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Nation Branding in A Transnational Marketing Context: Serbia's Brand Positioning Through Food and Wine

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Abstract

Food and gastronomic values of a country are distinguished assets in marketing places. The aim of this article is exploring the ways in which Serbia rebrands itself through promoting the local food and culture and positions the nation brand in a transnational marketing context. The key concepts for this research originate from the literature in place marketing and branding. The gastronomic offer is an instrument shaping people's perceptions about Serbia that is represented and communicated through values, narratives and manifestations. Accordingly, semiotics is adopted for analysing the data, which builds on three levels: axiological, narrative and discursive. Content analysis is used as a supportive method to infer meanings from codes and to determine emerging themes overarching the units of meaning. The tourism marketing strategy of The National Tourism Organization of Serbia (TOS) is closely examined through the touristic promotion materials (i.e. catalogues, posters, Soul Food video). In sum, the analysis results reveal how the country branding strategy of Serbia is handled in terms of the impact on the perceptions with a focus on food as a tourist attraction. The research is valuable for place-marketers, strategists, governments, and scholars from different fields of academia.

Keywords: Serbia; nation branding; transnational marketing; brand image; food tourism.

Introduction

Branding a country requires a systematic approach towards creating and communicating value proposition for positioning the brand image attached to long-term oriented goals (Rakita and Šipragić, 2014: 50). Assumingly, it can be easier to achieve this for the countries of political and economic stability and prosperity. Whereas, Serbia was subjected to negative media propaganda of the war crimes in addition to the turbulences and uncertainties brought by the transition simultaneously affecting the countries in Central and Eastern Europe

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(CEE). Consequently, Serbia seeks, not only re-branding the country in a highly competitive environment, but also creating a reliable and favorable image by integrating territorial efforts towards establishing “sustainable transnational thematic tourism products” promoted by European Commission (EC).

Szondi (2007: 9) argues that nation branding became a strategic goal for governments of CEE countries during the late 1990s. Consequently, National Tourism Organization of Serbia (TOS), the successor of Tourist Association of Serbia, was founded in 1994 with the aim of promoting and improving tourism, developing marketing strategies and enhancing the image of Serbia.

This article starts with a theoretical background on place marketing and place branding by focusing particularly on brand positioning. Following this section, research approach and details of the methodology adopted for this study are provided. We then present and discuss our findings, focusing on the projected image; an imagined journey through food; and manifestation of the brand image as a melting pot of different flavors.

Concepts – branding places

The literature on place marketing has evolved around different subject areas, in which different terms can be, and they are, often used interchangeably. Skinner (2008) discusses the problematic use of terminology, particularly caused by the blurred lines between place as a product brand and place as a corporate brand lead to certain level of complexity in this framework. Although, making such clarification on the place marketing and all the related phenomena is beyond the scope of this study, we take careful steps in clarifying our approach and methodology to build our analytical framework accordingly by providing justifications.

Marketing, branding, advertising and promotion are all different but intertwined concepts merging into the process of communication as the common denominator. Therefore, the study frames the key concepts by concentrating on the communication strategies in which communicating the brand image plays a key role. Ward and Gold (1994: 2) focus on the promotional activities and define “place promotion” as “the conscious use of publicity and marketing to communicate selective images of specific geographic localities or areas to a target audience”. In this vein, Skinner (2008: 923) suggests the term “place branding” in connection with the promotional activities of a place, which is “contextualized in the domain of marketing communications, marking the place with a distinct identity in the minds of various target groups targeted by the incorporated place, from an inside-out approach, assuring the place’s multiple stakeholders, in partnership, manage and communicate the place’s brand identity to the wider world as they wish it to be presented”.

The definition of place encompasses geographically a country, region or city, whereas the term destination is used popularly in tourism. Ritchie and Ritchie (1998) define destination brand as “a distinguishing name and/or symbol intended to identify the destination and to differentiate it from

competitive destinations”. Accordingly, the fundamental goal of destination branding is to achieve differentiation and resonance in the field of representations (Wang, 2013).

Whilst destination branding in tourism studies has been vastly approached from demand-side perspective by focusing on perceived image of a destination by the consumers, strategic communication dimension of place marketing requires a careful approach on the supply-side by investigating the processes such as image-making and communicating the image (Giannopoulos et al., 2011). Kapferer (1997: 28) recognizes brand as an external factor, as a sign, “whose function is to disclose the hidden qualities of the product which are inaccessible to contact”. Brand image communicates the strong, favorable, and unique associations to the consumers through “direct experience, brand information, word of mouth, assumptions of the brand itself -name, logo-, or with the brand’s identification with a certain company, country, distribution channel, person, place or event” (Keller, 2003: 70).

Branding a destination, and more specifically positioning brand of the destination, includes coherent product differentiation and market segmentation strategies to create the desired image. The aim of positioning is influencing how the images perceived, thus positioning the desired image in the minds of the people (Ries and Trout, 1981). Mental structures play a central role in the perception of images. According to Espelt & Benito (2005: 777), “knowledge, impressions and values based on a series of perceptions” are influential in the formation of mental structures. They are constructed either through the physical experience, senses, and feelings, or through images and narratives (Carr et al., 1992: 233). Whether as a result of personal experience or not, we have a certain image in our minds about a particular place, which Gunn (1988) calls “organic image”. Therefore “induced image” (Gunn, 1988), created and promoted by DMOs, is built as a new layer on top of the existing image (Echtner and Richie, 1991). Communication (message) is essential to influence public opinion. Giannopoulos et al. (2011) draw the context for destination branding at national level, where the Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and National Tourism Organizations (NTOs) are key players as the tourism policy-makers.

Nation branding is relatively a recent term and emerging area of interest, whilst having lack of clear conceptualization. Anholt (2007) highlights the notion of enhancing image and reputation of a country and therefore increasing its competitiveness in his definition of nation branding. The Anholt- GfK Nation Brands Index (NBI) serves this aim by providing a measurement tool for understanding how the image of a country is doing on the global level through the “nation brand hexagon” composed of people, governance, exports, tourism, investment and immigration, and culture and heritage (Anholt, 2005). Szondi (2008) discusses the conceptual similarities between nation branding and public diplomacy, while Anholt (2007) adopts a “synthesis of brand management with public diplomacy” towards drawing a model for enhanced

national competitiveness to attract tourism, trade and investment. In this framework Giannopoulos et al. (2011) elaborate on the tourism aspect pertaining to nation and destination branding as intertwined concepts.

This article takes tourism at its core, while recognizing the role of communication and public diplomacy in supporting the enhancement and promotion of sustainable transnational thematic tourism routes and products in the European framework through cross-border cooperation.

Kerrigan et al. (2012) suggest that the ideas of nation-ness and cultural plurality should be reconsidered when launching destination-branding campaigns on an international platform. When the country brand is politicized, it becomes an instrument of governmental hegemony. Although the national political discourse is inclined to stress national values in creating a “pure Serbian” identity, purity and homogeneity are not quite welcomed in an increasingly transnationalized marketing environment (Sirkeci, 2013). On the contrary, diversity is celebrated by UNWTO as “a catalyst for building understanding, and fostering social inclusion”, which was emphasized through the theme of World Tourism Day (WTD) in 2009.

Context - food and wine as transnational tourism products

Food plays an important role in place branding as a component of the overall country image. Accordingly, communicating the brand image of Serbia takes the meaning of food as a tourist attraction at its core, and describes Serbia’s gastronomic offer with a linkage to myths, narratives and historical roots. The richness of Serbian cuisine has found its way to the branding strategies through the “Soul Food” campaign by The National Tourism Organization of Serbia (TOS) with the purpose of combining food from different regions of the country into a unique gastronomic offer. On the official website of TOS (www.serbia.travel), gastronomy is emphasized through a variety of traditional dishes and recipes, in addition to history and culture. In 2012, TOS launched a new thematic campaign for the touristic promotion of Serbia called “Soul Food” by putting the gastronomic offer at the forefront.

The territory encompasses environmental and landscape values, history, culture, traditions, the countryside, the sea, as well as the original cuisine of the place. In this regard, the conversion of the territory into a culinary landscape is one of the challenges of tourism destinations (UNWTO, 2012). Gaztelumendi (2012: 11) asserts, “destinations must articulate a credible and authentic narrative of their food tourism offerings”.

Hall and Mitchell (2006) cite the following advantages of culinary tourism for a region – “increased demand for agricultural and food products and culinary specialties, creation of brands, direct insight into and local distribution of consumption as well as the protection of intellectual property rights”. According to the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance (OCTA, 2015), a non-profit organization that consults on F&B-themed tourism development worldwide; *“Food tourism is any tourism experience in which one learns about, appreciates,*

and/or consumes food and drink that reflects the local, regional or national cuisine, heritage and culture."

The concept of brand experience is linked to "experience economy" coined by Pine & Gilmore (2011), while offering a broader idea of "experiential marketing" (Wang, 2013). Ritchie and Ritchie (1998: 103) highlight the dimension of experience in defining destination branding, which "serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience". This argument can be closely linked with food experience and gastronomy from the tourism perspective. Food and cuisine have always been an important part of most travel experiences, whereas the concept of traveling to a destination specifically for its F&B product is a relatively recent mainstream consumer trend. According to the Global Report on Food Tourism, based on a survey conducted among the UNWTO affiliate members, 88.2% of respondents consider gastronomy as a strategic element in defining the brand and image of a destination (UNWTO, 2012). In this framework modern consumer society is defined by the changing nature of consumption habits for "all goods and services that are promoted as generators of pleasant experiences" (Čomić & Vičić, 2013: 15). Čomić & Vičić (2013:15) describe tourism as "hunt for experiences" in this sense.

As a result of the connection between food and culture, stereotypical codes about an authentic ethnic/national cuisine and culinary tastes also emerge rightly or wrongly (Montanari 1994: 110–116). Such stereotypes, directly or indirectly, strictly or loosely, impact upon the "culinary imaginary" (Duruz 1999: 98). The fantasy element is a part of this imaginary formed by representations of food and eating. The travel narratives play a crucial role in bringing image to life as well as transmitting it. Kostova (2003) gives the example of writings of Victorian travelers about Balkan cuisine between East and West influences. In symbolic terms, Vienna represents the "Western boundary", and Istanbul delineates the "Eastern boundary" creating the hybrid character of Balkan cuisine and eating habits, which was not however appreciated by the Victorian ideology and discourses (Kostova, 2003). Whereas the diversity and transcultural identity of Balkan cuisine has been favored by the contemporary marketing discourse as a mark of richness and commonality through the cultural identity and shared meanings. Djurdjevic (n.d.: 155) notes that "the same dish, albeit sometimes with different names, appears in Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Albanese, Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish or Romanian gastronomy as witness of a long cultural interchange, practiced despite religious, ethnic or linguistic differences". At the socio-cultural level, food and eating structure a system of values, regulations and beliefs that is linked to social hierarchies and power relations (Kostova, 2003: 22). In this manner cuisine is not only a part of cultural identity, but also a matter of national pride.

On the other hand, Mintz (1996: 114) argues that "national cuisine" is a "self-contradiction", which cannot be limited by the borders. As the culinary practices transgress the borders, it is more appropriate to use the term "regional

cuisines” as a part of a single country or a larger area involving more than a country such as Balkans (Bradatan, 2003: 43-44). Duvnjak et al. (2014: 212) gives South Serbia as an example of typical Balkan cuisine influenced by of different “Balkan peoples” (Bulgarians, Turks, Greeks), and often characterized by barbecue (*roštilj*) and the rivalry between two cities - Niš and Leskovac. The other food and beverage products are stuffed red peppers, stuffed wine leaves/cabbage (*sarma*), corn bread with sour cream (*prjaja*), a variety of pies (*burek*), šopska salad and various fruit brandies called *rakija* (plum, apricot, quince, pear) (Duvnjak et al., 2014: 212).

Culture is the set of behaviors, knowledge and customs that shape a society and on which a sense of belonging is based. The design of any food tourism offering will not be viable if it does not take into account the cultural characteristics of the territory (Gaztelumendi, 2012). The link between the locality and cultural practice structures the cultural topographies of food as well as the meanings of eating.

Research Design

This article tackles with the ways in which brand image of Serbia is created and communicated through food and wine within the framework of transnational thematic tourism products. An exploratory research design is adopted to understand correlational and cross-cultural characteristics of the phenomena. This suggests an interpretative research based on critical approach to the data rather than being largely concerned with the conceptual domain of theory testing. We opt to employ a hermeneutic approach in which representations, signs and language are the means of symbolic meaning created that communicate the country image based on food as the common denominator of values, narratives and representations.

The process of image-making is critical for research rather than the process of reception where a large set of data can be collected and analyzed for the statistics of the audience. That is why this research refrains from repeating the type of image studies done by place marketing organizations via large surveys of the perceptions of the audience. In addition, the meaning is evaluated according to context in this research, in which quantitative methods might fail to offer insightful approach. Semiotics is employed in reading images in accordance with the research question investigating how meaning is created (rather than what the meaning is). The processes, actors and discursive practices affecting the ways of meaning making and representing are explained through contextual framework to provide a concrete basis for the findings of the analysis.

A Framework for Semiotic Analysis - Brands as signs

The methodological framework of this study builds on approaches mainly influenced by Greimasian structuralist semiotics and post-structuralist theories of meaning such as visual rhetoric by Groupe μ (1992) and theory of codes by

Eco (1976). Whereas, Floch (2001) and Semprini (1992) are the two notable scholars, who applied semiotics into marketing research with a focus on brand identity and image that constitutes the backbone of the analytical framework of this study. According to Semprini (1992), the brand, through images, tells a story. The identity of a brand is “the resultant of this complex play of interaction and transformation.” It is true that the brand and its identity consist of a multitude of discourses. It is thus clear that the determination of the identity of a brand is through the workings of the multiple discourses.

Brand is a sign that consists of signifier and signifieds the units of meaning (Rossolatos, 2012: 5). Yet, the semiotic model by Greimas (1987) has shifted the focus from signs to semiosis – process of signification. Accordingly, this research focuses on the communication aspect of branding. In this regard, communication is interplay between codes and signs, while the codes are embedded in a system of rules given by culture. Floch (2001: 2-4), underlines the role of context, in which signs derive their value for the apprehension of meaning in real-life situations through communication of social practices. Accordingly, semiotics is an appropriate analytical tool to tackle with how meaning is created rather than what meaning is.

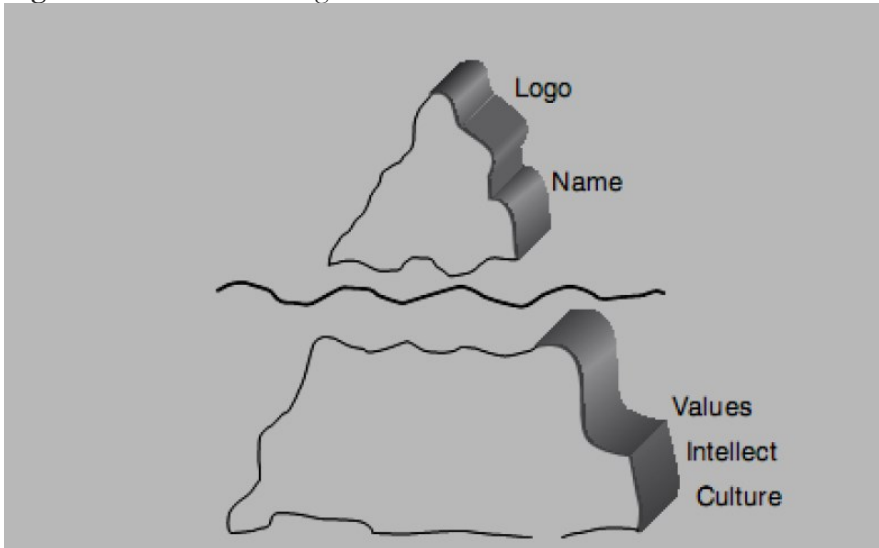
Everyday meanings and practices are interconnected to the codes created in the texts and messages given by the media, inherent in the branding and imaging strategies. In this respect, content analysis is used in this research as a supportive analytical tool in order to operationalize semiotic constructs in the analysis of narrative content and social representations. The reductionist nature of content analysis allows obtaining a manageable data to be coded. Codes lead to emergent thematic patterns for the inferences to be drawn from parts representing the whole. The official promotion posters by National Tourist Organization of Serbia (TOS) are coded and analyzed to explore emerging themes used in tourism promotion campaign. Calculating the frequency of occurrence is useful to spot repeating ideas and therefore to form overarching themes in the data with an aim of focusing on broader patterns and integrating coded data with the emerging thematic groups.

Semiotics may make or break a brand depending on the perceptions based on the cultural codes (Alden et al., 1999). Codes are important and they generate signs. Eco (1976: 49) states that, “codes provide the rules which generate signs as concrete occurrences in communicative intercourse”. In this sense, codes are where semiotics and social structure and values connect. Thurlow and Aiello (2007) explain this phenomenon by the symbolic value tied to cultural convention of signs, in other words the value of a brand is determined by its context (Rossolatos, 2012: 8).

As a matter of fact, meaning occurs beyond the visible components of the brand image, such as logo and name. Invisible components such as values, intellect and culture form the essence of signification (see Fig. 1). Beyond the official discourse, culture and everyday life shapes our cooking and eating practices (Bradatan, 2003: 43). The ingredients, the order of the meals and “the

etiquette of eating” are the building blocks of a cuisine (Goody, 1982: 151). The brand image of a country is often simplified in terms of this “label” concerning the food products or etiquette of eating, however this is the only visible part of the image. The deeper level of meaning is tied to cultural associations.

Figure 1. The brand iceberg



(Source: Davidson, 1997 cited in De Chernatony, 2006: 11)

Greimas and Courtés (1979) define semiotics as a theory of signification that occurs both “higher and lower levels than the sign”. On the lower level, the structural “atomization” of signs into semantic components form “semes”; while on the higher level, textual units form semantic entities. This research employs codes and themes referring to lower and higher level of semantic field.

The “generative trajectory of meaning” (Greimas, 1979: 134) describes discourse production process from fundamental to more complex structure (see Table 1). The fundamental structures are found at the deep level, while chain like narrative programs are at the surface level. The discursive structures are formed by surface structures through the process of localizing narrative in time and space by connecting abstract themes with concrete figures.

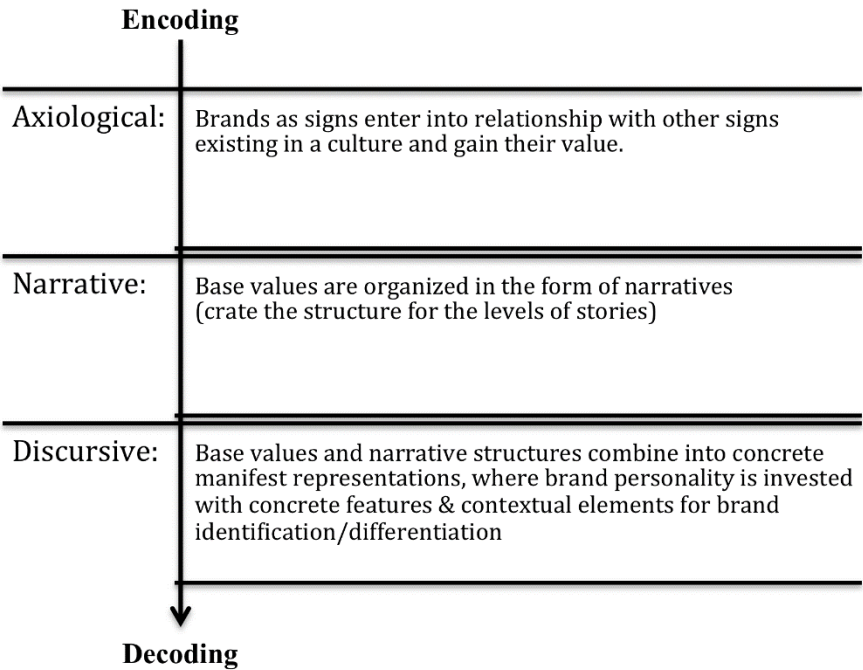
The analytical framework of this study adopts the semiotic model for brand identity by Semprini (1992), which is threefold (as in Fig. 2). Encoding and decoding is added to this structure to mark the communication process. When talking about brands, visual representations play an important role for making the brand more communicational through clear and unique messages. The term visual culture tells us about how images look and how they are looked at. Hall (1973: 12) emphasizes the role of communication in advertising practice through visual signs and their meaning based on “connotational positioning”.

The effectiveness of the message depends on “complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioral consequences” as a result of the decoded meanings (Hall, 1980: 130). Although Greimasian structuralist semiotics concentrates on the encoding in making the brand image, this study adopts the communication as a matter of signification process between encoding (creating codes) and decoding (interpreting codes). In Figure 4, the arrow showing the flow of communication from encoding to decoding is added on the three-level structure.

Table 1. Greimas’s generative trajectory
(Source: Greimas and Courtés, 1979: 134)

	Syntactic component		Semantic component
Semiotic & Narrative structures	Deep level	Fundamental syntax	Fundamental semantics
	Surface level	Surface narrative syntax	Narrative semantics
Discursive structures		Discursive syntax	Discursive semantics

Figure 2. Analytical Framework based on Semprini’s model for brand identity



The first level of analysis is in search for values shared in the community towards food, which makes the identity of a place. Therefore, this stage of

analysis is directly correlated with brand equity by describing the emotional, practical and logical dimensions in assessing the overall brand value, in which semiotics is applied to decipher intended meanings. The core values are organized to pass on the next level building up the narrative sequence.

The second level of analysis interprets stories, myths, narratives are told about a unique place through food based on contextual meanings. This is the step in which meanings at the deep level start being visible and communicable creating a story about the brand. Consequently, brands gain competitive advantage by differentiating themselves by transmitting functional attributes as well as emotions to make the brand more appealing (Fog et al., 2005).

The third level draws on the phenomenological account of perception as the research intends to reveal how the communication of the messages or signs (communication of brand) creates an impact on the people's perceptions or everyday meanings.

Findings and Discussion

The Projected Image

The gastronomic wealth possessed by Serbia is reflected on the "Soul Food" theme on the basis of geographical identity as well as protected regional products. The tourist events at certain locations and times of the year are also projected as a part of the tourism offer to attract visitors and to transform the projected image into a real experience. The natural beauties and cultural assets are emphasized in connection to food drawing routes for visitors, where they can enjoy different activities, food being the centre of attention. How the food varies throughout the country is explained by the influences of neighboring countries and the historical accumulation through the cultural exchange.

The brochure of Soul Food includes images, which are the same visuals shown on the posters. Among the 25 posters, 5 of them stand out as they are directly related to food. These are categorized as the authentic products of geographical places. For instance, Zlatibor is promoted through meat products (ham) as "Zlatibor specialties". The images do not only show pictures of food but also practices related to food and drinks such as grape harvest. The anchorage between the verbal and visual text signify the meaning. For instance, the plums as the visual text symbolizes the "plum fair" which is signified through the verbal text on the poster. Similarly, the image of wine bottles does not only acknowledge wine-making tradition, but also wine routes. While "healing herbs of Vojvodina" is connected with the nature, which is shown abundantly in the posters providing a typical look of the landscape.

The local people are often visualized working in the fields and producing food, or wearing traditional clothing. Probably it is not common to see people in old clothing style in the real life, which makes it into a floating signifier between past and present highlighting the continuation of traditions. In the promotional images nothing is shown that belongs to the modern life, big cities, global technology empires.

The posters communicate the image of Serbia predominantly through cultural heritage including monasteries, mosques, and castles and Roman ruins in the form of tangible cultural assets. Natural reserves and National parks are also examples of protected areas. The intangible cultural heritage is signified through the traditions such as clothing, rug weaving as well as the music. Guca Trumpet Festival has entered into the official promotion discourse as one of the posters by TOS.

Images play an important role in the choice of a destination to visit, while the visitors are in search of the projected image to be the reality. This link between the mental images and the real experience is vital in order to achieve consistency in branding strategy and maintain repeat visits (OCTA, 2015).

An imagined journey through food and wine

It is observed that the regions in Serbia are emphasized through their cultural traditions and well-known food products. Organic food emerges as the core idea within the Soul Food theme as the umbrella term. Yet, there are two separate brochures printed by TOS, one for “Soul Food”, and the other for “Organic Food”. Both of them have the same type of organization focusing on regions and their specialties – Western Serbia, Central Serbia, Eastern and Southern Serbia together, and Vojvodina region located in Northern Serbia. Organic food is stressed through “organic farming principles” and “green revolution” against chemical farming. While organic food is a crucial component of Soul Food theme, Soul Food draws a holistic experience based on the values and emotions, not only telling about organic farming tradition and good quality of products, but also passion about healthy eating, sensual and cultural desires, while recognizing culinary practices as an art form.

The brochures by TOS are also organizing the touristic experience by drawing routes as a common denominator. “Serbian Wine Routes” display it through the wine regions by providing information on “where to stay” and “what to eat” through the recommendations of accommodation and restaurant facilities, contact of wine cellars and other type of touristic activities for sightseeing. The information on the wine routes is gathered together through local tourism organizations of each region, and organized slightly different than soul food and organic food. Here the wine regions step forward rather than their location in the western or southern Serbia and else. A special theme is created for each of them, which is listed in Table 2.

Roman tradition in winemaking and the long history appears as a common theme, while it is stressed through “Roman treasure” for Knjazevac region. The old historical roots of harvesting and wine making as well as drinking are celebrated through festivals and fairs, while the tradition is continued by mostly small family businesses. Historical and geographical features come first for branding. For some regions the themes stress historical importance such as “Roman treasure” and “Royal wines”, “Grapewine capital” (Kruševac was capital city of medieval Serbia) whereas for others the emphasis is on geographical features such as sea, hill, sands, capital, Danube, and so on.

Table 2. Serbian Wine Routes

Regions	Themes	Key branding concepts
Palic	“Wines from Sands”	Prehistoric Pannonian Sea and sandy terrain, ancient winemaking heritage (2000 years), agricultural school, export, grape-picking days
Fruska Gora	“In the Reflection of the Danube”	Ancient winemaking heritage back to Romans, uncrowned wine capital of Serbia (Sremski Karlovci), export, nearness to Danube and climate, Groždzebal (grape ball)
Vrsac	“Sea of Vineyards”	Long-history of winemaking, the largest vineyards of Austria-Hungary in the past, ethnic diversity, hilly terrain,
Smederevo	“Golden Hill”	Historical importance for winemaking tradition, export, Smederevo Fall event (wine competition and medieval knights’ parade)
Oplenac	“Royal wines”	Winemaking during medieval ages, King’s Cellars
Negotin	“The Rajac Pimnice”	Winemaking tradition back to Romans, export through Danube, unique pimnice, first agricultural school in Serbia,
Knjazevac	“Roman Treasure”	Roman archeological site (Timacum Minus), ancient winemaking tradition back to Romans, Museum of Viticulture and Winemaking, ethno park, smoked ham, wine and cheese fair,
Zupa	“Grapewine capital”	Centuries long Serbian winemaking tradition, monasteries, “Serbian Champagne”, wine as the symbol of the rich and the powerful, hilly landscape, Zupa Harvest Festival

Serbia: A melting pot of different flavors

By bringing together different geographical regions and their specialties, TOS tries to show the richness of the country through a multi-dimensional communication model. When the posters are looked at one by one, they stand for the locality they represent either through monuments or landmark structures or through tradition and values associated with the local culture. When the posters are together they combine into a unique whole representing image of Serbia composed of different parts like drawing a network. If we think it as a semantic network, the towns can be the nodes and the how they are represented can be the links in the whole branding communication of the

country. Whereas, food appears as the underlying concept linking all nodes through Soul Food theme.

While Serbia opts for imaging the country on the basis of authentic types of food and cuisine classified by regions, it could be even more advantageous to carry out marketing campaign in a wider regional area throughout the Balkans and historical ties with Austria-Hungarian, Turkish influences and so on. The idea behind is simply because food is the product of a shared culture, somewhat that could not be completely nationalized at the level of deeper meanings attached. Nonetheless, speaking politically, this is a problematic issue within itself, especially when it is concerned that cuisine is “national pride” for countries. “Country of origin” is a similar term that plays an important role in the perceptions.

On the other hand, collective culture and history has a unitary role for regional marketing strategies. Belgrade, the capital city, enjoys this accumulation to the fullest extent, while attracting the highest number of visitors to Serbia. Therefore, it is possible to expect that Belgrade should be at the forefront of marketing activities. However, Belgrade is hardly ever part of the food marketing discourse of Serbia. One of the main reasons is that, the marketing discourse focuses on organic food and agriculture, an authentic village life rather than big cities and urban life.

Conclusion

This study contributes to place marketing research based on two aspects: food as a touristic attraction in positioning the brand image, and transnational. In this study, we are not suggesting a panacea for branding Serbia, as we assume there is not a unique formula and supposedly it will take dozens of years of hard work and concentration to see results. The point of emphasis in this study is, however, conveying a consistent and representative image of the destination, which is the key marketing activity of any tourism office at the local, regional, national and/or transnational levels.

The historical and cultural values are common to tourism marketing. Yet, the attractiveness of country image is not solely based on historical richness and cultural diversity, further to that experience plays the key role in shaping the perceptions. TOS draws closer to brand Serbia as a country of good food and hedonistic experience (indulging oneself with pleasures of eating) through Soul Food campaign. The diversity of tastes of different regions from North to South, and from East to West can be resembled to a repertoire. The important thing from the perspective of branding is actually vocalizing (communication), more than the repertoire.

The importance of regional cooperation can be understood better from this perspective. Serbia must benefit from increasing tourism in the region by attracting visitors and providing them pleasant experiences. The positive images play a crucial role in the attracting visitors to a country and vice versa. Pleased visitors help to disseminate this positive image based on their experiences.

Serbia claims this experience to be a hedonistic one through pleasures of eating and drinking as well as an authentic one by mingling with rural culture and traditions. Food is a tempting concept, which connects well with the so-called hedonistic and authentic value proposition. It is also highly likely that the familiarity with the host culture creates self-confidence in visitors. They know what to expect and what to go for. It basically feels like home. Yet, it is another place and a different experience away from home. The diversity on the discursive level should be actualized making Serbia into a real melting pot of different flavors. The theme of fusion cuisine sounds like the right approach in presenting the blend of cultural and historical values.

It can be argued that Serbia seeks to generate a country image consisting of a mix of brands connected through food. A country, which has a lot to offer something for everyone, is different from a place where everyone can find similar things to other places. When the emphasis is on diversity, this sounds like a clever strategy, however the desired image cannot be generated if this network turns into a tangled web. The result will be a dispersed image, which does not make a clear statement about the country as a whole. The golden rule of branding, whether it is about place or product, the message should be simple, unique and consistent in order to position the projected image in the minds of the people effectively and efficiently. Taking short-cut to branding through copy-paste formulas from successful brands often fail in achieving long-term results and a lasting image.

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