effective destination marketing and management strategies are mandatory in order to recover from these effects as soon as possible. The findings of this research offer strategies for the WBs to have a clear tourism development and marketing agenda for the future. However, as this study proposes, the effectiveness of such efforts will shape up only if a scientific approach to regional development is employed. Future studies should build on the proposals analysed in this study and contribute to the regional development agenda for a stronger WBs identity and positioning in tourism.

Besides the potential regional contribution, this study comes with a few limitations that are disclosed as follows. One of the study limitations can be the sample size. Yet interview-based research of this size is rightfully justified by Dworkin (2012). However, despite of the scientific support, the authors recognize this as a limitation and as an open invitation for researchers to complement this study with other research methods such as large-scale surveys. Another limitation is related with the sample selection criteria. The research relied on a convenient sampling, in order to get access to qualified experts through personal networks. The authors are also aware that other experts belonging to universities and other types of organizations could have been invited. This can be a further step to be undertaken in future studies. Finally, the lack of extensive previous research studies on the topic should also be mentioned. While this might be considered as a limitation, at the same time it was an opportunity to start exploring the topic and the methods, as well as (hopefully) stimulating the interest of

other scholars to extend the current research into real path-making and way-paving strategies.

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