Potentials of Banovina region branding through tourism and soft power by understanding local identity

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Abstract

Aimed at boosting tourism and regional growth, this study investigated Banovina, a captivating Croatian region known for its natural beauty and cultural richness. Despite its potential, Banovina hasn't yet established itself as a branded tourist destination. To understand resident perspectives on tourism and branding possibilities, the research employed a two-pronged approach. Online questionnaires gathered opinions from the local population, while semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from various Banovina institutions. This comprehensive approach provided valuable insights into Banovina's identity and potential branding strategies for tourist destination success. The study not only offers a theoretical framework for destination branding, identity, and image, but also analyzes Banovina's tourism offerings. It incorporates empirical research from the local population, interviews with relevant authorities, and a SWOT analysis to paint a well-rounded picture. The research concludes that Banovina possesses significant potential as a branded tourist destination, capitalizing on its unique cultural heritage, breathtaking natural beauty, and distinctive resources. However, challenges remain. To achieve economic prosperity and attract visitors and investors, successful branding is critical. This study provides a valuable framework and insights to guide Banovina's development as a unique and thriving tourist destination.

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[1] The paper is based on Master Thesis of Iva-Mila Brigljević under tutorship of Ass.prof. Dejan Gluvačević. The Master Thesis was successfully defended in September 2023.

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1. Introduction

Nestled amidst picturesque hills, verdant forests, and tranquil lakes, Banovina region harbors a wealth of natural beauty and cultural heritage. Despite its remarkable potential, the region remains largely undiscovered, awaiting recognition as a captivating tourist destination. This research delves into the untapped tourism potential of Banovina, exploring branding strategies to attract visitors and stimulate local economic growth.

Regional tourism, centered on promoting specific geographical areas, holds immense power to drive regional economic progress. Tourism is considered as one of the fastest-growing economic sectors, with the potential to generate employment opportunities and fuel economic expansion. Beyond economic benefits, tourism can foster positive social and cultural impacts. It contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage and traditional crafts while promoting understanding and tolerance among diverse cultures. As the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2018) asserts, "tourism can foster social and cultural exchange, contribute to education and mutual understanding, and assist in the preservation of cultural heritage and traditional crafts."

The theoretical framework establishes key concepts pertinent to the branding process of tourist destinations and presents an overview of Banovina's tourism potential. Particular emphasis is placed on the significance of regional tourism in the context of sustainable development of peripheral and remote areas (Ateljevic and Page, 2009, p. 46).

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. In-depth interviews were conducted with tourism stakeholders, including local government officials. Additionally, a survey was administered to local community to gather insights into their perceptions and experiences.

2. Theoretical frame

2.1. The importance of understanding identity and image in purpose to create attractive tourist destination

For a destination to transform into a coveted tourist haven, it must embark on the journey of crafting a compelling tourist brand. This endeavor, however, hinges on the establishment of a distinct destination identity, deeply rooted in local heritage and aspirations. By embracing its unique essence and projecting a captivating image, a destination can effectively attract and retain visitors.

In the realm of tourism, a destination's identity serves as its defining characteristic, setting it apart from its competitors and shaping its overall brand perception. As Skoko (2004) aptly asserts, destination identity is an intricate tapestry of attributes that contribute to the destination's overall image. These attributes can stem from a multitude of sources, including historical narratives, cultural expressions, geographical features, local inhabitants, and natural endowments. Collectively, they shape the destination's essence, the emotional and experiential qualities that resonate with visitors.

National and regional identities, in this context, encompass the ensemble of characteristics that define a nation or region, rendering it distinct from its counterparts. Encompassing a broad spectrum of elements, including visual, ethical, physical, cultural, and other dimensions (Skoko, 2021, p. 564), these identities form the foundation upon which a destination's brand is built.

Skoko (2021, p. 562), extending the concept of national identity branding to smaller geographical units like regions, posits that national identity serves as the bedrock for modern nation branding. Image, in this context, emerges as the reflection of this identity in the eyes of the international community. By bridging the gap between identity (who we are and what makes us unique) and image (how others perceive us), destinations can identify areas for image enhancement, with branding serving as the cornerstone of this transformative process.

Simon Anholt's (2009, p. 25) seminal concept of competitive identity has revolutionized the realm of nation branding, demonstrating its efficacy at the local and regional levels. This multifaceted framework encompasses six natural channels or elements that, when synergistically combined, foster a robust and sustainable image, embodying a holistic approach. These channels are as follows (Anholt, 2009, p. 23-24):

1. Tourism: represents the loudest channel of promotion, considering that the brand of the destination can be directly developed.
2. Products: represent products and services that come from a country or region and rely on the concept of the country of origin as a tangible value.
3. Culture and heritage: presentation of the destination's cultural achievements, but also its cultural heritage, which is also a unique feature of each destination.
4. People: celebrities, but also all other residents with their behavior in the country and abroad, and which represent an influence on the creation of the image of the destination they come from.
5. Political decisions of the government: the image of destinations is conditioned by both internal and external political decisions of the government.

6. Investments: represents the way in which investments are attracted, foreigners and students are employed.

These channels represent the "voices" that have the strongest influence on the strengthening of the state's image, since tourist boards have significant budgets and experts who know how to use tourism as a communication channel. Countries strive for branding with three main goals: attracting tourists, attracting investments and encouraging exports (Skoko and Gluvačević, 2016, p. 81).

Anholt (2009, p. 27) claims that destinations that have a competitive identity should at the same time achieve a clearer agreement on identity and social goals, create a climate in which the practice of innovation is nurtured and valued, be more effective in domestic and international tenders, promote investments more effectively, promote tourism, develop a healthier effect of the country of origin, be more noticeable in the international media, have easier access to regional and global bodies and achieve more productive cultural ties with other countries and regions.

2.2. Soft power and branding of tourist destination

Throughout history, countries shape their identity in different ways, using various sources of power and influence. Even before the emergence of the concept of branding, states were concerned about their reputation and strength. Examples are ancient Greece (culture and education), the Roman Empire (military and economic power), the Republic of Dubrovnik (diplomacy and trade) and the Ottoman Empire (military and cultural power). The goal of using these sources was positioning on a global level and strengthening influence. However, according to Nye (2012), too much power can lead to self-confidence and inappropriate strategies, as shown by the collapse of great empires throughout history.

In the 16th century, Spain dominated thanks to its control of gold, colonial trade, mercenary armies, and royal lines. In the 17th century, the Netherlands based its power on trade, capital markets and the navy. In the 18th century, France dominated a large population, rural industry, public administration, army and culture (soft power). In the 19th century, Great Britain derived its power from industry, political cohesion, finance, navy, liberal norms (soft power) and island location. In the 20th century, the United States dominated economic growth, scientific and technological leadership, geopolitical location, military strength and alliances, and universalist cultural and liberal international regimes (soft power). In the 21st century, the US has remained dominant thanks to technological leadership, military and economic power, and its role as a center of transnational communication.

The above mentioned only indicates that power and international position are not static concepts, but change throughout history in accordance with the transformations of the sources on which the identity of a certain nation is based. In this context, the concept of power is closely related to the context in which it is exercised, answering the question "Who gets what, how, where and when?" (Nye, 2012, p. 7).

As such, Nye (2012) distinguishes between hard power that relies on resources derived from military strength, political influence and natural resources, soft power that has the ability to attract and influence others through culture by spreading its ideas and values, and smart power that is in things power that combines the resources of hard and soft power.

Joseph Nye was the first to analyze the concept of soft power, defining it as the ''ability of a country to achieve its goals by attraction, rather than coercion'' (McConnell and McConnell, 2008, p.17). Soft power is a kind of counterbalance to hard power, which achieves its goals through cultural and intellectual influence (Anholt and Hildereth, 2010). Nye (2004, p. 11-12) states that soft power is based on culture, political value, and foreign policy as three essential resources, and in order to be realized, the involvement of all three resources is necessary. Given that hard power cannot be possessed by every country or destination, then soft power is an opportunity precisely for the "little ones" to use their own values, natural beauty, stable social model, culture and heritage, wisdom and worldview of people in order to create and strengthen their own power in international relations (Skoko and Kovačić, 2009, p. 33).

On the other hand, the concept of soft power also suffers from criticisms that mostly rely on the fact that soft power is too soft to be considered power because it tries to legitimize its real policies through altruistic values (Noya, 2006). In addition to the above, the criticism of soft power is also that it is sometimes difficult to determine the border between hard and soft power.

Creating a destination brand that is respectable and modern, i.e. creating a tourism brand through the affirmation and evolution of its identity on the market and external reputation, is a tool of strategic destination management. The goal of branding a tourist destination is primarily further dynamic development and economic progress and development (Bolfek, Jakičić, Lončarić, 2012, p. 366).

Branding of a tourist destination is essential for distinguishing it from other destinations and for attracting visitors. According to Pike (2015), a destination brand is "the sum of all experiences, impressions and expressions that characterize a destination". In other words, the destination brand is a combination of tangible and intangible elements that create a unique image

and identity of the destination. For successful branding of a tourist destination, it is necessary to identify and use the advantages and unique characteristics of the destination.

Another important factor in tourism destination branding is stakeholder involvement, as Morrison and Anderson (2002, p. 185) point out. The involvement of stakeholders such as local communities, tourism operators and government agencies is essential for the development of a shared vision and destination identity. This collaboration can also help ensure the sustainable development of the destination, which is crucial to maintaining the brand image over time.

Relating with the management of a tourist destination, several factors are necessary for the successful implementation of this process. Paliaga and Oliva (2021) state that by defining the identity that will be communicated and by creating an imagined image, i.e. by creating and gradually building the brand of the region, part of the process has already been completed. However, for marketers, part of the process still remains in its permanent dynamic. It is stated that "in this permanent dynamic, questions arise as to how to adapt to constant changes in the market, how to act efficiently and quickly, how to respond to new challenges, how to remain recognizable and unique, how to strengthen your position, and there remains the issue of managing the brand and the region for which is an established brand".

The goal of destination management is the continuous introduction of innovations in order to adjust the tourist product according to the interests and wishes of the market and the possibilities of the destination. The task is to connect all participants in the creation of a quality tourist product at the level of a certain destination (Vukman and Drpić, 2014). In an era of strong economic, social and cultural changes, the management of a tourist destination requires the recognition of an adequate model that can be implemented in practice, a methodology and a leading authority and organizational system for the implementation of planned projects (Bolfek et al, 2012, p. 364).

3. Banovina region
3.1. Basic information about Banovina region
Banovina is a province, that is, an area located in central Croatia, more precisely the Sisak-Moslavina County. It stretches between the Kupa, Sava, Una and Glina rivers, and borders Bosnia and Herzegovina on the southern side. It is important to mention that this area has been inhabited since the Copper Age. During the Middle Ages, Banovina was the seat of the famous Velika family Zrinski, which got its name from the town of Zrin, where their fortress was. Later, this entire region became a Military Territory with many

forts and served as a defensive belt against Ottoman attacks. The areas that were abandoned while fleeing from the Ottomans were inhabited by the inhabitants of the border regions that the Turks had already conquered. Given that part of that population was of the Orthodox faith, the ethnic composition of Banovina began to change. In the eighteenth century, Banska Krajina was placed under the administration of the ban, that is, the Kingdom of Croatia, and at the beginning of the nineteenth, it fell into the hands of Napoleon and his Illyrian provinces. At the end of that same century, it was reunited with Croatia, and during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Banovina of Croatia, it fell under the Sava Banovina. In the last century, Banovina became the focus of many armed battles and suffering (Lončar, 2014, p. 165-166).

Nowadays, Banovina is counted among the most underdeveloped regions of Croatia, which is still in the phase of post-war recovery (Lončar, 2014, p. 166). It is an area where economic and economic development is at a rather low level, despite its potential, and ethnic relations still form the basis of public debate.

The area of Sisak-Moslavina County affected by the earthquake is adorned with natural and cultural-historical heritage of international, national, regional and local importance. It is home to preserved natural areas of high biological diversity and numerous strictly protected species. Furthermore, the area has cultural-historical urban and rural units, individual historical buildings and localities, and numerous expressions and practices of intangible culture worthy of attention. Despite its great value and diversity, the heritage of this region remains unrecognized, neglected and endangered. The earthquake that hit the region in December 2020 further complicated the circumstances of preserving and using this heritage. At that time, the historic city center and numerous historical buildings suffered major damage. Moreover, due to significant changes in the living environment and circumstances, institutions, associations and communities important for the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage could not perform their activities (Čavrak, 2022, p. 155).

3.2. Tourist offer of Banovina

Banovina, a region rich in history and culture, offers visitors a unique experience. From beautiful natural landscapes and preserved rural settlements to colorful cities and various events.

Banovina boasts a rich and diverse cultural and natural heritage. The region is home to numerous historical buildings, from medieval fortresses to baroque churches and classicist palaces. Rural settlements enchant with their traditional wooden architecture and picturesque atmosphere. The natural beauty of Banovina includes spacious river valleys, hilly terrain, dense forests

and crystal clear rivers. Many areas are protected as nature parks and reserves, preserving the unique flora and fauna of the region.

Banovina is known for its numerous events that are held throughout the year in towns and villages. Chestnut festival in Hrvatska Kostajnica, Lovrenčevo in Petrinja, Zrin festival in Dvor na Una and Kraljica jezera in Topuski are just some of the popular events that attract visitors from all over Croatia and abroad.

The gastronomic offer of Banovina is rich in traditional dishes and drinks related to agriculture, animal husbandry, beekeeping and fruit growing. Local products such as milk and dairy products, fresh vegetables, meat, cured meats, brandy, liqueurs, wine, honey, cakes, jam and compote can be found at numerous local fairs and events.

Topusko, located in the heart of Banovina, is the epicenter of spa tourism in the region. The city boasts thermal springs and unique mud baths, which are known for their healing properties. The Topusko spa offers a wide range of treatment and rehabilitation services, and is especially known for the treatment of the musculoskeletal, nervous and muscular systems.

In the literature, tourist visits to places associated with death, tragedy, war, genocide and other similar events are called various terms such as "black dot tourism", "thanatotourism", "morbid tourism", "mourning tourism", "dark tourism" " and "horror tourism." These sites can include battlefields, cemeteries, tombs, former prisons, war memorials, and museums that focus on such themes. These destinations may not seem like typical attractions at first glance because they emphasize the morbid and strange, and not standard tourist content. However, it is important to recognize that a significant part of tourists is not only motivated by relaxation and entertainment, but also by the desire to discover the new, hidden and unknown. These "new tourists" want to learn, explore and experience something that is beyond mere enjoyment (Rabotić, 2013, p. 223).

In addition to the above, Banovina also offers many other activities for visitors, such as hiking, cycling, rafting, hunting, fishing, nature exploration and agritourism. The hospitality of the local population and the unique atmosphere of Banovina make it an ideal place to relax and enjoy the beauty of Croatia.

Given that Banovina is a relatively small area, there are not many tourist strongholds. The main urban and economic center is the city of Petrinja, but in addition to Petrinja there are also Glina, Hrvatska Kostajnica, Dvor and Topusko. Each of the mentioned settlements offers a different tourist offer and special features. In fact, Topusko, which can boast of spa tourism and geothermal springs, is the most relevant tourist destination at the moment.

4. Research

4.1. Research methodology

The purpose of the conducted research was to gain a deeper understanding of the opinions of Banovina residents about their area and branding opportunities. Brown points out (2017, p. 56) that "destination branding is not only about creating an attractive logo and marketing slogans, but is based on the authentic identity and experience that the destination provides to visitors". This statement emphasizes the importance of recognizing and promoting the authenticity of Banovina as a key element of successful branding. Furthermore, Kotler (2019, p. 82) emphasizes that "successful destination branding involves cooperation with all stakeholders, including local residents, tourism organizations and the private sector". Therefore, in order to create an authentic and recognizable Banovina brand, it is important to include the local community in the decision-making process, cooperate with tourism stakeholders and encourage the active participation of all relevant actors.

The primary research method used in this research is an online survey on a sample of the population of the Banovina area, and surveying can be defined as "a method of data collection in which, using a pre-prepared questionnaire, we obtain information about the characteristics of a statistical group in the form of answers to the questions" (Serdar and Šošić, 1989, p. 6). The advantages of using online surveys come from the fact that it enables the integration of the process of data collection, input, control and correction. Collecting results using an online survey questionnaire is a rational research method that has low costs and simpler data processing. On the other hand, online surveys can only reach Internet users, but even contacting such respondents is not fully supervised. All these facts result in unrepresentative samples, make it impossible to calculate the sampling error and limit the possibility of generalizing the results obtained for that sample, which points to the problem of external validity and applicability of the survey results (Dumičić, Žmuk,, 2009, p. 116).

For research purposes, the survey questionnaire was created using the Google Forms platform, which stands out for its practicality, anonymity and speed. The use of this platform facilitated the descriptive processing of the collected data. The online survey was conducted in the period from June 1 to 14, 2023, and was distributed among the residents of Banovina via social networks, i.e. Facebook and regional groups on that platform.

Another research method used for the purposes of this paper is the semi-structured interview method, which was conducted among key stakeholders in the destination. A semi-structured interview enables the generation of new ideas and questions based on the interlocutor's answers,

providing rich descriptive data about the personal experiences of the participants (Stanić, 2005, p. 33). Two short interviews with 8 questions were conducted, and the interlocutors were the director of the Tourist Board of Sisak-Moslavina County Ivana Plavec and the director of the Tourist Board of Petrinja Kristina Suppe.

The sample in survey research represents a selected group of participants from the population. It is important because it enables the generalization of results to the entire population based on data obtained from a smaller sample. Proper selection of the sample ensures the representativeness and reliability of the results. Also, the sample enables efficient data collection, reduces costs and time, and enables analysis and conclusions about the population. (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012, p. 392) There are two types of samples, which are random purposive. In this research, a purposive sample was used, in which the researcher deliberately selects participants based on specific characteristics or criteria that are relevant to the research (David, Bolšec, Šafarić, 2014, p. 219).

For the purposes of the work, the authors set one main and four subhypotheses, namely:
• Main hypothesis: The tourism potential of Banovina is insufficiently and inadequately used in the promotion of the destination.
• Subhypothesis 1: There is no clear consensus about the unique identity of Banovina.
• Subhypothesis 2: Banovina insufficiently uses natural heritage in tourism promotion.
• Subhypothesis 3: The promotion of cultural and historical assets is not emphasized enough in the promotion of Banovina as a tourist destination.
• Subhypothesis 4: Banovina does not sufficiently use new technologies in promotional communication and follows new trends.

4.2. Survey results according to the order of the questions in quiestionnaire
The questionar sample was 91 respondent as 76.9% of respondents identifying as women, while 23.1% of respondents were men.When the age factor is taken into account, a little less than 42% of respondents belong to the age group of 25 to 40 years, a little more than 36% are respondents in the category between 41 and 60 years, while the youngest and oldest group, i.e. those from 18 to Approximately 10% and 12% of respondents are 24 years old and older than 60.

Chart 1. Distribution of respondents by age
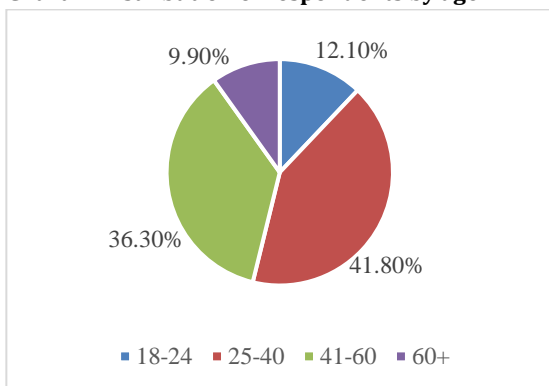
According to the level of education, a little less than 60% of the respondents have a college education, almost 40% have a high school education, and only slightly more than 3% have a specialist postgraduate study or a doctorate in science. Among the respondents, there are none whose current level of education is primary school.

In the category of work status, almost three quarters, or slightly more than 70%, are employed. About 13% of respondents are currently studying, and 7.7% are retired. Only 6.6% are currently unemployed.

There were many answers to the question "Name up to three associations with the memory of Banovina", but certain motives were repeated. As many as 28 answers contained the word "earthquake", and 16 answers contained the word "war". Of the negative motives that are mentioned several times, there are also "poverty" and "neglect". On the other hand, over 50% of the answers refer to the natural beauty, rivers, forests and other natural features of this region. The rest of the answers mostly contained characteristics of the settlement where the respondent comes from. The director of the Petrinja Tourist Board states that people from Croatia do not have a specific idea about Banovina, that is, they think it is somewhere far away or they classify it in Slavonia. He adds that the earthquake is the main association people have with Banovina, because that's when a large number of people heard about that region. He believes that the "mystification" of Banovina came from the time after the Homeland War, after which the entire area was neglected, and the traffic connection with the metropolis was extremely poor. He emphasizes that then the railway was shut down, numerous industries collapsed due to unsuccessful privatization, people were left without work and depopulation began, and there were no incentives from the top of the state for the return of people to Banovina, for economic, touristic, demographic development, encouragement and progress . To the

next question "List up to three most recognizable things on which Banovina should build its identity", about 70% of respondents answered with motives related to nature or the word "nature" itself. One of the most common answers is rural tourism, which in the answers is most often associated with gastronomy, followed by spa tourism related to geothermal sources. A noticeable number of respondents also included cultural and historical tourism in their answer and emphasized the importance of agriculture in the context of the identity of this region. The director of the Petrinja Tourist Board has a similar opinion to the local population and comments that Banovina should build its identity on the following fundamental elements: a rich, clean and untouched natural heritage that includes expanses of sweet chestnut forests, sources of drinking water and a rich historical heritage; the possibilities of active tourism such as hiking, mountain climbing, cycling and boating on beautiful rivers, all in the immediate vicinity of Zagreb; and the gastronomic experience and offer of local OPGs that stand out with products such as honey, fruit, liqueurs, brandy, sausages and cheeses. From the tourist board of Sisak-Moslavina County, they add that through previous contacts and conversations with people who do not have a place of residence in the area of Sisak-Moslavina County, they found out that reactions to the Banovina area are mostly positive, and most of the contacts highlight the already mentioned cultural-historical and natural heritage. On the third in a series of open questions, "What would you say is the main tourist potential and advantage of Banovina compared to other tourist destinations in the area?" almost 80% of respondents mentioned the natural resources of this area (rivers, forests, mountains, overall nature). As in the previous answer, geothermal springs in Topuski and culturally and historically significant locations were found in a large number of answers, and even 11% of answers mention the proximity of the capital Zagreb.

In a series of questions, the answers to which will be discussed below, the respondents were expected to mark the statements with a number from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates complete disagreement and 5 complete agreement. The first in that series of questions read "From 1 to 5, evaluate to what extent you think that Banovina uses new technologies in the tourist promotion of the destination".

Chart 2. Opinion on the level of use of new technologies in the tourist promotion of the destination
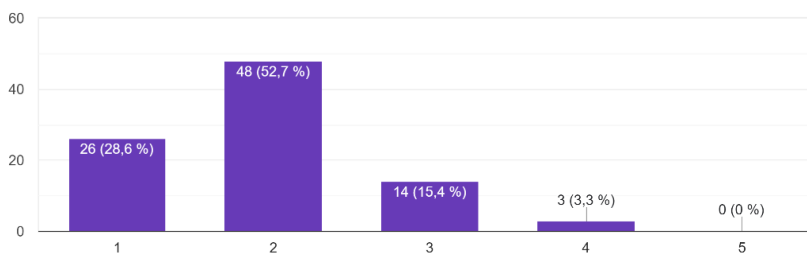

Based on the presented graph, the majority of respondents believe that new technologies are used little or even very little in the promotion of Banovina. Not a single respondent fully agrees that Banovina uses new technologies to a large extent, while only three respondents express a positive opinion. Respondents were asked to explain their answers, and the most common comments were that it is difficult to find information about events, that websites and social networks are confusing and that there is no updated information, that there is a lack of interactivity, and that the need to invest in promotion is emphasized. The director of the Tourist Board of Petrinja did not agree with the majority opinion of the respondents, at least in the context of the largest city in the region, and asserted that the Tourist Board of the City of Petrinja publishes information about events in the city daily on its website, Facebook page and Instagram. He mentions that for all manifestations, apart from online advertising, they print jumbo posters and B2 format posters and flyers, and that they cooperate with the media, both at the local and national level, and from this year they include bloggers and influencers in the promotional content. The director of the Tourist Board of the Sisak-Moslavina County believes that modern technologies are used, but that it is still necessary to increase visibility on social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, as well as other lesser-known networks. He states that Tourist

Boards were founded with the aim of managing the destination according to the principle of destination management, and one of the tasks is the promotion of the destination.The next question sought to answer the extent to which respondents believe that Banovina follows new trends in promotional communication in tourism, and more than 80% of respondents thought that promotion is done very poorly. Not a single respondent thought that the promotion was carried out well, and only 5% of the respondents said that Banovina was being promoted solidly. About 15% of respondents were undecided. The Director of the Tourist Board of Sisak-Moslavina County comments that each destination develops its tourist offer based on and in

accordance with the strategies of local and regional self-government units, the Republic of Croatia and the European Union. He mentions that the tourist offer is always in accordance with the peculiarities of each region individually, and that tourists choose destinations for vacation and stay in accordance with their needs.

Graph 3. Opinion on following the latest trends in promotional communication in tourism
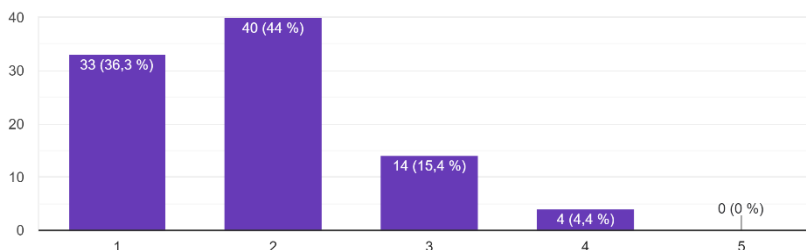
When it comes to the potential of the Banovina area, the majority of responses ended up at the positive end of the graph. About 35% of respondents agree with the possibility of achieving the tourist potential of Banovina, while slightly more than 25% of respondents fully support this idea. A large number of respondents, about 23%, were not sure of their answer, while about 15% of respondents expressed a negative opinion about the tourist potential of Banovina.

Graph 4. Respondents' opinion on the potential of Banovina as a successful tourist destination during the next 10 years
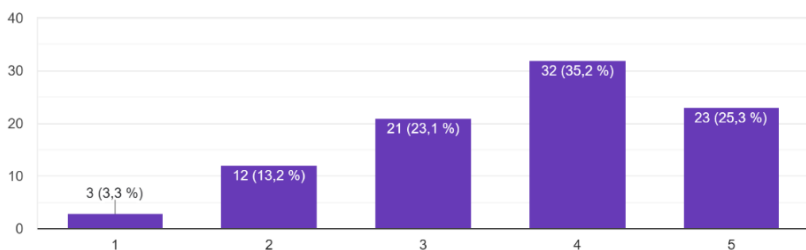

In the explanation of the previous question, the respondents stated that Banovina has great potential due to its proximity to the capital, but that there is a lack of long-term investment in tourism in order to generate sustainable income. Another comment emphasizes that Banovina has a large forest and water wealth that can be used for sports, recreation and relaxation tourism, and that there is an unused potential in this sense. It was also pointed out that

the combination of ecotourism and family trips to nature, especially for the population from Zagreb looking for an escape from the city, would be extremely attractive and potential for the development of Banovina as a tourist destination. One respondent emphasizes that Banovina has great tourist potential, but that significant and targeted investments are needed. It is stated that it is important to explore the potential of hot springs, restore the railway connection, extend the highway, organize the purchase of agricultural products, improve agricultural production, protect Pounje from floods, and build and put into operation recreational and tourist facilities on the Una. Also, there are skeptical voices who emphasize that the process of rebuilding Banovina after the earthquake and other events will take time and that the revival will not be quick. The Tourist Board of Petrinja claims that Banovina still does not have all the necessary tourist infrastructure, but they emphasize the increasing number of accommodation capacities and OPGs. They believe that connection, networking, better, stronger, i.e. wider promotion is necessary.

The respondents had to give their opinion on the topic of the industry that would be the best for the area under investigation, that is, they were asked whether they think that tourism is the best industry for the promotion and prosperity of Banovina. The largest number of respondents, or about 37%, agreed with the statement that tourism is the best industry in this context, about 20% completely agreed, while almost 21% of respondents were undecided. Over 20% gave a negative answer and gave preference to other industries.

Chart 5. Respondents' opinion on tourism as the best industry for the promotion and prosperity of Banovina
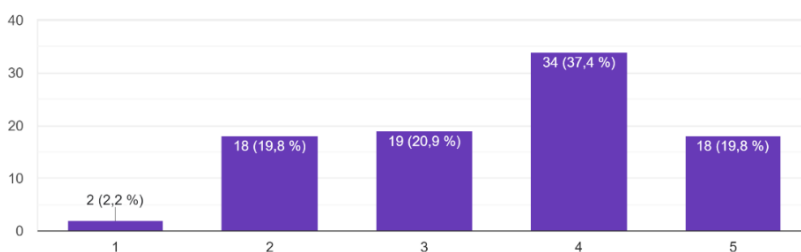

When it comes to potential industries and activities that could contribute to the prosperity and promotion of Banovina apart from tourism, there are more than a few suggestions and thoughts presented by the respondents. One of the proposals is to return to the village, to agriculture and animal husbandry as the first source of income. Encouraging small family farms, automating processes and making life easier on these farms would be key factors.

Tourism would be an upgrade there, enabling the placement of local products on the market and connection with the tourist offer. The second proposal highlights the wood industry as a potentially important sector due to the large number of forests in Banovina. Using wood resources in accordance with sustainable principles can create new jobs and stimulate economic growth. The restoration of railway traffic is also mentioned as a contribution to the development of the wood industry and tourism. The renewal of the railway network can enable attractive train trips through nature, especially for school trips. Ecological production is also mentioned as a possible industry that can contribute to the development of Banovina. A focus on a sustainable and ecological approach in agriculture and production can attract consumers and open up new market opportunities. The food industry with opportunities for cooperation with the local population also stands out. Encouraging small businesses and providing more favorable conditions for entrepreneurs can contribute to the development of the food industry and the promotion of local products. Furthermore, the production of special products based on the specific knowledge of the local population, such as arable crops, animal husbandry, the metal industry for the development of new materials, the wood industry, the chemical industry and renewable energy sources, is also mentioned as a potential industry with an emphasis on final products.

The director of the Petrinja Tourist Board mentions the major disasters that have befallen the region, from the Homeland War to earthquakes, as the main reason why Banovina is still not a strong brand. He claims that it is difficult to develop tourism and the economy after such tragedies, which certain regions in Croatia have never experienced, but have developed in every respect. The Director of the Tourist Board of Petrinja believes that Petrinja has the potential to use the post-earthquake story as part of its identity and suggests that an Earthquake Museum be developed in the town, which would display the testimonies of residents and the stories of the help they received.

In the series of questions that followed in the questionnaire, the respondents had to rate from 1 to 5 how strong potential certain resources are for the promotion of the destination, a rating of 1 indicates a very weak potential while a rating of 5 indicates a very strong potential. Natural beauties, with over 90% of positive responses, took the leading position in the context of the strength of the potential for the promotion of this destination. Only 5.5% of respondents do not have a good opinion about this resource.

Graph 6. Respondents' opinion on the strength of the potential of natural beauty
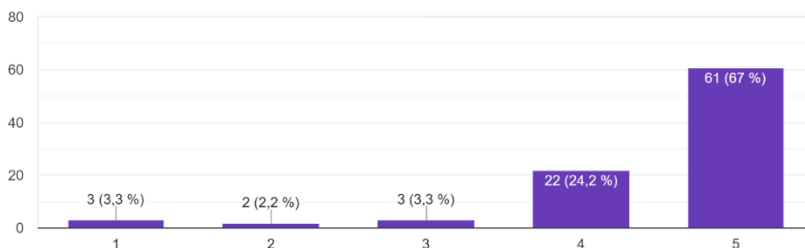

Cultural-historical heritage is also a convincing asset of Banovina according to the respondents with even slightly more than 80% of positive responses, of which 44% consider this a very big potential. Not a single respondent thinks that the potential of cultural and historical heritage is extremely weak. The director of the Tourist Board of Petrinja agreed with the interviewees, who emphasized that recently there are also cultural routes around Banovina, such as Thematic Paths around Hrastovačka Gora or Camino Banovina, the pilgrimage route Put St. Jacob. He adds that Banovina is an area with an extremely rich and turbulent history that should definitely be used to attract guests. The Director of the Tourist Board of Sisak-Moslavina County also highlighted Camino Banovina as a tourist product that can also develop religious tourism in this area.

Graph 7. Respondents' opinion on the strength of the potential of cultural and historical heritage
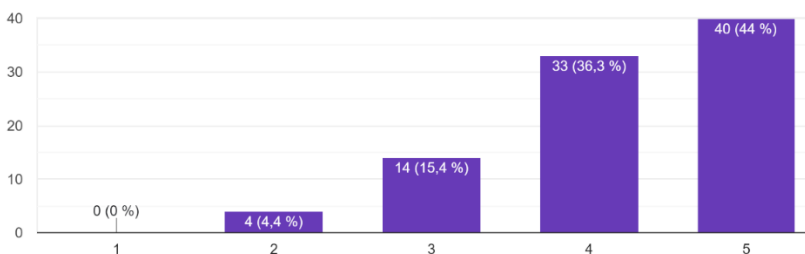

Gastronomy as a resource also occupies a high position in the eyes of the respondents. Over 35% of respondents consider this a very strong potential, and almost the same number consider it a strong potential. About 20% of respondents are undecided, and only about 9% consider gastronomy to be a weak or very weak potential.

Graph 8. Respondents' opinion on the strength of the potential of gastronomy
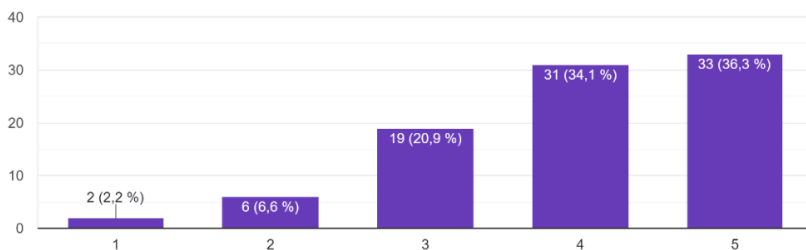

Sport is very important in the lives of the people of Banovinaija, as confirmed by the respondents. About 40% of them believe that sport has a strong potential, and almost 20% see it as a very strong potential. So, a total of about 60% of respondents have a positive attitude. As many as 30% of respondents are undecided about sports, and 11% consider this a weak or very weak potential.

**Graph 9. Respondents' opinion on the strength of the potential of sport**
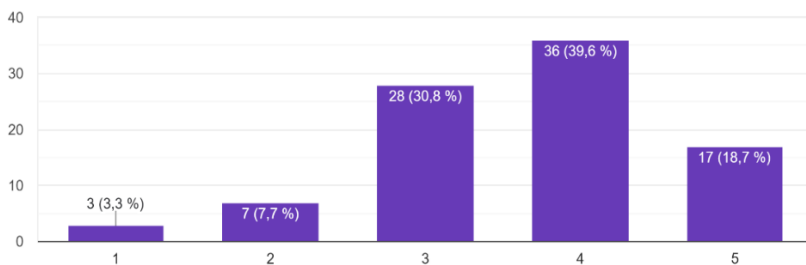
The lifestyle and quality of life were the last items to be evaluated in terms of potential. The answers for both items were very similar, but there were still differences. In both cases, slightly more than 30% of respondents are undecided about their answer, and although in the context of lifestyle there are still more of those with a positive attitude (about 40%), there is also a very large number of those with a negative attitude (about 25%). On the other hand, when quality became the key word, a large number of respondents moved to the negative side of the graph (approximately 35%), and 34% remained on the positive side.

Graph 10. Respondents' opinion on the power of lifestyle potential
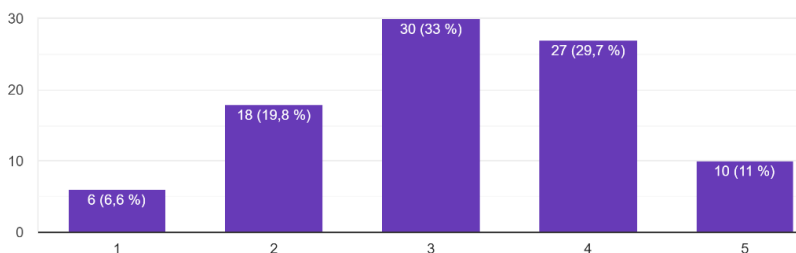
Graph 11. Respondents' opinion on the strength of the quality of life potential
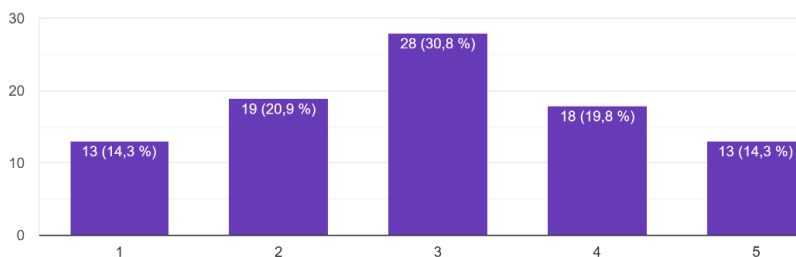
4.3. Discussion

The goal of this research was to find out the views of the local residents of the Banovina area on how their area can be highlighted as an attractive tourist destination. 91 people from the mentioned area, more precisely from one of the 5 possible settlements, participated in the research; Petrinja, Glina, Hrvatske Kostajnica, Topusko and Dvor and their surroundings. For the purposes of the research, it was necessary to generalize the answers so that the conclusion about the branding of Banovina as a tourist destination could be as comprehensive and general as possible.

The main hypothesis that claimed that the tourism potential of Banovina is insufficiently and inadequately used in the promotion of the destination turned out to be completely true. The respondents cited natural beauty, cultural heritage, gastronomic offer and geothermal springs as the greatest tourist potential of Banovina. However, they highlighted the lack of promotion of these aspects of the destination. They also suggested that the visibility of Banovina should be improved at the national and international level, through a stronger presence on the Internet, social media and tourist fairs.

The first subhypothesis, which claims that there is no clear consensus about the unique identity of Banovina, has been refuted. According to the majority of respondents, Banovina is perceived as a region with untouched

nature, rich history and culture, and excellent gastronomy. Considering these characteristics that the respondents recognized, it can be concluded that there is actually a strong consensus about the unique identity of Banovina. Respondents generally believe that the combination of natural wealth, history, thermal springs and proximity to Zagreb is sufficient for the tourism success of this region.

The second sub-hypothesis claims that Banovina insufficiently uses natural heritage in tourism promotion. Most of the respondents expressed that Banovina has an exceptional natural heritage, including untouched landscapes, mountains, forests, rivers and lakes. However, they pointed out that these natural resources are not sufficiently used or promoted enough to attract a larger number of tourists. The respondents indicated several possible shortcomings in the promotion of the natural heritage of Banovina. Some pointed out the lack of quality marketing efforts. They also noted a lack of information about natural attractions, hiking, biking, or other outdoor activities that proves this hypothesis correct.

The third sub-hypothesis was fully confirmed, the majority of the respondents believe that Banovina is almost not promoted as a tourist destination, and they mostly cite its rich history and cultural heritage as a great potential in tourism. Lack of investment in marketing activities, insufficient information of people about cultural events and poor presence on social networks can be key factors contributing to this result.

The last sub-hypothesis refers to the assumption that new technologies and trends in tourism advertising are insufficiently used in communication with the public. The population believes that it is very difficult and complicated to get relevant information related to local events and manifestations, some state that websites are outdated and unreadable, and some mention that social networks are completely neglected by tourist boards and authorities.

The conclusion of the conducted survey on the attitudes of the population of Banovina on its potential as a tourist destination points to several important facts. First, the research results showed that there is a significant interest among the residents of Banovina for the development of tourism in their area. Most respondents recognize the natural beauty, cultural heritage and other resources of Banovina as potential attractions for tourists. Secondly, the importance of investment in infrastructure, promotion and marketing activities is recognized in order to realize the tourism potential of Banovina. Respondents emphasized the need to improve road connectivity, build quality accommodation facilities and promote local attractions and events. Third, it is important to point out that the inhabitants of Banovina are aware of the value of preserving the natural environment and cultural

heritage. There is general support for sustainable tourism that respects natural resources and local community traditions. The results of this survey emphasize the need for further research and elaboration of concrete strategies for the development of tourism in Banovina. The involvement of the local community, relevant investors and experts will be key to the successful realization of the tourist potential of this area.

4.4. SWOT analysis

According to the author Gonan Božac (2008, p. 20), strategic factors for the future of the company are external and internal factors that are analyzed in a SWOT analysis, which can be an excellent and quick tool for analyzing the situation and preparing for the development of (tourism) strategies. It is essential for all destinations to know and be aware of most events that may represent greater or lesser strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats for them (Paliaga, 2010, p. 7). In the table below, the authors presented the situation in Banovina in the context of its current strengths and weaknesses, but also opportunities and threats for the future development of Banovina as a tourist destination, through a SWOT analysis.

Table 1. SWOT analysis of Banovina according to survey results

STRENGHTS	WEAKNESSES
Natural beauty of the region Varied gastronomic offer Thermal springs and wellness centers Rich cultural events and manifestations that promote local culture Geographical position and immediate proximity to Zagreb	Insufficient involvement of young generations in the process of planning and organizing the activities of cultural institutions Infrastructure damage due to recent natural disasters Insufficient development of tourist infrastructure Lack of marketing activities to promote the tourism potential of the region
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Applying for projects from EU funds Favorable conditions for hunting tourism Presence at tourism fairs Cooperation of local tourist boards in the area of Banovina Encouraging investment in the restoration and preservation of cultural heritage Possibilities for developing different forms of tourism	Slow process of reconstruction of the region after the earthquake in 2020. Unpredictable natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods Negative media influence or bad reputation of the region Depopulation of the population Limited support from local authorities and lack of tourism strategy

Banovina has several weaknesses in tourism development, such as insufficient involvement of young people, damaged infrastructure, lack of tourist infrastructure, lack of marketing activities, insufficient connectivity of rural areas, lack of use of cultural resources, lack of funds and lack of

maintenance of cultural heritage. However, through proper management, these weaknesses can be turned into opportunities, and opportunities into strengths. Involving young people and encouraging their participation in decision-making and organization, infrastructure renovation, development of tourist infrastructure, connectivity of rural areas and asphalting of roads, increased online presence, use of cultural resources, seeking financial support from the state and EU funds, and preservation of cultural heritage would eventually transform this region became the strong forces of Banovina, and tourism would probably reach an enviable level. With a comprehensive approach and cooperation of all stakeholders, Banovina can achieve sustainable and successful tourism development.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the potential of Banovina for branding as a tourist destination was studied. The research aimed to understand the attitudes of the local population and identify the obstacles facing the region. Analysis of the results reveals that Banovina has a rich cultural and historical heritage, beautiful nature and resources such as gastronomy and thermal springs that have the potential to attract visitors. However, the region faces challenges such as insufficient transport connectivity in rural areas, slow recovery after a devastating earthquake, and a lack of research on the needs of tourists. Also, insufficient utilization of EU funds and depopulation represent additional challenges. Key steps for the further development of tourism in Banovina include investing in events that attract a wider audience, especially young people who go the most, encouraging rural tourism and local OPGs, and developing a clear tourism strategy. Also, faster reconstruction, investing in marketing, creating a visual identity based on research, and improving the connectivity of rural areas are extremely important. This paper provides a theoretical framework for destination branding, identity and image, analyzes the tourism offer of Banovina and brings insight into the attitudes of the local population through conducted surveys and interviews with relevant people in power. The SWOT analysis gives an insight into the advantages and disadvantages of the region, which can serve as a guideline for further development.

In today's context, the branding of Banovina is extremely important for realizing its tourist potential and stimulating the economic development of the region. Through successful branding, this small area in central Croatia has the opportunity to highlight its qualities, thus creating a recognizable identity and image that will attract visitors and investors. Branding enables the region to stand out from the competition on the tourist market and attract the attention and affection of the target audience. Through the development

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of a tourist offer based on cultural and historical heritage, natural beauty, gastronomy and thermal springs, Banovina can offer very authentic experiences.

Branding also provides an opportunity for economic development of the region through investments in infrastructure, creation of new jobs and business opportunities for the local population. A strong brand enables the long-term sustainability of tourism, increasing the number of visitors, prolonging the stay of tourists and encouraging local economic development. In addition, it promotes pride and identification of the local population and encourages cooperation between the public sector, the private sector and the local community in order to develop the region together. In conclusion, creating a brand is a key tool for promoting the region, attracting tourists and investors, and realizing the prosperity of Banovina as a tourist destination.

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