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PROJECTED AND PERCEIVED DESTINATION IMAGE: THE ROLE OF POSITIONING AND VISIT EXPERIENCE IN DESTINATION IMAGE AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTION

DOCTORAL THESIS

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THE ROLE OF POSITIONING AND VISIT EXPERIENCE IN
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PROJECTED AND PERCEIVED DESTINATION IMAGE: THE ROLE OF POSITIONING AND VISIT EXPERIENCE IN DESTINATION IMAGE AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTION

ABSTRACT

The development of the tourism industry is significantly important for numerous countries. Nevertheless, in a progressively competitive market, countries aspiring to boost tourism must cultivate positive perceptions of their countries as an appealing tourist destination. Both concepts of projected image and perceived image of the destination are involved in accomplishing this task. However, there is little understanding of how the interaction between destination awareness and perceived destination image affects tourism behaviour in emerging countries in Balkan region. The objective of this study is to fill this knowledge gap by focusing on Albania, as the central country/destination of analysis. To direct this research, a framework was created using the awareness /image /behaviour hierarchy model.

This research specifically examines:

1) The relationship between destination awareness and perceived destination image, encompassing three components: cognitive image, affective image, and overall image.

2) The relationship between destination awareness and the likelihood of engaging in a specific behaviour towards a particular place.

3) The relationship between the cognitive, affective, and overall image components and behavioural intention.

A series of investigations was conducted to examine the relationships between destination awareness, destination image, and sources of information, which are believed to influence behavioural intention were tested using data from an online sample of Balkan travellers residing in German speaking countries.

Structural equation modelling was employed to analyse the data separately for two groups: all sample and visitors of Albania. The results of this study largely support the hypothesized relationship for majority constructs. While destination awareness impacted all components of the image, and behavioural intention, cognitive and affective components of image impacted behavioural probability, the overall image had no effect.

The findings of this investigation predominantly supported the hypothesized relationships for the majority of constructs. Destination awareness had a significant influence on all aspects of the image, as well as behavioural intention. The cognitive and affective components of the image influenced the likelihood of certain behaviours. Conversely, the overall image did not have any effect.

The results indicated that Balkan travellers of the German speaking market hold a favourable impression of Albania as a touristic destination. More precisely, Germans possess a more favourable image and have greater tendency to engage in positive behaviours when compared to Swiss and Austrians.

This study contributes to the existing body of tourism marketing literature by examining the relationship between the fundamental elements of destination image, namely cognitive and affective image, destination awareness, within the context of a developing destination in the Balkans and Mediterranean region. The findings of this study suggested further research, including the reimplementation of this study with different samples and by considering destination awareness and other variables as a mediator between destination image and behavioural intention.

IMAZHI I PROJEKTUAR DHE IMAZHI I PERCEPTUAR: ROLI I POZICIONIMIT DHE EKSPERIENCES NE IMAZHIN E DESTINACIONIT DHE QËLLIMIN E SJELLJES

ABSTRAKT

Zhvillimi i industrisë së turizmit ka rëndësi të konsiderueshme për shumë vende. Megjithatë, në një treg ku konkurrenca është gjithnjë në rritje, vendet që synojnë të nxisin turizmin duhet të zhvillojne një imazh pozitiv për vendeve tyre, si një destinacion tërheqës për turistët. Idetë e imazhit të perceptuar dhe të projektuar të destinacionit janë të përfshira në përmbushjen e kësaj detyre. Ekziston një mungesë informacioni në lidhje me mënyrën se si ndërveprimi midis ndërgjegjësimit për destinacionin dhe imazhit të perceptuar të destinacionit ndikon në sjelljen ndaj turizmit në vendet në zhvillim në rajonin e Ballkanit. Objektivi është të mbushet ky vakum i njohurive duke u përqëndruar në rastin e Shqipërisë si destinacion. Në mënyrë që të arrihet ky objektiv studimor, është hartuar një kornizë e cila përdor modelin hierarkik të ndërgjegjësimit/imazhit/sjelljes.

Ky kërkim shkencor shqyrton konkretisht:

a) Marrëdhënien midis ndërgjegjësimit të destinacionit dhe imazhit të perceptuar të destinacionit, duke përfshirë tre komponentët: imazhin kognitiv, imazhin afektiv dhe imazhin e përgjithshëm.

b) Marrëdhënien midis ndërgjegjësimit të destinacionit dhe gjasat për tu angazhuar në një sjellje të caktuar ndaj një vendi të caktuar.

c) Marrëdhënien midis komponenteve të imazhit kognitiv, afektiv, të përgjithshëm dhe angazhimeve të sjelljes ndaj destinacionit.

Gjatë këtij studimi u realizuan një seri hulumtimesh për të shqyrtuar marrëdhëniet midis ndërgjegjësimit të destinacionit, imazhit të destinacionit dhe burimeve të informacionit, të cilat besohet se ndikojnë në qëllimin e sjelljes ndaj këtij destinacioni.

Studimi përdori të dhënat nga një anketë në panelin e udhëtarëve që kanë vizituar balkanin dhe që janë rezidentë në vendet gjermanisht-folëse. Të dhënat u analizuan duke përdorur modelimin e ekuacioneve strukturore (MES) për të dy grupet; i gjithë kampioni dhe vizitorët e Shqipërisë.

Gjetjet e këtij hulumtimi mbështetën kryesisht marrëdhëniet e supozuara për shumicën e konstrukteve. Ndërgjegjësimi i destinacionit kishte një ndikim të rëndësishëm në të gjitha aspektet e imazhit, si dhe në gadishmërinë e sjelljes . Komponentët kognitivë dhe afektivë të imazhit ndikuan në probabilitetin e sjelljeve të caktuara. Nga ana tjetër, imazhi i përgjithshëm nuk pati ndonjë efekt. Rezultatet treguan se pjesëmarrësin në studim kanë një opinion të favorshëm për Shqipërinë si një destinacion turistik. Në mënyrë specifike, gjermanët kanë një imazh më të favorshëm dhe kanë tendencë më të madhe për t'u përfshirë në sjellje pozitive në krahasim me zviceranët dhe austriakët.

Ky studim kontribon në literaturën ekzistuese të marketingut të turizmit duke shqyrtuar marrëdhënien midis elementëve themelor të imazhit të destinacionit, më saktësisht imazhit kognitiv dhe afektiv, ndërgjegjësimit për destinacionin, brenda kontekstit të ndërtimit të një imazhi destinacioni në rajonin e Ballkanit dhe të Mesdheut. Të dhënat e këtij studimi sugjerojnë studime të mëtejshme, si përsëritja e këtij studimi me mostra të ndryshme dhe përfshirja e ndërgjegjësimit të destinacionit dhe variabla të tjerë si ndërmjetës midis imazhit të destinacionit dhe qëllimit të për ta vizituar.

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To summarize, this dissertation is a collaborative endeavour, and I am appreciative of every person who has contributed to this academic journey

DEDICATION

"To my father, in loving memory''

'*'Who mostly believed in me but did not see this dream come true.*"

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this PhD Thesis, titled: "*Projected and perceived destination image: the role of positioning and visit experience in destination image and behavioural intention.*", is based on my original work except quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that this thesis has not been previously or concurrently submitted for the award of any degree, at Epoka University, any other university or institution.

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Sonila Çela

Date: February 2024

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1. INTRODUCTION

In an environment of open trade, when the world has turned into a huge market, the competition of countries and nations has increased leading to the creation of a new competition dimension. Countries are competing in every level, in trade, tourism, education and sports. And most developed countries with a high brand index rating manage to attract tourists, investments, human capital, and even excellent students. In the meantime, other countries take action to strengthen their image and achieve a sort of position in a globalized market. Governments spend considerable amounts of money on advertising and promoting their countries abroad.

The attempts of almost every country, especially the governments of emerging countries along with other entities like National Tourism Agencies, to promote their destinations for more tourists have recently intensified. Nevertheless, they don't focus only on the the promotion of tourism but also on increasing the image of their destinations, in order to attract more investments in various sectors. Recently, the literature on the attraction of tourists and investment (foreign direct investments) has increased. Rehmet & Dinnie, (2013) state that "In today's globalized world, places, nations, regions compete even more intensely in attracting competitors (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013; Vuignier, 2017).

Tourism is widely recognised as a crucial catalyst for the global economy, both on a global scale and for particular countries. Multiple research and data from the World Travel and Tourism Council confirm that the Travel and Tourism sector is a crucial driver of economic development. According to the data from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), a significant number of individuals work in the tourism business. This sector is ranked third in the world in terms of the production of significant jobs. The same is true for, Albania, where, as indicated by the WTTC data, the tourist sector provides 24% of the employment opportunities (or one in four individuals).

The UNWTO World Tourism Board has documented a substantial increase in international tourist arrivals globally, with the most notable gain of 7% recorded in 2017. The increase was particularly remarkable for emerging destinations, like Albania. Reports from multiple sources worldwide indicate that there was a 4% surge in international tourist arrivals in 2019, reaching a total of 1.5 billion. Although a notable growth was noticed in 2019, it was considerably slower compared to the impressive rates observed in 2017 (+7%) and 2018 (+6%).

The upward trajectory was disrupted by the COVID-19 shutdown, during which several destinations depended solely on domestic tourism, while attempting to regain pre-pandemic levels. The most recent global tourism statistics indicate that foreign tourist visits are projected to reach 88% of the pre-pandemic level by 2023, with a prediction of reaching the same level as 2019 by 2024. (UNWTO, 2024). However, the figures indicate that Albania experienced a significant increase in international visitors in 2022, surpassing the data of 2019 (INSTAT, 2023).

In the race to regain pre-pandemic levels and attract a larger number of tourists in this fiercely competitive industry, both country governments and tourism organisations are constantly creating marketing strategies and activities to promote their destinations as desirable locations to visit. They are constantly striving to establish their presence in the worldwide market, with their main goal of promoting and positioning their country with various locations and cities in the minds of international travellers.

Based on current observations, it can be concluded that Albania, like other developing countries, has consistently made efforts to promote its attractions and provide a framework for tourist growth. More precisely, Albania's focus until 2005 was mostly on coastal tourism and, to some extent, tourism centred around cultural assets. Over the past decade, mountain tourism and adventure tourism have been incorporated into a structure for tourism development. Indeed, Albania has consistently referred to countries like Turkey, Greece, and Croatia as benchmarks for tourism development. Nevertheless, it is essential for Albania to construct a unique model for the development of tourism that considers its distinct resources and distinctive attributes, recognising the fact that each country possesses its own distinct qualities.

It should also be noted that countries are not solely competing for tourism but also in other areas. Globalization has transformed the world into a vast marketplace, where countries engage in competition across several domains such as exports, tourism, foreign direct investments (FDIs), and human capital (Marmier & Fetcherin, 2010). Countries are actively implementing marketing and branding tactics to differentiate themselves on the international stage, with the goal of attaining a competitive edge over their competitors. The underlying assumption is that a strong national brand can contribute to the sustained development and stability of a country (Fetscherin, 2010; Chaulagain, Wiitala, & Fu, 2019; Lourenção, Giraldi, & Oliveira, 2020).

The significant impact of Travel & Tourism on the global GDP has pushed numerous governments to intensify their endeavours in enhancing their brand index. A nation possessing a robust brand index possesses the capacity to allure tourists, foster a surge in exports, attract foreign investments, and thus attain economic expansion. The Boom Consulting Group annually publishes a brand index that evaluates countries based on their performance in two categories: tourism and trade. Albania has been placed as the 29th country out of 42 European countries in the 2022 brand index rating for tourism, showing an improvement of one position compared to the previous year (Blomberg, 2023). In terms of trade, Albania is ranked 32nd, seeing a decline of one position compared to the previous year. Albania's performance in tourism surpasses its performance in trade, although it faces intense competition from other countries, particularly in European destinations like Italy and Greece leaving behind only Western Balkan Countries.

In light of intense rivalry, the development of new strategies that aim at strengthening Albania's global brand image, particularly in the domains of tourism and economic development is vital.

Given the significant impact of travel and tourism on the global GDP, as well as on individual countries, the concept of destination branding has gained considerable significance over the past thirty years. The rise in competitiveness has garnered the interest of researchers and the tourism industry. Conversely, governments of countries that compete for higher tourism and foreign investments have intensified their endeavours to promote their destinations. Currently, there is a growing body of research and literature on destination branding that has attracted significant attention due to the increasing competitiveness in the

tourism industry. Scholars such as Pike & Page (2014), Cronjé & Plessis (2020), Molinillo et al. (2018), and Filieri et al. (2021) have contributed to this field (Pike & Page, 2014; Cronjé & Plessis, 2020; Molinillo, Liébana-Cabanillas, Anaya-Sánchez, & Buhalis, 2018; Filieri, Yen, & Yu, 2021). Additionally, country branding is recognised as a crucial strategy for a country's sustainable development, as highlighted by (Fetscherin, 2010).

Yet, the establishment of a strong brand for countries and the implementation of effective destination marketing techniques to attract tourism can be quite challenging. Tourism is a sector that provides services, with its products being primarily focused on delivering experiential encounters. This presents a challenge for travellers in assessing the appeal of a site, as their travel choices are typically influenced by the image and perception rather than the actual truth. However, prior to establishing a brand for a location, it is essential to cultivate a distinct and well-defined identity.

Obviously, the task of establishing a strong brand and employing efficient strategies to attract tourists can be extremely daunting. Tourism is an industry that offers services, with its focus being on providing immersive experiences. This poses a dilemma for travellers when evaluating the attractiveness of a destination, as their travel decisions are usually influenced by the image and perception rather than reality. However, prior to establishing a brand for the destination, it is crucial to develop a unique and well defined identity (Crockett & J.Wood, 2004). This involves determining what the brand will represent and express the values of the area, also highlighting the destination's strengths and personality. To achieve success in destination branding, it is necessary to establish a distinctive and unambiguous identity that captivates and amplifies the desires of the targeted client segments. The specific identification enables and supports a long-lasting distinction of the destination (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Merrilees, Miller, & Yakimova, 2021). The necessity of a unique identity comes as a need to be differentiated from competitors and positioned in people's mind (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009; Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio, Campo, & Molinillo, 2020; Shafiee, Foroudi, & Tabaeeian, 2021).

The rise in competitiveness has forced the branding of Albania and the creation of new strategies to promote Albania's image in the global arena, encompassing both the tourism and economic dimensions. Therefore, it is imperative to clearly establish the brand's identity and understand the sources that contribute to the brand's identity, taking into account its

strengths and weaknesses (Chernatony, 1999). The literature on destination marketing acknowledges that the image and personality of a particular country are crucial in differentiating it as a unique destination among numerous other options. The process of destination branding involves the formation of identity, construction of an image, communication, and positioning it towards the intended visitors (Mishra, 2010; Pike, 2008; Chen & Shih, 2019)

The scholarly literature agrees that in the current era of internationalisation, the development of a coherent country branding strategy and the development of a strong and positive country image, both internally and externally, are crucial tools for competition between economies (Jenes, 2012). Therefore, in order to effectively compete with other countries, Albania must take decisive actions to establish itself as a highly sought-after destination in the global tourism market.

Taking these into consideration, this research aims to examine Albania as a tourist destination and assess the perceptions of Balkan travellers from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland regarding Albania as a tourist destination. Through a preliminary examination, the projected image of Albania will be analysed and afterwards, it will be evaluated considering the attributes of its identity. This will be accomplished by a thorough examination of literature and an exploration of marketing theories, encompassing branding, promotion, marketing communication, destination branding, and destination image. The study's findings and impacts can serve as a valuable resource for developing marketing communication strategies aimed at promoting Albania as a destination brand in the German-speaking market. The objective of this study is to make a tangible impact in the research domain and serve as a benchmark for future academic research and government entities in formulating policies and strategies to enhance the global perception of Albania. The results of this study could have practical consequences for industry professionals in developing policies and strategies for promoting the destination to the German-speaking market.

1.1 Research Problem and Purpose of the Study

Destination branding is considered complex phenomenon by most tourism and destination marketing researchers. Given that the majority of tourist offerings consist of services rather than tangible things, their ability to compete relies solely on the reputation and perception

of the area they are associated with. Therefore, it is crucial for a place to have a favourable reputation and image in order to effectively compete in the tourism industry. In addition to these challenges and hazards, a place that has successfully navigated through periods of devastation such as communism, wars, or natural disasters typically encounters significant obstacles in rebuilding or altering its reputation in the tourism industry (Rossello, Becken, & Santago-Gallego, 2020).

Different approaches exist related to the effect of one attribute on the overall destination image. One potential consequence is that undesirable characteristics may inspire the formation of an unfavourable image of a destination (Meler & Ruzic, 1999; Kumar, 2019). In contrast, earlier authors such as Crompton in 1979 and Gartner in 1986 contended that the impact of these unfavourable characteristics on the overall perception about a destination would not be as significant (Crompton, 1979; Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011; Chi, Huang, & Nguyen, 2020; Rojas-Méndez & Khoshnevis, 2022).

The negative attributes might be alleviated to minimise their impact on the overall image. Consequently, the possibility of image reconstruction may arise. Nevertheless, the task of improving the destination image appears to be challenging (Almeida-García, Domígunez-Azcue, Mercadé-Melé, & Pérez-Tapia, 2020; Lee, Chung, & Koo, 2023). Gartner and Hunt (1987) argue that a positive shift in destination image can really occur, although it may develop gradually (Gartnerand & Hunt, 1987). The change in image is associated with the strategic positioning that competes for the consumer's attention (Ries & Trout, 1986). According to the author, altering people's opinions is challenging, which is why the process of changing the destination image is slow.

Despite the challenges and the fact that the creation or improvement of the image are time-consuming, governments, together with their Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs), are striving to create marketing campaigns that emphasise positive characteristics. Nevertheless, the creation of an image does not just depend on commercial communication operations. The latter may shape the preconceived perception before a first visit, but it does not affect the overall impression of a destination. Research indicates that the fundamental image of a place is formed based on an individual's personal experience on a particular destination. Therefore, in order to comprehend the image of a place, it is essential to examine

both the strategic positioning and communication efforts, as well as the overall consumer experience (Phelps, 1986; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Pike & Page, 2014).

Although studies on tourism and destination image creation is a well-established topic, it is still relatively new for the countries of the Western Balkans in general and for Albania, in particular. The importance of tourism development in these countries has increased significantly following a period of transition characterised by ethnic conflicts and/or totalitarian governments (Jones & Kubacki, 2014; Dragin-Jensen & Lenholdt, 2021). Given that the Western Balkans, like many countries across the world, rely heavily on tourism as a key driver of their economies, it is imperative for them to enhance its growth and distinguish their destinations in the fiercely competitive market.

Destination marketers in Albania are continually having a difficult time positioning the country in the tourism market due to the harsh and competitive environment where they operate. According to Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986), the success of a brand in a market that is highly competitive, is dependent on the selection of the brand's identity, the use of an identity-developing image, and the guarantee that the brand's image conveys its identity in a clear and concise manner (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986)). According to Janonis (2007), the process of developing a brand's image while simultaneously striving to offer elements of its identity to consumers is a means of strengthening the position of an organization in the minds of the target market (Janonis, Dovalienė, & Virvilaitė, 2007). Because of this, the process of building the destination brand is a process in which governments continually take activity and prepare strategies for the purpose of improving the image of their own country as a destination.

Currently, the demand to visit Albania and other destinations in the Balkans is increasing. Many Europeans are visiting these places either with vacation packages or on their own. Therefore, all countries in the region need to accentuate their distinguishability in the market. The Institute of Statistics reports that the interest of foreign visitors in Albania show an 18% increase in the number of foreign nationals entering the country in 2022 compared to 2019, which was considered the peak year for international tourism. Recently UNWTO reports confirm that Albania has showed a good performance regarding the increase of tourism, as one of the countries overcoming pre-COVID 19 figures (UNWTO, 2024).

Despite the increasing number of tourists every year and despite the efforts of the Albanian government to promote it, there is no tangible evidence, or any study conducted with tourists or individuals from any specific market in terms of understanding their perception towards Albania, their attitude towards visiting it, or even revisiting or recommending it as a destination. This study is an attempt to fill this gap by studying the image of Albania as a destination. However, the destination image is not complete without the investigation of the destination identity. Pike and Mason (2011) argue that effectively placing a destination's image in the marketplace necessitates substantial and enduring investment. Furthermore, the positioning of a destination in the marketplace is contingent upon the brand's strength. Thus, the branding process begins at the point where the destination stakeholders aspire to be (Pike & Mason, 2011). Consequently, this study aims to analyse the perception of Albania's destination image from both the perspective of destination management organisations (DMOs) and tourists.

Taking these into consideration, this study's overall aim is to define the projected and perceived image of Albania and investigate whether there is any disparity between the desired brand identity and the actual perceived image. Additionally, the study aims to understand the influence of positioning (awareness) and customer experience on the development of the destination image.

The purpose of this study is to identify the projected Image and Perceived Image of Albania and explore if there is any discrepancy between brand identity - Ideal Image - and Perceived Image and understand the role of positioning - Awareness - and customer experience on the formation of the Destination Image.

This study investigates how DMOs and tourism promoters position Albania as a touristic destination and how Albania's Brand Image is perceived by Balkan travellers in German speaking market who have visited at least one of the Western Balkan countries.

1.1.1 Objectives of the Research

The primary objective of this study is to analyse and evaluate the current projected destination image of Albania as a tourist destination, aiming to acquire a comprehensive understanding of its attributes, qualities, and advantages.

Another objective is to investigate and analyse the current state of Perceived Destination Image within the context of Balkan travellers in the German speaking market, with the aim of understanding their perception and attitude toward specific attributes of Albania.

This study aims to assess and analyse the influence of Positioning – Destination Awareness on the development of Albania's destination image as well as to examine the effects of these elements on individuals' behavioural attitudes towards Albania, as a tourist destination. In this context, it also aims to examine and assess the influence of Destination Image on behavioural attitudes towards Albania as a tourism destination.

An additional objective of the study is to ascertain and assess the influence of information sources on the perception of destination image and behavioural intention, as well as to determine and evaluate the impact of personal experience – such as duration of stay and mode of travel – on the perception of destination image and behavioural intention among visitors to Albania.

The study also aims to examine whether it is the case of inconsistency between the perceived and projected image of Albania for the German-speaking market. In line with this, it will be investigated whether there is a difference in the perception of destination image or behavioural attitude between tourists and non-visitors.

1.1.2 Research Questions

This research will answer the research questions listed below:

RQ1. What is the projected destination image by the Travel Tourism Destination of Albania and travel agencies?

RQ2. What is the perceived image of Albania as a destination among German-speaking potential tourists? Is there any gap between the perceived destination image among tourists who have visited Albania and those who have not? Is there any discrepancy between the projected image and perceived destination image?

RQ3. To what extent does the source of information of potential German-speaking tourists impact the evaluation of the image of Albania as a tourist destination?

RQ4. To what extent does the level of awareness/knowledge impact the perceived Destination Image of Albania?

RQ5. To what extent does the number of visits impact the perceived Destination Image of Albania?

RQ6. To what extent does the way of traveling impact the perceived Destination Image of Albania?

1.1.3 Hypotheses

H1. Cognitive image has a significant relationship with destination affective image.

H2. Cognitive and affective images have a significant effect on the overall image of a destination.

H3. Cognitive and affective image have a significant effect on the tourist's destination behaviour – intention to visit and recommend the destination.

H4. Overall destination image has a significant influence on the tourist's destination behavioural intention.

H5. Way of traveling have a significant effect on the Destination Image and Behavioural intention.

H6. Destination Awareness and knowledge is positively related with Destination Image

H7. Destination Awareness and knowledge have a significant effect on the Behavioural Intention

H8. Personal Experience have a significant impact on Destination Image and Behaviour Intention

H8a. Personal Experience -length/nights of stay have a significant impact on the tourist's Destination Image

H8b. Personal Experience – times of visit – have a significant impact on Destination Image.

H8c. Personal Experience -length/nights of stay have a significant impact on behaviour outcomes.

H9. The Source of Information will impact the Destination image and Behavioural Intention

H9a. The Source of information has a significant effect on the Destination Cognitive Image

H9b. The Source of information will have a significant effect on the Destination Affective Image

H9c. The Source of information has a significant effect on the Overall Image

H9d. The Source of information has a significant effect on the Behavioural Intention

1.2   Research Context and Albania as a Tourist Destination

Albania is a small country in the Southeast of Europe. The geographic position places it very near to the European market, however, it is still "undiscovered". 50 years under the communist regime has left it back in comparison to its competitors in the tourism market. A market analyses "The (last) undiscovered pearl of the Mediterranean" conducted in April 2018 would classify Albania as a missing part of the Mediterranean tourism puzzle (Topalovic & Rašica, 2018). Apart of its history, Albania is one of the oldest places in Europe with a beautiful landscape, the friendship of its people, unspoiled nature and very rich culture. According to Lonely Planet, Albania is the mysterious destination of Mediterranean Europe. The first adventurous travellers discovered a place with old moral principles still intact, as well as numerous archaeological remnants from the somewhat forgotten old Greek and Roman civilizations (Lonely Planet, 2019).

Over the recent years Albania is seen as one of the best destinations to visit. Articles published in Lonely Planet or National Geographic list it as one of the top 10 destinations in Europe.

The Albanian government has implemented various comprehensive strategies and frameworks to promote tourism growth. However, there appears to be a deficiency in effectively implementing these strategies through concrete action plans, well-defined policies, and collaboration with private entities in the tourism sector. The absence of a distinct vision, the divergent viewpoints, and the varying levels of importance placed by different governments have resulted in a protracted and challenging process of consolidating Albania's tourism brand.

The tourism industry is striving to diversify its offer. The demand trend in the international market indicates a shift from mass tourism to alternative forms of tourism. Albania has significant potential to promote alternative tourism, such as adventure tourism, cultural

tourism in diverse regions, and culinary tourism (Mirta, 2019). In recent years, the central government has made efforts to enhance tourism in Albania through promotional campaigns, updated strategies, and investment incentives. One of the initiatives which aims to boost investments consist of financial incentives designed specifically for the establishment of new 4 and 5-star hotel establishments.

The tagline of the Albanian government is "Branding Albania." Nevertheless, the initial stage of branding involves establishing the identity and constituent aspects that form the identity of Albania as a destination. To effectively establish the desired perception of the destination, it is necessary to actively market it and subsequently tailor its positioning to suit various target segments.

1.2.1   Tourism Statistics

To comprehend the progress of tourism and the establishment of Albania as a Destination Brand, it is beneficial to examine the tourism statistics of the past 6 years. The tourism statistics on the arrivals of foreigners in Albania are presented below. They are based on the official figures issued by INSTAT, the National Institute of Statistics. It is necessary to previously elucidate the technique and definitions used to determine those classified as foreign tourists. The Institute of Statistics categorises ethnic Albanians of Kosovo and Macedonia as foreigners due to their use of the respective state passports while entering Albania. Conversely, the Albanian diaspora - emigrants residing in various countries - is categorised as Albanians. The following tables present annual tourist arrivals categorised by mode of travel and country of origin.

Table 1.1

Foreign Citizens Arrivals 2017-2022

Description	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total	5,117,700	5,926,803	6,406,038	2,657,818	5,688,649	7,543,817
By air	577,844	691,550	783,863	269,801	764,683	2,499,021
By sea	393,013	439,331	468,364	64,079	205,852	705,951
By land	4,146,843	4,795,922	5,153,811	2,323,938	4,718,114	7,223,325

Source: www.instat.gov.al

Tourists reach Albania by air, sea and land. Data indicated that more than 80 % of foreigners who visit Albania arrive by land.

Table 1.2

Arrivals Based on Travel Purpose

Description	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Arrivals of foreign citizens	5,117,700	5,926,803	6,406,038	2,657,818	5,688,649	7,543,817
I. Personal	5,049,173	5,839,626	6,304,845	2,542,494	5,588,400	7,437,477
1. Holidays, visit to relatives, etc.	4,865,841	5,639,818	6,094,889	2,457,446	5,411,591	7,067,487
2.Health treatment	634	276	658	1,437	1,504	2,392
3. Religious	601	778	794	326	488	495
4.Tranzit	182,097	198,754	208,504	83,285	174,817	367,103
II. Business and professional	68,527	87,177	101,193	115,324	100,249	106,340

Source: www.instat.gov.al/media/6586/movements-of-citizens

The flood of international tourists has been steadily rising since 2017, reaching its highest point in 2019. However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted this trend. Although there has been some recovery in 2021, the number of tourists has not yet reached the levels seen in 2019. In terms of visitor arrivals, 2022 stands out as the most favourable year, with an 18% increase compared to the number of arrivals in 2019. Approximately 94% of visitors come to this region for holiday purposes, while 14% arrive for business purposes. Additionally, 5% of visitors use Albania as a transit to other neighbouring countries.

Table 1.3

Tourist Arrivals Based on Place of Origin

Country of Origin	Tourist Arrivals					
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Greece	489,179	552,638	596,884	203,445	276,915	484,167
Italy	363,344	436,103	467,745	123,489	354,370	610,578
United Kingdom	127,333	126,296	133,175	53,402	89,624	166,599
Montenegro	380,989	357,071	366,817	174,233	319,770	441,625
Poland	114,582	153,718	192,403	24,404	112,223	16,822
USA	97,786	116,978	119,179	2,457	95,377	138,079
Spain		24,675	28,750	2,801	12,567	45,235
Germany	121,604	142,291	165,703	39,461	119,009	187,664
Switzerland	54,051	54,869	64,870	18,388	57,011	65,159

Source: Institute of Statistics

Tourists visiting Albania originate from several European nations, such as Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom, Poland, Germany, with less arrivals from Spain and Switzerland. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, official data indicates a consistent upward trend in the number of tourists originating from Germany and Poland. Official data on the origin of tourists is insufficient, however around 90% of visits come from Europe, with 7% originating from Western Europe.

1.2.2 Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs)

The National Tourism Agency operates in accordance with Law Number. 93/2015 "On Tourism", DCM number. 298, dated 20.04.2016, and any additional regulations or laws that apply. The National Tourism Agency, referred to as "AKT", is a governmental organization that operates as a legal, public, and budgetary body. It functions as an organization under the supervision of the Ministry in charge of tourism. The headquarters of AKT are in Tirana. The NTA possesses a circular seal that bears the official name of the institution: "Republic of Albania" of the Ministry in charge of tourism and "National Tourism Agency". The National Tourism Agency possesses the following functions and competencies (Zera, 2018). The organization enforces marketing strategies in the tourism sector to promote Albanian tourism domestically and internationally, with the aim of establishing Albania as a recognized tourist destination in the global market. At the same time, it:

- Offers comprehensive information for visitors, travellers, and tourists, including details about tourism services, products, destinations, activities, and other relevant information.
- It facilitates the promotion of tourist products and destinations both domestically and internationally, by collaborating with regional tourism offices, local government, and other organizations involved in the tourism industry.
- Facilitates investment in designated areas of tourism development by partnering with other official entities responsible for promoting investment in the country.
- The organization initiates and promotes tourism projects within its specific area of expertise, subject to the previous approval of the ministry of tourism.

- Conceives and formulates advertising materials, aligning them with the current trends of the tourism market, and oversees their creation.

- Executes the national tourism development strategy and national marketing strategy for the tourism sector.

- Suggests to the Minister of Tourism the modification of tourism laws and regulations, providing compelling justifications for these proposals.

- Supervises, enhances, and maintains the official website for promoting Albanian tourism, ensuring it remains current and relevant.

- The entity gathers the income derived from the leasing contracts for the regions designated for tourism development and distributes them in compliance with the rules of the relevant laws.

- The National Tourism Agency is responsible for supervising the execution and qualification requirements of current leasing agreements and development agreements pertaining to firms that receive incentives.

Research lends credence to the argument that in the current climate, when competition is at an all-time high, it is the responsibility of governments and destination management organizations (DMOs) to brand their locations in order to differentiate themselves from other competitors and position themselves in the market (Pine & Gilmore, 2013). In addition to distinguishing themselves from the destinations offered by competitors, it is essential to ensure that the target group perceives them in the manner in which they would like to be perceived.

Within the tourism industry, the competition among destinations is primarily centred on the attraction of tourists; hence, the efforts that are made to construct a positive image of the destination continue to be their primary purpose. The job of Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) is becoming increasingly important in this era of intense competition, technology advancements, and strategies that are centred on the creation of destinations that are environmentally sustainable. The relevance of the contributions made by DMO leadership in the involvement of stakeholders and supporting pillars like information technology infrastructure, sustainability, liveability, and governance is not to be underestimated (Sorokina, et al., 2022).

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six different parts. The **first chapter**, named "**Introduction**" comprises background information about the research, the research problem, research questions, and hypotheses. There is a brief description of the tourist sector in Albania. This text provides an overview of the functions of the Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) and emphasises its importance in terms of marketing and positioning the destination, as well as managing the destination and cooperating with tourism stakeholders.

Chapter 2

The second chapter of the document, titled "**Literature and Theoretical Background**" contains an in-depth review of existing literature and a detailed exploration of the theoretical framework. The most significant theories include Branding, Brand Identity, brand identification models, Destination Branding, Brand Image, Destination Image, research on destination image, as well as the traditional view of projected image and perceived image of a destination. This chapter discusses the concepts of destination positioning and customer experience from the perspective of destination image. The Conceptual Framework for this study is offered at the close of the second chapter.

Chapter 3

The third chapter is titled "**Research Methodology, Research Design, and Data Collection Techniques**" and provides comprehensive information on several research tools, including qualitative and quantitative interviews. It also offers a thorough explanation of the constructs and items utilised by researchers, which is further backed by relevant literature. This chapter includes comprehensive information on the methodology of data collection, the administration of surveys, the sample frame, and the concerns of reliability and validity. Additionally, it covers the procedures used for data analysis and interpretation at different phases of the study.

Chapter 4

Chapter four, entitled **"Research Findings,"** is divided into two subchapters. The first subchapter - **4.1 Descriptive Findings** - analyses the research outcomes from a descriptive perspective, presenting both qualitative and quantitative data. The initial step of this research utilises qualitative data as an exploratory framework to identify the characteristics of the destination Albania. The second subchapter **4.2** provides research findings derived from utilization of Quantitative Data Analysis, which involves further statistical analyses. The subchapter presents the findings obtained from Exploratory Factor Analysis, Confirmatory Factor Analyses, and Structural Equation Model testing the relationship of constructs. The summary of hypothesis testing is offered at the end of this section.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 contains the **Conclusion and Discussion of the Results**. This chapter provides a concise summary and conclusions derived from both the qualitative study on Projected Destination Image and the quantitative study on Perceived Destination Image. This chapter presents an analysis of the results and a discussion of the hypothesised relationships. The chapter explores the interrelationships between variables in the structural equation.

Chapter 6.

Chapter 6, titled "**Research Contribution and Recommendations**," provides an analysis of the contributions made to the existing theory, a presentation of the revised conceptual framework, and an examination of the practical consequences. This chapter also includes recommendations for the tourism stakeholders. It has two subsections that outline the limits of the research and provide guidance for further research.

References and appendices are sequentially supplied following this chapter.

2 LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Branding Concept

Several research has been dedicated to the topic and concept of brand. Various authors have attempted to delineate the concept during different periods starting with the definition of AMA, which defines brand as a name, term, sign, symbol, design or a combination of these associated to a product, company or organization in order to differentiate it through the competitors in the market. Later authors as Aaker (1996) and Keller (2003), identify one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003; AMA, 1995). Rooney states that a brand helps to identify and distinguish a product or organisation in a competitive market (Rooney, 1995). Simeon expands on this by defining a brand as a cohesive collection of traits, visuals, or feelings that customers remember or encounter when they associate with a particular symbol, product, service, organisation, or location (Simeon, 2006).

Several authors perceive brands to achieve optimal market positioning and to establish product differentiation, thereby creating a competitive advantage (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Conversely, other scholars define brands as entities that customers remember and respond to their needs (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Rooney, 1995; Chernatony, 1999). In today's fiercely competitive market, establishing and cultivating strong brands has become a pressing necessity that is also extremely challenging (Kohli, Harich, & Leuthesser, 2005).

For a brand to be considered successful, it must be recognised and comprehended by customers for its distinctive and differentiated value that fulfils their requirements and expectations (Chernatony & McDonald, 2003).

Brand should be distinguished in a way that attains the competitive edge. Aaker (1996) identifies two essential factors for achieving success in brand building. Initially, the owner of the brand must possess the knowledge and ability to develop the brand's identity and comprehend the significance of the brand: what a brand represents, can its identity be accentuated. An additional crucial aspect of brand development is the ability to effectively handle internal influences and pressure (Aaker, 1996). Therefore, in order to build powerful destination brands, Destination Marketing Organisations need to determine the identity of their place by highlighting its distinctiveness, values, strengths, and qualities, and then differentiate it in this competitive environment to convey a positive image. Essentially, the branding process is a crucial strategic undertaking that requires thoughtful evaluation of multiple factors to guarantee the brand's impact and triumph in the ever-changing market environment.

2.2 Brand Identity

The concept of "brand" in the context of identity-based brand management was first presented by Meffert in 1974, and subsequently expanded upon by Keller in 1993 and Burman in 1996. A brand is defined as a set of functional and non-functional benefits that differentiate it from other competitors in a lasting manner, as perceived by the target audience (Burmann, Riley, Halaszovich, & Schade, 2017). Conversely, brand identity refers to the comprehensive set of unique and important characteristics and elements that establish the definition of a brand. While citing Aaker (2003) Janonis et al. define brand identity as a collection of brand connections that must be cultivated and maintained for a brand's strategy. The purpose of identity is to establish and cultivate the connection between a brand and a consumer, offering a distinct advantage (Janonis, Dovalienė, & Virvilaitė, 2007).

Kuenzel and Halliday (2008) examine the brand identity from a social perspective, which provides a thorough understanding of the circumstances in which brand owners are likely to identify. They emphasize that brand identification leads to the development of relationships, resulting in favourable word-of-mouth and a readiness to make repeat purchases (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008).

From an internal organisational standpoint, brand identity is primarily determined by the desired attributes that managers aim for the brand to possess, in other words what brand

owners, executives want the brand to be while focusing on the necessity of brand stability (Pike, 2008; Pike & Page, 2014; Pike & Page, 2018; Eades & Arbogast, 2022).

The brand identity dimensions: *brand identity*, *brand face*, *consumers' face*, and *competitors* relationship to each other help the brand managers develop the brand identity as a function of relationship with consumers, as a result optimizing their marketing and communication strategies in the increasingly dynamic environment (Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013; Volpert & Michel, 2022; Anderski, Griebel, Stegmann, & Ströbel, 2023).

The brand management literature fully agrees on the high strategic importance of managing brand identity. Fung, King, Hudson, & Meng (2017) assert that when brand attractiveness is included in the model, the brand identity that is deemed appealing by the target consumers leads to the establishment of customer brand identification (So, King, Hudson, & Meng, 2017). The success in communicating the identity of the brand stands at the external brand communications focused on the brand's visibility and reputation may increase the prestige of the brand, strengthening the brand identification (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Balmer & Podnar, 2021).

The *brand identity* is considered as a core concept of a product and service, as it is seen by customers: a logo, a slogan, the design, the product itself. The same aspect of brand identity has some similarities with the idea of a national identity; however, comparison is not always possible. Techniques such as graphic design, communication don't have any relation (Dinnie, 2007; Hall, 2014).

Other two authors, Sheraton and Riley (1998), have proposed a theoretical framework for evaluating and recognizing the internal brand strength. This framework considers not only the qualities of the brand, but also the behavioural attitudes of employees and the way it is embraced by different client segments. The consistent measuring of behavioural brand strength, financial strength, and potential success rates is crucial for the creation of strong brand equity (Chernatony & Riley, 1998; Burmann, Riley, Halaszovich, & Schade, 2017). The suggested approach can assist marketers in quantifying and reducing the gap between identity-image (Roy & Banerjee, 2014).

2.2.1 Brand Identity Models

Literature affirms the significance of establishing brand identity, and multiple authors have devised several models for brand identification. Various authors have developed numerous brand identification models. Nevertheless, the literature indicates that three of them are considered the most exemplary models that accurately portray the brand identity. In their study on building the brand identity for Slovenia, Ruzzier & Go (2008) analysed three prominent models of brand identity: De Chernatony's Vision and Culture Model; Aaker and Joachimsthaler's Brand Leadership Model; and Kapferer's Prism (Ruzzier & Go, 2008; Ruzzier & Chernatony, 2013).

a) *Chernatony's Vision and Culture Model*

Leslie De Chernatony (1999) developed a framework known as "the process of managing a brand" which aims to determine the brand identity. The concept consists of four essential components: *Personality*, *Positioning*, *Vision & Culture*, and *Relationship*. The objective was to support managers and stakeholders in building, extending, and sustaining strong brands. The organization's culture plays a vital role in determining a brand's identity, as it directly influences the core principles of the corporate brand. This is achieved by utilising the metaphor of the corporate character. The identity perspective focuses on the characteristics of a brand and how customers might manifest their preferences through consumption. The model suggests that the aspirations and self-images expressed by stakeholders are reflected in the relationships between corporate employees, employees and customers, and employees and stakeholders (Chernatony, 1999; Chernatoney, 2001).

b) *Aaker and Joachimsthaler's Brand Leadership Model*

In 2000 Aaker and Joachimer presented the brand leadership model, which was different from the classic models. The authors argued that brand management process requires strategic and visionary perspective. Brand identity as an element of "brand leadership model" is determined by authors as a set of brand associations that brand managers aspire to build or maintain. Brand identity structures is compound from 3 layers which are the "core identity", "extended identity", and "brand essence". The elements of the core identity are constant and reflect the values and strategy of the brand organization. The focus of core

identity is both on customers and organization. Extended identity includes elements such as brand personality specifications that are not in line with the core identity (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2012). Fundamentally, the brand essence can be considered as brand DNA (Atmajaa & Budi, 2016). If brand identity is considered as a whole, it is seen that brand identity has four elements; brand as product, brand as an organization, brand as a person, as a relationship and brand as a symbol association (Ghodeswar, 2008; Lin, Pearson, & Cai, 2011; Lai, Wang, & Khoo-Lattimore, 2020). Apart of these elements one of the brand identity constructs is *"relationship"*. All the successful brands have an intense element, they all have a clear personality and purpose (Crockett & J.Wood, 2004; Kladou, Kavaratzis, Rigopoulou, & Salonika, 2017; Ruiz-Real, Uribe-Toril, & Gázquez-Abad, 2020; Chi, Huang, & b, 2020). A brand personality is argued as a set of human characteristics associated with a given brand like a human personality (Aaker, 1996; Peco-Torres, Polo-Peña, & Frías-Jamilena, 2021; Baştuğ, Şakar, & Gülmez, 2020; Wang, Li, Li, Li, & Lin, 2022).

c) *Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism*

In his work, Kapfererer (1997) outlines brand identity using a schema consisting of six facets, represented by a hexagonal prism. Each facet symbolises a distinct attribute of a brand. The initial aspect of the hexagon showcases the physical attributes or "physique". It focuses on the question "What does it resemble?" What is its functionality? What does it specifically represent? The answers to these questions provide the brand with a concrete tangible effect. In destination branding, the physical aspect can be represented by determining the geographical position by counting a particular place.

A brand possesses a distinct "personality". Over the years, the marketing literature has attributed human traits to brands, conveying the type of person the product would be if it were human. A brand should embody its own cultural identity, reflecting the origins of its products. The culture of a brand is not only manifested through tangible representations, but also through its values, which serve as a means of communication. A brand embodies a "relationship" due to its ongoing involvement in transactions and interactions among individuals.

Another aspect on the left side of the prism is consumer reflection, which indicates that a brand is defined by how people perceive it and the specific lifestyle and values it embodies. In essence, the brand symbolises and communicates customers' self-perception and disposition towards a certain brand. It demonstrates the inherent relationship that exists between brand and the customer (Kapferer, 2008; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011; Spiga & Cardeba, 2024).

The left side of the hexagonal prism symbolises the process of externalisation, which pertains to the observable characteristics and qualities of a brand. The right side represents the process of internalising elements that are not readily visible (Mishra, 2010). Each instance of communication, involving both the sender and receiver, influences how the brand is perceived by external and internal stakeholders like as customers, competitors, managers, and workers (Burmann, Riley, Halaszovich, & Schade, 2017).

The concept of relationship is a fundamental component in all three models and is highlighted as a crucial aspect of a brand's identity. Marketers strive to establish enduring partnerships (Halliday & Kuenzel, 2008)

Among all these models, the brand identity prism can give the picture of different elements of the brand. In the destination branding. It sheds light on the characteristics and elements of a country, the elements that make the country a brand. For this reason, Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism is used in the first phase of the study to examine the elements that comprise the brand identity of Albania considering the values and strength that differentiate it in the tourism market.

2.3   Destination Branding

The concept of destination branding has originated from the domain of marketing literature, initially proposed by Pritchard and Morgan in 1998. It delves into the complex interplay between tourism promotion and the dynamics of power. Kotler & Gertner (2002) later investigate the possibility of a country operating as a brand by questioning "Can a country be a brand?! Research indicates that nations actively compete with each other and strive to get a competitive edge in promoting their products.

Strategic place marketing aims to improve a nation's standing and reputation in the international market. The work of Dinniee in 2008 highlights the significance of destination differentiation as a crucial strategy in a competitive context (Dinniee, 2008). Academic literature universally acknowledges that in the present era of internationalisation, the implementation of a country branding strategy is imperative. This strategy plays a crucial role in establishing a strong and favourable national image, both internally and externally, thereby fostering competition among nations (Jenes, 2012; Hao, Paul, Trott, Guo, & Wu, 2021; Steenkamp, 2021; Ahmed, Abudaqa, Jayachandran, & Alzahmi, 2022; Nguyen & Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2021). Hence, in order to effectively compete globally, it is necessary for countries, especially developing ones, to implement strategies aimed at enhancing their prominence in the tourism industry.

Pike and Scott (2009) assert that the concept of branding in tourism saw a gradual shift, but in the past decade, it has experienced rapid adoption worldwide. The topic of branding in literature has been addressed since 1940, but articles specifically focusing on destination and place branding were not produced until 50 years later. According to Kavaratzis, the most prevalent and advanced concept in tourism destination marketing is branding. In 2003, Keller emphasised the significance of the branding function, stating that all marketing communications should prioritise strengthening the brand identity (Cotîrlea, 2015; Bilan, Lyeonov, Lyulyov, & Pimonenko, 2019).

Country brands have been described as symbols of a location's identity and image, with a focus on the value of the brand. This value is determined by factors such as customer satisfaction and loyalty, recognition of the brand name, perceived quality, and other positive associations with the brand (Govers, 2013; Lourenção, Giraldi, & Oliveira, 2020)

Pike (2008) adopted the destination management approach depicted in Figure 2.1. The Destination Branding method, as derived by Pike from Aaker's branding concept, consists of three fundamental elements (Yusof & Ismail, 2014). Brand identity, as defined by Steven Pike, is the ideal representation of a brand in the market by a DMO (Destination Marketing Organization). Brand positioning encompasses various elements such as the promotion mix, logo, tagline, and most importantly, brand image. Brand image refers to the actual perception of the destination in the market, which may or may not align with its intended brand identity.
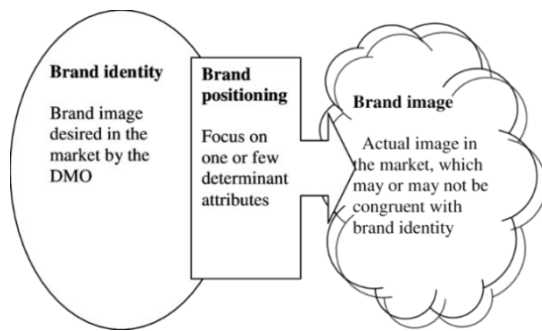
According to Pike, brand image can be described as a clouded and indistinct representation that reflects the current perception in the market, which may not align with the identity in other words desired image pursued by national tourism boards.

Figure 2.1 Destination Brand Identity, Brand Position and Brand Image

Source: Pike 2008

2.3.1 Destination Identity

Researchers have reached a consensus that destination identity is related to the values, traditions, local culture, and national identity. Various promotional materials are used to promote the identity of a tourism location (Kavoura, 2014). Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, Foroudi, & Nguyen (2016) propose that the identity of a place brand can be determined by two indicators: national culture and infrastructure. National culture encompasses various elements such as the country's identity, reputation, distinctive traits, societal transformations, geographical and environmental factors, population, and cultural aspects, including historical and linguistic aspects. Infrastructure encompasses various aspects such as security, economic conditions, technology advancements, aims for tourism growth, and strategies for place marketing and promotion. The authors assert that these indicators have a positive impact on country branding and they identify them as the primary factors that influence the results of place branding, political perception, social media and news, place awareness, place association, and tourism experience (Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, Foroudi, & Nguyen, 2016; Zha, Melewar, Foroudi, & Jin, 2020; Foroudi, 2019; Tran & Rudolf, 2022)

The country identity has been examined by several authors, with Berrozpe, Campo, and Yague (2017) specifically studying the identity of Ibiza, Spain. They utilised Kapferer's six dimensions of brand identification to analyse the perceptions of prior visitors to Ibiza. They argue that the identity is strong and resistant to young individuals who enjoy the lively parties and vibrant ambiance at clubs and discotheques in Ibiza. Research on destination brand identity is also undertaken for Hong Kong. The author, through an analysis of many components of brand identity, has delineated the distinctive attributes that contribute to the intrinsic value of Hong Kong as a destination (Mishra, 2010).

Nevertheless, the attainment of a prominent status as a unique and noteworthy destination is not just dependent upon the characteristics and attributes of the destination itself, but also relies on the approach and behaviour of the local authorities. Therefore, it is recommended that local government officials establish a practice of conducting frequent and structured consultations with business stakeholders to inform strategic decisions regarding brand identification (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013).

2.4   Brand Image and Destination Image

The concepts of Country Brand and Country Image have been subjects of significant research since the 1960s. A substantial amount of these research concentrated around comprehending the country of origin's image and its impact on the perception of product quality, as well as on the intention to purchase. However, when considering tourist destinations as a "product" to be "acquired" within this framework, there is a great deal of uncertainty and confusion, and such research domain becomes more complicated. When the product is a destination for travellers, particularly on an international scale, its circumstances evolve more complex (Zhang, Xu, Leung, & Cai, 2016; Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Dedeoğlu, 2019).

The concept of Country Image was initially introduced in the early 1980s by Bannister and Saunders in their article titled "UK Consumers' attitudes towards imports: The measurement of national stereotype image" published in 1978. In this work, Country Image refers to the whole perception of a country, which is shaped by factors such as unique products, economic and political progress, historical events and connections, traditions, industrialization level, and technical advancement. The authors have verified that the perception of a country's national image can differ among different cultures, as exemplified by the phrase "*Made in England*" or '*Made in France*" (Bannister & Saunders).

The image theory is founded on the psychological concepts proposed by William in 1976, wherein the term "image" possesses varying implications that are tailored to the specific context in which it is employed. McInnis and Price (1987) define the "image" as a distinct method of processing and storing information or stimuli in memory, according to psychologists. Ernest Ditcher's 1985 research, titled "What is an image," asserts that measuring images can lead to tangible improvements in sales. In order to analyse and

evaluate an image, it is necessary to consider various variables, including particular attributes, characteristics, emotional and functional benefits, and more, rather than solely focusing on the overall image of an object or person (Cotîrlea, 2015).

Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009) examine the perception of a country's image within social groups. The initial set of definitions perceives country image as a universal concept comprising broad images formed not only by representative products but also by the level of economic and political development, historical events and connections, culture and traditions, and the level of technological expertise and industrialization. Another classification of definitions centres on the portrayal of nations in their capacity as sources of goods. This definition suggests two key points. Firstly, it acknowledges that nation image and product image are separate but interconnected ideas. Secondly, it recognises that the perception of a country influences the perception of products originating from that country (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009; Lu, Heslop, Thomas, & Kwan, 2016; Oduro, Nisco, & Petruzzellis, 2023).

The concept of country image encompasses the collective perception and appraisal of several aspects of a country, such as its history, geography, culture, politics, economy and technical development (Zhang, Xu, Leung, & Cai, 2016; Aydin, Erdogan, & Baloglu, 2021).
The perception of a country's image, similar to any other visual representation, is not limited to a single perspective. Researchers have explored other dimensions, with less emphasis on evaluating attitudes towards nations and their residents compared to country-of-origin image (Jenes & Malota, 2009).

Contemporary literature affirms that there is widespread agreement that the perception of a destination plays a crucial role in shaping a visitor's decision to travel, their satisfaction as consumers, and their evaluation of the destination (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001; Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Marques, Silva, & Antova, 2021; Li, Liu, & Soutar, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to thoroughly examine the image of the place, particularly for rising destinations such as Albania and the Western Balkans, which have experienced significant destruction in the past.

2.4.1 The Concept of Destination Image

The literature assessment indicates that Country Image and Destination Image are often investigated as interchangeable concepts. The topic of Destination Image and Country Image has been under investigation over the past five decades, beginning with Majo in 1973 (Baloglu, Henthorne, & Sahin, 2014; Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2020; Nazir, Yasin, & Tat, 2021). Multiple meta-analyses were performed on published articles, and review papers were subsequently published about destination image study between 2002 and 2020.

The main objective of this study is to determine the impact of visit experience and awareness on Destination Image, as well as the relationship between destination image and tourist behavioural intention. To do this, a comprehensive analysis of the definition and measurements of these constructs is provided below. Stepchenkova and Eales (2010) have elucidated that the examination of destination image has seen significant theoretical progress since its inception in the 1970s, as initially suggested by Hunt (1971). Subsequently, the notion of tourist image has been extensively examined across several fields like marketing, geography, sociology, and tourism studies, among others. This has led to the exploration of numerous subjects and viewpoints. Kim and Richardson (2003) have collected the main subjects and approaches explored by numerous writers about the image studies on tourism. Regarding perspectives, they encompass the correlation between image and the choosing of a destination, the process of forming an image, modifying and changing an image, and measuring an image. The themes covered encompass the elements of imagery, the correlation between physical visits and images, the impact of geographical distance, the influence of news coverage and cultural events, and the destination images held by tourism interest groups other than visitors. The research cited by the scholars of destination image has provided the following definitions for the concept of image.

Table 2.1

Definitions of Destination Image

Author /Year	Definition
Hunt 1971	Impressions and perceptions an individuals have on a state in which they do not currently live.
Lawson and Bond-Bovy (1977)	A subjective representation of an individual's understanding, perceptions, biases, imaginings, and emotional reflections regarding a particular thing or location.

Crompton (1979)	The sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination (Crompton, 1979).
Aaker and Myers (1982), Dowling (1986)	Set of meanings by which an object is known and through which people describe, remember, and relate to it. The net result of the interaction of a person's beliefs, ideas, feelings, and impressions about an object (Dowling, 1986).
Phelps (1986)	Perceptions or impressions of a place (Phelps, Holiday destination image — the problem of assessment: An example developed in Menorca, 1986).
Embacher and Buttle (1989)	Ideas or conceptions held individually or collectively of the destination under investigation. Perceptions held by potential visitors about an area (Embacher & Buttle, 1989).
Calanton et al. (1989)	Perceptions of potential tourist destinations (Calantone, Benedetto, & Bojanic, 1989).
Echtner and Ritchie (1991)	The perceptions of individual destination attributes and the holistic impression made by the destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991).
Fakeye and Crompton (1991)	The mental construct developed by a potential tourist on the basis of a few selected impressions among the flood of total impressions (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991).
Kotler (1994)	The image of a place is the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person holds of it.
Milman and Pizam (1995)	Visual or mental impression of a place, a product, or an experience held by the general public (Milman & Pizam, 1995).
Echtner and Ritchie (1991)	The perceptions of individual destination attributes and the holistic impression made by the destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991).
Gartner (1993	Destination images are developed by three hierarchically interrelated components: cognitive, affective, and conative (Gartner, 1994).
MacKay and Fesenmaier (1997)	A composite of various products (attractions) and attributes woven into a total impression (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997).
Baloglu and McCleary (1999)	An individual's mental representation of knowledge, feelings, and global impressions about a destination An attitudinal construct consisting of an individual's mental representations of knowledge, feelings, and global impression about an object or destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).
Jenkins (1999)	The expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or a group might have of a particular place (Jenkins, 1999).
Murphy, Pritchard, and Smith (2000)	A sum of associations and pieces of information connected to a destination, which would include multiple components of the destination and personal perception (Murphy, Pritchard, & Smith, 2000).
Bigné et al. (2001)	The subjective interpretation of reality made by the tourist (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001).
Tapachai and Waryszak (2000)	Perceptions or impressions of a destination held by tourists with respect to the expected benefit or consumption values (Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000).
Kim and Richardson (2003)	A totality of impressions, beliefs, ideas, expectations, and feelings accumulated toward a place over time (Kim & Richardson, 2003).
Tasci et al. (2007)	An interactive system of thoughts, opinions, feelings, visualizations and intentions toward a destination (Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007).
Keller (2008)	Associations a consumer holds of a brand Destination image.

Source: Authors Own elaboration

In essence, destination image refers to a collection of beliefs and impressions that are formed over time through information obtained from different sources. These beliefs and impressions create a psychological construct that reflects the qualities and advantages of a specific product or destination. Perception of a location by an individual or a collective is the defining characteristic. One's perspective of a location might be influenced by their collection of beliefs, ideas, and impressions about it (Baggio, 2005; Crompton, 1979; Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). The consensus among scholars is that destination image refers to a comprehensive evaluation of cognitive and affective (emotional) perception (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Yin, Cheng, Bi, & Ni, 2020). The two definitions were assessed using the consumer engagement theory proposed by Poiesz in 1989. Author elucidates that consumer psychology adopts a cognitive perspective that focuses on the processing of information. Therefore, it became evident that these two definitions adhere to distinct methodologies in the notion of consumer engagement (Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007). The concept of high involvement theory posits that consumers are rational and make judgements by systematically sequentially examining the attributes of objects. Gartner's (1986) definition posits that consumers will consistently assess a location by considering its qualities and activities on each occasion. Conversely, the low involvement theory posits that consumers, instead of assessing attributes individually, streamline their evaluation process by employing different criteria for different circumstances. This forms the core assumption of Crompton's (1979) definition: a comprehensive assessment based on beliefs and impressions, rather than focusing on individual components. Therefore, when processing image information, certain researchers in the field of destination image presume that certain consumers engage in effortful processing, while others engage in restricted processing. However, Baloglu and McCleary's (1999) formulation is seen as thorough in capturing the essence of the destination image construct, as it encompasses the affective aspect as well.

The concept of destination image incorporates a range of complex elements such as impressions, ideas, beliefs, sentiments, identity, and perceptions. It holds significant importance in tourism research for two primary reasons. The destination image is regarded as a precursor to the decision-making behaviour of prospective tourists. It pertains to the degree of contentment with the whole experience at the destination (Chon, 1990). Bornhorst et al (2010) argued that destination stakeholders should recognise that the primary

competition lies in securing a place in the minds of consumers. The perceived image of a destination by potential tourists will significantly impact their behaviour actions and attitudes towards that destination (Bornhorst, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010; Ahmed, Sohail, Myers, & San, 2008; Huang, Marion, Wong, & Law, 2023). Moreover, by implementing a successful strategy for positioning destinations, it is possible to create a favourable distinction between destinations and their competitors in the perception of potential visitors (Pike & Ryan, 2004; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Shahab, Ghazali, & Mohtar, 2021).

2.4.2 Key Research on Destination Image

Research on destination image for many years in 2000s is focused on the identification of factors that influence the formation of destination image such a motivation, sociodemographic and information stimuli. Tourists' motivations, such as relaxation, adventure, or cultural exploration, were identified as key factors influencing the formation of destination images (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Research puts emphasis on sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, and income, on driving how individuals perceive and construct image toward destinations and how various information sources, including word-of-mouth, advertising, and media, shape individuals' perceptions of a destination (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993).

Earlier Echtner and Ritchie in his work for measurement of destination image concentrates on tangible and intangible components for measuring the image. The tangible aspect encompasses the observable and measurable physical or functional characteristics of a destination, such as pricing, climate, and various types of accommodations. On the other hand, the intangible aspect includes the ambiance of the destination, the friendliness of the local people, and the reputation. According to Echtner and Ritchie, just analysing the image of a destination based on its attribute lists or investigating certain components of the destination image would not provide a comprehensive measurement (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010).

Gunn (1988) presented an alternative perspective, highlighting two components that contribute to the development of an image: organic and induced. Organic images are created by sources that are not directly linked to destination marketing. Conversely, induced images are created by the promotional endeavours of the organisations responsible for promoting

tourist destinations. The primary distinction between the two is on whether or not the developers have control over the destination. (Gartner, 1994). While other scholars, identify three elements that contribute to the construction of an image: familiarity with the destination, ideas and attitudes related to the product, and the expectations generated by the product (Moutinho, 1987; Andreu, Bigné, & Cooper, 2008; Buhalis, 2000; Jeong & Shin, 2020).

Many scholars use the model developed by Beerli & Martín (2004) to measure the cognitive component of destination image. This model consists of nine dimensions: 'natural resources', 'general infrastructure', 'tourism infrastructure', 'tourism leisure and recreation', 'culture, history and art', 'political and economic factors', 'natural environment', 'social environment', and 'atmosphere of the place' (Beerli & Martín, 2004). The measurement of the affective dimension is often conducted using four semantic differential dimensions: unpleasant–pleasant, sleepy–arousing, distressing–relaxing, and gloomy–exciting. These dimensions are commonly employed to investigate the feelings and emotions associated with a certain destination (Li & Ali, 2015). Another three-dimensional image is a representation of a three-component attitude model known as the overall image. This model is a conceptual dimension and a higher-level construct that consists of three or more distinct sub-dimensions: cognitive, emotive, and conative (Pike & Ryan, 2004; Stylidis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017).

Matos (2012) outlined the framework of destination image, stating that it consists of two primary elements: controllable forces (induced image), which encompasses variables such as external stimuli, promotional efforts, access routes, and infrastructure. Unpredictable influences (depicted as organic elements) are determined by individual characteristics such as motivation, previous travel experiences, and external stimuli such as local residents, geographical and temporal distance, and service providers (Matos, Mendes, & Pinto, 2015; Le, Scott, & Lohmann, 2018). However, the classification of destination image as either multi or unidimensional depends on the particular research objectives and the particular destination being studied.

2.4.3   The Traditional View of Destination Image: Projected vs. Perceived Image

The concept of Destination Image is examined from two perspectives. Research considering the two approaches has been in a rise in the number of studies that have been carried out,

especially from the beginning of 2000 until the present day (Pike, 2002; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010; Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). The projected image describes how destination stakeholders present and promote a particular location, whereas the perceived image refers to how travellers evaluate their perception and overall impression of a destination. The tourist's projected image is shaped by the diverse representations of a place or destination, which are developed and influenced by various stakeholders for multiple objectives and delivered over specific communication channels. Tourist guidebooks and marketing materials provide various portrayals of certain destinations, which both reflect and influence the images associated with those destinations (Andsager & Drzewiecka, 2002; Karri & Dogra, 2023; Bose, Pradhan, & Roy, 2022).

The task for managing a destination's image is typically delegated to the Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) or National Tourism Boards. Their responsibility entails the production of promotional materials for various channels, encompassing both physical and online mediums. These materials include brochures, video advertisements, and destination websites (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Hence, the original perception is the representation crafted by DMO and other entities, subsequently interpreted by tourists and travellers. Pike (2004, 2008) defines the image of a location as a combination of both factual knowledge and subjective perceptions pertaining to that area, whether they are derived from nature or modified by external factors. Put simply, it refers to the collective understanding, information, and convictions that individuals possess, irrespective of their prior experience with the destination. For the destination image to be formed, a certain amount of information must be present. As a result, the representation of a tourist destination by promotional efforts of tourism organisations and tour operators, along with news and information from various channels, contributes to the Projected Image. Conversely, the tourist's perception of the destination is generated by recommendations from others, and personal experiences in the particular destination (Ashworth & Voogd, 1988; Ma, Schraven, Bruijne, Jong, & Lu, 2019).

The existence of two dimensions, namely projected and perceived, suggests that the brand and its associated meanings are always being renegotiated and reshaped. This means that the place brand is the outcome of both discursive and performative processes. In this context, the term "discursive" refers to the emphasis on signs and words that facilitate action, whereas "performative" refers to the emphasis on physical and material representations. The projected image can be continually updated and enhanced as the destination evolves, hence

improving the perceived image (Pedeliento & Kavaratzis, 2019; Aydoghmish & Rafieian, 2022).

In the current era of technological advancement and widespread use of social media and online communication where images can be easily shared and social media plays a crucial role in promoting and influencing our consumption of tourism opportunities and destination images, emerged the need to evaluate the effectiveness of measurement scales in this field. In his study, Nicholas Wise (2020) assesses the Destination Image by classifying visuals shared on Facebook by National Tourism Organisations. He analyses the perceived image of a destination by considering many elements that contribute to the formation of the destination image (Wise, 2020).

In these days characterized by the rapid and extensive dissemination of experiences, images, and information through social media and online communication, it becomes difficult to create and sustain a strong and enduring impact on the minds of tourists or potential customers. Consequently, the triumph of a brand depends on the brand owner's adeptness in effectively communicating its values. A prior study has verified that effectively conveying the brand to clients is essential for the success of destinations. Communication allows destinations to effectively express and advertise their distinctive value proposition (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016).

2.5   Destination Positioning

The exploration of destination branding in literature began later than the appearance of branding literature itself, which had an explosion in the 1940s. Nevertheless, advancements in destination brand positioning provide valuable knowledge on how to carry out and successfully finalize a destination brand positioning strategy. Pike and Ryan propose that in order to achieve effective brand positioning for a destination, the destination brand should communicate to the target audience the advantages it offers compared to competing destinations. This should be done by emphasizing the unique attributes of the destination and maintaining consistent communication with the target audience (Pike & Ryan, 2004), or at least it may form the ground for gaining and building competitive advantages. (Pike & Mason, 2011; Agić, Kurtović, & Čičić, 2014). Positioning, a crucial component of destination branding, has a significant role in attaining economic objectives (Domazet,

2013). Studies suggest that strategic positioning can provide a competitive edge, particularly when a destination highlights distinctive and appealing features that distinguish it from competitors in the same competitive market (Dimitrov, Stankova, Vasenska, & Uzunova, 2017; Krabokoukis & Polyzos, 2021).

The concept of destination positioning is considered as the initial phase of a methodical marketing strategy for a location/destination. This approach involves addressing many components in a systematic manner in order to shape the perceptions of travellers (Wang & Pizam, 2011; Babic-Hodovic, 2014). Anholt and Pike argue that effectively positioning a place involves addressing perceptual obstacles, such as identifying unique characteristics, attributes and/or values compared to competitors and applying effective marketing tactics and slogans. The tourism industry is currently seeing intense competition among destinations, as they strive to attract visitors and establish themselves as sustainable tourist attractions in the long term. To achieve success in this country's competitive environment, it is essential to identify an appropriate positioning strategy that promotes long-term growth (Prayag, 2007; Chen & Phou, 2013; Chaudhry, Nazar, Ali, Meo, & Faheem, 2022). While branding plays a crucial role in creating a unique selling proposition, it is important to recognise that branding and positioning a location/destination extends beyond just the tourism industry (Anholt, 2005).

Chacko, along with other researchers such as Crouch, Zhang, Zhao, Liu, and Luo, considers positioning to be one of the most important concept and procedure in marketing of a destination (Chacko, 2007; Crouch, 2011; Zhang, Zhao, Zhang, Liu, & Luo, 2021). Brand positioning is a concept in management that considers the managerial perspective (Kapferer, 2008). According to David Aaker, brand position refers to the specific aspect of a brand's identity and value proposition that is deliberately conveyed to the intended audience, highlighting its superiority over rival brands. Brand positioning seeks to provide a value proposition that is very appealing to the intended target audience. Hence positioning is a fundamental concept in marketing strategy that operates on the notion that all decisions are relative. It serves as a roadmap to guide marketing strategy (Keller, 2014; Saqib, 2021).

Destination brand positioning refers to the strategic connection between a destination's brand identity and brand image, effectively linking the internal and external aspects of the destination. Furthermore, the positioning of a destination is influenced by various elements,

such as media exposure, personal travel experiences, word-of-mouth recommendations, level of awareness and knowledge about a particular destination (d'Astous & Boujbel, 2007). Hence, it is crucial to consider all potential sources that might strengthen the competitiveness and long-term viability of every country in the competitive market (Snežana & Dario, 2008).

Destination brand positioning tries to build an association among the destination and the self-image of the tourist (Lever & Abbas, 2018). Therefore, in order to succeed, the focus must be turned towards visual features. Consequently, it is essential for the phrasing and visual elements to be in perfect alignment with each other (Stojanović & Šerić, 2018).

Another key element not to be left apart is the contradiction and ambiguity during destination positioning. The process of branding a location and establishing a robust destination positioning should focus on creating powerful associations. It is imperative that it does not intensify the current paradox (Dauscher, Dietrich, & Schmidt-Bleeker, 2013). Anholt argues that in order to establish itself as an attractive country, it is crucial to identify the key strengths and opportunities that contribute to sustainable tourism, as well as gaining acceptance as a preferred destination by visitors (Anholt, 2010; Acharya & Rahman, 2016; Kladou, Kavaratzis, Rigopoulou, & Salonika, 2017; Swain, et al., 2023).

Various scholars highlight the significance of positioning in enhancing the brand image (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2010; Diwan & Bodla, 2011; Shafiee, Gheidi, Khorrami, & asadollah, 2020; Saqib, 2021). They believe that positioning statement impacts the complete marketing plan and by making erroneous positioning companies, organizations destinations may have an effect the strength of the image. Wrong positioning results in low top of mind, a low brand awareness, low recall on brand image and missing of brand connection (Aaker, 1996; Sudhakar & Rahman, 2016; Renani, Aghdaie, Shafiee, & Ansari, 2021).

Destination positioning involves communication, the consistent conveyance of messages to certain target groups and receiving of feedback from them (Burmann, Riley, Halaszovich, & Schade, 2017). Potential communication gaps might hinder brand management's capacity to improve marketing plans, as they may have false knowledge of their positioning in consumers' minds (Chernatoney, 2001).

Research highlights the crucial role of destination positioning, which involves stakeholder participation, effective branding tactics, and the significance of difference in establishing a distinct destination identity. Destination positioning refers to the process of conveying the identity of a place, which influences the perception and image formed by travellers towards that destination. When destination brands are not viewed as intended, discrepancies between brand identity and brand image emerge. The gap between brand image and brand identity might arise from the implementation of positioning strategies as well as communication channels. (Chernatony, 1999; Spiga & Cardeba, 2024)).

2.6   Customer Experience and Destination Image

Although many destinations strive to attract tourists, the primary issue lies not only in acquiring new visitors but also in engaging repeat visitors. The customer who returns is a satisfied traveller. Therefore, is important understanding that what individuals truly desire are not material goods, but rather fulfilling and gratifying experiences. Prior research has demonstrated that the travel experiences of visitors have an impact on both the perception of a destination and the level of loyalty towards that destination (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Bo, NG, Li, & Ho, 2012; Morais & Lin, 2010; Rather, Hollebeek, & Rasoolimanesh, 2021).

The image of a destination is greatly impacted by the tourism experience. This demonstrates that a remarkable tourist experience stimulates the senses, both physically and emotionally, making it easily memorable for tourists. These memories then shape the overall image of the destination (Dagustani, Kartini, Oesman, & Kaltum, 2018). A tourism experience is defined as a favourable memory that remains after the event has taken place (Kim & Thapa, 2018; Kim & So, 2022). Many scholars have recognized the necessity and methods of creating tourism experiences to emphasize the significance of cultivating memorable tourism experiences that can be retained in the memories of tourists over an extended period of time (Xu, Morgan, & Song, 2009; Soldatenko & Backer, 2019). Tourists' perception of a destination's image can impact their tendencies to revisit. Examining the effect of experience on the perception and behaviour of individuals would greatly benefit DMO. Scholars have suggested that a favourable perception established in the minds of tourists increases their likelihood of revisiting tourist attractions.

Research in the field of destination image has found that destination image indirectly affects loyalty intentions, mostly through satisfaction (Stylidis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017; Soliman, 2021). Several studies have found that pleasure plays a mediating role in the connections between destination image and loyalty intentions (Assaker & Hallak, 2013; Aguilar, Guillén, & Roman, 2016; Sharma & Nayak, 2019).

2.7   Research Framework and Conceptual Model

Projected Image- Destination Ideal Image differently expressed as Brand Identity named also by Stiven Pike (2004, 2008) expresses how governments and DMO's want their brand to be perceived.

*Destination Perceived Image -*The image held by tourists or potential tourists before or after visiting the destination. Knowledge of the brand before experiencing it can be induced by geographic information, mass media covering and reporting, or associations raised by positioning strategies and campaigns. This image is formed by individual experiences of the visitors of the destination.

Behavioural Intention toward a destination indicates behaviour actions to consume tourism products as well consider visiting or recommending to others (Ramkissoon, Uysal, & Brown, 2011; Su, Nguyen, Nguyen, & Tran, 2020).
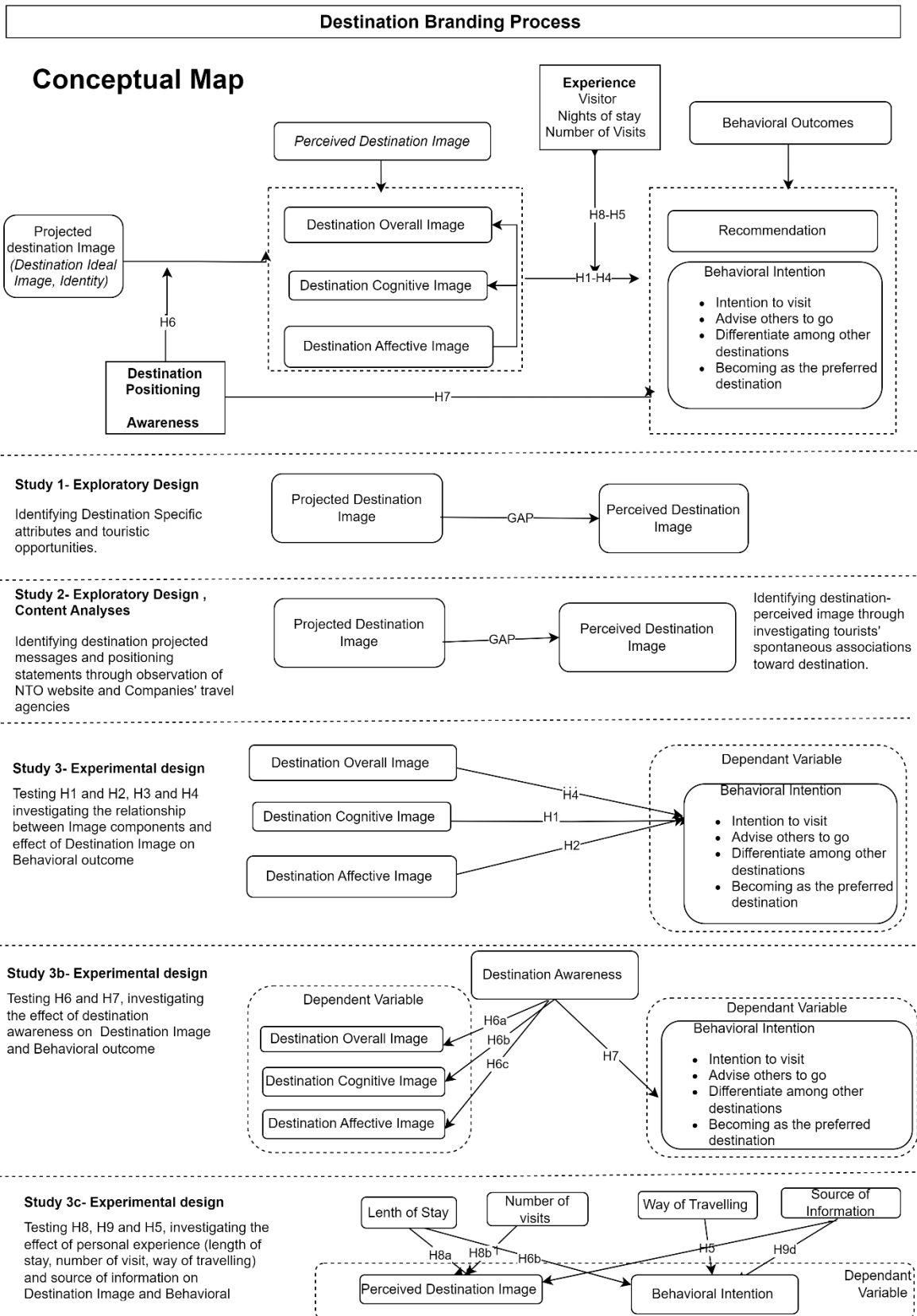
Figure 2.2 Conceptual framework

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES.

The objective of this study is to identify the brand identity (projected image) of Albania and its brand image by examining the perceptions of foreigners, specifically Balkan travellers from the German-speaking market, towards Albania as a touristic destination. The study employs a mix methodology, which entail gathering both primary and secondary data. The use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches and elements is driven by the goal of producing a thorough and all-encompassing understanding of the notion. In this context, the notion includes all aspects in which philosophers, ethicists, methodologists, applied researchers, and other academics critically analyse various research approaches at the philosophical in nature, methodological, and techniques levels to develop a comprehensive mixed methods research approach (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2017; McChesney & Aldridge, 2019).

This study utilises an exploratory consecutive mixed method approach as suggested by various experts (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Headley & Clark, 2020). By integrating qualitative and quantitative data, the aim is to adopt a more holistic approach in examining a phenomenon and conducting a case study. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data necessitates a systematic approach, which can be achieved through various degrees of data blending (e.g., complete, partial), at different stages of time, within different components of the research study (e.g., design, data collection, data analysis, reporting), and with varying methodological emphasis overall (Tashakkori & Charles, 2021). This study employed an exploratory sequential design, in which the qualitative data collection and analysis occurred before the collection and analysis of the quantitative data.

The Delphi technique is applied (Habibi, Sarafrazi, & Izadyar, 2014) in the first phase. This methodology is employed to collect the opinions of tourism experts and ascertain the consensus on the defining characteristics of Albania as a tourist destination. The Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism is a useful tool for constructing high-quality instruments and analysing qualitative data. It encompasses various dimensions such as personality traits, cultural values, relational aspects, and the individual's representation and self-image dimensions in relation to a brand's public objective.

To investigate the projected image of the destination, as mentioned by Pike, we assess the elements using the aspects of the Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2008) and conduct attribute content analyses.

The study consists of three stages:

- The initial phase involves conducting exploratory qualitative research through semi-structured interviews which were directed to field experts. This phase helped on investigating deeper in the research problem.
- The second phase is the content analyses of printed materials and brochures of travel agencies, DMO Website and their Brochures.
- The final, stage is an empirical study, in which the structured questionnaire is disseminated and collected from the visitors and potential visitors. The output of the first phases is used to design the context specific questionnaire for this phase.

The target group and characteristics of participants are shown in the table below.

Table 3.1

Target Group and Participants Characteristics

		Methodology	Number of Participants	Characteristics of Participants
1	Field Experts	Qualitative Methodology in the form of in depth Interviews	7 tourism experts	Experts writing and speaking in Media also they are opinion and critics for tourism sector of Albania. They are present in the media with their evaluation on the situation of Albania.
2	Destination Marketing Organization Website (Albanian Tourism Agency) Tourism Agencies	Content Analyses on Brochures and positioning statements	• 1 – DMO • 4-Albanian Tourism Agencies • 10-International tourism agencies.	Institution responsible for the promotion and marketing of Albania as a destination. Represents Central government. Albanian tourism agencies promoting packages for visiting Albania. Tourism Agencies located in the German speaking market promoting packages for visiting Albania.
3	Potential Tourists,	Empirical Study by employing a quantitative survey	400-500	German-Speaking Market, International Travelers. Individuals who have visited Balkan Countries in last 12 months.

The study utilised an exploratory sequential approach, and the qualitative phase findings were used to facilitate the research design and creation of instruments in the quantitative phase. The next sections detail the techniques, discoveries, and results of each phase, considering the sequential nature of the data. During the exploratory phase –both during its initial phase and second phase - a series of comprehensive and semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals involved in the tourism industry and economy experts. Stakeholders were interviewed to investigate what they thought of the projected image, characteristics, and the values of Albania as a destination, and to create models that depict the interrelated features of the destination.

The qualitative phase findings were utilised to generate hypotheses that explore the role of Destination Awareness and Customer Experience, as well as the constructs that describe their mutual interaction. Phase two involved conducting a quantitative analysis to assess the validity of constructs and the proposed hypotheses. This was done by administering a structured survey to German international travellers who have visited the Balkans, Turkey, Greece, and Albania, in last 3 years.

3.1   Quantitative Research Instrument

The current research aims to examine the relationships between established constructs rather than creating new measures. To measure destination image and behaviour probability, appropriate measurement scales were derived from existing literature that discusses the study of destination images and travel behaviour (Baloglu, Henthorne, & Sahin, 2014). Using an established measurement scale offers several benefits. Firstly, it ensures that the measure's validity is likely to have been well examined. Secondly, it enables the researcher to compare their findings with others who have used the same framework or concept (Collis & Hussey, 2021).

The questionnaire utilized in this research was developed through the following processes. The primary objective of this study was to investigate the concept of destination image. Consequently, an extensive review and analysis of the relevant articles in the field of tourism was conducted. This study also aims to comprehend the significance of destination awareness and visiting experience in shaping destination image and behaviour intention, such as visit intentions and recommendations. To do this, existing scales for these

constructs in the literature are explored. Furthermore, the evaluation involved examining the specific items used to assess the content and define the dimensions of the constructions within the Western Balkan region and specifically in Albania as a tourism destination. Therefore, the present study utilised the attributes/dimensions of perceived destination image proposed by Asunción Beerli and Josefa D Martín, as well as Nicholas Wise, as a foundation for developing the measuring items and scale. These attributes/dimensions are presented in the table below (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Wise, 2020).

Table 3.2

Dimensions /Attributes of Destination Image

Dimension	Attributes of Destination Image
Natural Resources	Beautiful Scenery; Aesthetics; Weather; Protected Nature Reserves; Fresh Water Lakes/Rivers/Waterfalls; Mountains/Valleys/Gorges; Rugged Coastline & Sea; Beaches; Islands; National Parks; Variety/Uniqueness of Flora; Variety/Uniqueness of Fauna
Natural & Built Environment	Beautiful Scenery; Aesthetics; Attractiveness of Towns; Attractiveness of Cities; Cleanliness; Mass Tourism/Overcrowding; Pollution
Leisure, Recreation & Entertainment	Sport/Physical Activities; Leisure Activities (Fish/Hunt/Camp); Adventure/Adrenaline Activities; Swimming; Hiking/Trekking; Nightlife/Parties; Events/Festivals; Shopping/Fashion
Culture, History, Heritage & Art	Museums/Memorials/Monuments; Historical Buildings/Structures; Music/Theatre/Drama; Religion; Folklore/Local Customs; Sport
Tourist Infrastructure & Marketing	NTO Image; General Information; Hotels/Accommodations; Restaurants/Bars
Gastronomy	National Cuisine; Food Culture/Marketplaces; Drink Culture; Viticulture; Agriculture
Atmosphere & Appeal	Family-Oriented; Exotic; Mystic; Relaxing; Stressful; Fun/Enjoyable Experiences offered; Boring; Pleasant; Attractive/Interesting
Political & Economic Factors	Political Stability/Political Tendencies; Safety/Security; Economic Development; Prices

Source: Beerli & Martín, 2004; Wise, 2020.

To fully encompass the cognitive and emotive aspects of the image, additional scholars are consulted to modify the dimensions employed in the questionnaire. The objects have been

customized with characteristics of Albania as destination. The initial phases of the study, which involved exploratory and qualitative methods, guided us on this path. The content analysis and qualitative interviews are utilized to identify the characteristics of Albania, including its natural attractions, history and culture, food and gastronomy, and more. The study incorporates demographic questions to facilitate supplementary analyses. The measuring scale items for these constructions are explained and discussed in the subsequent subsections.

3.1.1 Destination Awareness

Brand awareness pertains to the consumer's ability to identify and acknowledge the brand. The focus is on strategies to elevate the brand's prominence in the individual's thinking. Logos, taglines, packaging, and similar elements have the potential to generate consumer recognition. (Yuwo, Ford, & Purwanegara, 2013).

Table 3.3

Destination Awareness

1	I have heard of Albania as a destination	Aaker (1996)
2	I have an opinion about Albania	
3	This destination has a good name and reputation	Boo et al., 2009, Yan Yang, Xiaoming Liu & Jun Li (2015)
4	I am aware of this destination (I can recognize the name of Albania among other destinations)	Aaker (1996)
5	When I think about similar types of destinations, this destination comes to my mind immediately	Yan Yang, Xiaoming Liu & Jun Li (2015)
6	Some characteristics of Albania come quickly to mind	Boo et al., 2008; Konecknic & Gartner 2007).
7	I can recall a few important sites in Albania	

3.1.2 Cognitive Destination Image

The cognitive component of destination image refers to the understanding of the destination's objective characteristics (Khan, Chelliah, & Ahmed, 2017). Hanyu (1993) proposed that cognitive quality pertains to the evaluation of the tangible characteristics of the destination. Previous research has identified many indicators that can be used to assess cognitive destination image. Echtner and Ritchie (1993) compiled a list of attributes that were utilised in 14 prior studies. Prayag, Hosany, Muskat, and Chiappa (2017) also referenced this list.

Subsequently, other researchers incorporated the list into their investigations on destination image (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Prayag, Hosany, Muskat, & Chiappa, 2017). Afterwards, other researchers incorporated the aforementioned list into their investigations on destination image (Jenkins, 1999; Govers & Go, 2003; Son & Pearce, 2005; Kim & Yoon, 2003; Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, & Hou, 2007; Lin, Liang, Xue, Pan, & Schroeder, 2021; Stylidis, 2022). The frequently utilised features include: aesthetic appeal; sociability; favourable weather conditions; cost-effectiveness; vibrant nightlife; tranquilly; lodging options; diverse cultural experiences; recreational opportunities; and individual security.

The present study utilised established measures that have consistently demonstrated strong factor loadings in previous research to assess the cognitive destination image construct (Govers & Go, 2003; Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, & Hou, 2007; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007; Martínez & Alvarez, 2010; Liang & Lai, 2022).

The cognitive destination image scale is presented in Table below:

Table 3.4

Cognitive Destination Image Scale

	Natural Sources	
1	Beautiful Nature (scenic mountains Valleys, freshwater lakes, rivers)	Beerli & Martín, 2004; Wise, 2020; Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Campo-Martinez and Alvarez (2010); Lin et al. (2007); Tasci et al. (2007).
2	National Parks, uniqueness flora and fauna	
3	Beautiful and unspoiled beaches	
4	Rugged Coastline and Sandy beaches	
5	Pleasant weather (300 days of sunshine)	
	Natural and built	
6	Beautiful Towns and attractive cities	Beerli & Martín, 2004; Wise, 2020; Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Campo-Martinez and Alvarez (2010); Lin et al. (2007); Tasci et al. (2007).
7	High level of cleanliness (clean environment (beaches, parks, roads, etc.)	
8	Good Quality of Transportation Infrastructure	
9	Good Public Transportation Service	
10	Easy Accessible destination	
11	Tourist sites are easily accessible	
	Leisure and Entertainment	
12	Good opportunities for recreational activities	
13	Rich and fun night life	(Beerli and Martín 2004); Wise, 2020; Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Campo-Martinez and Alvarez (2010); Lin et al. (2007); Tasci et al. (2007).
14	Variety Sports and physical Activities (hiking, swimming)	
15	Camping opportunities	

16	Interesting Events and Festivals	(Stylos & Andronikidis, 2013).
17	Good shopping facilities	
18	Various tourist activities	
	Tourist Infrastructure	
19	Variety of Accommodation Facilities (Hotes, Modern resorts, Guesthouses, etc.)	(Beerli and Martín 2004); Wise, 2020; Baloglu nd McCleary (1999); Campo-Martinez and Alvarez (2010); Lin et al. (2007); Tasci et al. (2007); Stylos, N., & Andronikidis, A. (2013).
20	Nice coffee shops, restaurants and bars	
21	Accessibility of tourist Information (Tourist Information Centers)	
22	Abundant and updated information on the National Tourism Organization websites, and plenty of printing materials	
23	Accessibility through Travel Agencies	
	Gastronomy	
24	National traditional cuisine	Authors own addition.
	Variety of Food, Drink, and viticulture	Sheng-Hshiung Tsaura, Chang-Hua Yenb and Yu-Ting Yana (2016).
25	Fresh food, Agriculture gastronomy	Authors own addition.
	Destination Image Statements	
26	Friendly and hospitable local People	Baloglu and McCleary (1999); Campo-Martinez and Alvarez (2010); Tasci et al.,2007.
27	The country offers Safety and security for tourists	Asli D. Tasci (2006); Konecknic & Gartner, 2007.
18	Family-oriented destination	Stylos, N., & Andronikidis, A. (2013).
29	I can have pleasant and exciting experiences at this destination	(Beerli and Martín 2004); Wise, 2020;
	Good Value for money	Sheng-Hshiung Tsaura, Chang-Hua Yenb and Yu-Ting Yana (2016).
30	Reasonable prices for food and accommodation	Hosseini, S. (2015);Stylos, N., & Andronikidis, A. (2013).
31	Reasonable prices for attractions and activities	
32	Reasonable prices for transportation	
33	Satisfactory customer care on behalf of various professionals (e.g. Waiters, hotel managers, tour guides)	Stylos, N., & Andronikidis, A. (2013).
34	Political stability	
37	Albania provides more benefits than other similar Western Balkan destinations	Konecknic & Gartner, 2007.
38	It is one of the preferred destinations I want to visit	Boo et al., 2008, Yan Yang, Xiaoming Liu & Jun Li (2015).

3.1.3 Affective Destination Image

The majority of research conducted in tourism destination areas relies on the contributions of Russell (1980) and Russell and Pratt (1980) in determining the appropriate scale for measuring the affective component, thus emotional evaluations of destination image (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, & Hou, 2007; Son & Pearce, 2005; Farmaki, 2012; Pike & Ives, 2017).

Russel and Pratt propose that the emotional component of place perception can be characterized by two independent bipolar scales: pleasant-unpleasant and arousing-sleepy. According to the authors, these two scales are sufficient in theory to represent the emotional perception. Nevertheless, in order to enhance the dependability of the scale, the authors propose the inclusion of two more bipolar scales: one measuring excitement vs gloominess, and another measuring relaxation versus distress. Excitement can be described as a fusion of pleasantness with arousal, while gloominess falls within the category of being both unpleasant and inducing sleepiness. Additionally, to the items proposed by Russel and Prat this research utilized also inhospitable-welcoming proposed by Farmaki (2012) when studying projected and perceived image of Cyprus. This study's author argued as suitable item to measure the affective component of perceived image of Albania due to its association with hospitability.

Table 3.5

Affective Component Scale

Inhospitable - Welcoming	(Farmaki 2012)
Unpleasant - Pleasant	
Sleepy - Lively	
Boring - Exciting	Russel and Prat (1981); Pike 2017
Distressing - Relaxing	

The scales have undergone rigorous testing in numerous research including various distinct destinations. The findings demonstrated that the eight semantic difference scales are reliable indicators of the affective image construct. Consequently, the present study utilised these scales in a seven-point semantic differential format to assess the emotional aspect of the destination image.

3.1.4 Behavioural Intention

Behavioural intentions scales have been commonly used in many destinations image studies (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Lee M.-C. , 2009; Byon & Zhang, 2010; Mehraliyev, Chan, Choi, Koseoglu, & Law, 2020; Abbasi, Kumaravelu, Goh, & Singh, 2021). However, it has long been understood that purchase intention scales suffer from severe theoretical and empirical problems (Day, Gan, Gendall, & Esslemont, 1991; Brennan & Esslemont, 1994; Wright & MacRae, 2007; Hazari & Sethna, 2023; Nguyen, Faulkner, Yang, Williams, & c, 2022).

Thus, in order to better predict the likely behaviour, the below items are used in this research to measure the behavioural intention, consideration for visiting in the future or advising to other people.

Table 3.6

Destination Consideration and Loyalty

Destination Consideration and Loyalty	
I would like to visit Albania in the future	Konecknic & Gartner 2007; Chi & Qu, 2008; (Ya Liu, & Li, 2015); Kevin K. Byon James J. Zha (2010)
I would advise other people to visit destination	
Albania provides more benefits than other similar Western Balkan destinations	Konecknic & Gartner, 2007
It is one of the preferred destinations I want to visit	(Yang, Liu, & Li, 2015)

3.2 The Quantitative Questionnaire

A survey instrument consisting of five sections was created to collect data from the participants (*see Appendix 2*). Four screening questions tailored to the target age group (18-65 years old) and the target market were included in the survey. Part I consists of two inquiries aimed at capturing the respondents' immediate awareness of Western Balkan countries as a destination. Additionally, there are two questions regarding their knowledge

of destination tourism slogans and their ability to associate each slogan with the corresponding destination. Part II consisted of a set of 15 questions related to travel habits. The study specifically focused on visitors of the Western Balkan region. If the respondents answered "No" to a particular topic, the interview was terminated. Additional inquiries pertain to the countries the individuals have visited within the Western Balkans, the motive behind their travels, the number of trips undertaken, and the major objective of their visits. Another component comprised destination-specific questions regarding the number of journeys and whether the visit was a day trip or an overnight trip. If it was the case of overnight trips, information on the number of days and type of lodgings was inquired. The individuals were asked about their mode of travel, whether it was as part of a group, individually, or with their family. The survey included inquiries about the purpose of the respondent's most recent journey to Albania, the specific region they visited, and the amount of money they spent during their trip.

Two questions focused on the information channels. The first question was directed to all the participants, while the second question targeted only those who have visited Albania, asking on the channels of information they have used during their time in Albania.

Part III consisted of 7 items that assessed participants' knowledge and awareness of the destination, familiarity with its characteristics, awareness of key cities in Albania, and perception of the destination's reputation. The destination awareness items were measured by using a Likert Scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 represents "Strongly Disagree" and 5 represents "Strongly Agree". The cognitive destination image items, in Part III, were assessed using the same scale 1-5. The survey participants were asked to assess the affective image with 5 items using a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 to 7. In another question, the overall image of Albania was assessed using a Likert Scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 represents a very unfavourable perception and 7 represents a very favourable perception.

Another question was directed specifically to visitors of Albania to assess their likelihood of recommending this destination to others. The scale used to measure this construct ranges from 1, indicating "very unlikely" attitude, to 7, representing a "very likely" one. The final question in this section consisted of four behavioural items: intention to visit, intention to

recommend to others, consideration as a preferable destination, and recognition of Albania as a provider of more benefits compared to other similar destinations.

Part IV had a specific inquiry concerning the primary elements that influence their selection of a place when deciding to travel. Participants were instructed to prioritise and arrange factors indicating their choice of destination, from the most influential driver to the least influential. In addition, the questionnaire included two open-ended questions. One of these questions was designed to elicit spontaneous responses regarding the characteristics of Albania, whether favourable or bad. The non-compulsory additional inquiries were incorporated subsequent to Part V, which consists of demographic questions. The open-ended question sought to elicit further perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of the country. Ultimately, the demographic questions were incorporated into Part V.

The survey was first formulated in English and later translated into German through the back-translation method. The back translation method entails translating the content back into its original language and subsequently comparing it to the source text. This stage is used to verify that the intended significance and objective of the questions have not been compromised.

3.3   Qualitative Guideline

This study, as outlined in the start of this chapter employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews as a means of facilitating interactive conversation. This methodology is employed to collect the perspectives of tourism experts and ascertain the consensus that exists among them on the Brand Identity of Albania as a destination. The semi-structured interview questions delve into the components that constitute Albania's identity, as defined by the Kapferer (2008) Brand Identity Prism. The experts are chosen based on their specialised knowledge and ability to represent the internal stakeholders. Seven specialists, field analysts, policy officials, industry representatives, and academic professionals specialising in the field are interviewed to analyse the internal stakeholders' perspective on the Brand identity of Albania.

The identity aspects are obtained by using the Brand Identification Framework proposed by Kapferer in 2008. The identity elements are requested based on the facets of Brand Identity

Prism (Kapferer, 2008). Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism dimensions are tested in the context of the Brand Albania as a Destination.

An interview guide where the experts are firstly presented with the dimensions of brand identity, then every concept is explained in the branding, marketing perspective. After that the elements that compose the concept of identity from a destination perspective are presented. These concepts are derived from the literature and also based on some characteristics of Albania (Berrozpe, Campo, & Yague, 2017). Upon informing the interviewee on the concept the question is asked. The concepts and interviews are displayed below. Additionally, the attributes of Albania on strengths and opportunities Albania holds as a destination are asked.

3.3.1   Qualitative Interview Questions

- What do you think about Albania as a destination? What does it symbolize or offer to tourists in terms of physical aspects? I am referring to geographic position, natural sources, resources found in the environment, such as minerals or water, sea, beaches, rivers, and mountains, basic infrastructure, hotels, restaurants, cities and villages, heritage. What about ancient cities such as Butrint and Apollonia, monuments, and museums? What further information do you have?

- What cultural attributes does Albania have to offer? What are the cultural aspects that constitute its cultural identity? What types of destination values, symbolic principles, historical significance, cultural legacy and human heritage does it offer? What about the study of local history, stories, myths, archaeological remnants, folklore, and other related subjects? Is there any further attribute you would like to include?

- If Albania were personified as a person, what kind of individual would it resemble? What personal characteristics would Albania possess? Which personal characteristics or traits can determine Albania as destination?

- A traveller can experience several aspects of a relationship during their travels. What are the attractions and experiences available to visitors in Albania, such as energetic or tranquil options, romantic or group activities, family or couples-oriented attractions, opportunities for fostering friendship, and a range of daytime activities and nightlife?

- What is your perception of the image of Albania? How do you believe tourists perceive Albania as a tourism destination?

- What are your views on the sociodemographic, psychographic, and behavioural characteristics of the "typical" visitor or tourist?

- When assessing the Albania brand as a tourism destination, how do you analyse its primary strengths, advantages, and opportunities for attracting tourists? What is your assessment of Albania's brand commitment? Albania's brand promise?

- Destination Identity refers to the desired state or vision of what a destination aspires to become "what destination wants to be". Given this data, how would you assess the overall identity of the Albania Destination Brand?

- When assessing the performance of a Destination Management Organisation (DMO), how do you evaluate their work?

- What is your evaluation of Albania's tourism offerings? Could you enumerate the various categories of tourism? What is your perspective on the integration of different forms of tourism as a package to target specific markets? What is the product's diversity?

3.4   Sampling Techniques and Target Group

This study utilizes a two-step sampling approach. First, a probability-based sampling approach, which relies on a pre-recruited panel sample and a quota sampling and in which a predetermined number of the desired respondents from each country targeted in the study is included. Indeed, a pre-recruited online panel surveys refer to a collection of individuals who have already consented to participate in a sequence of surveys. A probability-based survey employs a randomized selection method in which all those displaying certain characteristics have equal opportunities to be chosen as participants. The pre-recruited online panels' population that facilitates probability samples are generally populated using means other than the internet or email, such as telephone or postal mail (Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2016).

The study at hand focused on individuals who live in German-speaking countries and have visited Balkan countries, such as Greece and Turkey, in the past 0-36 months (in the last 3 years). Individuals between the ages of 18 and 65, of both genders, who accurately represent the age range and gender distribution of international travellers in the Balkan Region were targeted. A preselection of people who travelled in the region "Balkan countries, Greece or

Turkey" in the past 0 to 36 months. A pre-target of individuals who visited Albania was not possible due to the lack of this specific information on the individuals' members of this panel. Visitors of Albania represent the random selection among visitors of Balkan countries. The quotas for participants from each target country were meticulously monitored.

3.5 Pilot Testing

After completing the questionnaire, an online pilot test was conducted. The pilot poll was disseminated through social media platforms. The focus was on the areas -countries - in the target of the survey, as well as the specific age range and individuals with a particular interest in travelling to the Western Balkans. A total of 25 complete surveys were collected in this phase; however, they are not included in the final sample. Following this phase, minor modifications were implemented to the survey, specifically in terms of language. Modifications on scripting were made. Prior to its final online distribution, the survey was scripted into two languages, German, and English, allowing respondents to choose the preferred language to answer the questionnaire.

3.6 Data Collection and Survey Administration

The data collection method for quantitative questionnaires can be conducted through several means such as telephone, personal interviews, mall intercepts, mail surveys, and more recently, online platforms (McDaniel & Gates, 2020; Zikmund, Ward, Lowe, Winzar, & Babin, 2014; Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2016; Wu, Zhao, & Fils-Aime, 2022). Due to the challenging nature of the research aim, which involves obtaining a sample from German-speaking countries, an online strategy was chosen for its convenience in terms of administration and distribution. Therefore, the present study employed an online survey, a form of data collection that involved the use of an online panel to create and distribute the questions. Research indicates that online surveys offer researchers the ability to reach diverse and sizable audiences without being constrained by geographical boundaries. Additionally, online surveys allow for time efficiency and offer flexibility in terms of survey questionnaire structure.

Online surveys offer several significant benefits. Firstly, they allow researchers to distribute surveys to a large number of potential participants simultaneously. Secondly, they are more

time-efficient for participants when compared to traditional methods. Lastly, respondents have the flexibility to complete the surveys at their own comfort (McDaniel & Gates, 2020). Despite their numerous advantages, online surveys are not without objections, as pointed out by several authors. An often-raised concern regarding the use of online surveys is that the demographic of internet users may not accurately reflect the overall population (Evans & Mathur, 2018; Ball, 2019). Recent research has indicated that conducting surveys online leads to better data quality in terms of responses to both closed- and open-ended questions. This finding has been supported by several studies conducted by various authors (Grandjean, Nelson, & Taylor, 2009; Messer, Michelle, & Dillman, 2012; Shin, Johnson, & Rao, 2011; Kim, Dykema, Stevenson, Black, & Moberg, 2019). Nelson and Taylor (2009) sought to authenticate the online survey by administering a survey through two methods: online and paper-based. The findings suggest that an estimation produced from a probability-based online-panel survey is expected to have a similar level of accuracy as one acquired from a well-designed mail survey.

Another research study has shown that there are no significant variations in the factor structures, factor loadings, and variances of factors between data collected by online surveys and paper-based surveys (Martins, 2010). This suggests that online surveys can generate data that is comparable to data obtained from paper-based surveys. Moreover, online surveys are both comfortable and easily available to a significant number of homes due to the increased prevalence of personal computers and internet connection compared to previous years (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). This study used an online survey delivered via an online panel as a method for collecting the primary data (quantitative empirical survey).

The researcher created the questionnaire using Data Centrum / Lime Survey software in both English and German languages. The responses have been gathered by a professional market research agency through their online panel. The scripted survey was integrated in the online panel and distributed to the target population. The panel provider asserted that the panel accurately represents the German-speaking population of tourists who travel on Western Balkans. The length of interview ranged from 8 to 12 minutes, with an average duration of 10 minutes.

3.6.1 Response Rate and Data Cleaning

The online panel provider distributed the poll to a total of 3000 individuals residing in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, specifically targeting those who had been travelling to the Balkan region. The survey was available to anyone aged 18 to 65.

Three locations were chosen for a sampling method called simple random sampling, and no significant differences that can be attributed to chance were found. Therefore, it can be deduced that the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants closely resemble those of the international tourist population in the German-speaking market. A grand total of 557 responses were gathered, with 141 of them being identified as individuals who have visited Albania during last 3 years. The study's response rate is 18.5 percent. Data cleaning was performed subsequent to the data collection process. Among the 557 questionnaires that were completed, 40 were excluded due to displayed closeness with Western Balkan Countries or not meeting the standards of quality assurance. Therefore, they were, not included in the final sample. The use of open-ended questions facilitated an understanding of the participants' past, unveiling their association with the Western Balkans and Albanian culture. Although these responses had a negligible impact on the outcome, the author chose not to include them in the final sample. Among the deleted responses were also the responses that did not meet the standards of quality assurance. 12 questions had a standard deviation under the limited 25 %. Finally, a total of 517 individuals' responses were used for further study, with 130 representing the sample of visitors of Albania throughout the 0–36-month period.

3.7 Data Analysis and Interpretation

3.7.1 Qualitative Analysis

Content analysis is a research methodology employed to identify the occurrence of particular phrases, concepts topics, or ideas within qualitative data, such as text. Researchers can employ content analysis to examine the occurrence, significance, and interconnections of specific words, topics, or concepts quantitatively and analytically. Content analysis is a suitable approach when the focus of observation is communication rather than behaviour or physical things. The term refers to the process of objectively, systematically, and quantitatively describing the explicit content of a communication. It encompasses both

observation and analysis. The unit of analysis can vary and may include words -distinct words or word types in the message -, characters - individuals or objects -, themes - propositions -, space and time measures (message length or duration), or subjects (message subject) (Malhotra, 2020; Lindgren, Lundman, & Graneheim, 2019).

Possible data sources encompass qualitative interviews, open-end questions, field research notes, chats, and any form of communicative language, such as talks, newspaper headlines, speeches, media, and historical documents. In order to do content analysis on the text, it is necessary to code or break down the material into manageable categories for analysis. After encoding the text into code categories, these codes can be further classified into "code categories" to provide a more concise summary of the data. Content analyses is a method for drawing conclusions by methodically and impartially detecting distinctive attributes of messages.

This study employed content analysis to define the projected image of a destination, which was collected from the promotional materials of Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and Tourism Agencies and the qualitative interviews. The interviews were transcribed initially and subsequently analysed. The information collected from the DMO website, brochures, and promotional materials of tourism agencies was coded and then turned into a quantitative format for further analysis.

3.7.2   Quantitative Data Analyses

In this study, the data is initially analysed and disaggregated using Quantum Data Tabulations. This analysis serves as an initial stage in comprehending the perspective of foreign travellers from German-speaking countries towards Albania, as a tourism destination, including their perception of Albania's image and their travel behaviour. Data analysis was conducted in this step, utilizing the breakdowns provided below:

- Region
- Gender
- Age Group
- Visitors of Albania
- Number of nights accommodated in Albania
- Way of traveling

- Region visited

- Information channels used to be informed about Albania

- Awareness of Albania as a destination (I have heard of Albania as a destination, Top two boxes)

- Top of mind awareness as a destination in Western Balkans

- Annual income in euro

- Expenditures during the trip in euro

The preliminary analysis is also performed using SPSS statistics. This involves applying simple descriptive statistics, such as the mean, standard deviation, and percentage, to analyse the demographic characteristics of tourists. Additionally, a reliability test is used to assess the reliability of the questionnaire items. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient is used to assess the consistency and reliability of the questionnaire results. A higher Cronbach's alpha value indicates a stronger correlation between each item and greater internal consistency. Exploratory Factor Analysis is employed to evaluate the suitability of the measurement data obtained from quantitative research and to reduce the number of variables for subsequent data analysis. The data analysis procedure was organized into multiple sequential steps.

Table 3.7

Steps of Data Analyses

Step 1	Preliminary data analysis	The purpose of preliminary data analysis is to address a number of issues pertaining to missing data, outliers, and normality.
Step 2	The measurement model analysis: Exploratory factor analysis	In order to evaluate the validity, reliability, and unidimensionality of the constructs being examined.
Step 3	Confirmatory factor analysis	To validate the measurement reliability of latent constructs utilized in a structural equation model.
Step 4	The structural model analysis	To test hypotheses on the proposes model.

3.7.3 Statistical Method

3.7.2.1 Overview of Structural Equation Modelling

Structural equation modelling is a statistical technique employed to examine and analyse the interactions between different variables in a multivariate context. It is a statistical method that combines factor analysis and multiple regression analysis to examine the underlying link between observed variables and unobserved constructs. The researcher prefers this strategy, since it allows for the estimation of various and connected dependencies in a single investigation.

This study utilises two sorts of variables: endogenous variables and exogenous variables. Endogenous variables, also known as dependent variables, exogenous variables precisely equal to the independent variable. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is a statistical methodology that is considered a second-generation analysis technique. It employs a confirmatory approach to examine multivariate data. This statistical method is a commonly employed and extensively utilised strategy in research conducted in the fields of psychology and social sciences (Bentler, 1983; Browne, 1984; Hair et al., 1998; Schmacker & Lomax, 2004) (Bentler P. , 1983; Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012; Schumacker & Lomax, 2004; Jr., et al., 2021). SEM allows the observation of separate relationships for each set of measured variables. It enables the examination of distinct associations for each of a group of measured variables. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is the optimal and most effective method for estimating a set of distinct multiple regression equations concurrently.

The process of Structural Equation Modelling involves the utilisation of two sub-models: a measure model and a structural model. Initially, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is conducted to establish the measurement model, which elucidates the interconnections among the observed variables. Structural equation modelling (SEM) employs various models to depict the connections among observed data, mostly to assess a researcher's presumed theoretical model. The objective of SEM analysis is to ascertain the degree to which the model theory is corroborated by the data obtained from the sample. If the sample data corroborate the theoretical model, then it is reasonable to posit more intricate theoretical models. If the sample data does not align with the theoretical model, there are two options:

either the original model can be adjusted and tested, or alternative theoretical models should be constructed and evaluated (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004).

SEM has the capability to evaluate several types of theoretical models. Fundamental models encompass regression models, path models, and confirmatory factor models. Prior to delving into these models, it is essential to establish the definition of fundamental terminology. There are two primary categories of variables: hidden variables, also known as latent variables, and seen variables, sometimes referred to as measured variables. Hidden variables - also known as latent constructs or factors - are variables that cannot be immediately observed or measured. Latent variables are unobservable or indirectly assessed constructs that are inferred from a set of observed variables, which are quantified using tests, measures, questionnaires, and similar methods. The measured variables, also known as indicators, are a collection of variables that are utilised to ascertain or deduce hidden variables. Variables, whether they are directly observed or inferred, can be classified as either independent variables -exogenous - or dependent variables -endogenous. An independent variable is a variable that is unaffected by any other variable in the model. A dependent variable is a variable that is impacted by another variable in the model. Structural equation models comprise observable variables and latent variables that are either independent or dependent. In order to comprehend structural equation modelling, the following four types of models are elucidated in the sequence of their development: Regression, confirmatory factor analysis, path model, and structural equation models (Kline, 2023).

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is a form of structural equation modelling that focuses on examining the connections between indicators and latent variables. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) allows researchers to examine hypotheses concerning the presence or absence of correlations between observable variables and latent variables. The CFA examines the association between observable variables and underlying latent variables. Prior to using the CFA, it is essential to possess comprehensive knowledge, grounded in theory and prior evidence, regarding the quantity of data elements under consideration. The research aims to determine the correlation between each element and its respective metrics. The path model represents the third type of model. Route patterns employ correlation coefficients and regression analysis to accurately represent complex relationships that may exist among the measured variables. Route analysis entails the simultaneous solution of

many regression equations, which theoretically establish the links between the variables observed in the route model (Byrne, 2016).

3.8   Issues of Reliability and Validity

Management research frequently addresses latent characteristics that are not easily perceptible. Consequently, researchers frequently assess these attributes by employing established scales that encompass many indicators. Before examining the relationships between different concepts or conducting hypothesis tests, it is essential to evaluate and record the dependability and accuracy of scales that use several indicators (Cheung, Cooper-Thomas, Lau, & Wang, 2023). Hence, it is crucial to guarantee that the questions are "valid, reliable, and unambiguous" (Zohrabi, 2013; Mohajan, 2018).

By employing Cronbach's alpha, we assess the internal consistency of the research. Below table outlines the internal consistency of the research.

Table 3.8

Reliability Statistics, Internal Consistency of Data

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.947	0.975	68

The alpha coefficient for the items is .947, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency. As widely known the reliability coefficient of .70 or higher is considered "acceptable" in most social science research situations.)

3.8.1   Evaluating the Fit of the Model

The Goodness-of-fit index is a vital metric used to evaluate the suitability of the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) model. The quantification measures the degree to which the provided model accurately replicates the covariance matrix of the indicator variables. This study employed several commonly used indexes to assess absolute fit in marketing research, including the (GFI) Goodness-of-Fit Index, Standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative fit Index

(CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), parsimonious fit index (PNFI), and the normed chi-square (χ^2/df) (Yaşlıoğlu & Yaşlıoğlu, 2020).

The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) measures the extent to which the model explains the proportion of variance and covariance. The GFI index compared the discrepancy value of the model being evaluated to that of the model when it is completely saturated. A GFI value index exceeding 0.90 indicates that the model is appropriately defined. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) index helps to mitigate the bias of the chi-square test in rejecting specified models. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) is commonly employed for evaluating research models. The Parsimony Fit Index (PNFI) is specifically intended to determine the optimal model from a group of competing models. Out of the Parsimony Fit Indices, the normed chi-square (χ^2/df) is the most commonly used index for assessing the suitability of the model (Byrne, 2016).

This study examines the use of the Structural Equation Model in two groups, all participants on the survey and visitors of Albania. Considering that for SEM analyses a minimum number of surveys is needed, when the sample is decreased (visitors of Albania) a parcelling approach is needed. The parcelling approach is employed to reduce the number of parameters to simplify the analysis and testing the SEM model for smaller sample (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012).

Table 3.9

Model Fit Recommended Values Threshold

Fit Indices	Authors	Recommended Values for threshold
CMIN/DF	Marsh & Hocevar, 1985;	< 5.0
	Bentler, 1990;	< 5.0 Reported if n > 200
	Hair at el, 2009	< 3.0 Good; <5.0 Sometimes Permissible
GFI	Chau, 1997;	> .90
	Segars & Grover, 1993	> .90
CFI	Bentler, 1990;	> .90
	Hatcher, 1994	> .90
RMSEA	Byrne, 2016	< .08
	Hu & Bentler, 1999	< .05
	Meyers et al, 2005	< .08 : good fit; .08 to 1 : moderate fit; > 1 : poor fit
SRMR	Hair at el, 2009	< 0.09
RMSR	Meyers et al, 2007	< .05
PCFI	Meyers et al, 2009	> .5

3.9   Ethical Considerations

Ethical Consideration in Business and Management research serves as a safeguard against the manipulation of data, therefore fostering the pursuit of knowledge and truth, which is the fundamental objective of research. Ethical considerations are of utmost importance in every facet of research, encompassing the choice of subject matter, methodology, findings, discourse, referencing, and publication. This study upholds the principles of Ethical Behaviour, which fosters an atmosphere of trust, accountability, and mutual respect among the individuals involved in this research. The principles of honesty, impartiality, respect for intellectual property, social responsibility, confidentiality, non-discrimination, and other pertinent topics guide all the processes throughout the entire research stages (Hasan, Rana, Chowdhury, Dola, & Rony, 2021) .

This study utilises qualitative methodology in its preliminary stage. It considers the incorporation of procedures to protect the authenticity of participants' perspectives during data collecting via interviews. Furthermore, it ensures the rights of the participants and follows ethical norms such as anonymity, voluntary participation, privacy, secrecy, and the availability of opt-out choices. These methods are implemented to guarantee the precision of the acquired information and the fulfilment of the study's goals (Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023)

The ultimate primary data collection involved administering a survey using a questionnaire that was initially designed in English and subsequently translated into German. Research ethics in non-native languages necessitate meticulous translation and interpretation (Eaton, 2020).

Data collection used an online approach through a professional agency who assured that ethical regulation for online data collection are applied based on the ESOMAR guidelines.

- Data protection regulations, ensuring that personal information is obtained for particular reasons, is sufficient, pertinent, and not excessive.
- Measures to safeguard personal identifiers, refrain from accepting unwanted communications, and display a privacy policy statement on their website. (ESOMAR, 2018)

Through the adoption of ethical behaviour, researchers in management not only contribute to the progress of knowledge but also to the responsible and sustainable growth of organisations and society.

3.9.1 Confidentiality

Preserving the confidentiality of data obtained from research participants entails that only the researcher and the advisor possess the power to handle and authenticate the accuracy of persons' responses. The confidentiality of all survey participants' information is strictly upheld, and no names are published without the participants' explicit consent for the participants in the qualitative component. No identifiable information is collected from the participants in the online panel research. The research endeavour has been led by efforts to prevent anyone outside of the project from linking individual subjects with their responses.

3.9.2 Informed Consent

The online quantitative survey incorporated a permission statement that explicitly outlined the subject's rights, the study's objectives, the methods involved, and the potential advantages and disadvantages of participating. The informed consent entails the stipulation that everyone participating in the study must do so voluntarily, and no one is compelled to complete the survey without their explicit assent and volition. The research participants have provided their informed consent.

Furthermore, the individuals who would need additional information prior to participating in the survey were provided with the email contact of the researcher. The questionnaire did not need any personally identifiable information from the responders, such as their name and email address.

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Descriptive Findings

4.1.1 Findings from Qualitative Research

The findings from the qualitative phase facilitated the investigation of the projected image - brand identity - of Albania covering the first objective of the study. This phase includes analyses from the two components, interviews with experts and promotional materials of Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and Tourism Agencies. The results from the qualitative interviews conducted with seven tourism experts are analysed following the Kapferer's framework for brand identification.

The initial round of the study yielded an agreement among industry experts regarding the distinguishing qualities, attributes, and identity factors that differentiate Albania in the competitive landscape. Regarding the identity of Albania, the interviewed experts unanimously identified several key aspects in line with the Physical dimension of Kapferer's Identity Prism. These include the country's advantageous geographical location, breath-taking landscapes, pristine nature, historical archaeological sites, coastal areas, beaches, rivers, overall safety, and rich cultural heritage, including three UNESCO sites: Gjirokastra, Berati, and the ancient cities of Butrinti and Apollonia.

Albania boasts a notable advantage in terms of its varied scenery and the close proximity of its tourism destinations. According to (Interviewee3, 2020) Shkodra is the only city where visitors may enjoy the combination of a coastline, a lake, and a mountain. According to the experts, the distinguishing relationship type that sets Albania apart as a destination is characterized as energetic, friendly, and loyal.

The cultural and traditional influences on Albania's identity are also evident in the concept of *besa*, which represents a pledge of honour. All the experts affirm the presence of the friendship factor and hospitality.

Albania Brand's Cultural Dimension is characterized by its authenticity, historic legacy - including the UNESCO sites, the rich culture and tradition, evident in the gastronomy but also in legends, myths, and folklore. The concept of besa, a pledge of respect and honour, is also highly regarded in Albania. The traditional costumes, arts, and crafts are highly diverse and vary significantly across different regions. The Albanian language, different and distinct from those spoken in the region, serves as another defining aspect of Albania's cultural identity. The destination provides a diverse and genuine cultural experience that guarantees exploration.

Experts were invited to identify the key characteristics that most accurately depict the personality, of the brand of Albania. The responses characterized Albania as a welcoming, inquisitive, well-known, trustworthy, self-assured, dynamic, and essential travel location. The personality results were considered also based on (Aaker, 1997) personality traits. In accordance with Aaker (1997), the personality characteristic of sincerity encompasses friendliness and familiarity, while competence is characterized by reliability and confidence. The personality trait of excitement includes curiosity, energy, and vitality. One of the experts interviewed referred to "wild" as a personality attribute of Albania which falls under the category of ruggedness. The findings indicated that 4 out of 5 aspects of Aaker's personality traits are relevant to the Albanian Brand as a destination.

The experts were asked how they would describe a typical visitor of Albania in order to analyse the reflected image of the country, based on the identity prism. According to the recorded responses, the typical visitor of Albania is drawn by something new and enticed by the wild natural environment (Interviewee4, 2019). The typical visitor was identified as Discoverer (Curious) (Interviewee5, 2019), who possesses a sense of adventure (Interviewee3, 2020), and a deep appreciation for nature. Furthermore, this person is characterized as an extrovert (Interviewee2, 2020). The responses from the quantitative analysis corroborated a finding that identified the first factor driving destination choice.

The self-image of Albania as a touristic destination is derived from the responses of experts to the question "How do you believe tourists perceive Albania as a tourist destination?" The responses revealed descriptions of beautiful natural landscapes in all four seasons, as well as a sense of pride and friendliness among the local population. The region is known for its authentic culture, excellent cuisine, and a Mediterranean spirit that encompasses its weather, flora and wildlife, and also local products. Additionally, the area is characterized as underdeveloped, unknown, and highly appealing. According to (Interviewee5, 2019), some visitors have the perception that Albania is unsafe before they visit it, but they are pleasantly surprised to find a safe and secure environment. The study identifies the key aspects that define Albania's identity and can distinguish it in the tourism market. These characteristics describe every aspect of the Kapferer's Identity Prism, which can serve as a model for differentiating the destinations brand positioning.

While assessing Albania as a touristic destination and considering its strengths and potential, it is evident that one of its key attributes is its authenticity, which appeals to travellers seeking adventure and exchanges with friendly locals.

When asked about their perception of Albania as a tourist destination, experts stated that tourism industry in Albania was primarily focused on Sun & Beach tourism, rather than other forms of tourism that guarantee a longer seasonality. The demand trend in the international market indicates a shift from mass tourism to alternative tourism, where simple attractions are no longer sufficient to satisfy tourists. Instead, an authentic experience takes precedence. Albania possesses significant potential for the advancement of alternative forms of tourism, such as adventure tourism, cultural exploration of many regions, and gastronomic experiences. The absence of tourism operators in both urban and rural areas is a significant constraint. Others: the lack of personnel with expertise in the field of tourism, ranging from tour guides and managers to wait staff and other local service providers.

When asked about the DMO's operations and potential areas for improvement, experts assert that the Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) requires to robust collaboration with tourism industry stakeholders, partnerships, well-defined structures, and openness. There are several limitations in Albania regarding this issue: The Central Government's unsatisfactory performance, including problems with the law on tourism, a limited tourism strategy due to

its lacking legal framework, corruption, and informality. Limited capacities of local institutions, including those dependable from the municipalities and regions. Private enterprises often have limited capacities and lack the necessary knowledge to fully grasp the benefits of partnerships. Moreover, in recent years they are lacking even employees. According to the interviewed experts' other limitation include the inadequate synchronization across different activities and programs, including substantial multinational endeavours. Every initiative /project possesses its individual objective, frequently intersecting with others, leading to ambiguity, and eroding the confidence of local operators.

The qualitative interviews' findings, presented below, suggest that Albania, due to its strategic location, offers a remarkable display of nature's four seasons' colours and the essence of the Mediterranean region, including its weather, flora, fauna, and local products. A traveller can discover genuine experiences and a destination rich in cultural history, including three UNESCO sites and one UNESCO tradition known as *isopoliphony*. They can also explore local legends, myths, folklore, archaeological ruins, traditional heritage such as clothing and crafts, and indulge in the region's distinctive culinary traditions. A traveller can discover a secure destination inhabited by hospitable and pleasant individuals. A destination that is both familiar and dependable, characterised by confidence, energy, and vitality. It offers a unique opportunity to witness *besa* a pledge of respect and honour. The typical visitor in Albania is a millennial who is passionate about nature and has a strong desire to explore new destinations.

Brand promise: The last authentic experience! ..... in the "heart" of the Europe

4.1.1.1 Results of Content Analysis

According to Pike (2008), the projected image of a destination refers to how Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) aim to be viewed, representing a perfect representation of their destination. To fully understand the projected image, a content analysis is conducted on the promotional materials of Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and Tourism Agencies that target the German-speaking market. The data obtained from the DMO website, brochures, and promotional materials of tourism organisations was encoded and subsequently converted into a quantitative format for further analysis.

The attributes obtained from promotional materials, such as brochures and websites, are displayed in the below table.

Table 4.1

Projected Image Attributes by Agencies and DMO Website

1	Heart of the Mediterranean, Mediterranean climate	Frequency
2	Finest beaches, pristine beaches, inviting beaches, pebble beaches, Striking coasts, hidden bays, stunning Riviera	18
3	Wild and rugged mountains, dazzling mountain, imposing mountains, limestone mountains, snow-capped mountains, stunning views of mountainous, wild and rugged landscape, wild, untouched nature	14
4	Idyllic valleys and forests, pretty valleys, Hidden Valley, wonderful symphony of magnificent Alps, dense forests, ancient forest, picturesque views, spectacular view	16
5	archaeological treasures, dramatic amphitheatres, magnificent castles	10
6	Ancient towns, preserved historic towns, stone towns, fascinating historical cities, historical monuments, historic stories	5
7	Delightful people, friendly people, friendly hosts, friendly welcome	12
8	Rich in history, interesting history	6
9	Vibrant tradition, ancient traditions, Vibrant live	15
10	Seldom-discovered scenery, breath-taking scenery, breath-taking scenery, stunning natural scenery, Stunning landscape, diversity of landscapes	7
11	Europe's best-kept secrets	5
12	Unforgettable journey, Unforgettable experiences	10
13	Tolerant nation when it comes to religion, religion tolerance	2
14	unique experiences, authentic insights,	8
15	Europe's hidden gem, hidden paradises	2
16	charming and delightful country	3
17	pristine lakes, hidden lakes, turquoise waters	3
	traditional villages, charming villages, pretty rural villages, secluded stone villages, sleepy coastal villages	5
18	diverse cultures, genuine subsistence culture	4
19	delicious food	20
20	plenty of sunshine	20
21	Colourful architecture, charming cities, colourful trails	28
22	World Heritage Site, UNESCO world heritage site	6
24	Thermal waters, thermal baths	10
25	Honest people, hospitality	20

The findings from this section of the study align with the qualitative interviews, which revealed traits such as breath-taking landscapes, cultural diversity, warm hospitality, and the

genuine honesty of the local people. Statements like "Europe's hidden gem", "hidden paradise", "UNESCO world heritage site" are traced in those promotional channels.

The outcomes of this stage are utilised to ascertain the country-specific characteristics that are incorporated into the quantitative questionnaire. The destination image undergoes formation and transformation at many stages, both prior to and following the visit. When a traveller considers visiting a destination, the first thing he typically does is search the internet for information, particularly regarding recommended sites to visit. Individuals mostly seek information on destination websites, various agency websites, and travel magazine articles.

The pre-visit stages play a crucial role in determining the success of a destination. To accurately assess the positioning of a destination and identify any discrepancies between the perceived image by international tourists and the projected image, it is necessary to examine relevant information sources (Martín-Santana, Beerli-Palacio, & Nazzareno, 2017).

4.1.2 Findings from Quantitative Research

4.1.2.1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The study sample consisted of 50.5% males and 49.5% females, with an average age of 41.8 years. The age distribution of the respondents was as follows: 66.5% were between 35 and 65 years old, while 33.5% were between 18 and 34 years old. 49.5% of the participants identified as female, whereas 50.5% identified as male. The majority of the respondents (53.8%) are married, whereas 34.6% of them are single. The majority of German-speaking respondents are from Germany (65%), with Austria (24%) and Switzerland (11%) following closely behind. 45% of the respondents obtained a degree, whereas 39% have successfully finished technical school and 13% have completed high school. The majority of them reside in modestly sized households, often consisting of 3.1 individuals on average. Approximately 60% of those who disclosed their annual income reported an average annual income of 58,441 Euros.

Table 4.2

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

	Total	Region			Gender		Visitors of Albania	
	Total	*Austria*	*Germany*	*Switzerland*	*Female*	*Male*	*Visitors*	*Non-Visitors*
BASE	517	125	336	56*	256	261	130	387
		24.20%	65.00%	10.8%*	49.50%	50.50%	25.10%	74.90%
18-24	61	20	31	10	32	29	23	38
	11.80%	16.00%	9.20%	17.90%	12.50%	11.10%	17.70%	9.80%
25-34	112	32	66	14	71	41	35	77
	21.70%	25.60%	19.60%	25.00%	27.70%	15.70%	26.90%	19.90%
35-44	114	27	74	13	66	48	29	85
	22.10%	21.60%	22.00%	23.20%	25.80%	18.40%	22.30%	22.00%
45-54	123	29	84	10	46	77	25	98
	23.80%	23.20%	25.00%	17.90%	18.00%	29.50%	19.20%	25.30%
55+	107	17	81	9	41	66	18	89
	20.70%	13.60%	24.10%	16.10%	16.00%	25.30%	13.80%	23.00%
M.S.	41.77	39.09	43.27	38.78	39.49	44.01	38.3	42.94
Std Dev.	12.96	12.72	12.8	13.19	12.51	13.03	12.83	12.81
BASE	517	125	336	56*	256	261	130	387
		24.20%	65.00%	10.8%*	49.50%	50.50%	25.10%	74.90%
Single	179	50	105	24	93	86	61	118
	34.60%	40.00%	31.30%	42.90%	36.30%	33.00%	46.90%	30.50%
Married	278	52	198	28	126	152	59	219
	53.80%	41.60%	58.90%	50.00%	49.20%	58.20%	45.40%	56.60%
Other	60	23	33	4	37	23	10	50
	11.60%	18.40%	9.80%	7.10%	14.50%	8.80%	7.70%	12.90%

4.1.2.2 Perceived Image of Albania Based on Potential Tourist Perceptions

Top of Mind Awareness and Spontaneous Awareness

When asked to recall the first touristic location in the Western Balkans that came to their mind, 26% of the respondents chose Croatia, while 15% mentioned Albania. Albania was mentioned as a secondary spontaneous awareness by 16% of the respondents, contributing to a total spontaneous awareness of 31%. Croatia has achieved a notable level of recognition, with 43% of people spontaneously mentioning it as the top destination in the Balkans. Montenegro ranks third with a spontaneous awareness rate of 16%, including a 4% top-of-

mind awareness. Serbia follows closely behind, with a spontaneous awareness rate of 15%. 35% of the participants were unable to spontaneously name a tourism destination country in the Balkans.

Upon examining the spontaneous awareness of Albania based on demographic data, it is shown that ladies cited Albania in 35% of cases, whilst males mentioned it in 27% of cases. Furthermore, it has been shown that individuals in the younger age group (18-24 years old) and the oldest age group (55+ years old) exhibit a somewhat greater level of spontaneous awareness compared to other age groups. The level of spontaneous awareness among visitors of Albania is significantly higher compared to non-visitors, with 47% of visitors demonstrating awareness compared to 24% of non-visitors.
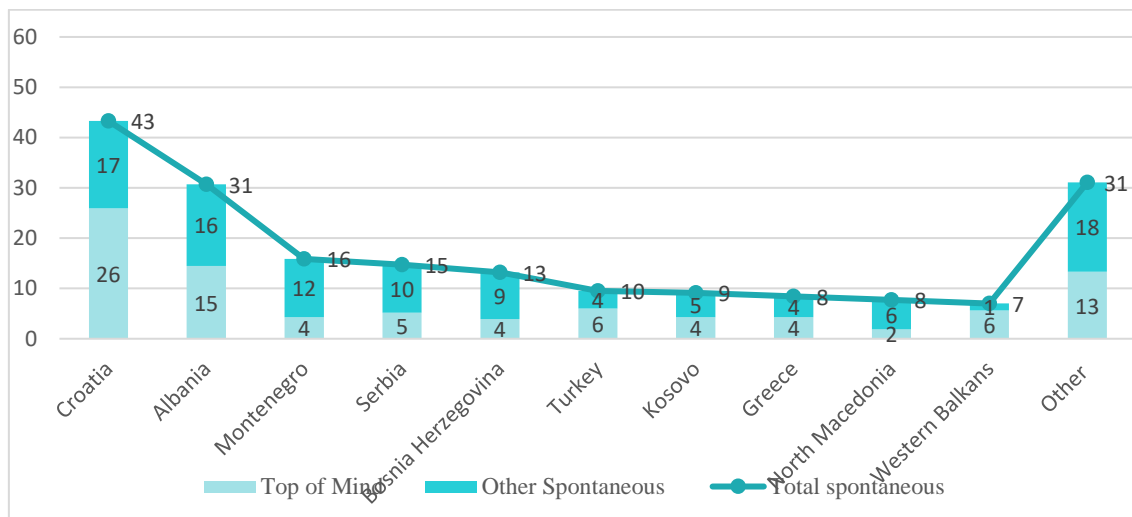
Figure 4.1 Top of mind awareness and spontaneous awareness

Tourism slogans - Awareness and Associations with Respective Countries

32% of the respondents have heard/seen the Albanian tourism slogan "Go your own way." Albania stands 5th amongst the Balkan countries, as regards the awareness of its slogan. The awareness towards the slogan is higher amongst younger group of ages (18-24 years old), compared to older group of ages. Almost half of the respondents belonging to this group of age have heard the Albanian slogan. Furthermore, females show higher awareness of the slogan compared to males.
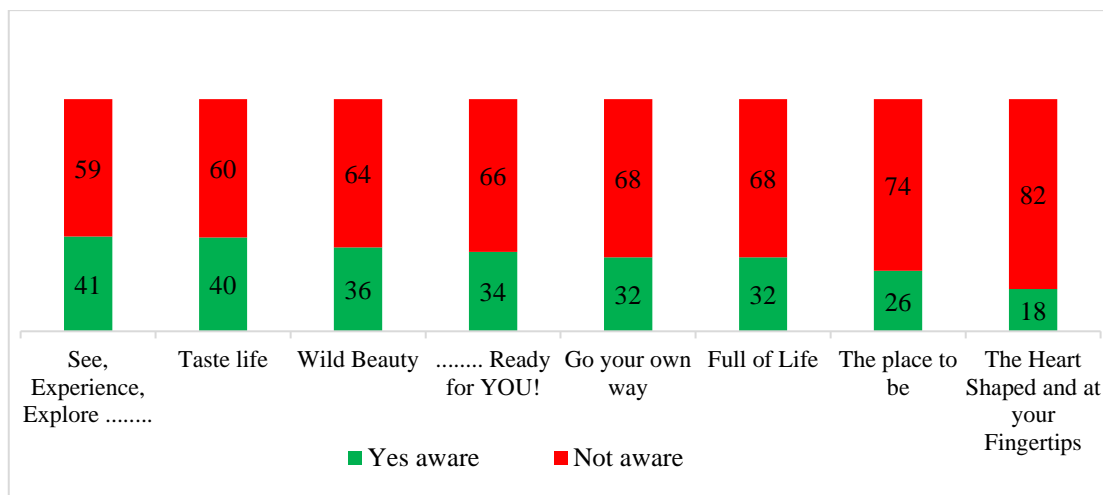
Figure 4.2 Awareness on slogans

While analysing the association of the various slogans with the respective countries, it is observed that the respondent is unable to establish a clear connection with the Albanian slogan, despite being aware of its existence. The slogan is associated more with Kosovo (23%) than with Albania (19%). In addition, the other Balkan countries have not successfully established a significant connection between the tourism slogan and their own countries.

Table 4.3

Association of Slogans with Countries

Association of slogans with countries (Q.4)	Albania	Bosnia and Hercegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Go your own way	19	15	23	15	17	16
.... Ready for YOU!	21	17	17	13	16	15
The Heart Shaped at your Fingertips	7	28	15	14	12	14
Taste life	10	13	13	18	15	18
Wild Beauty	27	11	18	21	18	15
See, Experience, Explore	15	14	13	18	21	22

Every single responder (100%) has visited the western Balkan region at least once, as determined by the study's criteria and quota (Q.4). 39% of the individuals have travelled to Serbia at least once, with Bosnia and Herzegovina being the second most visited destination with 32% of the respondents. Additionally, 25% of the individuals have visited Albania at least once.
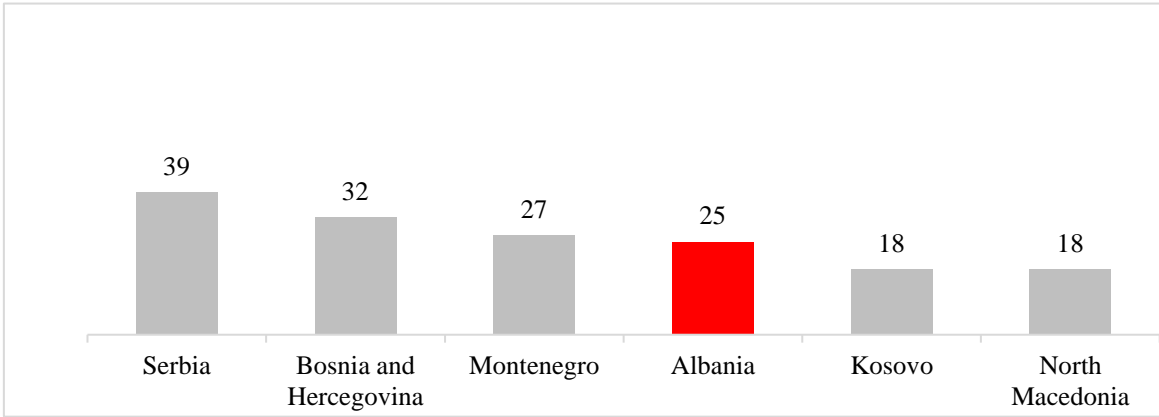
Figure 4.3 Countries they have visited

While analysing the visits per country of origin, it is noted that Albania is visited mostly by the respondents living in Switzerland, with a rate of 39%, followed by the residents in Germany, with a rate of 25%. The rate of Austrians visiting Albania is slightly lower, about 21%. The latest have mostly visited Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina.
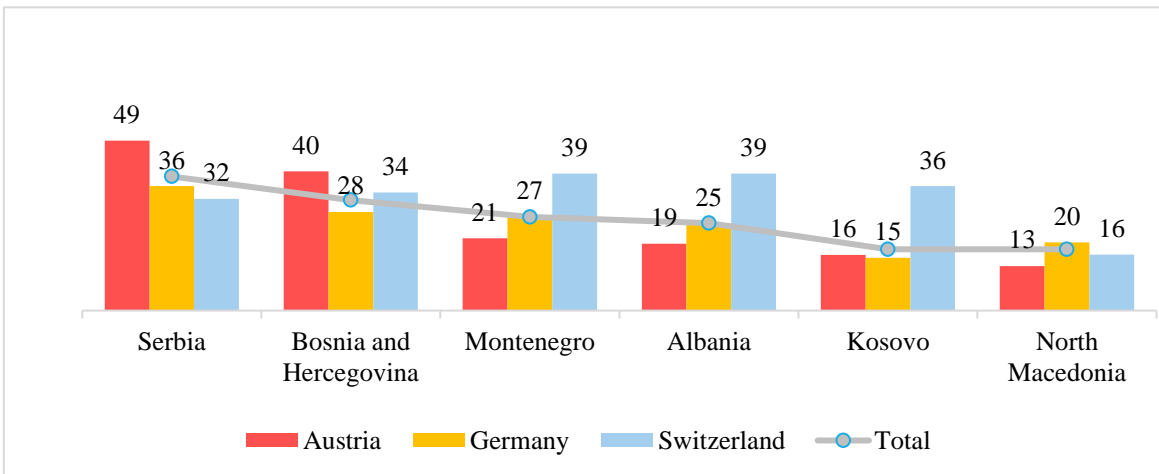
Figure 4.4 Countries they have visited/analysed per country of origin

While analysing the data on visits per country of origin, it is evident that the majority of visitors to Albania are from Switzerland, constituting 39% of the total, followed by Germany with 25%. The proportion of Austrians travelling to Albania is slightly lower, at 21%. Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina have been the most commonly frequented destinations by Austrians.
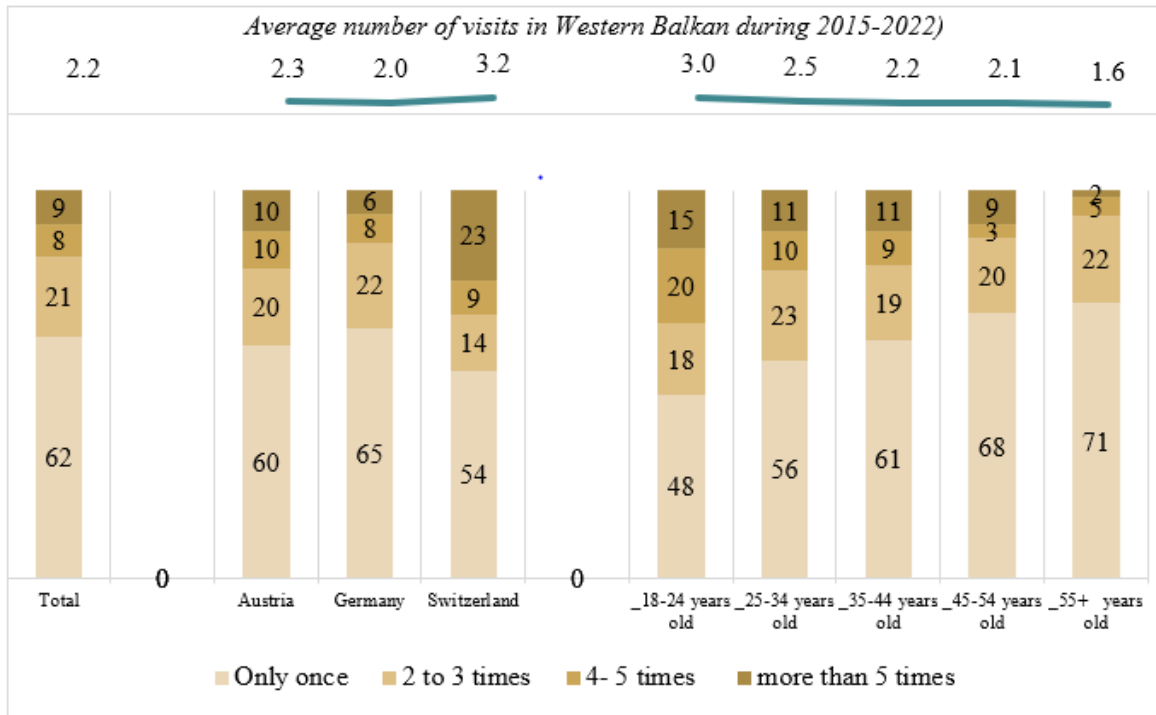
Figure 4.5 Number of visits Western Balkan during 2015-2022

Regarding the purpose of their visits, the majority - 41% - have primarily been to the Western Balkans just for the purpose of visiting these countries. 21% of respondents reported that their visit was incidental or a diversion during a vacation to another destination, while 12% indicated that they travelled specifically to visit friends or family.
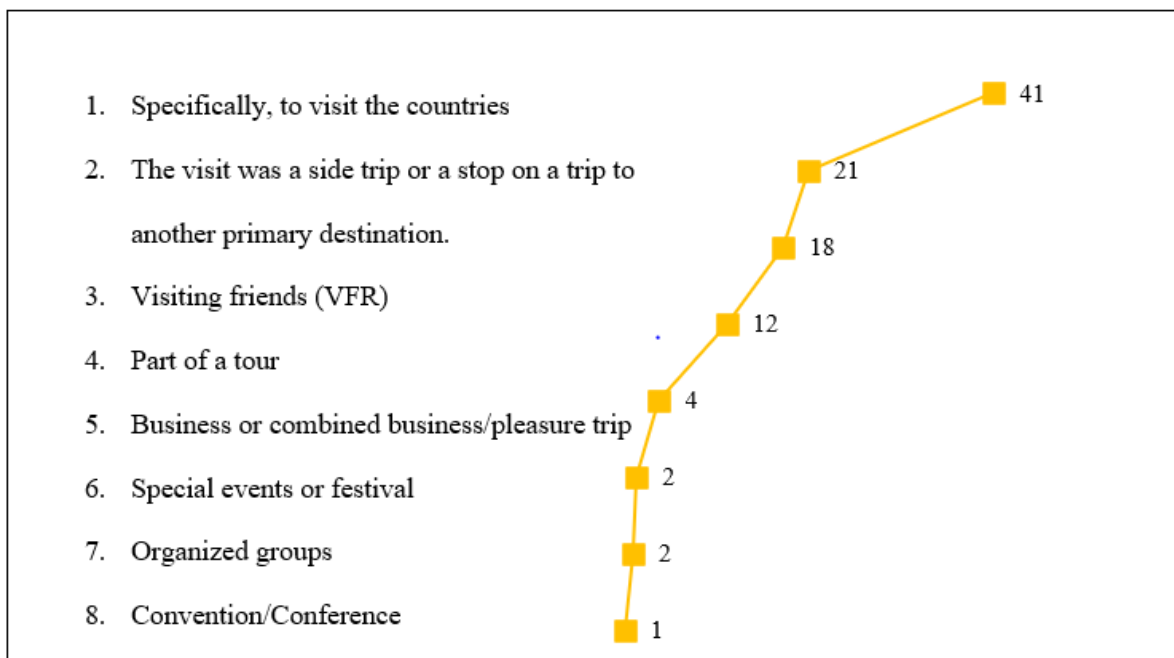
Figure 4.6 Reasons they have visited the Western Balkan

Traveling in Albania

The respondents who have visited Albania - 25% of the total number, have visited Albania an average of 1.8 times between 2015 and 2022. Swiss respondents have a higher frequency of visits throughout this period, with an average of 2.5 trips. Additionally, females have made two (2) visits to Albania during this period, while males have made 1.4 visits.
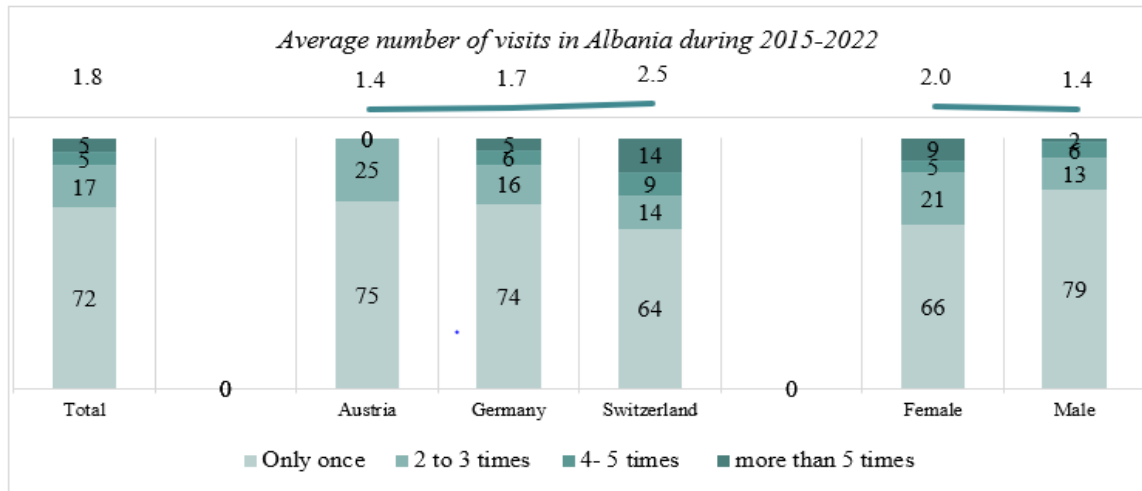
Figure 4.7 Average number of visits in Albania during 2015-2022

The majority of the visitors of Albania have chosen a day trip (78% of them), while only 22% have stayed overnight, by mostly using hotels or staying at friends or relatives.
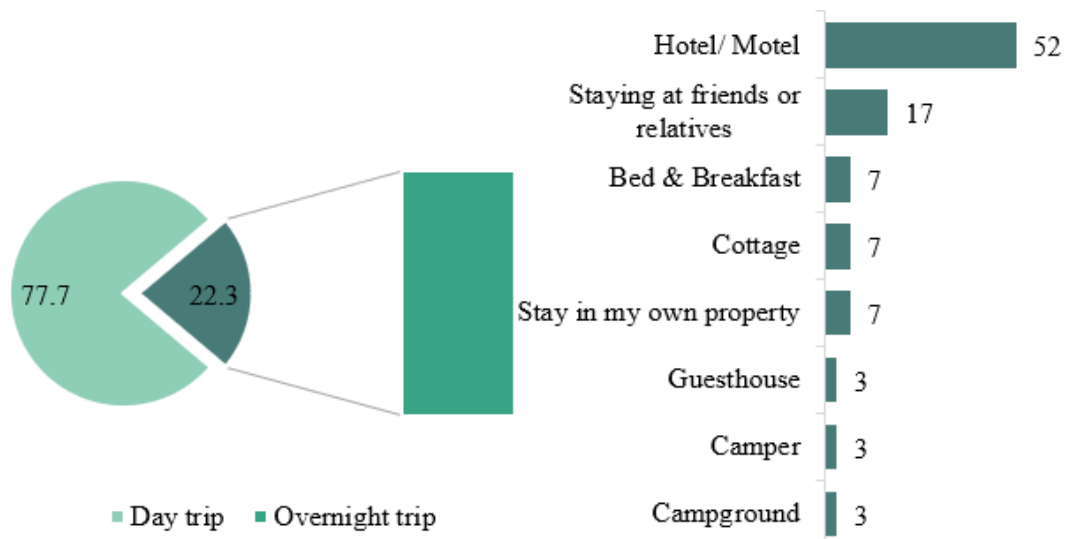
Figure 4.8 Type of visit and accommodation

The average duration of stay for visitors in Albania was 4.3 nights. Approximately half of the tourists to Albania travelled independently, constituting 50% of the total. Meanwhile, 39% of the visitors explored the country with their families, and 12% joined organised group tours. 49% of the individuals arrived in Albania using air transportation, while 41% of them utilised land transportation such as buses or cars. The remaining 10% arrived by water.
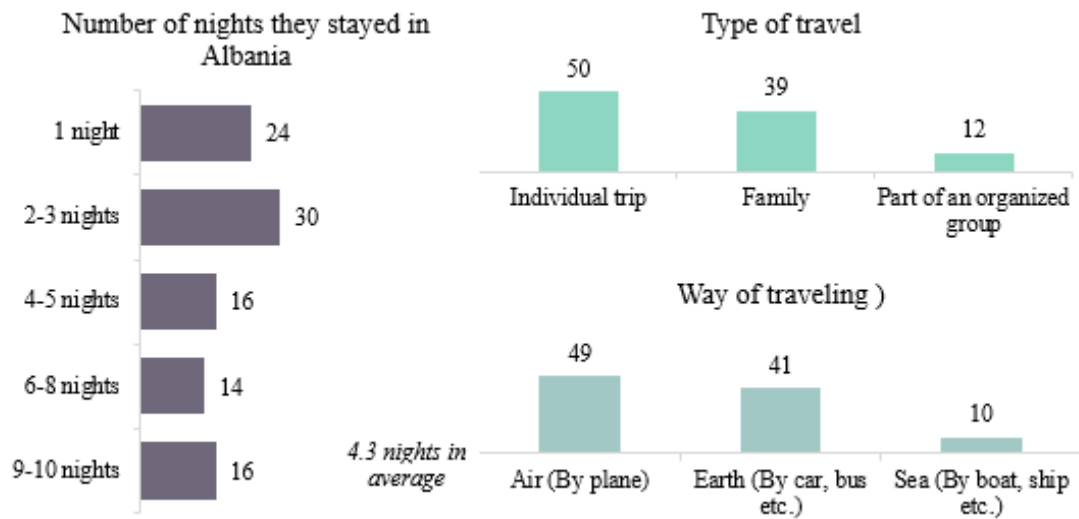
Figure 4.9 Type, way of traveling and length of stay

In terms of the purpose of their travels, the majority of the respondents has been to Albania for its coastal areas (59%), while the 34% came for cultural tourism and adventure. 18% of the tourists explored the country's mountainous regions.
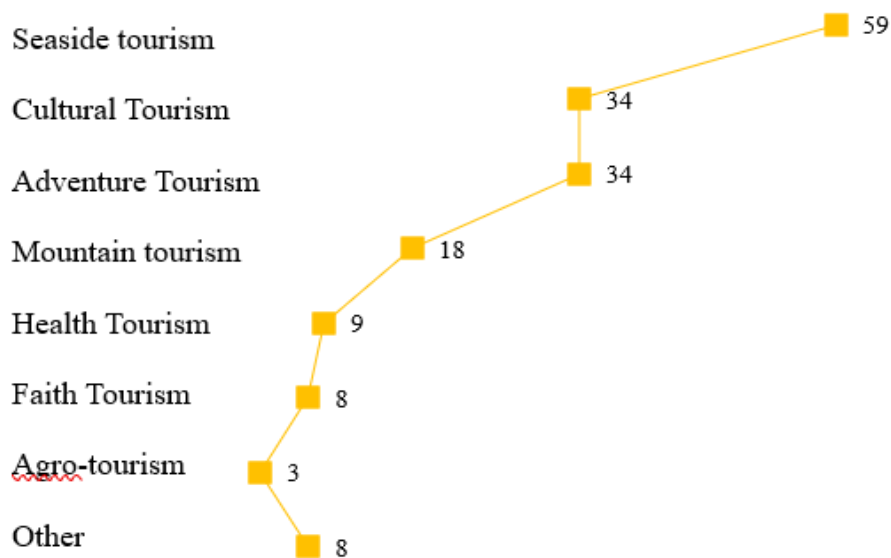
Figure 4.10 Tourism type

During their most recent visit, 59% of the visitors chose Central Albania as their destination, which includes Tirana (the capital), Durrës (a beach city), Kruja (known for its castle), Elbasan (also known for its castle), and other locations. Approximately 35% of the individuals chose to travel to the southern region of Albania, primarily for the purpose of enjoying the coastal attractions such as Vlora (including the beach and riviera), Saranda (seaside), Gjirokastra (castle), and Berati (castle and ancient city). 22% of the visitors explored the northern region of Albania, including attractions such as Shkodra castle and lake, the alps (Theth, Valbona, Lepushe, Vermosh), Lezha castle, and Dibra (Korab, Lura).

Their average expenditure on their recent trip to Albania amounted to 1306 euros, which equates to 303 euros per night, based on an average stay of 4.3 nights.
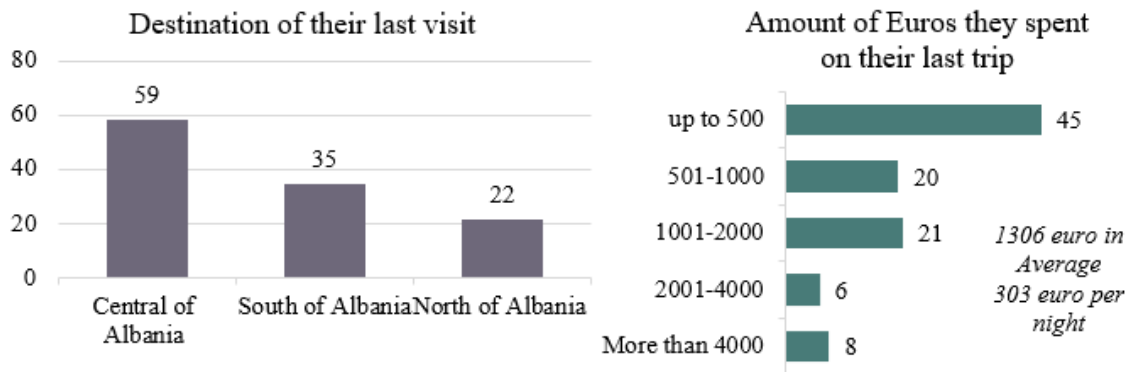
Figure 4.11 Destination of last visit and amount of euros spent

All participants, - both tourists and non-visitors - were asked about the sources they used to obtain information about Albania. The majority responded that they primarily rely on the internet (79%), followed by word of mouth from friends, family, or colleagues (62%), and social media (49%). 46% utilise brochures, while 41% use travel agents. The younger demographic tends to rely more heavily on digital information outlets, whilst the older demographic is more inclined to utilise brochures and travel agencies.

	Internet	Word of Mouth	Social Media	Brochures, guidebooks	Travel Agents	Previous trips	Advertisements	Celebrities, influencers	Tourism fair
Total	79	62	49	46	41	35	24	21	19
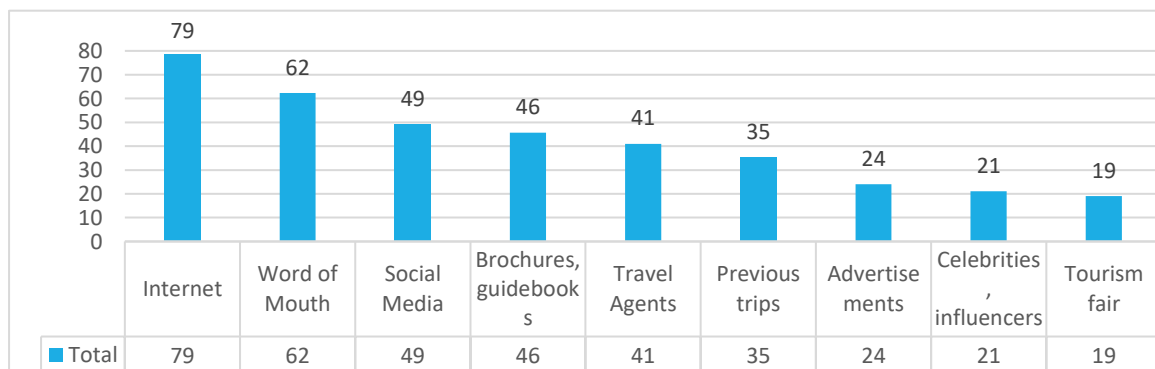
Figure 4.12 Information channels to learn about Albania for total sample

When those who visited Albania were asked about their primary sources of local information, the majority responded to have relied on information provided by hotels/motels (65%), cities/local information centres (58%), and word of mouth from local residents (58%). 42% of individuals utilised the National Tourism Organisation website, while 37% relied on travel agents.
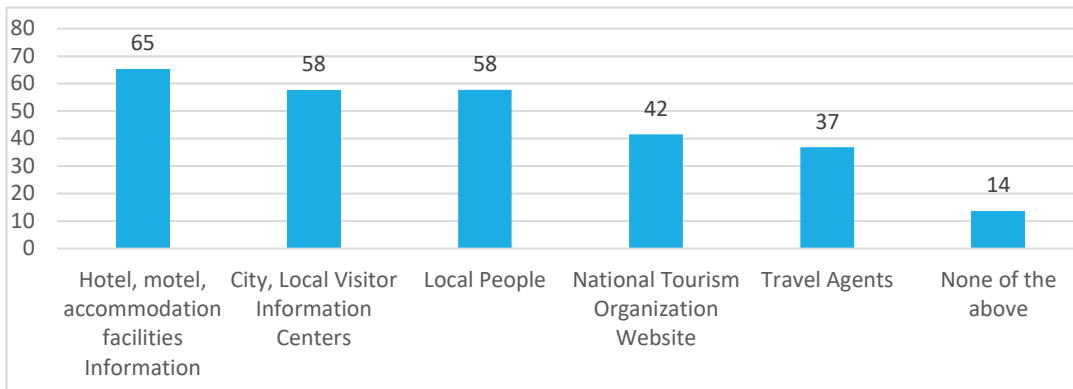
Figure 4.13 Information channels to learn about Albania for visitors

The participants were queried regarding their immediate positive and negative connotations with Albania. The associations are displayed as a word cloud. These spontaneous associations prescribe the image of German speaking individuals toward Albania as a destination.

Figure 4.14 Word cloud Albania

Destination Awareness

A significant majority of 68% of respondents are aware of Albania as a travel destination. 54% of respondents possess a viewpoint regarding Albania and are knowledgeable about this destination. Approximately 39% of individuals hold the belief that the destination possesses a favourable reputation, while only35% are able to recall a limited number of significant cites in Albania.
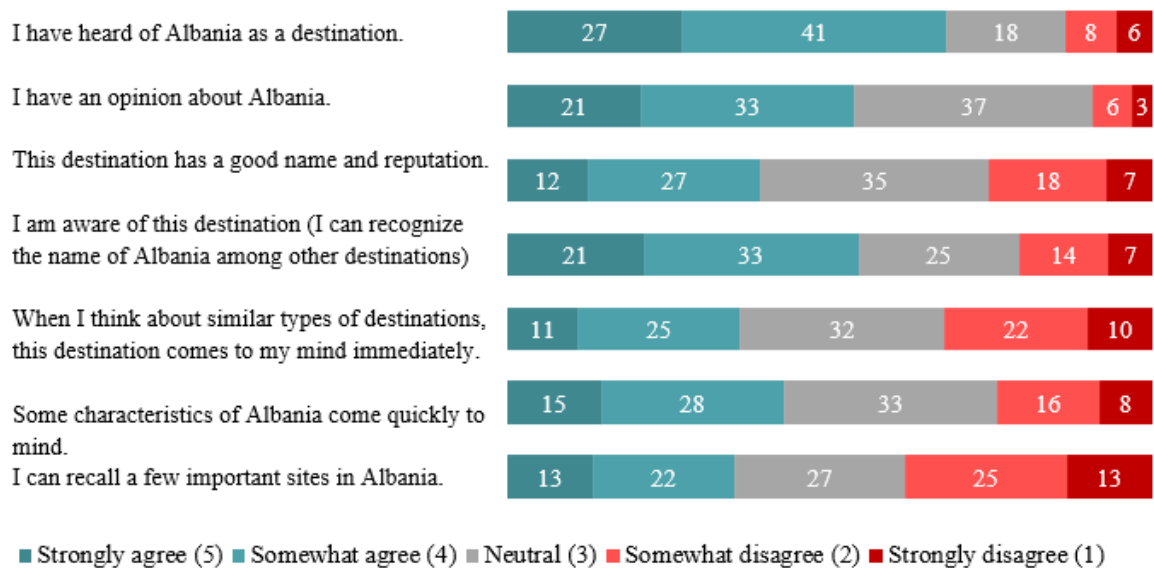
Figure 4.15 Destination awareness

Natural Sources

The majority of respondents greatly value natural sources. 70% of the respondents believe that Albania possesses stunning natural scenery, while the 60% perceive Albania's climate as enjoyable. Visitors and non-visitors hold contrasting perceptions about the evaluation and image of Albanian nature. The visitors have a more favourable perception, with evaluations exceeding 10-20 points (for various attributes), in comparison to the respondents who have not visited Albania. Figure 4-16
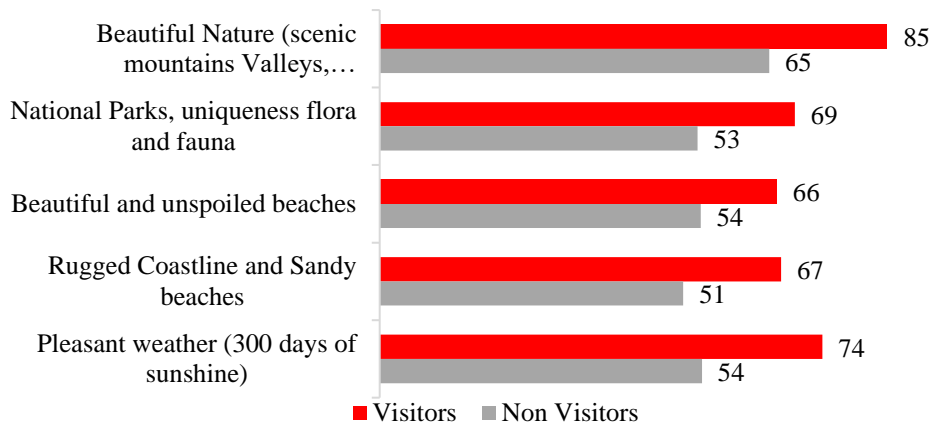
Figure 4.16 Natural sources analysed per visitors/non-visitors.

Natural and Built

The respondents have given much lower evaluations to the infrastructure and structures compared to the natural sources. 54% of the respondents perceive Albania's cities and towns as aesthetically pleasing, while 45% find the tourist spots easily reachable, and 40% consider the destinations easily accessible. Only 30% of them possess a favourable perception of cleanliness, the transportation infrastructure, and the public transportation system.
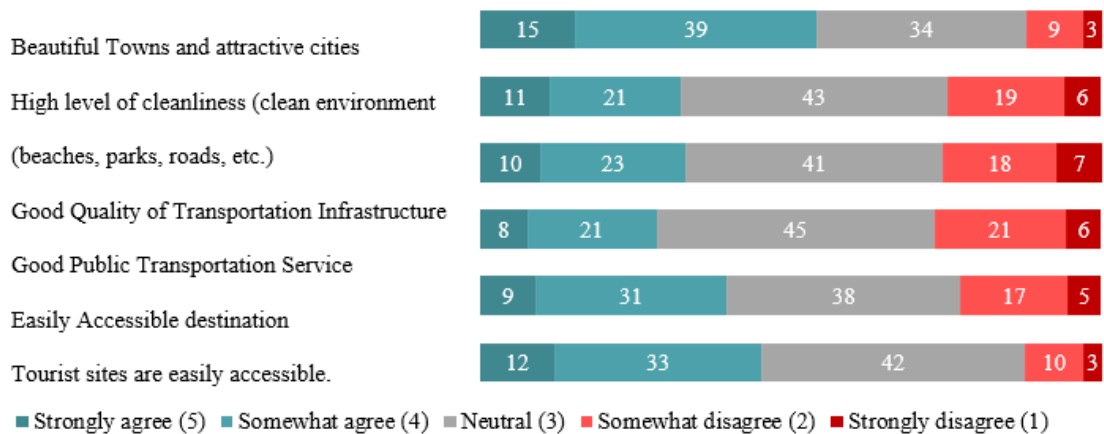
Figure 4.17 Natural built

Visitors and non-visitors have contrasting perceptions about the evaluation and image of the Albanian infrastructure. The visitors have a much higher evaluation score, ranging from 10 to 26 points, for various features, compared to the respondents who have not visited Albania.
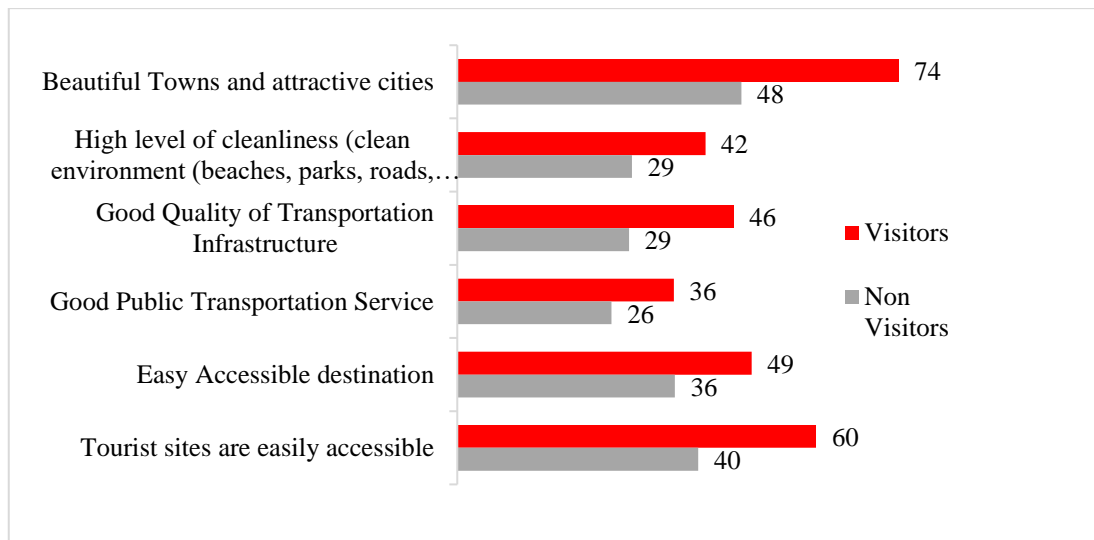
Figure 4.18 Natural and built analysed per visitors/non-visitors, (Top 2 boxes)

Leisure and Entertainment

Asked about the sources and chances for leisure and recreation, the respondents generally have a positive image of Albania in this regard. Around 5 out of 10 of the respondents think that Albania offers good opportunities for recreational activities for sport activities and has various tourist activities. About 4 out of 10 of the respondents think that Albania offers a rich night life, good shopping opportunities and interesting events or festivals.
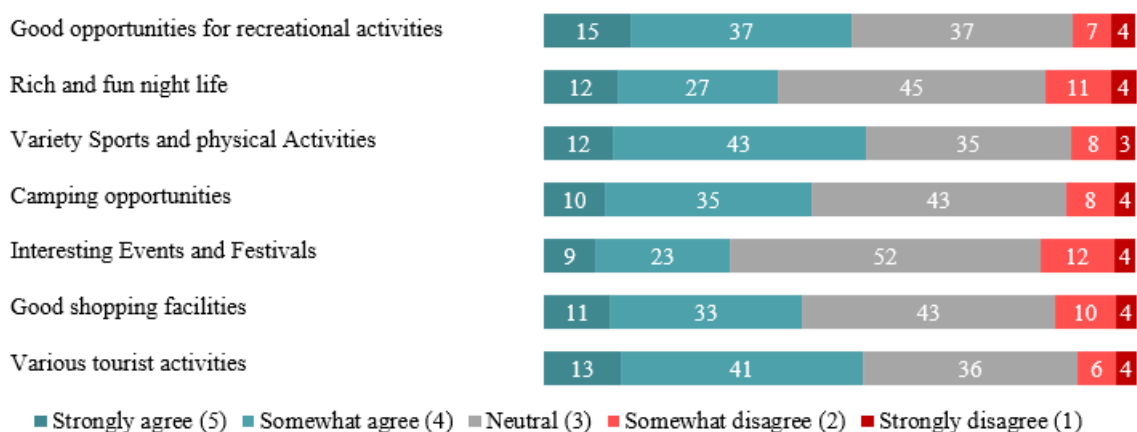
Figure 4.19 Leisure and entertainment

Visitors and non-visitors have different perceptions about the evaluation and image of leisure and entertainment options in Albania. The visitors possess a more favourable perception in contrast to the responders who have not visited Albania.
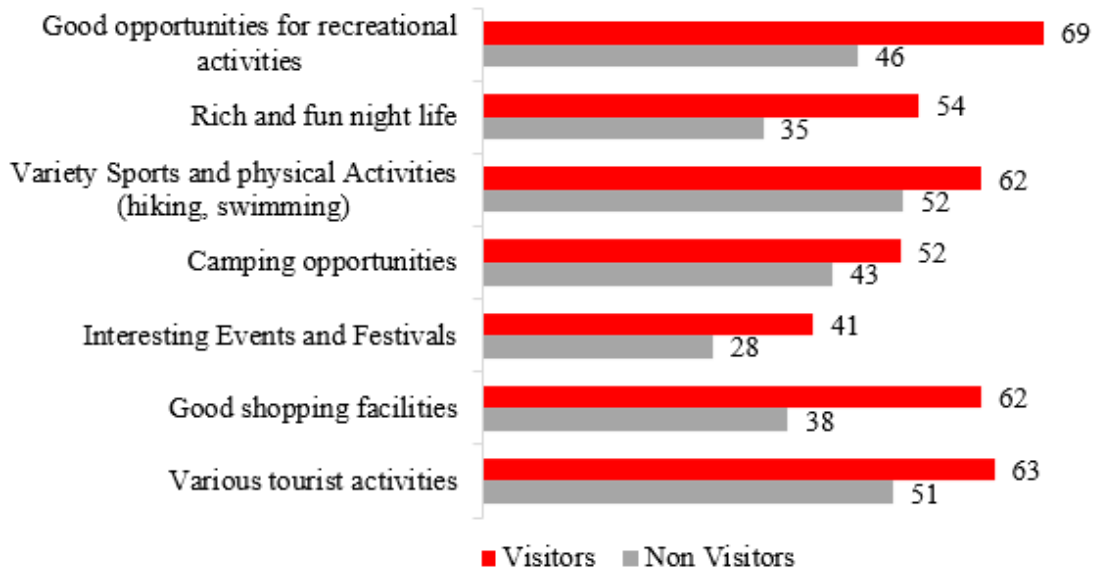
Figure 4.20 Leisure and entertainment analysed per visitors/non-visitors

Culture, History, Heritage, and Art

The culture, history, art, and the heritage of Albania create a robust image amongst the German speaking tourists, evaluated highly by around 5 or 6 out of 10 of them. Slightly better image as regards the traditional costumes and crafts and the rich folklore, culture and ISO-Polyphony. The culture, history, art, and heritage of Albania are highly regarded by approximately 50-60% of German-speaking tourists, reflecting a positive perception of the destination. The image of traditional costumes, crafts, folklore, culture, and ISO-Polyphony has improved slightly.
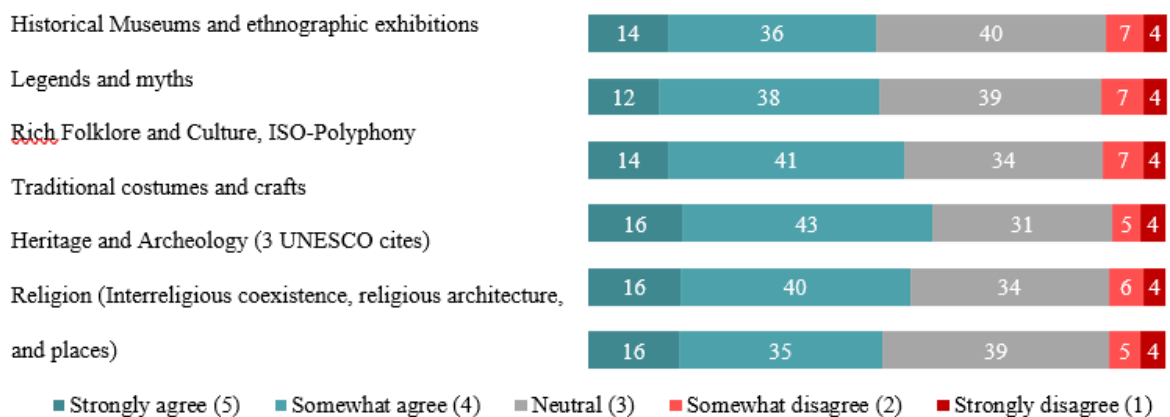
Figure 4.21 Culture, history, heritage, and art

There is a clear difference between the evaluation/image towards Albanian culture, history, heritage, and art between visitors and non-visitors. Visitors have a better image compared with the respondents that have not visited Albania.
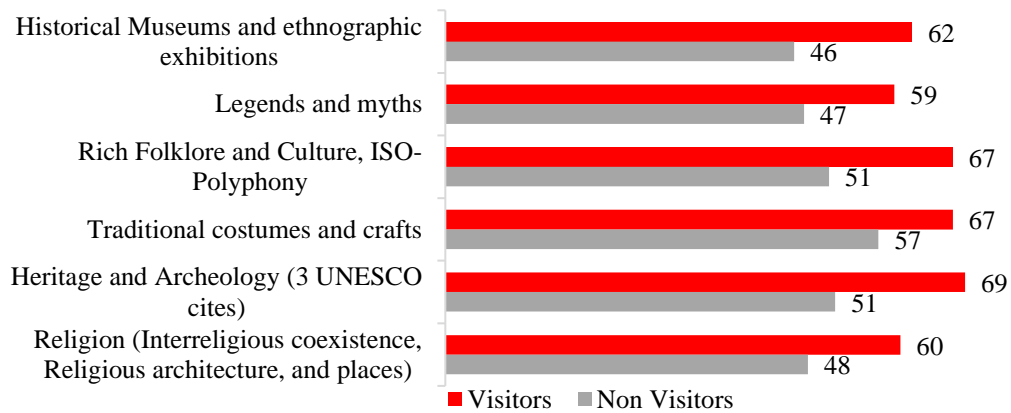
Figure 4.22 Culture history art and heritage analysed per visitors /non-visitors

Tourist Infrastructure

Similar to the general infrastructure and buildings, the appraisal of the tourism infrastructure is comparatively lower when compared to other measured topics. The coffee shops and restaurants are the ones that set themselves apart from others. Approximately 40% to 60% of the respondents maintain a favourable perception of the Albanian tourist infrastructure.
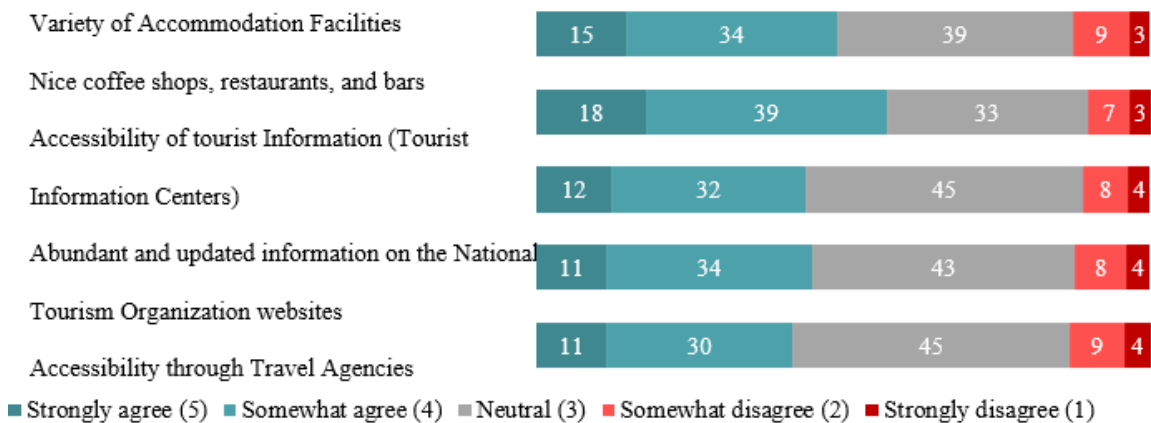
Figure 4.23 Tourist infrastructure
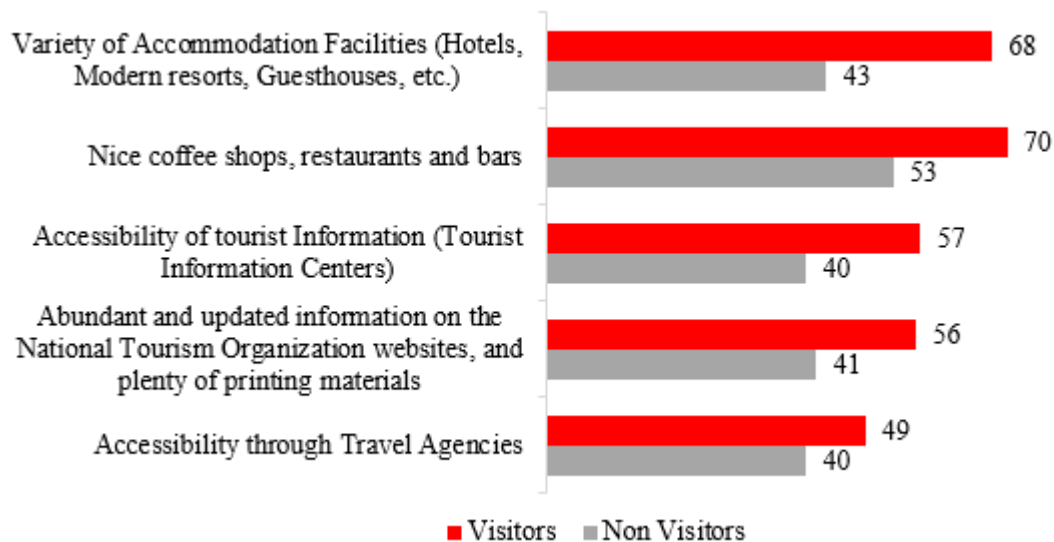
Figure 4.24 Tourist infrastructure visitors vs non-visitors

Visitors and non-visitors hold dissimilar views in relation to the Albanian tourist infrastructure. The visitors exhibit a more favourable perception in contrast to the respondents who have not travelled to Albania (with a difference of 9 to 25 points higher). There is a substantial gap in the range of possibilities for accommodation between visitors and non-visitors.

Gastronomy

Albanian food is highly regarded for its strong reputation and exceptional qualities. 70% of the respondents express a positive assessment of the national traditional cuisine, while 65% of them express satisfaction with the diversity of food, beverages, viticulture, and the freshness of agricultural gastronomy.
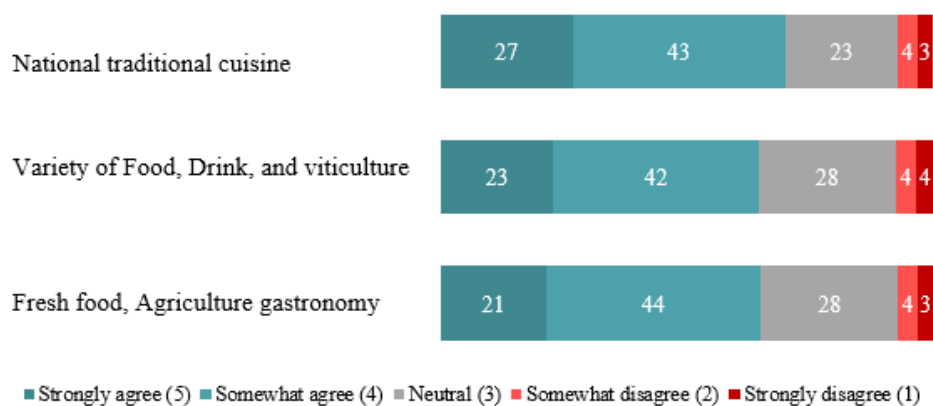
Figure 4.25 Perception toward gastronomy

The visitors have a better image of the Albanian gastronomy compared with the respondents that have not visited Albania. Anyways the non-visitors have also a high evaluation of the gastronomy attributes of Albania.
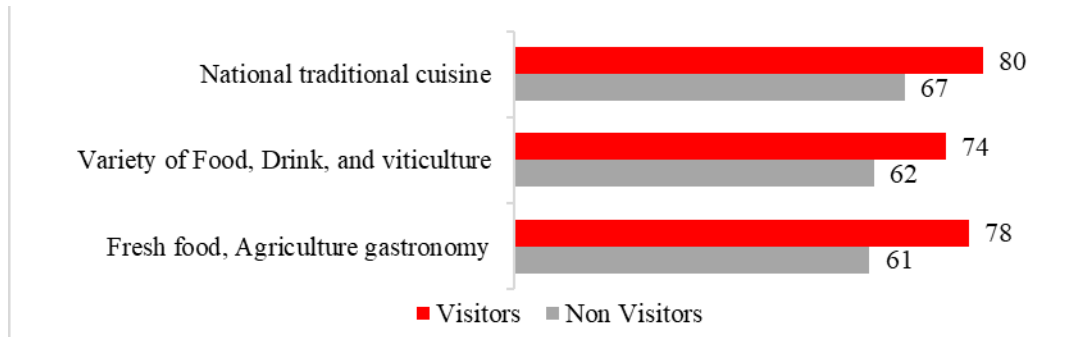
Figure 4.26 Gastronomy analysed per visitors/non-visitors (Top 2 boxes)

Destination Image

The image attributes associated with money, value, hospitality, and security in Albania as a tourist destination are generally positively evaluated. However, there is a slight deficiency in terms of tourist safety and security, as well as concerns about political stability. Albania is known as a family-oriented destination. These attributes are rated lower in terms of image evaluation compared to other attributes, which are highly rated by approximately 6 out of 10 respondents.
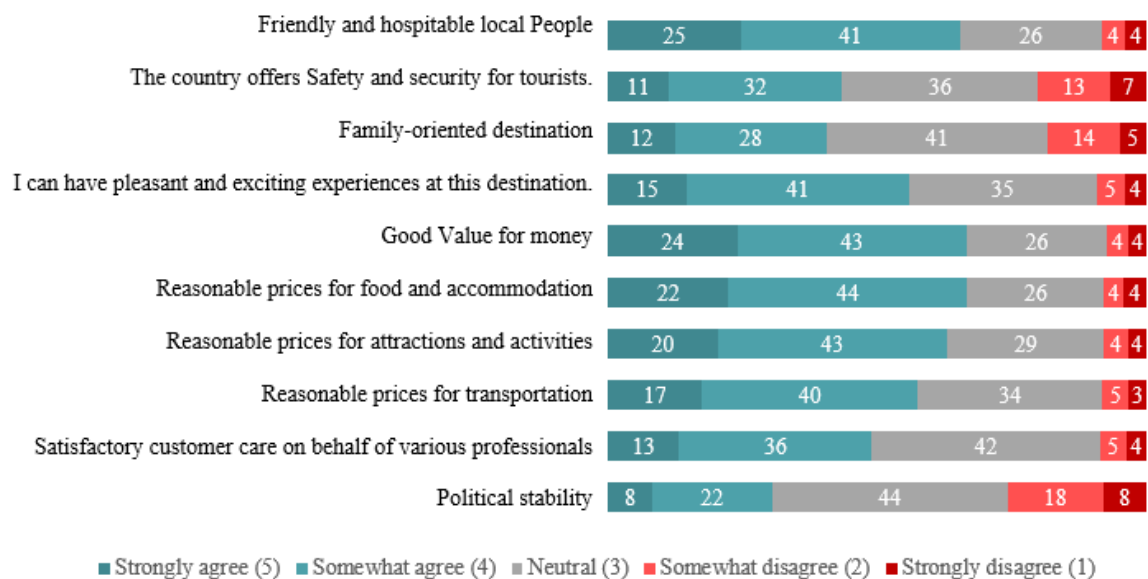
Figure 4.27 Perception about money for value, hospitability, security

The perception of Albania as a tourist destination is significantly more positive among visitors than among non-visitors. Upon visiting Albania, respondents appear to alter their opinions, particularly about the lowest-rated aspects such as visitor safety, security, and the family-friendly nature of the area. These characteristics demonstrate the highest gap in assessment between individuals who have visited and those who have not visited.

Figure 4.28 Perception about money for value, hospitability, security visitor vs non-visitor

Destination Affective Image

Regarding the affective component, more than 3 out of 10 respondents think that Albania is highly exciting, lively, and welcoming. 28% of them think that Albania is highly pleasant and 24% evaluate Albania as relaxing.
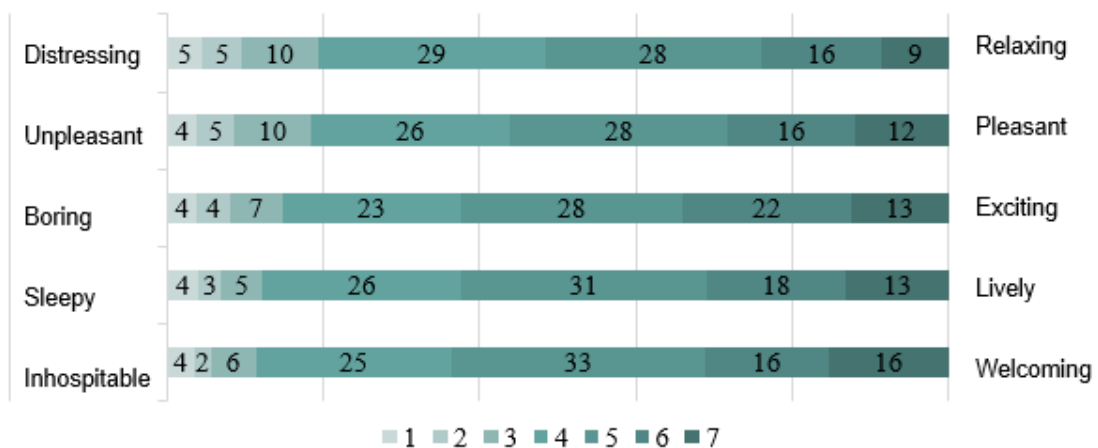
Figure 4.29 Destination affective image

The visitors have a notable better image of Albania as a destination compared with the non-visitors.
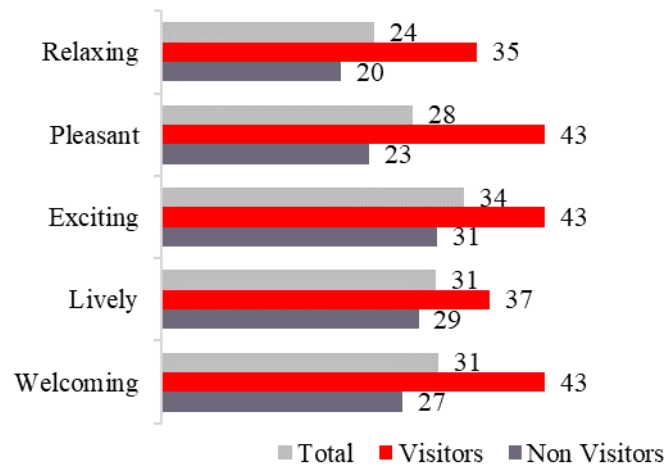
Figure 4.30 Destination image analysed per visitors/non-visitors (Top 2 boxes)

Three out of ten of them would describe Albania very favourable as a tourist destination. 39% of the visitors think of Albania as a very favourable as a tourist destination, vs. 27% of the respondents that have not visited the country. *Refer to Fig 4.31.*
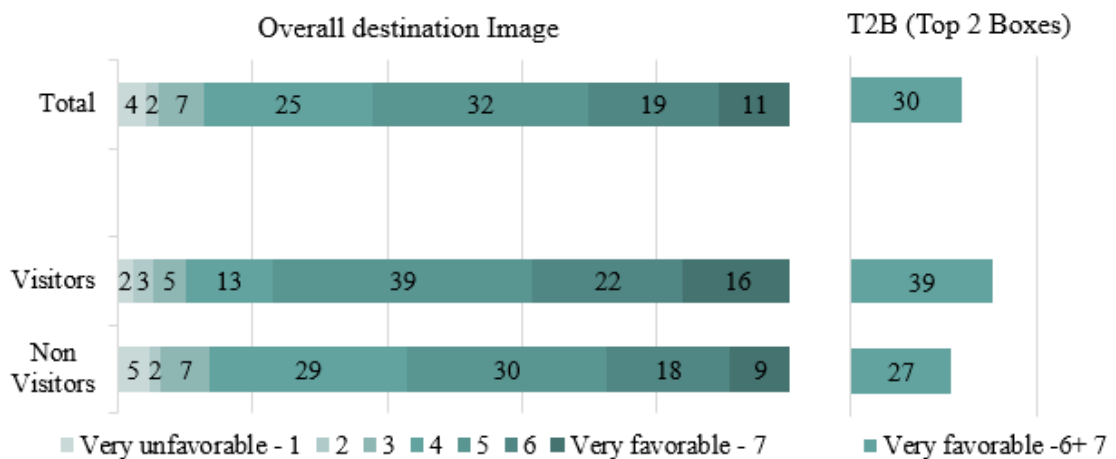
Figure 4.31 Perception about overall image of Albania

Level of Recommendation of Albania as a Touristic Destination

Half of the visitors assert that it is quite probable that they would recommend Albania to others as a touristic destination. A somewhat greater proportion of tourists from Germany

(52%) and females (55%) had a higher degree of recommendation compared to males (44%).
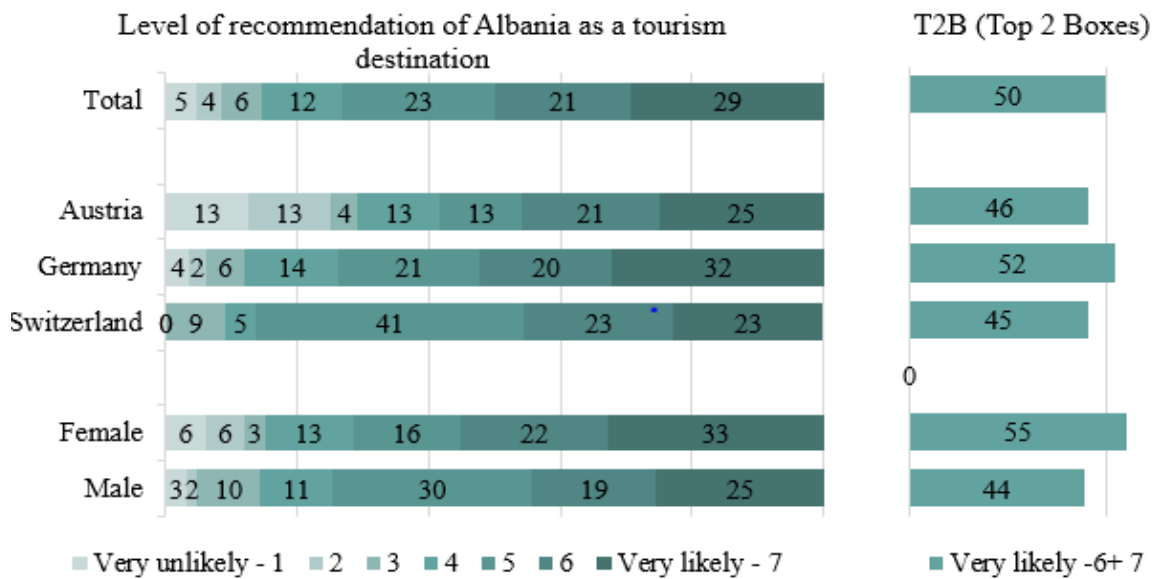
Figure 4.32 Intention to recommend

Destination Consideration

66% of the respondents expressed a desire to visit Albania in the future, while 56% of them specifically endorsed Albania as one of their chosen destinations. Approximately 43% of respondents express a willingness to suggest Albania to others, while 40% believe that Albania offers superior advantages compared to other comparable Western Balkan destinations.
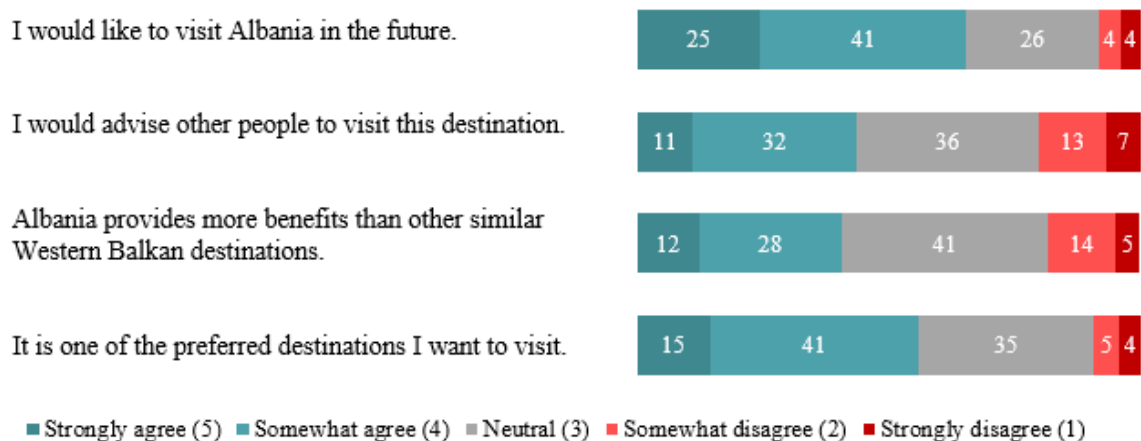
Figure 4.33 Destination consideration

Visitors and non-visitors have contrasting perspectives about Albania as a destination. The degree of recommendation from visitors is significantly greater, with 66% compared to 41% for non-visitors.
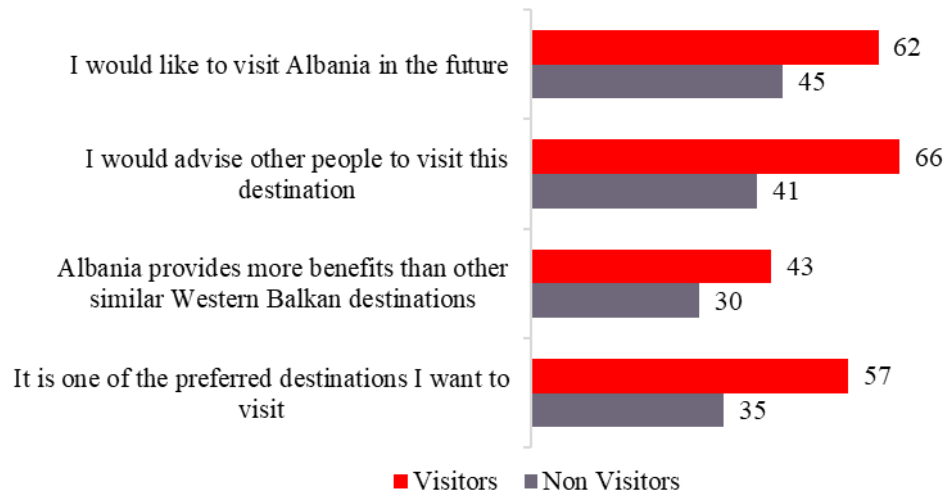
Figure 4.34 Destination consideration analysed per visitors/non-visitors (Top 2 boxes)

Ranking of Main Factors on Deciding Country to Visit

Asked about the criteria that primarily influences the selection of a place, the respondents prioritize four key considerations when choosing a country to visit. Their past experiences in that country, recommendations from friends and family, the allure of a new destination, and the proximity of the country to their home.
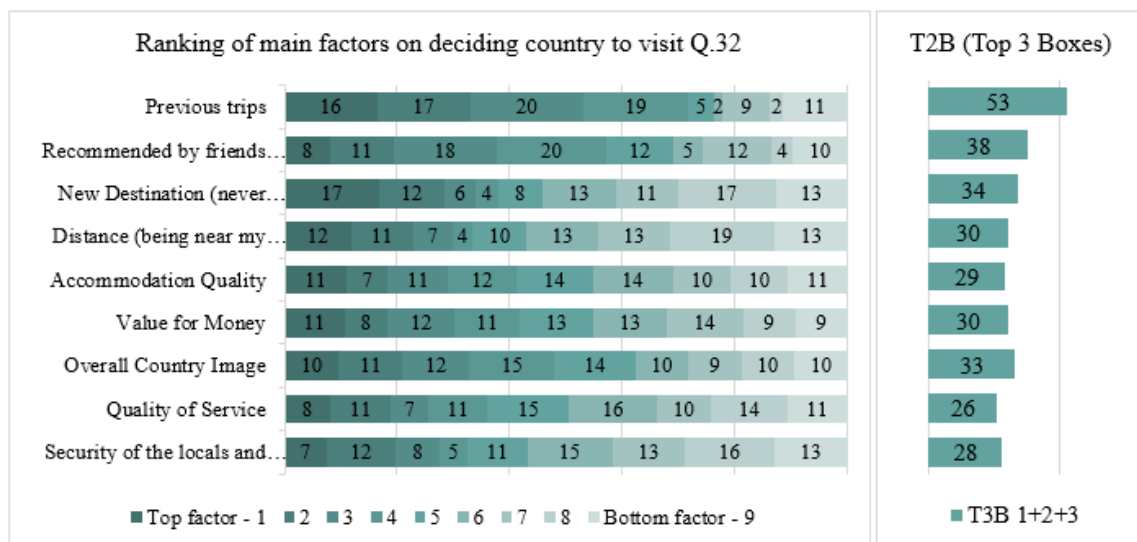
Figure 4.35 Ranking of main factors on deciding country to visit

4.2 Quantitative Data Analyses

4.2.1 Exploratory Factor Analysis

The data was analysed at multiple phases utilizing SPSS 26. The qualitative open-ended comments were analysed and re-incorporated into the survey system. SPSS can analyse all the quantitative variables. Principal Component analyses with varimax rotation were performed to reduce the number of items, considering the quantity of items included in the quantitative survey.

The KMO test yielded an index of 0.987, which is considered "admirable" according to Kaiser (1974). This score exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.60 as suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007; Melović, et al., 2020). The Bartlett test of sphericity yielded a statistically significant result, with a p-value of less than 0.01. Significant Bartlett's test of sphericity scores indicates the presence of strong correlations among the variables. The KMO and Bartlett's test of sphericity indicate that it was suitable to utilize a factor analysis technique for data evaluation. Res

Table 4.4

KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.978
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	26094.780
	df	1711
	Sig.	.000

A comprehensive assessment of the data's suitability for factor analyses was conducted by performing an exploratory factor analysis. This analysis involved extracting principal axis with varimax rotation and applying Kaiser normalisation. Only factors with eigenvalues greater than one were considered. As a result, the first factor encompassed 22 items out of the total (58 items). Existing research indicates that the number of items per factor typically ranges from 3 to 6. However, the decision on the appropriate number of items per factor and the number of factors to maintain is primarily determined by the factor loading values along with supporting evidence from literature (Schreiber, 2021). In this case, it was decided to do an additional Factor Analysis. During the item reduction phase, items categorized under

Destination Awareness, Destination Behavioural Intention, and Destination Affective Image were excluded from the factor analyses due to their existing support in literature. The previously mentioned elements were loaded and categorized in the initial factor analyses.

The second factor analysis consisted of 43 variables that are mainly associated with Cognitive Image in the destination image literature. The Principal Components analysis was conducted using Promax factor rotation with Kaiser Normalisation. Latent variables were determined by selecting factors with loadings exceeding 0.4. Several tests were conducted to assess item loadings, specifically those with Eigen values of 1 and above. These tests identified four factors, with the first factor having a loading of 17 items. A determination regarding the optimum number of elements to be kept was required. According to previous studies, weak factor loadings may occur when items that would naturally group together are distributed across an excessively high number of subscales (Finch, 2020).

The statistical software enables the user to specify the number of factors. In this case, a Principal Components analysis was performed with Promax factor rotation. The fixed number of factors was set at 6, ensuring that there were between 6 and 9 items per component. The EFA test has been conducted, and each factor is indicated by loadings >.40, which stipulates that the data surpasses the threshold for respondent understanding. However, KMO and Bartlett's Test were also conducted, which provide a clear understanding of the sampling adequacy attained at a substantial level. Validity testing using the Cronbach Scale was conducted for each individual factor. An assessment of data appropriateness for factor analysis was also conducted.

The table below (Table 4.5) displays the factor loading, total variance, and Cronbach's α coefficient for each factor. The Cronbach's α coefficient for each factor exceeds 0.885, indicating a high level of internal consistency (Nawi, A.Tambi, Samat, & Mustapha, 2020).

Table 4.5

Exploratory Factor Analyses of Constructs

	Eigen Value	Variance (%)	Crombach's α	Factor Loading	Communalities
Factor 1- Functional Attributes	**20.258**	**51.960**	**0.926**		
Q22. Good Public Transportation Service				0.804	0.739
Q22. High level of cleanliness (clean environment (beaches, parks, roads, etc.)				0.711	0.747
Q22. Easy Accessible destination				0.709	0.648
Q22. Good Quality of Transportation Infrastructure				0.705	0.721
Q27. Family-oriented destination				0.575	0.632
Q27. The country offers Safety and security for tourists				0.547	0.676
Q27. Political stability				0.603	0.612
Q22. Beautiful Towns and attractive cities				0.592	0.665
Q27. Friendly and hospitable local People				0.485	0.657
Factor 2- Appealing Activities	**6.487**	**20.088**	**0.888**		
Q23.Good shopping facilities				0.662	0.694
Q23. Interesting Events and Festivals				0.618	0.569
Q23. Rich and fun night life				0.566	0.561
Q23. Good opportunities for recreational activities				0.553	0.66
Q23. Various tourist activities				0.508	0.626
Q23. Camping opportunities				0.444	0.498
Factor 3- Tourist Infrastructure	**2.969**	**21.770**	**0.907**		
Q25. Accessibility of tourist Information (Tourist Information Centers)				0.635	0.676
Q25.Abundant and updated information on the National Tourism Organization websites, and plenty of printing materials				0.604	0.62
Q22. Tourist sites are easily accessible				0.602	0.636
Q25. Variety of Accommodation Facilities (Hotels, Modern resorts, Guesthouses, etc.)				0.593	0.684
Q25. Accessibility through Travel Agencies				0.582	0.587
Q25.Nice coffee shops, restaurants and bars				0.509	0.674
Factor 4 Tradition and Culture	**2.546**	**29.660**	**0.917**		
Q24. Rich Folklore and Culture, ISO-Polyphony				0.715	0.736
Q24. Traditional costumes and crafts				0.659	0.688
Q24. Legends and myths				0.637	0.687

Q24. Heritage and Archeology (3 UNESCO cites)				0.608	0.73
Q24. Religion (Interreligious coexistence, Religious architecture, and places)				0.572	0.636
Q26. National traditional cuisine				0.523	0.676
Q24. Historical Museums and ethnographic exhibitions				0.513	0.653
Factor 5- Economic and Satisfactory Attributes	**2.1550**	**38.944**	**0.943**		
Q27. Reasonable prices for attractions and activities				0.772	0.786
Q27. Good Value for money				0.757	0.778
Q27. Reasonable prices for food and accommodation				0.737	0.773
Q27. Reasonable prices for transportation				0.661	0.71
Q26. Variety of Food, Drink, and viticulture				0.543	0.695
Q26. Fresh food, Agriculture gastronomy				0.531	0.676
Q27. Satisfactory customer care on behalf of various professionals (e.g. Waiters, hotel managers, tour guides)				0.484	0.611
Q27. I can have pleasant and exciting experiences at this destination				0.431	0.643
Factor 6 Natural Attractions	**1.9835**	**1.798**	**0.886**		
Q21. Rugged Coastline and Sandy beaches				0.663	0.704
Q21. Beautiful and unspoiled beaches				0.581	0.661
Q21. National Parks, uniqueness flora and fauna				0.521	0.625
Q21. Pleasant weather (300 days of sunshine)				0.497	0.591
Q21. Beautiful Nature (scenic mountains Valleys, freshwater lakes, rivers)				0.480	0.725
Q23. Variety Sports and physical Activities (hiking, swimming)				0.472	0.611
Destination Awareness Construct	**2.284**	**3.871**	**0.943**		
Q20. Some characteristics of Albania come quickly to mind				0.749	0.664
Q20. I have an opinion about Albania				0.739	0.637
Q20. I am aware of this destination (I can recognize the name of Albania among other destinations)				0.723	0.646
Q20. I can recall a few important sites in Albania				0.702	0.655
Q20. When I think about similar types of destinations, this destination comes to my mind immediately				0.691	0.726

Q20. I have heard of Albania as a destination				0.618	0.637
Q20. This destination has a good name and reputation				0.492	0.655
Affective Image Component Construct	**1.941**	**3.291**	**0.911**		
Q28. Inhospitable - Welcoming				0.733	0.796
Q28. Unpleasant - Pleasant				0.729	0.786
Q28. Sleepy - Lively				0.723	0.764
Q28. Boring - Exciting				0.704	0.724
Q28. Distressing - Relaxing				0.65	0.675
Destination Visit Intention and Recommendation Construct	**1.004**	**1.702**	**0.904**		
Q31. Albania provides more benefits than other similar Western Balkan destinations				0.563	0.661
Q31. It is one of the preferred destinations I want to visit				0.54	0.745
Q31. I would advise other people to visit this destination				0.514	0.762
Q31. I would like to visit Albania in the future				0.485	0.69
Total Variance Explained					67.545

4.2.2 One Factor Congeneric Model

After conducting (EFA) exploratory factor analysis for each construct, (CFA) confirmatory factor analysis was carried out using one-factor congeneric models. CFA was conducted to evaluate the measurement model of all latent variables (factors) produced by Exploratory Factor Analyses.

The purpose of conducting one-factor congeneric models was to confirm the one-dimensionality of the latent variables. The one-factor congeneric model demonstrates the association between a latent variable and a set of observed variables using regression analysis. Within the domain of structural equation modelling (SEM), the assessment of a one-factor congeneric model is occasionally considered a verification of the component's content validity. In the domain of structural equation modelling (SEM), the assessment of the goodness-of-fit for a one-factor congeneric model serves as a preliminary examination to validate the factor's content validity (Kline, 2023).

Functional Attributes

The EFA results yielded a single factor construct named "Functional attributes," which was assessed using 9 items. The initial one-factor congeneric model was found to be a poor fit

based on several fit indices: the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (c2/df = 13.296), the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI = 0.857), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.893), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = 0.830), the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA = 0.154), the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR = 0.0557), the Root Mean Squared Residual (RMR = 0.057), and the parsimonious fit index (PNFI) = 0.664.

In structural equation modelling (SEM), the adequacy of a one-factor congeneric model is also considered a confirmatory assessment of the content validity of the component. The modification indices indicated significant covariance among the measurement errors of the items '*Good Quality of Transportation Infrastructure; Good Public Transportation Service, High level of cleanliness (clean environment (beaches, parks, roads, etc.);* The modification indices indicated significant covariance among the measurement errors of the items; *Friendly and hospitable local people, and Family-oriented destination; The country offers Safety and security for tourists and Beautiful Towns and attractive cities*; Modification indices also showed a correlation between measurement error of The country offers Safety and security for tourists and Political stability. Methods for redefining the model consist of either eliminating one of the items or drawing covariance among the measurement errors (Byrne, 2016).

The CRDIFF approach was employed to ascertain the parameters to retain. This procedure produces a tabular representation of the crucial ratios for the paired parameter estimates. Byrne (2016) states that any parameter pairings with CRDIFF values below 2 can be equally constrained to determine the model.

Table 4.6

Critical Ratios for Differences Between Parameters for Functional Attributes

	par_1	par_2	par_3	par_4	par_5	par_6	par_7	par_8
par_1	0.000							
par_2	0.052	0.000						
par_3	0.350	0.337	0.000					
par_4	-0.179	-0.222	-0.554	0.000				
par_5	2.020	1.859	1.527	2.088	0.000			
par_6	1.287	1.171	0.846	1.381	-0.785	0.000		
par_7	2.932	2.708	2.354	3.002	1.301	1.732	0.000	
par_8	1.609	1.468	1.126	1.697	-0.607	0.292	-1.555	0.000

The outcome of this procedure yielded a new model consisting of 9 items, with covariance observed among measurement errors (Figure 4.35). The model generated a satisfactory fit. The indices for the updated model are as follows: $\chi^2/df = 2.569$, GFI = 0.979, CFI = 0.989, TLI = 0.981, RMSEA = 0.057, SRMR = 0.0227, RMR = 0.023, and PNFI = 0.552. All the values fall within the specified threshold. All items scored significantly high on this measure, ranging from 0.58 to 0.83.
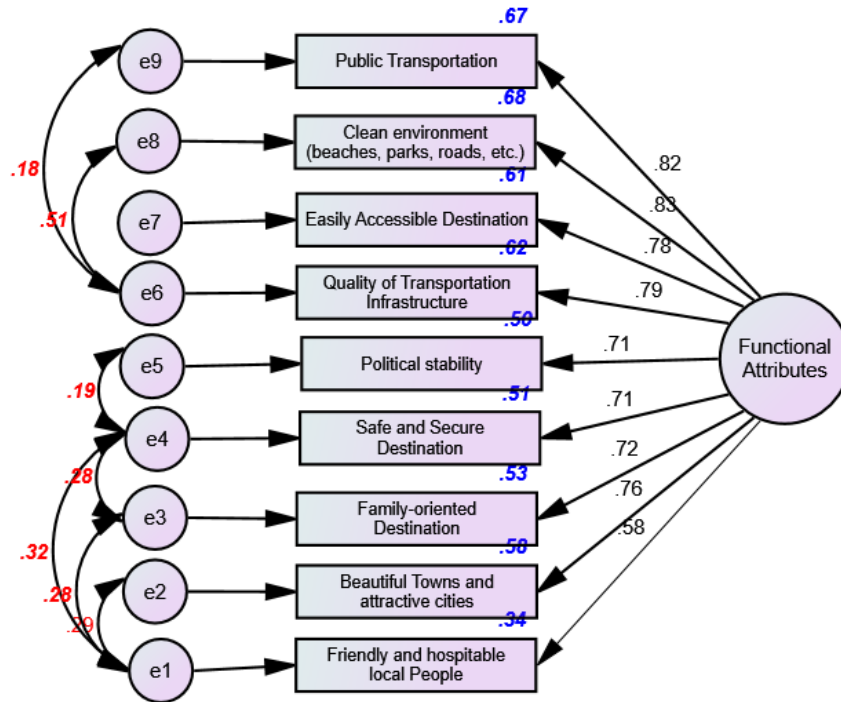
Figure 4.36 Functional attributes One Factor Convergence model

The model is recursive. A recursive model refers to a specific scenario in which an equation system is used to identify the endogenous variables one by one, in a sequential manner. Consequently, the equation for the first endogenous variable does not contain any endogenous variables, but only exogenous variables (Byrne, 2016; Kline, 2023).

Natural Attraction

The fit indices for the one-factor congeneric model assessing the natural attractions component as determined by its features(items) *Rugged Coastline and Sandy beaches*; *Rugged Coastline and Sandy beaches; National Parks, uniqueness flora and fauna; Beautiful Nature (scenic mountains Valleys, freshwater lakes, rivers); Pleasant weather (300 days of sunshine) and environment for sports and physical Activities (hiking,*

swimming) are c2/df = 7.241, GFI = 0.958, CFI = 0.965, TLI =0.942, RMSEA= 0.11, SRMR= 0.0306, RMR=0.028 and PNFI =0.664.

The single congeneric model revealed that the data did not exhibit a strong match, particularly in the measurement model fit Cmin/Df, which exceeded the threshold of 5.0 for acceptable fit. The modification indices showed covariance between the measurement errors of items *National Parks, uniqueness flora and fauna,* and *Beautiful Nature (scenic mountains Valleys, freshwater lakes, rivers.* The covariance coefficient between these two items is 0.37. Shown by model fit indices is the covariance between the measurement errors of the items: *National parks, uniqueness flora and fauna* and *Environment for sports and physical activities (hiking, swimming)* with a value of correlation .12. The model fit modification indices indicate a covariance between the measurement errors of the items of items *Rugged Coastline and Sandy beaches* and *beautiful and unspoiled beaches.*

Table 4.7

The Critical Ratio Differences (CRDIFF) Table for Natural Attractions

	W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	par_6	par_7	par_8	par_9	par_10	par_11	par_12	par_13	par_14	par_15
W1	0.000														
W2	1.318	0.000													
W3	-0.83	-2.631	0.000												
W4	0.916	-0.305	1.671	0.000											
W5	0.443	-0.817	1.23	-0.553	0.000										
par_6	-14.18	-14.69	-13.42	-14.1	-14.04	0.000									
par_7	-12.55	-12.54	-11.5	-12.68	-12.61	3.005	0.000								
par_8	-13.58	-14.25	-13.43	-12.73	-12.65	0.183	-2.107	0.000							
par_9	-6.645	-7.179	-6.458	-6.945	-6.752	6.344	4.786	6.31	0.000						
par_10	-9.02	-9.884	-8.546	-9.311	-9.149	11.755	7.379	9.154	0.851	0.000					
par_11	-8.86	-10.13	-9.151	-9.793	-9.526	8.541	5.817	7.529	-0.334	-1.597	0.000				
par_12	-9.923	-9.969	-9.231	-10.28	-10.16	7.616	8.026	6.336	-1.183	-2.607	-1.076	0.000			
par_13	-8.607	-9.041	-7.519	-8.901	-8.702	11.606	11.377	8.431	0.727	-0.214	1.296	2.73	0.000		
par_14	-8.845	-9.57	-8.411	-8.351	-8.54	8.73	6.092	11.408	0.379	-0.633	0.832	1.787	-0.405	0.000	
par_15	-9.241	-10.09	-8.933	-9.19	-8.629	8.309	5.531	10.93	-0.237	-1.408	0.114	1.085	-1.147	-0.815	0.000

Drawing covariances among measurement errors of measurement items resulted in a new model (Figure 4). The model resulted in a good model fit. The indices for the modified model are 2/df = 1.125, GFI = 0.996, CFI = 1.000, TLI =0.999, RMSEA= 0.041, SRMR= 0.0096, RMR=0.009 and PCFI=0.4. All the values are within the threshold. All items loaded highly in this factor from 0.68 to 0.80.
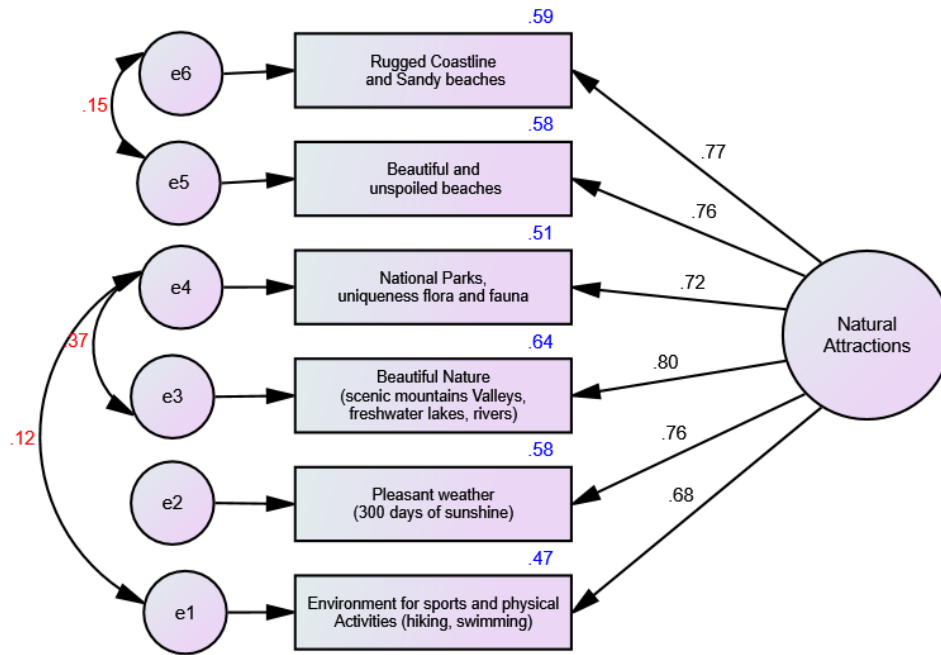
Figure 4.37 Natural attractions

As factor one this model is a recursive model considering that all exogenous variables fit in one direction and no measured endogenous variables are included in the model.

Tradition and Culture

Tradition and culture construct is measured by items describing the destination attributes as below:

- *Rich Folklore and Culture, ISO-Polyphony*
- *Traditional costumes and crafts*
- *Legends and myths*
- *Heritage and Archelogy (3 UNESCO cites)*
- *Religion (Interreligious coexistence, religious architecture, and places)*
- *Historical Museums and ethnographic exhibitions*
- *National traditional cuisine*

The one-factor congeneric model for ***tradition and culture*** demonstrated a rather satisfactory fit of the data to the model. The fit indices are c2/df = 3.895, GFI = 0.971, CFI = 0.982, TLI =0.972, RMSEA= 0.075, SRMR= 0.0228, RMR=0.021 and PCFI =0.654.

The examination of the modification indices indicated that enhancing the model fit might be achieved by establishing a covariance between the measurement errors of the items. *Rich Folklore and Culture, ISO-Polyphony, Traditional costumes and crafts, and Legends and*

myths. The covariance value from the first and second mentioned item is .17 and from the second and the later mentioned item is .25. Further investigations on modification indices suggested also the presence of covariance among measurement errors of *Legends and myths* and *historical museums and ethnographic exhibitions.*

Table 4.8

CRDIFF Between Parameters Tradition and Culture Model

	par_1	par_2	par_3	par_4	par_5	par_6	par_7	par_8	par_9	par_10	par_11	par_1	par_13	par_14	par_15	par_16	par_17
par_1	0.000																
par_2	**1.574**	0.000															
par_3	-0.436	-2.028	0.000														
par_4	-0.679	-2.274	-0.270	0.000													
par_5	-1.193	-2.792	-0.751	-0.587	0.000												
par_6	-1.33	-2.952	-0.903	-0.666	-0.178	0.000											
par_7	-15.48	-16.724	-14.888	-14.509	-14.846	-14.619	0.000										
par_8	-14.86	-16.192	-14.687	-13.980	-13.864	-13.965	**1.469**	0.000									
par_9	-15.59	-16.904	-15.522	-15.118	-14.586	-14.383	-0.305	-1.716	0.000								
par_10	-6.016	-6.696	-5.850	-5.690	-5.497	-5.398	7.478	6.825	7.611	0.000							
par_11	-9.377	-10.714	-9.105	-8.907	-8.594	-8.393	10.800	9.758	11.103	-0.130	0.000						
par_12	-10.19	-11.844	-10.459	-10.194	-9.906	-9.769	8.995	8.000	9.389	-1.882	-2.424	0.000					
par_13	-12.52	-13.165	-12.378	-12.116	-11.979	-11.656	6.337	4.998	6.601	-4.089	-5.542	-3.370	0.000				
par_14	-10.71	-11.925	-9.989	-10.065	-9.993	-9.811	11.471	8.052	9.197	-1.876	-2.453	-0.009	3.314	0.000			
par_15	-10.56	-11.764	-10.202	-9.565	-9.684	-9.580	11.643	10.909	9.329	-1.863	-2.338	0.038	3.316	0.050	0.000		
par_16	-10.58	-11.898	-10.421	-9.991	-9.43	-9.584	9.231	10.89	11.506	-1.836	-2.363	0.074	3.355	0.081	0.036	0.000	
par_17	-10.166	-11.331	-9.956	-9.605	-9.284	-8.797	9.679	8.773	12.066	-1.346	-1.66	0.764	4.103	0.77	0.739	0.735	0.000

Introducing the consideration of measurement errors that vary together led to a better fit for the model. The indices for the updated model are as follows: 2/df = 1.1723, GFI = 0.996, CFI = 0.996, TLI = 0.993, RMSEA = 0.037, SRMR = 0.0135, RMR = 0.037, and PCFI=0.522. All values fall within the specified threshold, and all items have high loadings in this factor, ranging from 0.71 to 0.86.
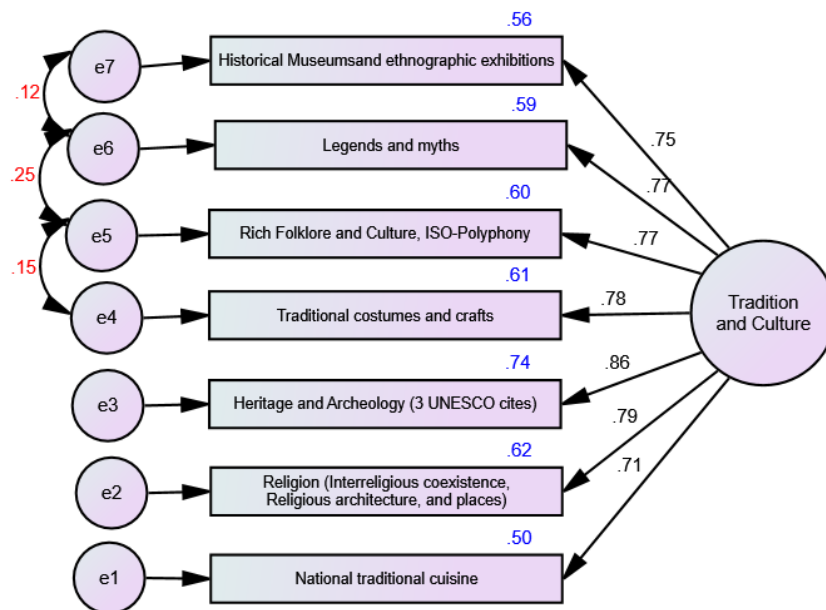
Figure 4.38 Tradition and culture

The tradition and culture factor model follows a recursive structure, where all exogenous variables are aligned in one direction and no measured endogenous variables are incorporated into the model.

Appealing Activities

Appealing activities construct is measured by items describing the destination attributes referring to entertainment in the destination below:

- *Good shopping facilities*
- *Interesting Events and Festivals*
- *Rich and fun nightlife*
- *Good opportunities for recreational activities*
- *Various tourist activities*
- *Camping opportunities*

The one-factor congeneric model for the factor of **appealing activities** demonstrated a satisfactory fit of the data to the model. The fit indices are as follows c2/df = 5.085, GFI = 0.961, CFI = 0.982, TLI =0.972, RMSEA= 0.089, SRMR= 0.0271, RMR=0.023 and PCFI =0.586.

The modification indices suggested that enhancing the model fit might be achieved by incorporating covariance between the measurement errors of the items; *Interesting Events and Festivals and Camping opportunities* with a covariance value of .17. Data suggested covariance of the measurement items *Interesting Events and Festivals* and *Rich and fun nightlife* with a correlation value of .19. Higher correlation is noticed among the measurement errors of items, *good opportunities for recreational activities and Rich and fun nightlife*. The covariance value among the latter items is .23.

Table 4.9

Critical Ratios for Differences Between Parameters Appealing Activity

	par_1	par_2	par_3	par_4	par_5	par_6	par_7	par_8	par_9	par_10	par_11	par_1	par_13	par_14	par_15
par_1	0.000														
par_2	0.724	0.000													
par_3	-0.588	-1.414	0.000												
par_4	-1.612	-2.244	-1.009	0.000											
par_5	-3.655	-4.223	-2.835	-2.346	0.000										
par_6	-16.04	-15.928	-14.286	-13.823	-11.028	0.000									
par_7	-15.38	-14.446	-12.758	-14.037	-11.191	0.468	0.000								
par_8	-16.21	-15.953	-13.523	-13.944	-11.653	0.140	-0.408	0.000							
par_9	-3.751	-4.056	-3.320	-2.873	-1.439	8.856	8.656	8.802	0.000						
par_10	-7.067	-7.363	-6.168	-5.592	-3.236	12.723	9.734	10.363	-1.374	0.000					
par_11	-9.989	-10.962	-9.702	-9.564	-6.926	6.931	6.368	6.852	-4.618	-4.175	0.000				
par_12	-9.883	-9.310	-8.545	-8.706	-6.140	7.357	9.567	7.432	-4.050	-3.372	0.786	0.000			
par_13	-7.925	-7.952	-6.267	-6.414	-4.281	8.987	11.988	11.714	-2.134	-0.975	2.984	2.426	0.000		
par_14	-9.972	-10.215	-8.566	-7.773	-5.820	10.515	7.493	10.531	-3.563	-3.006	**1.337**	0.535	-1.842	0.000	
par_15	-13.61	-13.819	-11.632	-11.559	-8.548	5.812	5.030	5.867	-4.877	-5.275	-1.207	-1.858	-4.117	-2.628	0.000

The careful selection of limited parameters led to a strong alignment between the data and the model, as evidenced by the following fit indices: x2 = 1.768, GFI = 0.993, CFI = 0.997, TLI = 0.993, RMSEA = 0.089, SRMR = 0.0125, RMR = 0.011, and PCFI = 0.399. All items exhibited high scores in this factor loading, ranging from 0.71 to 0.85.
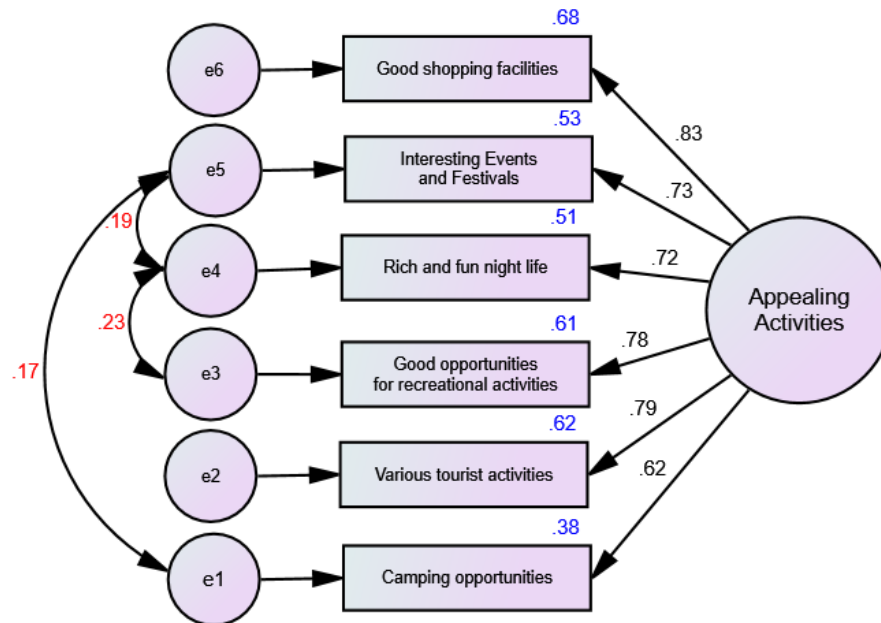
Figure 4.39 Appealing activities

This model is a recursive model since all exogenous variables are unidirectional and no measured endogenous variables are included.

Tourist Infrastructure

Tourist Infrastructure construct is measured by items describing the destination attributes referring to entertainment in the destination below:

- *Variety of Accommodation Facilities (Hotels, Modern Resorts, Guesthouses, etc.)*
- *Nice coffee shops, restaurants, and bars*
- *Accessibility of tourist Information (Tourist Information Centers)*
- *Tourist sites are easily accessible.*
- *Abundant and updated information on the National Tourism Organization websites, and plenty of printing materials*
- *Accessibility through Travel Agencies*

The one-factor congeneric model for *Tourist infrastructure* demonstrated a mitigated and significantly improved fit of the data to the model. The fit indices are as follows*:* $c2/df$ = 4.642, GFI = 0.970, CFI = 0.982, TLI =0.962, RMSEA= 0.089, SRMR= 0.0235, RMR=0.021 and PCFI =0.589. The examination of the modification indices indicated that enhancing the model fit might be achieved by establishing correlations between the measurement errors of the items. *Nice coffee shops, restaurants and bars,* and *a Variety of Accommodation Facilities (Hotels, Modern Resorts, Guesthouses, etc.).* The covariance weight among this parameter is .23. A covariance in the value of .12 observed among the measurement errors of the items: *Abundant and updated information on the National Tourism Organization websites, and plenty of printing materials* and *Accessibility through Travel Agencies*

Table 4.10

Critical Ratios for Differences Between Parameters Tourist Infrastructure

	par_1	par_2	par_3	par_4	par_5	par_6	par_7	par_8	par_9	par_10	par_11	par_12	par_13	par_14
par_1	0.000													
par_2	1.191	0.000												
par_3	**1.333**	0.280	0.000											
par_4	0.157	-0.979	-1.237	0.000										
par_5	1.616	0.597	0.358	**1.559**	0.000									
par_6	-15.1	-17.046	-15.294	-15.616	-15.708	0.000								
par_7	-14.81	-16.688	-17.402	-16.539	-17.991	-1.243	0.000							
par_8	-3.511	-4.252	-4.330	-3.660	-4.530	9.103	9.853	0.000						
par_9	-7.591	-9.351	-9.528	-8.579	-10.034	8.361	12.489	-2.997	0.000					
par_10	-9.939	-10.849	-11.791	-10.797	-12.121	6.660	10.773	-4.628	-2.326	0.000				
par_11	-9.192	-10.807	-9.671	-9.610	-10.472	11.168	8.678	-3.850	-1.093	1.031	0.000			
par_12	-9.373	-10.975	-10.753	-9.296	-11.134	7.925	9.215	-4.026	-1.310	0.940	-0.161	0.000		
par_13	-12.87	-14.774	-14.531	-13.704	-14.939	5.209	6.630	-5.612	-4.119	-2.078	-3.031	-2.989	0.000	
par_14	-9.738	-11.166	-10.490	-10.011	-10.346	10.774	8.227	-4.123	-1.429	0.660	-0.433	-0.242	2.681	0.000

The establishment of covariances among parameters for tourist infrastructure led to a strong alignment between the data and the model. $x2$ = 2.245, GFI = 0.990, CFI = 0.995, TLI =0.993, RMSEA= 0.039, SRMR= 0.0139, RMR=0.012 and PCFI=0.464. The new model is displayed in Figure 5.39.
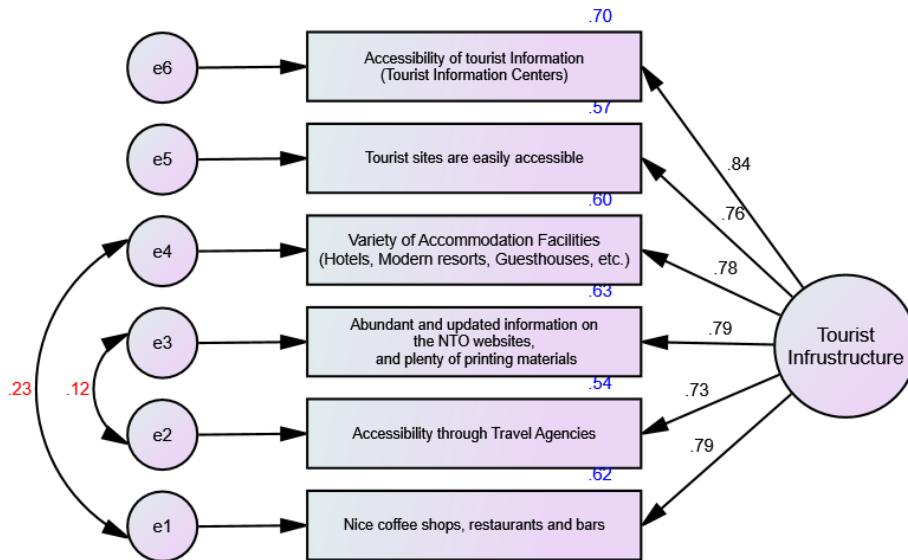
Figure 4.40 Tourist infrastructure

All items exhibited high loading scores in this factor, ranging from 0.73 to 0.84. This model is recursive since it only includes exogenous variables that have a unidirectional relationship and does not incorporate any measured endogenous variables.

Economic and Satisfactory Attributes

Another factor extracted from the EFA included 8 items, 4 of them highly related to economic attributes like prices for food, accommodation, etc., 2 of them with gastronomy, and two of them with satisfaction toward service professionals and satisfaction in terms of experience. The items displayed below are factorized under the construct *Economic and Satisfactory Attributes*.

- *Reasonable prices for attractions and activities*
- *Good Value for money*
- *Reasonable prices for food and accommodation*
- *Reasonable prices for transportation*
- *Variety of Food, Drink, and viticulture*
- *Fresh food, Agriculture gastronomy*
- *Satisfactory customer care on behalf of various professionals (e.g. Waiters, hotel managers, tour guides)*
- *I can have pleasant and exciting experiences at this destination.*

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The one-factor congeneric model for Economic and Satisfactory qualities demonstrated a well-suited fit of the data to the model, with moderation. The fit indices are as follows: c2/df = 10.528, p-000, GFI = 0.898, CFI = 0.936, TLI =0.910, RMSEA= 0.084, SRMR= 0.0443, RMR=0.021 and PCFI =0.669.

The analysis of the modification indices revealed that the model fit could be enhanced by drawing covariance between the measurement errors of the items; *I can have pleasant and exciting experiences at this destination* and *Satisfactory customer care on behalf of various professionals (e.g. Waiters, hotel managers, tour guides).* The covariance value for this parameter is .25. The measurement error *of I can have pleasant and exciting experiences* is correlated with the measurement error *of Fresh food, Agriculture gastronomy.* The correlation value among this parameter is .25. A covariance with a loading value of .35 is observed among the measurement error of ite*ms Fresh food, Agriculture gastronomy,* and *Variety of food, drink, and viticulture.* The measurement error of the item *Reasonable prices for transportation* covariates with measurement errors of items *Reasonable prices for attractions and activities (.26), Reasonable prices for food and accommodation (.19)*

Table 4.11

CRDIFF Among Parameters- Economic and Satisfactory Attributes

	par_1	par_2	par_3	par_4	par_5	par_6	par_7	par_8	par_9	par_10	par_11	par_12	par_13	par_14	par_15	par_16
par_1	0.000															
par_2	-0.123	0.000														
par_3	-1.059	-0.923	0.000													
par_4	0.646	0.721	**1.685**	0.000												
par_5	2.071	2.119	3.045	**1.777**	0.000											
par_6	1.555	**1.595**	2.480	1.093	-0.526	0.000										
par_7	2.759	2.805	3.747	2.239	0.762	**1.290**	0.000									
par_8	-16.22	-14.637	-16.571	-15.557	-16.419	-15.549	-17.025	0.000								
par_9	-14.04	-12.593	-14.402	-13.920	-14.728	-14.057	-15.377	2.835	0.000							
par_10	-15.9	-14.068	-15.280	-15.072	-16.018	-15.218	-16.540	1.268	-1.467	0.000						
par_11	-15.79	-14.103	-15.779	-14.116	-14.951	-14.531	-16.157	0.257	-2.337	-0.892	0.000					
par_12	-15.54	-13.915	-15.698	-14.269	-14.871	-13.991	-15.944	0.864	-1.834	-0.366	0.794	0.000				
par_13	-16.03	-14.368	-16.164	-14.517	-15.460	-14.437	-16.387	-0.174	-2.728	-1.284	-0.607	-1.532	0.000			
par_14	-16.34	-14.577	-16.487	-15.242	-16.022	-14.680	-16.273	-0.309	-2.966	-1.473	-0.560	-1.365	-0.135	0.000		
par_15	-6.262	-5.755	-5.925	-6.113	-6.715	-6.464	-7.069	6.993	5.522	6.124	7.171	6.819	7.302	7.407	0.000	
par_16	-10.041	-8.978	-9.502	-9.879	-10.927	-10.207	-11.45	12.19	7.588	11.56	9.391	9.082	9.892	10.45	-0.381	0.000

The specification of Economic and Satisfactory attributes constraint parameters resulted in a good fit of the data to the model x2 = 1.812, GFI = 0.990, CFI = 0.996, TLI =0.992,

RMSEA= 0.040, SRMR= 0.0145, RMR=0.012 and PCFI=0.463. The new model is displayed in Figure 4.41.
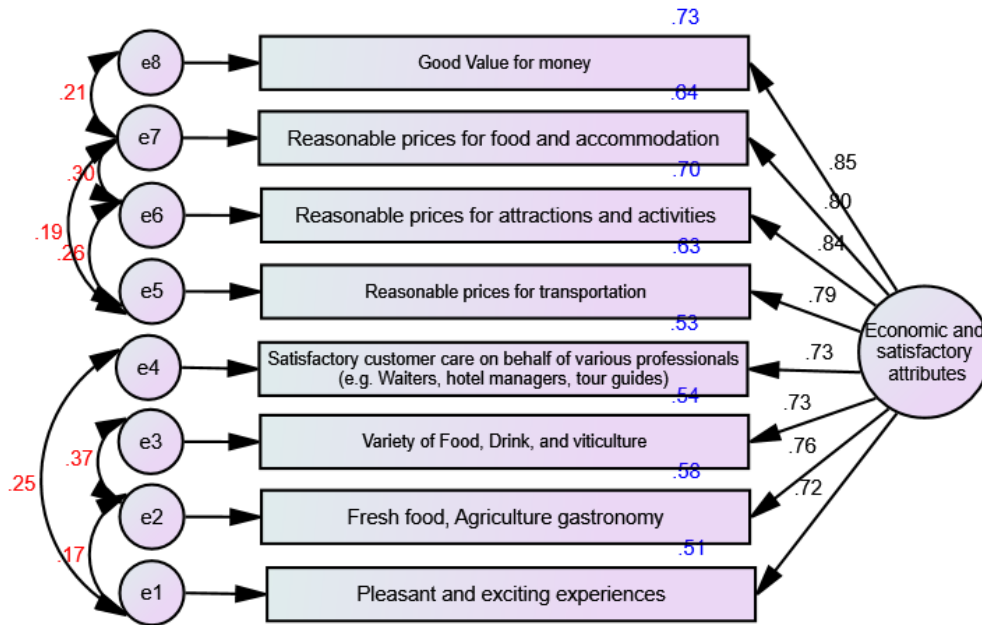
F*igure 4.41* Economic and satisfactory attributes

All items loaded highly in this factor from 0.72 to 0.85.

Destination Awareness

Level of knowledge and awareness about a destination is measured by 7 items. More precisely, by asking the respondents if they have heard, have created an opinion about a destination as listed below:

- *Some characteristics of Albania come quickly to mind.*
- *I have an opinion about Albania.*
- *I am aware of this destination (I can recognize the name of Albania among other destinations)*
- *I can recall a few important sites in Albania.*
- *When I think about similar types of destinations, this destination comes to my mind immediately.*
- *I have heard of Albania as a destination.*
- *This destination has a good name reputation.*

All these items were loaded on one factor which was labelled as **Destination Awareness**

The **destination awareness one factor** revealed a moderated fit to the model of the data. with few indexes within the threshold. The initial model fit indices are $\chi2$ =90.975, c2/df = 6.605, p=0.000, GFI = 0.898, CFI = 0.999, TLI =0.938 RMSEA= 0.104, SRMR= 0.038, RMR=0.045 and PCFI =0.639. Investigation of the modification indices suggested that the goodness of model fit could be improved by drawing covariations among the measurement errors of items; *I have heard of Albania as a destination* and *This destination has a good name and reputation.* The correlation value of this parameter is 0.18. MI indicates that measurement errors of item *I have an opinion about Albania* correlates with measurement errors of other three items measuring Destination Awareness. It correlates with measurement errors of *I have heard of Albania as a destination (0.13), I am aware of this destination (0.22), Some characteristics of Albania come quickly to mind (0.26)* After the re-specification of Destination awareness items constraint parameters resulted in a good fit of the data to the model $\chi2$ =26.778, c2/df = 2.678, p=0.003, GFI = 0.994, CFI = 0.959, TLI =0.981 RMSEA= 0.057, SRMR= 0.0188, RMR=0.024 and PCFI =0.472.

Table 4.12

Critical Ratios for Differences Between Parameters Destination Awareness

	par_1	par_2	par_3	par_4	par_5	par_6	par_7	par_8
par_1	0.000							
par_2	2.383	0.000						
par_3	**0.469**	-1.861	0.000					
par_4	-1.284	-3.827	-1.731	0.000				
par_5	-4.526	-6.964	-4.895	-3.115	0.000			
par_6	-0.781	-3.258	-1.248	0.530	3.697	0.000		
par_7	0.272	-0.643	0.073	0.828	2.261	0.601	0.000	
par_8	-5.285	-7.082	-5.469	-4.170	-1.701	-4.349	-3.754	0.000
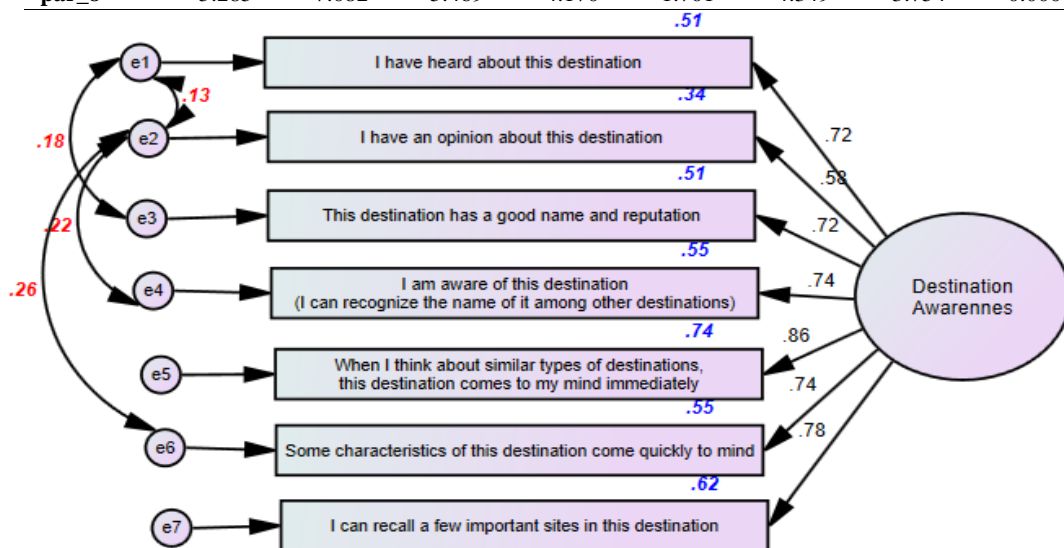
Figure 4.42 Destination awareness

All the items exhibited high scores in this component, ranging from 0.72 to 0.85. This model is recursive because it only includes exogenous variables that have a unidirectional relationship and does not include any measured endogenous variables. This model is a recursive model since all exogenous variables are included in one direction and no measured endogenous variables are included in the model.

Destination Affective Image

Affective Image construct for a destination is measured by items' 5 orthogonal bipolar scales describing the affection potential tourists have toward a destination with the items listed below:

- *Inhospitable - Welcoming*
- *Unpleasant - Pleasant*
- *Sleepy - Lively*
- *Boring - Exciting*
- *Distressing – Relaxing*

The one-factor congeneric model for Destination Affective Image demonstrated a satisfactory match with the data in certain indices, while requiring improvement in others. The initial model fit indices are as follows: χ^2 = 90.975, c^2/df = 18.195, p = 0.000, GFI = 0.929, CFI = 0.929, TLI = 0.907. The values obtained are as follows: RMSEA = 0.477, SRMR = 0.0381, RMR = 0.081, and PCFI = 0.477. An analysis of the modification indices indicated that enhancing the model fit might be achieved by incorporating covariance between the measurement errors of the components; Distressing-Relaxing and Boring - Exciting.

The re-specification of the model resulted in improved goodness-of-fit indices, indicating a better fit of the data to the model compared to the initial model. The new model asserts a χ^2 value of 19.743 (p = 0.001), $2\chi/df$ ratio of 4.936, GFI of 0.985, CFI of 0.991, TLI of 0.996, RMSEA of 0.087, SRMR of 0.0171, and PCFI of 0.397.
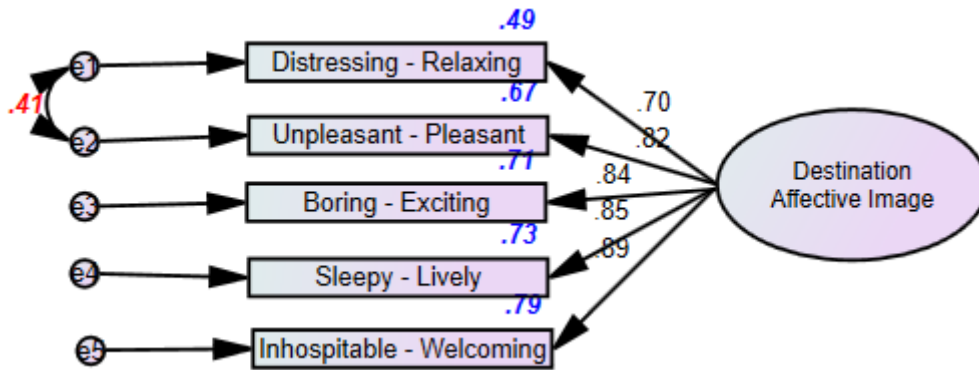
Figure 4.43 Destination affective image

Table 4.13 *CRDIFF Between Parameters (Destination Affective Image)*

	par_1	par_2	par_3	par_4	par_5	par_6	par_7	par_8	par_9	par_10	par_11
par_1	0.000										
par_2	**0.431**	0.000									
par_3	0.000	-0.472	0.000								
par_4	0.679	0.214	0.72	0.000							
par_5	-11.47	-10.73	-10.7	-11.1	0.000						
par_6	-1.081	-1.112	-0.983	-1.186	4.882	0.000					
par_7	-1.23	-1.387	-1.158	-1.519	12.22	**0.42**	0.000				
par_8	-5.825	-5.756	-5.615	-6.016	7.749	-2.207	-4.37	0.000			
par_9	-7.595	-6.388	-6.541	-7.31	3.366	-3.188	-4.96	-1.35	0.000		
par_10	-8.856	-7.627	-7.138	-8.244	2.536	-3.793	-5.76	-2.21	-0.98	0.000	
par_11	-11.5	-10.27	-10.05	-9.843	0.833	-4.821	-7.89	-4.42	-2.74	-1.99	0.000

All items exhibited high scores in this component, ranging from 0.70 to 0.91 Considering that all this model is a recursive model considering that all exogenous variables fit in one direction and no measured endogenous variables are included in the model.

Behavioural Intention

Behavioural Intention construct is measured by items describing the destination attributes referring to entertainment in the destination below: *How likely are you to visit Albania*

- *I would like to visit Albania in the future*
- *I would advise other people to visit this destination*
- *Albania provides more benefits than other similar Western Balkan destinations*
- *It is one of the preferred destinations I want to visit*

The one-factor congeneric model for Behavioural Intention demonstrated a well-suited fit of the data to the model, with moderation. The fit indices are as follows: χ_2 = 11.734, c2/df = 5.867, p=0.003, GFI = 0.898, CFI = 0.959, TLI =0.938 RMSEA= 0.084, SRMR= 0.0156,

RMR=0.017 and PCFI =0.639. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) is somewhat below the threshold of 0.09. The fit indices for the model are as follows: $\chi 2$ = 11.734, c2/df = 5.867, p=0.003, GFI = 0.898, CFI = 0.959, TLI =0.938, RMSEA= 0.084, SRMR= 0.0156, RMR=0.017, and PCFI =0.639. These values, indicate that the model has an acceptable fit. RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) value of 0.04 exceeds the threshold of 0.08, suggesting a reasonable level of fit. Enhancing the model fit can be achieved by closely examining the modification indices. Although the MI (Multiple Imputation) indicated a covariance between measurement errors e1 and e2 in Figure 4.44, the author of this study chose not to use it due to the rising in p-value (0.053), which negatively impacted the model fit.
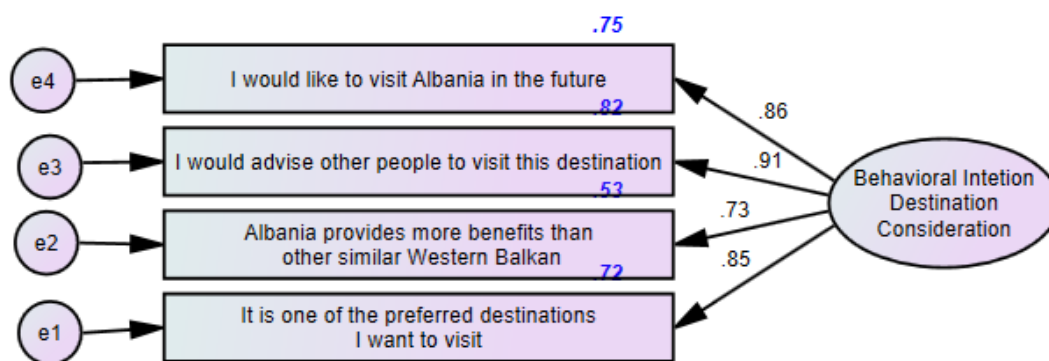
Figure 4.44 Behavioural intention

Table 4.14 *Critical Ratios for Differences Between Parameters (Behavioural Intention)*

	par_1	par_2	par_3	par_4	par_5	par_6	par_7	par_8
par_1	0.000							
par_2	-5.187	0.000						
par_3	1.967	7.232	0.000					
par_4	0.278	2.451	-0.433	0.000				
par_5	-11.66	-8.101	-15.091	-7.499	0.000			
par_6	-9.792	-5.295	-11.694	-6.115	2.726	0.000		
par_7	-14.35	-9.285	-16.883	-7.178	-0.199	-2.759	0.000	
par_8	-16.324	-11.248	-16.02	-9.047	-2.751	-5.565	-2.689	0.000

All items indicate a high load score in this factor ranging from 0.73 to 0.91. This model is recursive since it only includes exogenous variables and does not incorporate any measured endogenous variables.

4.2.2 Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Subsequently the validation of all factors using the one-factor congeneric model, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the distinctiveness and discriminant validity of the latent variables: Functional Attributes, Natural attractions, Tradition and Culture, appealing activities, Tourist infrastructure, Economic and satisfactory attributes. The Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA) indicated that the data matched the model reasonably well, as evidenced by several fit indexes: $\chi2 = 2980$, p=0.000, $\chi2/df = 3.693$, GFI = 0.764, CFI = 0.878, TLI = 0.87, RMSEA = 0.072, and SRMR = 0.01486. Refer to Figure 4.45 for the Confirmatory Factor Analysis CFA Model.
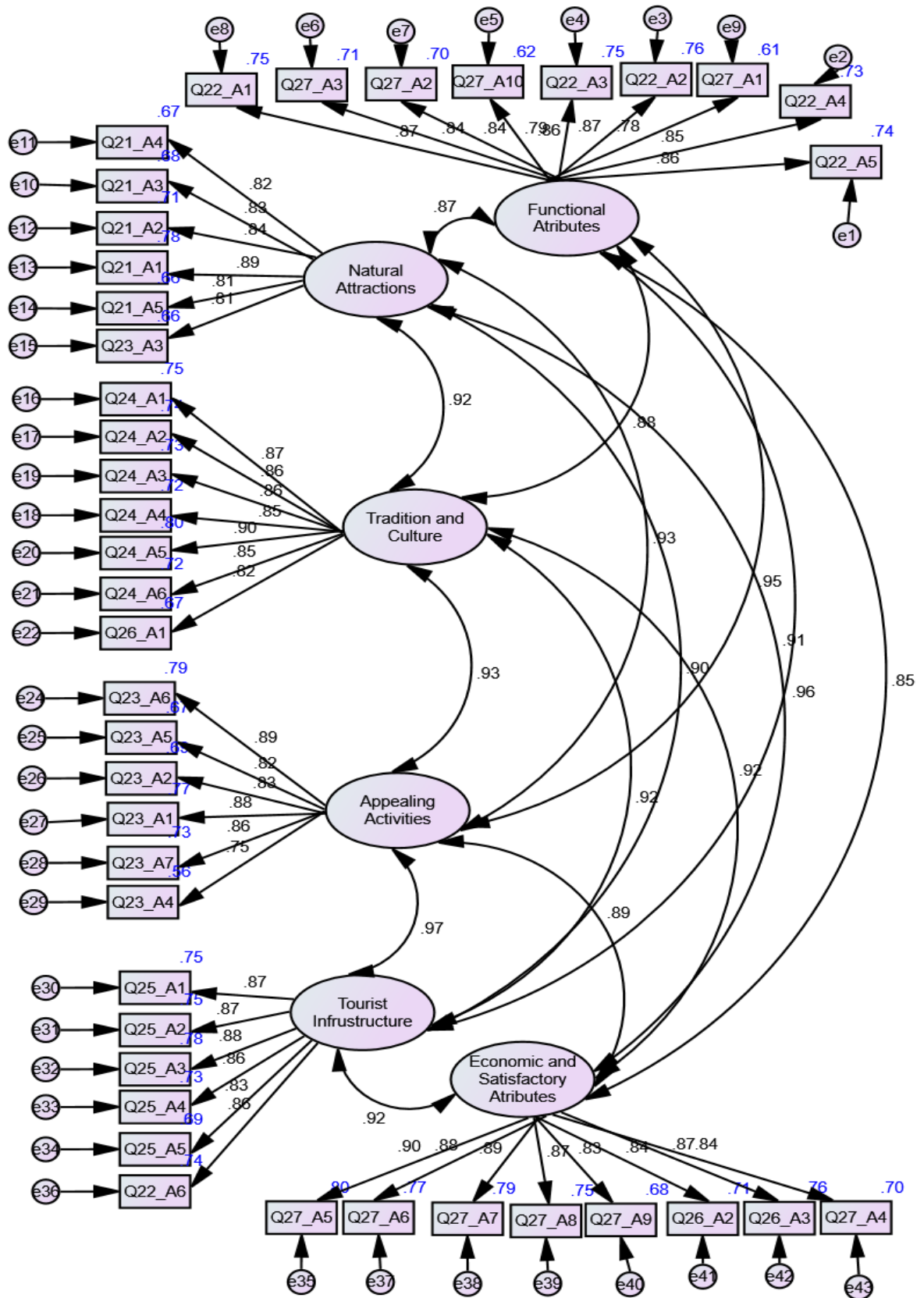
Figure 4.45 Initial model for Confirmatory Factor Analyses

The examination of the modification indices in the model demonstrated substantial association among the measurement errors of items loaded in Functional Attributes. *Easily Accessible destination* item measurement error is correlated with measurement errors of items *Good Public Transportation Service* and *High level of cleanliness (clean environment (beaches, parks, roads, etc.).* The later items have a correlation of 0.32 among their own measurement errors.

Measurement errors of items *Friendly and hospitable local People* and *the country offers safety and security for tourists* covariate among them at value of 0.15. The last item is correlated with measurement error of *Political stability (.12) Good Quality of Transportation Infrastructure and Good Public Transportation Service items highly covariate with each other.* Although these two elements - infrastructure, and public transport - might be measured together, they are maintained separate in the model due to the specific setting of Albania. In this context, the lack of public transport and the quality of infrastructure are commonly addressed by tourists as areas in need of improvement. This fact is also referred to in the recommendations section of the survey.

Modification indices suggested a correlation among measurement errors of items of Natural Attractions. The items *Rugged Coastline and Sandy beaches and Beautiful and unspoiled beaches have a correlation value of .25. The other two items of Natural Attraction construct correlate (.33) with the measurement errors of National* Parks, uniqueness of flora and fauna Beautiful Nature (scenic mountains, valleys, freshwater lakes, rivers). Tradition and culture construct items of Legends and myths, Rich Folklore and Culture, ISO-Polyphony measurement errors correlate (.28) and the latter correlates with the measurement errors of *Traditional costumes and crafts* item. Modification indices suggest the correlation among measurement errors of *Good opportunities for recreational activities and* Rich & fun nightlife. This item measurement also correlates (.18) with *interesting events & festivals.*

Further investigation in the modification indices highlighted a covariance between the measurement errors of the first two items, Tourist Infrastructure, Variety of *Accommodation Facilities (Hotels, Modern resorts, Guesthouses, etc.)* and *nice coffee shops, restaurants and bars. The correlation value of this parameter is .21.* The final construct of the confirmatory factor analysis is Eight items were used to measure the economic and satisfactory attributes.

Modification indices suggested a high correlation between measurement errors of *Good Value for money* and *Reasonable prices for food & accommodation (.45) with Reasonable prices for attractions & activities (.39) and Reasonable prices for transportation (.29) Measurement errors of Variety of Food, Drink, & viticulture and Fresh food, Agriculture gastronomy are correlated.* The correlation value of this parameter is .29.

The measurement errors of items *I can have pleasant and exciting experiences at this destination* and *Satisfactory customer care on behalf of various professionals (e.g. Waiters, hotel managers, tour guides).* The correlation value among this parameter is .10.

The model was then re-specified by drawing covariances among the items (measurement errors) within the same factor. Modification indices suggested other correlations among items in different factors however the current author didn't covariate those measurement errors. Literature suggests as good practice to covariate only items inside each construct and evaluate each item independently. None of the items were removed since all items load highly on the specific factor (Kline R. B., 2023). On the other side MI's less than 10 are not used since they would not have any significant effect on improving the model fit (Byrne, 2016).

The re-specification of the model resulted in improved goodness-of-fit indices, indicating a better fit of the data to the model. The first CFA model had a $\chi 2$ value of 2987, p-value of 0.000, $2\chi/df$ value of 2.717, GFI value of 0.830, CFI value of 0.925, TLI value of 0.917, RMSEA value of 0.058, and SRMR value of 0.1484.

When examining Figure 5.46 (final CFA), it is evident that all constructs displayed factor loadings between 0.75 and 0.89. These values exceed the minimum threshold of 0.40, as recommended (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Nevertheless, the coefficient correlations among the constructs exceeded the maximum threshold of 0.85 (Kline, 2023), with values ranging from 0.91 to 0.96. This suggests the presence of multicollinearity, indicating a lack of differentiation among the constructs. These components are decomposed into another factor, known as Destination Cognitive image, which will be incorporated into the Structural Model.
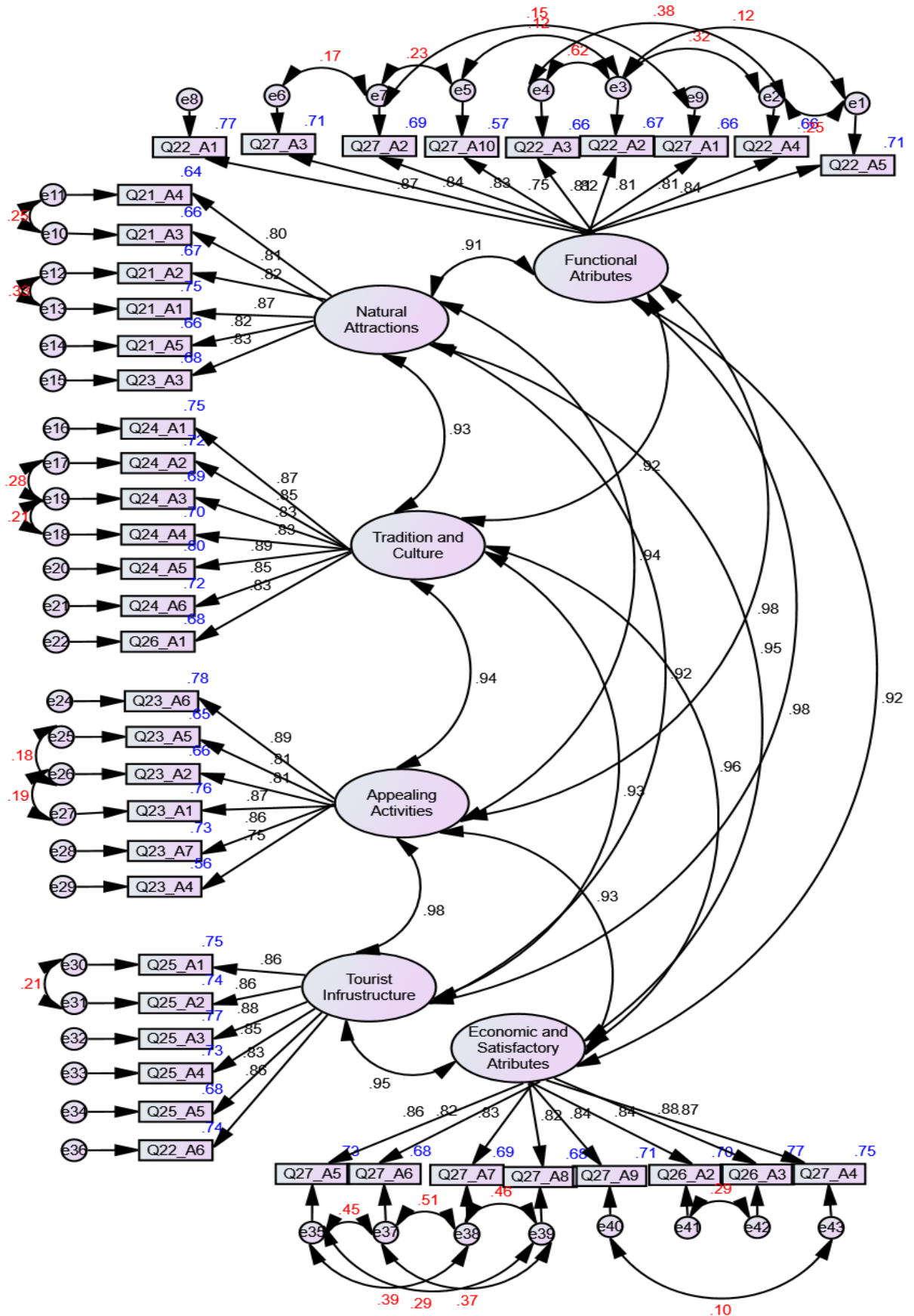
Figure 4.46 Final Confirmatory Factor Analyses for all constructs

The other two constructs which will be included in the structural model are Destination Awareness and Behavioural Intention. The validity of these constructs with the measurement items is tested with the one congeneric factor.

4.2.3 The Structural Equation Model (SEM)

Following the completion of validity tests for all constructs in the measurement model using the One Congeneric model, as well as Confirmatory Factor Analysis for the Destination Cognitive Image, satisfactory fits were obtained. Subsequently, a second stage of testing was conducted using the Structural Model (Byrne, 2016; Kline, 2023)

Numerous authors contend that the degree of fit in a structural model is conditional upon the sample size and the quantity of parameters requiring estimation. A significant sample size is required for models that are more intricate and comprise a greater number of parameters, as stated by Kline (2023). The significance of the goodness-of-fit indices in a structural model is depending upon the sample size and the quantity of parameters requiring estimation. According to Bentler and Chow (1987), the minimum recommended ratio of approximated parameters to sample size is 5:1 (Bentler & Chou, 1987).

Prior to determining the sample size and parameter ratio, this study examines two structural equation models (SEMs): one that includes the entire sample and another that focuses solely on visitors of Albania. The initial structural equation modelling (SEM) model, as depicted in Figure 16, involves the estimation of 55 parameters (q=55). The sample size for this investigation is N=517, resulting in a ratio of n/q = 517/55 = 9.4. This ratio exceeds the recommended threshold of 5:1 proposed by Benkter and Chow and is in close proximity to the 10:1 ratio indicated by Kline (2023).
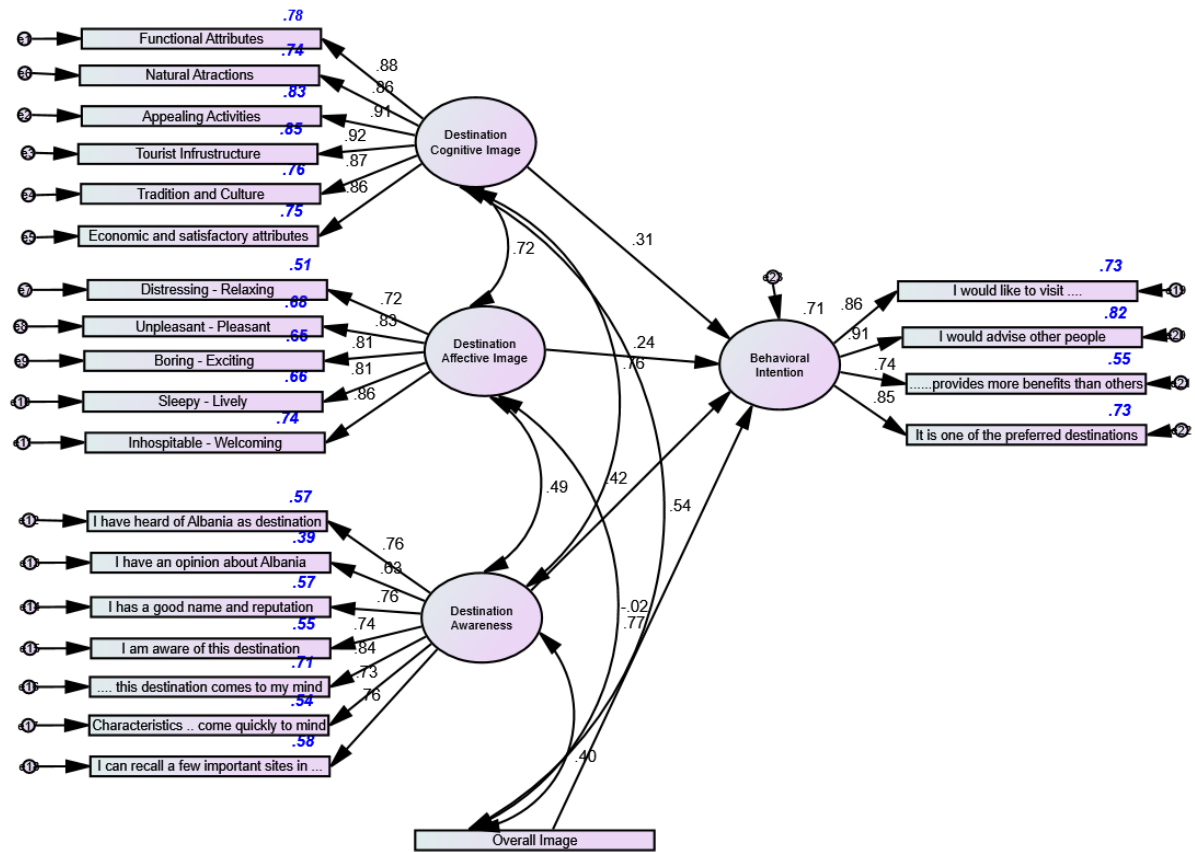
Figure 4.47 SEM model total sample

The model incorporates endogenous variables, which are also known as independent variables. The variables that were measured; Q28 (Distressing - Relaxing) Q28A (Unpleasant – Pleasant) , Q28_B (Boring – Exciting) Q28_C (Sleepy - Lively) Q28_D (Inhospitable - Welcoming) FAC_1 (Functional Attributes), FAC_2 (Natural Attractions), FAC_3 (Appealing Activities), FAC_4 (Tourist Infrastructure), FAC_5 (Tradition and Culture) FAC_6 (Economic and satisfactory attributes), Q20_A1 (I have heard of Albania as a destination), Q20_A2 (I have an opinion about Albania), Q20_A3 (This destination has a good name and reputation), Q20_A4 (I am aware of this destination (I can recognize the name of Albania among other destinations), Q20_A5 (When I think about similar types of destinations, this destination comes to my mind immediately), Q20_A6 (Some characteristics of Albania come quickly to mind), Q20_A7 (I can recall a few important sites in Albania, Q31_A1 (I would like to visit), Q31_A2 (I would advise others to visit), Q31_A3 (Distinct among other near destinations), Q31_A4 (One of the preferred destinations I want to visit).

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Endogenous latent variable, BHVI (Behavioral Intention) Dependent Variables in the model, Exogenous observed variable is Q29 (Overall image of Albania) and Exogenous Latent variables are DAI (Destination Affective Image), DCI (Destination Cognitive Image) and Aware (Destination Awareness). The initial structural model demonstrated high goodness-of-fit indices, indicating a strong fit between the data and the model. The values obtained are as follows: χ_2 = 953, c2/df = 4.312, p=0.000, GFI = 0.843, CFI = 0.928, TLI =0.918 RMSEA= 0.08, SRMR= 0.0511, RMR=0.056 and PCFI =0.811.

Relationship Paths in the Initial Structural Model

Table 4.15

Relationship Paths in The Initial SEM Model

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
BHIN	<---	AFFIMAGE	0.26	0.083	3.12	0.002	Significant
BHIN	<---	DAWARENESS	0.499	0.072	6.961	***	Significant
BHIN	<---	Overall, Image	-0.005	0.051	-0.096	0.924	Not Significant
BHIN	<---	COGNIMAGE	0.151	0.045	3.374	***	Significant
Economic and satisfactory attributes	<---	COGNIMAGE	0.404	0.043	9.326	***	Significant
Tradition and Culture	<---	COGNIMAGE	0.406	0.043	9.365	***	Significant
Tourist Infrastructure	<---	COGNIMAGE	0.433	0.045	9.54	***	Significant
Appealing Activities	<---	COGNIMAGE	0.412	0.043	9.514	***	Significant
Functional Attributes	<---	COGNIMAGE	0.419	0.045	9.375	***	Significant
Natural Attractions	<---	COGNIMAGE	0.382	0.041	9.259	***	Significant
Inhospitable - Welcoming Destination	<---	AFFIMAGE	1				Significant
Sleep-Lively Destination	<---	AFFIMAGE	0.975	0.047	20.833	***	Significant
Boring - Exciting Destination	<---	AFFIMAGE	1.042	0.052	19.885	***	Significant
Unpleasant - Pleasant Destination	<---	AFFIMAGE	1.104	0.054	20.352	***	Significant
Distressing - Relaxing Destination	<---	AFFIMAGE	0.947	0.06	15.725	***	Significant
Heard the destination	<---	DAWARENESS	1.022	0.072	14.156	***	Significant
I can recall destination sites	<---	DAWARENESS	1				Significant
Characteristics come to my mind	<---	DAWARENESS	0.919	0.07	13.129	***	Significant
Destination comes to my mind	<---	DAWARENESS	1.117	0.07	15.998	***	Significant
I am aware /Recognize the name	<---	DAWARENESS	0.944	0.073	12.875	***	Significant

Destination has good name and reputation	<---	DAWARENESS	0.96	0.066	14.558	***	Significant
I have an opinion about…	<---	DAWARENESS	0.619	0.061	10.218	***	Significant
I would like to visit …...in the future	<---	BHIN	1				Significant
Advise other people to visit….	<---	BHIN	1.037	0.043	24.038	***	Significant
Distinct among other near destinations	<---	BHIN	0.713	0.044	16.361	***	Significant
It is my preferred….	<---	BHIN	0.974	0.045	21.78	***	Significant
DAWARENESS	<-->	Overall Image	0.395	0.051	7.71	***	Significant
COGNIMAGE	<-->	Overall Image	0.792	0.072	11.042	***	Significant
AFFIMAGE	<-->	DAWARENESS	0.409	0.047	8.636	***	Significant
AFFIMAGE	<-->	Overall Image	0.711	0.055	12.849	***	Significant
COGNIMAGE	<-->	AFFIMAGE	0.877	0.07	12.533	***	Significant
COGNIMAGE	<-->	DAWARENESS	1.000			***	Significant

Table 4.15 summarizes the relationship paths as a result of the initial structural model analysis, The results of the first structural model analysis stated that only one of relationship was not statistically significant, the overall image effect on the behavioral intentions. Different authors argue that removal of the path of the non-significant relationship would improve the model (Byrne, 2016; Kline & Tamer, 2016; Kline R. B., 2023). The present author removed the path of relationship Overall Image -Behavioral Intentions (Hypotheses 4) and a slight better improvement was indicated in the model fit. Therefore, the re-specification of the structural model demonstrated a small improvement in certain fit indices. The goodness-of-fit indices for the updated structural model are as follows; $\chi_2 = 953$, **c2/df = 4.294**, p=0.000, GFI = 0.843, CFI = 0.928, TLI =0.918 **RMSEA= 0.056,** SRMR= 0.051, RMR=0.056 and **PCFI =0.814.** Slightly modified indices are highlighted in bold.

The Structural Model – Visitors of the Destination.

In order to examine the relationship between constructs and evaluate Hypotheses 5, 6, 7, and 8, the structural model is assessed using a sample of visitors of Albania, along with other factors. In addition, the Second SEM Model incorporates an endogenous observable variable, Q30- Likely to recommend, which was exclusively posed to visitors of Albania. 25% of the overall sample comprises visitors to Albania.

The second Initial Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) model, as shown in Figure 4.48, consists of 57 estimated parameters. The sample size for this study is N=130, resulting in a ratio of n/q = 130/57 = 2.2, which is smaller than the recommended 5:1 ratio proposed by

Bentler and Chow (1987). The study aims to assess the effectiveness of the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) on tourists of Albania. To do this, a parcelling approach is employed to decrease the number of parameters, to enhance the stability of computed parameters, and minimize random error.

After using the parcelling approach, the number of parameters decreased to 21. The sample ratio for visitors in the new model is n/q=130/21=6.1, which indicates that the ratio 6:1 is greater than the previously suggested ratio.
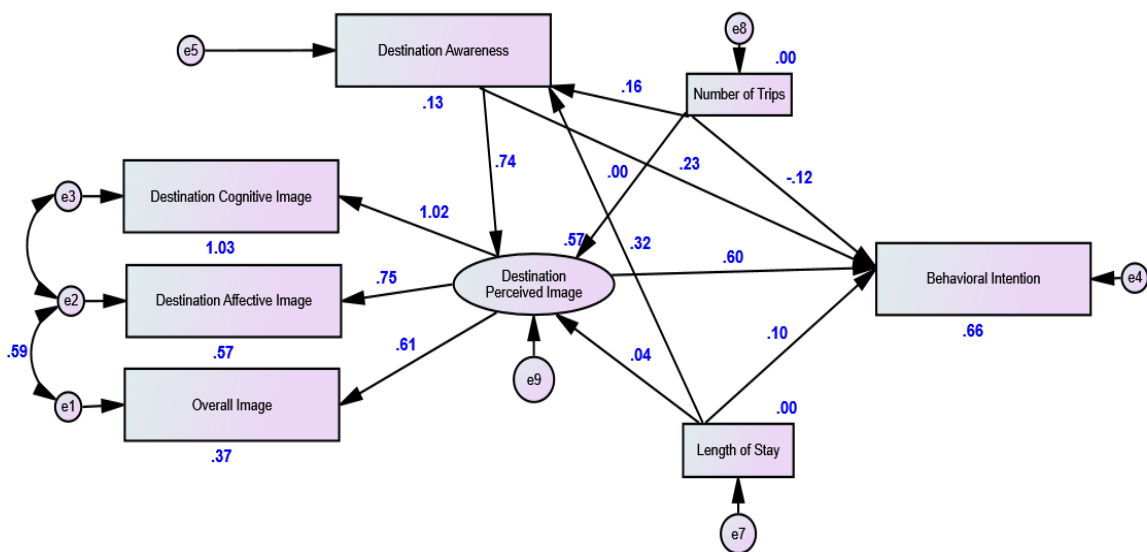
Figure 4.48 SEM model -visitors

The goodness-of-fit indices of the second structural model indicate that the data match well with the model of visitors. The chi-square value is 16.623 with a p-value of 0.002, and the chi-square divided by the degrees of freedom is 2.375. The goodness-of-fit index (GFI) is 0.967, the comparative fit index (CFI) is 0.980, and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) is 0.941.

The adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) is 0.867, the root mean square residual (RMR) is 0.308, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is 0.103, and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) is 0.0695.

Relationship Paths in the Visitor Structural Model

Table 4.16

Relationship Path in the Visitor SEM Model

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
AWARENESS	<--	Times of Visit	0.08	0.042	1.922	0.055	Significant at 10 %
AWARENESS	<--	Length of Stay	0.089	0.023	3.957	0.000	Significant
Destination Perceived Image	<--	AWARENESS	0.518	0.083	6.22	0.000	Significant
Destination Perceived Image	<--	Number of visit	-0.001	0.02	-0.075	0.94	Not Significant
Destination Perceived Image	<--	Length of Stay	0.008	0.011	0.67	0.503	Significant at 10 %
Overall Image	<--	Destination Perceived Image	1				
Destination Affective Image	<--	Destination Perceived Image	1.206	0.134	8.97	0.000	Significant
Destination Cognitive Image	<--	Destination Perceived Image	1.159	0.158	7.319	0.000	Significant
Behavioral Intention	<--	Destination Perceived Image	0.975	0.187	5.204	0.000	Significant
Behavioral Intention	<--	Destination AWARENESS	0.264	0.123	2.138	0.032	Significant
Behavioral Intention	<--	Number of visit	-0.068	0.029	-2.298	0.022	Significant
Behavioral Intention	<--	Length of Stay	0.031	0.017	1.871	0.061	Significant at 10 %

Based on the data presented in the table, the model's results show that out of twelve relationships, one is not statistically significant, while two are statistically significant at the 10% level. These two relationships have a noticeable impact on both the behavioural intention and the perceived image of the destination.

A new model was created by eliminating the variable "number of visits" and altering the relationship from direct/indirect to covariance between the measurement error of "Behavioural Intention" and "length of stay". The revision of the model resulted in the identification of a new model, where Destination Awareness was found to have a significant impact on both Destination Perceived Image and Behavioural Intention.

This finding provides support for hypotheses H7 and H7a. The perceived image of a location has a substantial impact on one's behaviour towards that destination.
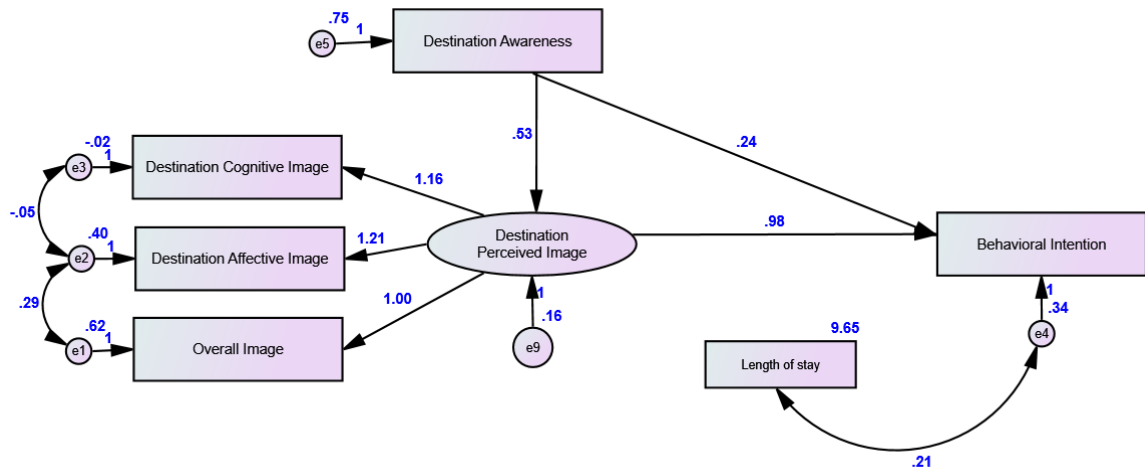
Figure 4.49 Revised SEM model for visitors

The removal of the non-significant paths resulted in a poorer fit of the indexes in the data. Nonetheless, the current author decided to retain the model based on the significance level of the relationships in the model Fig-4.49.

Table 4.17

Relationship Paths in the Modified Visitor Structural Model

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
Destination Perceived Image	<---	AWARENESS	0.527	0.082	6.407	***	Significant
Overall Image	<---	Destination Perceived Image	1				Significant
Destination Affective Image	<---	Destination Perceived Image	1.208	0.133	9.054	***	Significant
Destination Cognitive Image	<---	Destination Perceived Image	1.161	0.157	7.386	***	Significant
Behavioral Intention	<---	Destination Perceived Image	0.975	0.189	5.17	***	Significant
Behavioral Intention	<---	AWARENESS	0.244	0.124	1.973	0.049	Significant

The initial conceptual model considers awareness as moderator of relationship among Destination Image and Behavioural Intentions. The data for the modified SEM model for

the visitors indicates the Destination Awareness appears to have a positive effect on Destination Perceived Image and Behavioural Intentions, resulting in the confirmation of the Hypotheses H6 and H7. To explore the potential impact of additional variables on Destination Image and Behavioral Intention, the study utilized a regression analysis among variables.

Source of Information

Source of information is one of the constructs measured with items: Previous trips, Internet social media, Travel Agents, Word of Mouth, Brochures/travel guidebooks, Advertisements Tourism fair Celebrities/ Influencers. It is considered by different authors as a predictor of the destination image (Jamaludin, Aziz, Yusof, & Idris, 2013). It is also considered a significant factor in shaping the perception of a destination and is particularly influential through web platforms (Llodrà-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco, & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015). This study incorporates information sources into the regression analysis and presents the regression outcome in the table below:

Table 4.18

Source of Information

Source	SS	Df	MS	Number of Observations	=	517
				F(12,504)	=	71.97
Model	297.454753	12	24.7879	Prob >F	=	0.0000
Residual	173.588526	504	0.344422	R-squared	=	0.6315
				Adj R-squared	=	0.06227
Total	471.043279	516	0.912875	Root MSE	=	0.58687

Behavioral Intention	Coefficient	Std.err	t	P>|t|	[95%	conf.Interval
Destination Cognitive Image	0.512074	0.063933	8.01	0.0000	0.386467	0.637681
Destination Affective Image	0.213359	0.037518	5.69	0.0000	0.139648	0.28707
AWARENESS	0.314459	0.045833	6.86	0.0000	0.224412	0.404506
Previous trips	0.037127	0.063749	0.58	0.5610	-0.08812	0.162373
Internet	0.023796	0.077457	0.31	0.7590	-0.12838	0.175975
Social Media	0.019578	0.063292	0.31	0.7570	-0.10477	0.143927
Brochures/travel guidebooks	-0.12279	0.061146	-2.01	0.0450	-0.24292	-0.00266
Travel Agents	0.026712	0.06086	0.44	0.6610	-0.09286	0.146283
Word of Mouth	0.047923	0.065335	0.73	0.4640	-0.08044	0.176285
Advertisements	0.083151	0.075341	1.10	0.2700	-0.06487	0.231172

Tourism fair	0.014238	0.078221	0.18	0.8560	-0.13944	0.167917
Celebrities/ Influencers	-0.02543	0.073208	-0.35	0.7280	-0.16926	0.118399
_cons	-0.51357	0.143548	-3.58	0.0000	-0.7956	-0.23155

Table 4.18 displays the linear regression analysis, with the behavioural intention as the dependent variable and the destination cognitive image, destination affective image, destination awareness, and information channels as the independent variables. These variables are measured using Q17_A1 to Q17_A9. By utilising the information channels items, study evaluates hypothesis number 9 and it is seen that none of these variables exhibit statistical significance, except for Q17_A4 (Brochures/travel guidebooks), which demonstrates statistical significance at a 10% level of significance.

Consequently, drawing from these findings, it is determined that the source of information has a substantial impact on the overall perception of the tourist for a site. As a result, hypothesis number 9 is not supported.

The results of a simple linear regression analysis indicates that the information sources have a positive and significant impact on the dependent variables, Destination Affective Image and Cognitive Image. The Internet (0.5-0.000) and friends and family (0.436-0.000) appear to have a notable and favourable impact on the emotional perception of the destination.

The previous trip (0.228-0.000), internet usage (0.3-0.000), and interactions with friends and family (0.34-0.000) have a favourable and statistically significant impact on the cognitive image of the destination. The linear regression analysis shows that only the variables Internet and Friends and Family have a statistically significant and positive impact on the dependent variable Overall Image (Q29).

The findings indicate that hypotheses 9a, 9b, and 9c are rejected for all information sources except for Internet, Friends and Family, Previous Trips, and Brochures in relation to H9.

Personal Experience (Number of Visits and Length of Stay)

In order to assess the impact of personal experience, specifically the number of visits and duration of stay, on the perception of a place, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted. The regression study includes the number of visits to Albania during 2015-2022 (Q8) and the number of nights of stay variable as independent variables, with the Destination Image as the dependent variable. The findings can be seen in Table 4.19.

Table 4.19

Personal Experience (Number of Visits and Nights of Stay) Effect on Destination Image

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of Observations	=	130
				F(2,127)	=	7.31
Model	8.4051482	2	4.202574	Prob >F	=	0.0010
Residual	73.0611949	127	0.575285	R-squared	=	0.1032
				Adj R-squared	=	0.0891
Total	81.4663431	129	0.631522	Root MSE	=	0.75848

IMAGE	Coefficient	Std. err	t	P>|t|	[95% conf	Interval
Q8	0.0239975	0.041321	0.58	0.562	-0.0577694	0.105764
Q11	0.0770899	0.022399	3.44	0.001	0.0327659	0.121414
_cons	3.860701	0.121578	31.76	0.000	3.620121	4.101281

The above table gives a simple linear regression table where the dependent variable is the mean of Destination Cognitive Image, Destination Affective Image and Destination Overall Image.

The independent variables of the linear regression are personal experience in terms of the number of visits to Albania during 2015-2022 (Q8) and the number of the nights people stayed in Albania during their last trip (Q11). Both variables exhibit a strong and statistically significant impact on the Image, with a significant level of 1%. Furthermore, these variables exert a favourable influence on the Image. The regression results provide further evidence supporting the research conclusions for hypothesis 7a) The duration of a person's stay greatly influences their perception of a destination: and 7b) A tourist's previous visits to a destination have a substantial impact on their overall impression of it.

Table 4.20

Personal Experience and Destination Perceived Image

Equation		Obs	Params	RMSE	R-squared	chi2	P>chi2
Destination Cognitive Image		130	2	0.649742	0.1132	16.59	0.0002
Destination Affective Image		130	2	0.926549	0.0773	10.9	0.0043
Destination Overall Image		130	2	1.248254	0.1399	21.15	0.0000
		Coefficient	Std.err	z	P>|z|	[95% Conf.	interval]
Destination Cognitive Image	Q8	0.047338	0.035397	1.34	0.1810	-0.02204	0.116715
	Q11	0.063054	0.019188	3.29	0.0010	0.025446	0.100662
	_cons	3.38743	0.104148	32.53	0.0000	3.183303	3.591557
Destination Affective Image	Q8	0.017742	0.050478	0.35	0.725	-0.08119	0.116676
	Q11	0.083044	0.027363	3.03	0.002	0.029414	0.136674
	_cons	4.010131	0.148518	27.00	0.000	3.71904	4.301221
Destination Overall Image	Q8	0.037046	0.068004	0.54	0.586	-0.09624	0.170331
	Q11	0.155038	0.036863	4.21	0.000	0.082787	0.227289
	_cons	4.409496	0.200085	22.04	0.000	4.017337	4.801656

In the given table, the regression model is applied again, using the exogenous set of regressors, which includes both variables Q8 and Q11. By conducting a series of regressions that account for correlated errors, a significant and favourable influence of variable Q8 on Destination Cognitive Image, Destination Affective Image, and Destination Overall Image is noticed. However, the effect of variable Q11 seems to be positive, although it is not statistically significant. These results reinforce the prior findings on the influence of these two variables in the regression analysis. It is seen that the variable Q11 has a highly significant impact, whereas the variable Q8 appears to have a minimal impact in most cases.

Table 4.21
Number of Visits

Equation		obs	Params	RMSE	R-squared	chi2	P>chi2
DCI		130	1	0.67619	0.0395	5.35	0.0207
DAI		130	1	0.958811	0.012	1.57	0.2096
Q29		130	1	1.330468	0.0229	3.04	0.081
	Coefficient		Std.err	z	P>|z|	[95% Conf	interval]
DCI							
Q8	0.0814443		0.035219	2.31	0.0210	0.012416	0.150472

_cons	3.598038	0.085435	42.11	0.0000	3.430588	3.765488
DAI						
Q8	0.0626615	0.049939	1.25	0.2100	-0.03522	0.160541
_cons	4.287507	0.121144	35.39	0.0000	4.050069	4.524944
Q29						
Q8	0.1209073	0.069297	1.74	0.0810	-0.01491	0.256727
_cons	4.927339	0.168102	29.31	0.0000	4.597865	5.256812

The regression table above presents the results of seemingly unrelated regression with the same set of exogenous regressors. By observing the models, it was concluded that variable Q8, which represent the personal experience regarding the number of visits to Albania during 2015-2022, that the results indicate an insignificant impact of variable Q8 in the second regression, where the dependent variable is destination cognitive image. This shows that there is an insignificant impact of personal experience as per the number of visits in destination affective image. However, variable Q8 indicates a positive and significant effect in destination cognitive image and overall image at 5% and 10% level of significance. Therefore, based on these results, it is maintained that hypothesis 7A, which asserts that personal Experience (Previous visit) significantly affects the tourist's overall image of a destination is supported at 10% level of significance.

Findings from a linear regression analysis with Behavioural Intention as a dependent variable, and the length of stay as an independent variable indicate a significant and positive impact of the length of stay on behaviour intention, with a coefficient of 0.108-0.000. Length of stay is an independent variable, data indicate that there is a significant and positive effect of Length of Stay on Behaviour intention, (0.108-0.000). Way of traveling, individually or in group. Mode of transportation, either solo or in a collective. When travelling to an emerging destination with limited infrastructure, the mode of transport with and the company, with whom they travel affects the perception about the destination. To determine whether the people who travel with, have any impact on a tourist's behavioural intentions, such as revisiting the destination or recommending it to others, further investigation is needed.

Table 4.22

Part of a Group

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of Observations	=	130
				F(5,124)	=	50.21
Model	83.2382095	5	16.64764	Prob >F	=	0.0000
Residual	41.1098675	124	0.331531	R-squared	=	0.6694
				Adj R-squared	=	0.6561
Total	124.348077	129	0.963939	Root MSE	=	0.57579

Behavioral Intention	Coefficient	Std.err	t	P>|t|	[95% Conf	Interval
Destination Cognitive Image	0.7673141	0.136742	5.61	0.0000	0.496664	1.037965
Destination Affective Image	0.1328809	0.074967	1.77	0.0790	-0.0155	0.281262
AWARENESS	0.2404234	0.092905	2.59	0.0110	0.056538	0.424309
Part of an organized group	-0.1923137	0.17461	-1.1	0.273	-0.53792	0.153288
Individual Trip	-0.051697	0.109902	-0.47	0.639	-0.26922	0.16583
_cons	-0.7106556	0.30016	-2.37	0.019	-1.30476	-0.11656

Table 4.22 displays a simple linear regression analysis with the dependent variable being behavioural intention and the independent variables being destination cognitive image, destination affective image, destination awareness, and variable Q12 (with whom they travelled). The regression analysis reveals a positive and statistically significant influence of destination cognitive image, destination affective image, and destination awareness on behavioural intention. Nevertheless, participating in a group, family or personal journey does not exert a statistically substantial influence on behavioural intention. This outcome provides no evidence in favour of hypothesis number 5: Way of traveling have a significant affect the Tourism Destination Image and Behavioral intention.

Group Analyses, Country of Origin

The qualitative data indicated interest and curiosity for visiting Albania. '*Neues Land interasent für tourismus - New country interesting for tourism*' since the sample included people from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, it was decided to include also a

comparative analyses to understand perception of each of this country individually toward destination image as well as behavioral intentions.

Quantitative Data indicates that the country of origin of tourists has a moderated effect on the perception of Destination image as well as behavior intentions. For this regression model, three dummy variables -for Austria, Germany and Switzerland – was created. The dependent variable in this case is Behavioral Intention and as a reference group, which is kept outside the regression, is Austria. Observing the regression model results, it was concluded that being a German increases the probability of having behavioral intentions. Therefore, Germany has a higher BI (0.25, p = 0.012). In addition, being a German increases the likelihood of having a higher destination cognitive image (0.209, p = 0.004), destination affective image (0.271, p = 0.006), and overall image (0.368, p = 0.011). Observing the regression model compared to Austria, being a Swiss citizen increases the likelihood of having a higher destination cognitive image (0.255, p = 0.022), destination affective image (0.259, p = 0.088) and overall image (0.531, p = 0.017).

Table 4.23

Group Analyses, Country of Origin: Germans vs Austrians and Swiss People

Equation		Obs	Params	RMSE	R-squared	chi2	P>chi2	
BHV		517	2	0.948503	0.0126	6.58	0.0372	
DCI		517	2	0.694091	0.0179	9.4	0.0091	
DAI		517	2	0.94547	0.0147	7.71	0.0212	
Overall, Image		517	2	1.382869	0.0157	8.27	0.016	
		Coefficient	Std.err	Z	P>|z|	[95% conf	Interval	
Behavioral Intention								
	Germany	0.248863	0.099372	2.5	0.012	0.054097	0.443629	
		0.10675	0.152521	0.7	0.484	-0.19219	0.405685	
Switzerland								
	_cons	3.112	0.084837	36.68	0.0000	2.945723	3.278277	
Destination Cognitive Image								
	Germany	0.209448	0.072718	2.88	0.004	0.066923	0.351972	
		0.255915	0.111611	2.29	0.022	0.037162	0.474669	
	_cons	3.338532	0.062081	53.78	0.000	3.216854	3.460209	
Destination Affective Image								
	Germany	0.271191	0.099054	2.74	0.006	0.077048	0.465333	
		0.259286	0.152033	1.71	0.088	-0.03869	0.557265	
	_cons	4.08	0.084565	48.25	0.000	3.914255	4.245745	
Overall Image								
	Germany	0.368024	0.14488	2.54	0.011	0.084065	0.651983	
Switzerland		0.531714	0.222368	2.39	0.017	0.095882	0.967547	
	_cons	4.504	0.123688	36.41	0.000	4.261577	4.746423	

4.2.4 Overview of the Hypotheses Validation

The measurement and structural model analysis, including the first model for all data and the second model for visitors, along with supplementary regression analyses, offer insights into the hypothesized links between the constructs of the conceptual model.

The structural models were used to test hypotheses H1-H4 and H6, while regression analyses were employed to test hypotheses 5, 7, 8a, 8b, 8c,8d, and 9a, 9b,9c,9d. The outcomes of all hypothesis testing are summarized below:

Table 4.24

The *Results of All Hypothesis Testing*

Hypotheses	Comments on hypotheses testing
H1. Cognitive image significantly correlates with destination affective image.	Cognitive image is significantly and positively correlated with destination Affective image. (0.79-0000). Hypotheses supported.
H2. Cognitive and affective image correlates with overall image of a destination.	*Hypotheses supported.* • There is a significant and positive correlation among Destination Cognitive Image and Overall Image, (1.3-0.000) - • There is a significant and positive correlation among Destination affective Image and Overall Image (0.68 – 0.000
H3. Cognitive and affective image significantly affects the tourist's destination behaviour (intention to visit and recommendation)	Cognitive and Affective Destination Image have positive effect over Behaviour Intention and is statistically significant. *Hypotheses supported.* • There is a significant and positive effect of Destination Cognitive Image on the Behaviour intention, (0.29-0.000) • There is a significant and positive effect of Destination Affective Image on the Behaviour intention, (0.44-0.000)
H4. Tourist's overall destination image influences the tourist's destination behavioral intention	Tourists overall image does not have effect on Behavioral intention. *Hypotheses not supported.* • Overall Image does not have a statistically significant impact on Behavioural intention. (0.03-0.942)
H5. Way of traveling have a significant affect the Tourism Destination Image and Behavioral intention	Traveling as part of an organized group or individual trip does not have a statistically significant impact on Destination Image and behavioral intention. *Hypotheses not supported.*

H6. Destination Awareness and knowledge is positively related with Destination Image	Destination Awareness is positively related to Destination Image *Hypotheses supported.* • The relationship between Destination Awareness and Destination Cognitive Image is significant and positive, (0.39-0.000) • The relationship between Destination Awareness and Destination Affective Image is significant and positive, (0.64-0.000) • The relationship between Destination Awareness and Overall Image is significant and positive, (0.50-0.000)
H7. Destination Awareness and knowledge have a s significant effect on the Behavioral Intention	Destination Awareness have a statistically significant effect on Behavioral Intention *Hypotheses supported.* • There is a significant and positive effect of Destination Awareness on the Behaviour Intention, (0.27-0.034)
H8a. Personal Experience (Length of stay (nights) significantly affects the tourist's Destination Image	Personal Experience (nights of stay,) have a significant effect the Destination image. *Hypotheses supported.* • There is a significant and positive effect of Length of Stay on Destination Cognitive Image, (0.063-0.010) • There is a significant and positive effect of Length of Stay on Affective Image, (0.08-0.002) • There is a significant and positive effect of Length of Stay on the Overall Image, (0.15-0.000)
H8b. Personal Experience (times of visit) have a significant effect on the Destination image.	Personal Experience (times of visit,) have a significant effect on the Destination image. *Hypotheses not supported.* • There is no significant effect of times of visit on Destination Cognitive Image, Destination Affective Image and Overall, Image
H8c. Personal Experience (Length of stay (nights) affects the Behavior intention	Personal Experience (nights of stay,) does not have significant effect the Behavioural Intention. *Hypotheses supported.* • There is a significant and positive effect of Length of Stay on Behavioural Intention, (0.108-0.000)
H9a Source of information affects the Destination Cognitive Image	Previous trip (0.228-0.000), Internet (0.3-0.000) and Friends and family (will 0.34-0.000) as Information sources will have a positive and statistically significant effect on Destination Cognitive Image *Hypotheses supported for Previous Trips, Internet and Friends and Family*
H9b Source of information affects the Destination Affective Image	Internet (0.5-0.000 and Friends and family (0.436-0.000) have a significant positive effect on the Destination affective image. *Hypotheses supported for Internet and Friends and Family*

H9c Source of information affects the Overall Image	Internet (0.343-0.008) and Friends and Family (0.38-0.001) have a statistically significant and positive effect over Overall Image *Hypotheses supported for Internet and Friends and Family*
H9d Source of information affects the Behavioral Intention	Brochures/travel guidebooks as a source of information has a statistically significant negative effect on Behavioral Intention (-0.12-0.045) *Hypotheses supported for Brochures/travel guidebooks*

5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

5.1 Projected Destination Image versus Perceived Destination Image

The main objective of this study was to determine the brand identity - Ideal Image - by examining the perceived image of Albania. In order to determine the projected image of Albania as a destination, two research phases were conducted: in-depth interviews with tourism professionals and content analyses of brochures from the National Tourism Agency and tourism agencies that bring international tourists to Albania.

Research indicates that Albania possesses distinctive qualities that make it a remarkable location. With its advantageous geographical location at the centre of the Mediterranean, this region possesses stunning landscapes, untouched natural beauty, exquisite beaches, and breath-taking coastal areas. Additionally, it is home to numerous archaeological sites, including three that have been recognised as UNESCO World Heritage sites. Albania boasts a notable advantage in the form of its varied scenery, encompassing beaches, rivers, and mountains. Additionally, the country benefits from the close proximity of its tourism destinations, which are conveniently located near one another. Moreover, the data portrays Albania as a cultural and traditional destination, with UNESCO-recognized Polyphony and traditional attire. Hospitable individuals and inviting location attribute invites tourists to explore.

National Tourism has advocated for the qualities of the natural landscape, world heritage sites, historical significance, cultural traditions, amicability of residents, and delectable traditional cuisine. The findings from comprehensive interviews and analysis of the obtained material reveal a robust identity that is presented throughout many websites of the National Tourism Organisation (NTO) as well as travel businesses.

Pike (2004, 2008) argues that the destination branding process is insufficiently accomplished solely through the projected image provided by the supplier side. It also requires the perceived image from the demand side Therefore, possessing a strong destination brand implies that there should be no disparity between the projected and perceived image.

To determine whether there is a disparity between the projected image of Albania as a travel destination and the actual perception held by the German market, a qualitative question was included in the questionnaire. This question aimed to elicit the immediate thoughts that come to the mind of the German people when they first hear the word "Albania". The findings suggest that Albania possesses attractive features such as its scenic landscapes, stunning beaches, pleasant climate, and welcoming hospitality. Additionally, the country offers good value for money.

An intriguing finding from the qualitative data– the open-ended question within the survey - revealed that participants in the study had negative perceptions of Albania as a tourist destination, despite having limited personal experience with the country. These perceptions were based on spontaneous associations they attribute to Albania as a destination. The predominant negative connotations revolve primarily around concerns related to safety, criminal activity, refugee matters, inadequate infrastructure, high development density, and traffic congestion. Moreover, there is an enduring association between Albania and historical factors, including its affiliation with communism as well as its implication in the Kosovo War.

Upon comparing the results obtained from the initial phase, which included interviews and content analysis, with the spontaneous associations provided by German-speaking individuals, it was discovered that the positive attributes align with the projected image attributes. However, there are also negative associations present.

The findings suggest a discrepancy and highlight the need to address negative associations. However, there is no evidence to suggest the presence of a gap between the projected and perceived image. Additional observations shall be conducted to validate this claim. However, conducting a quantitative analysis of the disparity in a projected image and perceive image of specific location is a challenge, as demonstrated by references in the existing literature. Multiple scholars have employed social media and user-generated content

to analyse the perceived image and have conducted qualitative observation image (Foroudi, Jin, Gupta, Foroudi, & Kitchen, 2018; Lam, Ismail, & Lee, 2020). Though, addressing the issue of negative associations is important since prospective travellers primarily use internet reviews of a specific destination to influence their perception of it (Duan, Marafa, Chan, Xu, & Cheung, 2020). In order to overcome the negative perceptions toward destinations more information on information channels shall be included (Almeida-García et al. 2020).

Since majority of the people associating negative perceptions were people who didn't visited Albania compared to visitors who associated positive perceptions confirms that visit experience has an effect on the destination image.

This finding emphasizes the importance of conducting more investigation and thoroughly evaluating the sources and reliability of these unfavourable connections, especially considering that most individuals voicing these opinions have not personally visited Albania. Negative connotations of non-visitors might be induced by social media comments, news or even friends and previous visitors therefore there is a need for broader and more knowledgeable perspectives that consider the changing dynamics of the country and initiatives to overcome outdated assumptions or misinterpretations.

The research also aimed to comprehend the perception of Albania among visitors and potential visitors from the German-speaking market. The evaluation, aimed at understanding the Perceived Destination Image, utilized a quantitative survey primarily focusing on Balkan travellers from the German-speaking market. The evaluation of the destination image was conducted based on three dimensions of destination image: cognitive, affective, and overall image.

The study found that participants had a favourable Cognitive Image of Albania, as shown by a significant score of 3.5 out of 5. Conversely, the Affective Image received a higher rating of 4.3 out of 5, indicating a more intense emotional attachment and favourable inclination towards Albania as a tourist spot. Albania's overall image received a commendable rating of 4.37. The numerical data indicates a distinctly favourable perception of Albania as an appealing tourist destination in the German-speaking market.

The third objective of this study is to comprehend the impact of Destination Image, Positioning - Destination Awareness -, and Visiting Experience on behavioural outcomes, namely visit intention and recommendation.

The findings of this survey suggest that persons who have visited Albania hold a higher positive perception (scoring 3.8 out of 5) compared to those who have not visited it and who scored 3.4 out of 5. These findings validate the idea that customer experience has a direct impact on the perception of a destination. The relevance of customer experience in terms of visits is validated by visitors who exhibit a more positive attitude towards their intention to visit or suggest. Visitors exhibit a higher score (3.6 out of 5) compared to non-visitors (3.2 out of 5) in terms of behavioural consequences. The length of a stay in a visited destination is regarded as a significant factor in determining the selection of a destination.

The third objective of this study is to comprehend the impact of destination image, positioning (destination awareness), and visiting experience on behavioral outcomes, namely visit intention and recommendation. The findings of this survey suggest that persons who have visited Albania hold a higher positive perception (scoring 3.8 out of 5) compared to those who have not visited, who scored 3.4 out of 5. These data validate the idea that customer experience has a direct impact on the perception of a destination. The effect of customer experience in terms of visit is confirmed by visitors who exhibit a more positive attitude towards their intention to visit or suggest to others. Visitors exhibit a higher score (3.6 out of 5) compared to non-visitors (3.2 out of 5) in terms of behavioural consequences.

The length of a stay in a visited destination is regarded as a significant factor in determining the selection of the destination (Atsız, Leoni, and Akova 2022) and is also recognized as an important aspect of the tourist experience by several researches (Adongo, Badu-Baiden, and Boakye 2017; Oklevik et al. 2021; Vieira, Borges, and Rodrigues 2021). The research findings further validate that longer stays are associated with a more favourable perception of the destination and desired behaviour. The findings suggest that tourists who remain for multiple nights have a higher overall rating than those who stay for just one night. The attitude toward behavioural outcome (visit intention, intention to recommend) reaches a rating of 4.3 out of 5 for visitors who stay for a duration of 8-10 days.

The findings additionally validate the impact of destination awareness on destination image and behavioural intention. Individuals who possess knowledge about Albania exhibit a significantly more favourable perception of the destination image, with a score of 3.74, in contrast to those who lack awareness, who scored 2.34.   The attitude towards behavioural aim is significantly stronger among individuals with a high level of destination awareness (3.8) compared to those with low awareness (2.7 out of 5).

5.2 Discussion of the Results and Hypothesized Relationships

The examination of the relationships between concepts plays a crucial role in any research project since it is the point where the theoretical foundations intersect with empirical evidence. This stage is essential for understanding the intricate relationship between variables and confirming the assumptions made in the research hypotheses. In this discussion, our main objective is to carefully examine the suggested connections, uncover possible patterns, and evaluate the strength of the theoretical framework that guides the study.

The hypotheses, derived from established theories and conceptual structural models, offer a framework for comprehending the expected relationships among various variables. The purpose of the following discussion is to clarify the complex network of links proposed in the hypotheses, providing insight into the expected orientations, dimensions, and significance levels of these linkages.

By carefully investigating the connections between theories, the research's goal is to enhance the overall comprehension of the topic being studied. Through an in-depth examination of the factual data and a comparison with the expected outcomes based on theory, study objective is to not only confirm or disprove the suggested hypotheses, but also to discover possible opportunities for enhancing current theories or constructing new conceptual frameworks.

During this section, the empirical terrain by closely examining data patterns, statistical analyses, and the practical implications will be explored. In addition, it will take into account any unforeseen discoveries, recognizing the ever-changing nature of research and the potential for unexpected connections that may arise during the investigation.

In essence, the examination of hypotheses' relationships serves as a critical tool for enhancing the comprehension of the study problem, guiding the author towards indirect insights and facilitating future investigation in the field of academic research. The objective of this academic endeavour is to extract significant insights, formulate sound conclusions, and make substantial contributions to the wider discourse in the selected topic of study.

The results of the current study provide substantial support for the relationships hypothesized suggested in the research model. Findings suggest that both the cognitive and affective aspects of the perception of Albania as a destination have a strong impact on people's behaviour towards visiting Albania. The probability of behaviour was discovered to be influenced by the cognitive aspect of the destination image and to a greater extent through the emotional (affective) aspect of the destination image. On the other side, overall image did not affect the destination image. Furthermore, it was shown that the level of knowledge about the destination had an impact on the perception of the destination and the likelihood of engaging in certain behaviours, such as visiting or recommending. Moreover, it was discovered that the customer experience, specifically the way of the visit and the duration of the stay, had a direct influence on behavioural intention. The mode of transportation does not impact the perception and behavioural action toward a destination.

Research on the role of information sources has shown that various sources, such as previous trips, the internet, and word of mouth, have an impact on different aspects of a destination's image. Additionally, sources like brochures have been found to influence people's behavioural intentions.

5.2.1 Destination Awareness, Destination Image Relationship

The research objectives were developed to enhance comprehension of the complex correlation between destination awareness and the various components of the destination image. The purpose of this investigation is to examine the relationship between destination awareness and three specific components of destination image: cognitive, affective, and overall image. Hypotheses H8a, H8b, and H8c have been formulated to address this objective.

The empirical data strongly support the validity of hypotheses H8a, H8b, and H8c, indicating a clear positive link between destination awareness and all three dimensions of destination image, specifically the cognitive, affective, and overall. This statement suggests that having a high awareness of a place has a beneficial impact on both the cognitive (knowledge-based) and affective (emotional) aspects of how the place is perceived, ultimately influencing the overall perception of the place. The formation of a more favourable image toward a destination is influenced by a variety of factors, such as having an opinion about it, being aware of it, remembering it when thinking of similar destinations, and even recalling some of its sites and attributes. Findings indicate that destination awareness have an effect on destination image in three components, cognitive, affective and overall image.

This aligns with previous studies that emphasize the significant influence of destination awareness on destination image, thus on individuals' perceptions and emotions towards a certain location (Manurung & Astini, 2020). The study emphasizes the importance of including destination awareness increasing activities to foster favourable cognitive and emotional connections among potential visitors, underscoring its strategic importance.

In essence, these findings indicate that a destination's cognitive traits, when well understood and recognized due to a high level of awareness, contribute to the positive advancement of both cognitive and emotional components of how the destination is perceived. These findings are consistent with other research suggesting that a strong cognitive foundation positively impacts the overall perception of a location (Shatnawi, Alawneh, Alananzeh, Khasawneh, & Masa'deh, 2023; Indahsari, Heriyadi, Afifah, Listiana, & Fauzan, 2023).

This study offers useful insights into the existing knowledge base, giving nuanced implications for destination marketing and management. Destination marketing professionals can enhance destination awareness by highlighting the critical significance of destination positioning. This involves various aspects that contribute to the overall perception of a location, such as affective and cognitive characteristics. By developing targeted strategies, professionals can improve positioning statements and shape individuals' impressions of a destination.

5.2.2 The Role of Destination Awareness on Behavioral Intention

The research's structural model sought to examine the influence of destination awareness and knowledge on behavioural outcomes. The formulation of Hypothesis H9 was intended to formally address the specific relationship. The results of this study definitively confirm hypothesis H9, showing a substantial and favourable impact of destination awareness on the likelihood of behavioural outcomes.

This is consistent with previous research that highlights the substantial influence of destination awareness on determining visitor behaviour (Pike & Ryan, 2004; Fernando & Yasri, 2023). The study found that being more aware of a place had a favourable impact on the likelihood of potential visitors exhibiting desired behaviours.

The association between familiarity with a location and the probability of specific actions highlights the importance of improving and expanding awareness campaigns in destination marketing and management strategies. Prior studies have demonstrated that knowledge of a place directly influences the behaviour of visitors, specifically in terms of the frequency of visits and the degree of engagement.

Initially destination awareness was determined as a moderator of relationship destination image - behavioral intention, however, data suggested that this construct only affected attitude toward each of the constructs but did not impact the relationship of destination image – behavioral intention. A high awareness indicated the likelihood of visiting the destination, recommending to others, or considering as a preferred destination.

Ultimately, these research findings provide essential insights into how destination awareness affects behavioural outcomes. Destination marketers and managers can strategically utilise awareness-building activities to shape and influence the behavioural habits of potential tourists, by recognizing the positive impact demonstrated in this study.

5.2.3 Destination Image and Behavioural Outcome Relationship

The study examined the impact of cognitive (knowledge based), affective (emotive), and overall image of the destination on the likelihood of conative/behavioural outcomes, as

hypothesized in H3a, H3b, and H4. Current research findings suggest that the cognitive and affective aspects of the destination positively influence behavioural intention. However, the overall image of the destination does not have an impact on behavioural outcome. The results demonstrated various degrees of support for the hypotheses testing corresponding to the different aspects of the destination image. The cognitive and affective components have a significant positive impact on behavioural outcome, with the affective component having a slightly greater influence on destination behavioural outcome, such as being interested in visiting Albania in the future, recommending it as a destination, recalling that it offers numerous benefits and that is becoming one of the preferred destinations or even the recalling of a cite are impacted by the level of cognitive image and affective image.

The findings align with several studies that confirm the relationship between cognitive image and behavioral outcome, sometimes referred to as conative image by various authors (Gorji, Garcia, & Mercadé-Melé, 2023; Nazir, Yasin, Tat, Khalique, & Mehmood, 2021; Stylidis, 2022). Although earlier studies have regarded the overall image held by tourists as an important component of the image, this study did not find any impact of this construct on conative behaviour (V.G. & Park, 2020).

The present study investigated the suggested correlation between two categories: individuals who visited and those who did not visit the destination (Albania). The results did not provide evidence in favour of hypothesis H4 for either group. Nevertheless, the results did indicate an alternative result, specifically, their suggestion to visit it. Empirical data suggest that individuals who have travelled to Albania hold a more positive perception of the destination in comparison to those who have not visited.

5.2.4 Role of Information Sources on Destination Image and Behavioural Intentions

Study findings indicated that previous trips, internet, and friends and family influence the destination cognitive image. Internet, family and friends have a significant impact on affective component of destination image. At the same extent, these information sources impacted also overall image of the destination. A surprising finding is that behavioral intention was impacted only by brochures/travel guidebooks, meaning that when people want to decide for a destination, they need more intensive information.

Previous research indicates that source of information such as previous trips, internet social media, travel agents, word of mouth, brochures/travel guidebooks, advertisements, tourism fair, celebrities/influencers is considered by different authors as a predictor of the destination image and a significant factor on shaping the perception toward a destination (Jamaludin, Aziz, Yusof, & Idris, 2013; Llodrà-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco, & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015). In contrast to prior research, this study suggests that a varied utilisation of different types of information sources should be employed for different purposes. For instance, if the goal is to enhance perception about a destination, various channels should be utilized.

On the other hand, if the objective is to influence behaviour, more comprehensive information should be provided through brochures or travel guidebooks. Different from the scholars who argue that online word of mouth plays a role in shaping the image, Kamaluddin et al. (2023) advocate for the concept that high-quality tourism information shared on social media is essential for effectively raising awareness of destination brands among tourists. (Kamaluddin, Jailani, Yusoff, & Akhuan, 2023) while another author provisions that information source is not a driver of awareness, but awareness is a driver of information choice (Gursoy, Chiappa, & Zhang, 2018). This study has not tested the relationship between information sources and destination awareness. These findings highlight further research for testing this relationship and further investigating if these results can be generalized or there is only specific to German speaking market culture.

5.2.5 Personal Experience and Destination Image Relationship

Determinants of personal experience in this relationship were determined by length of stay, and way of travelling. This relationship is tested only on visitors of Albania, and descriptive findings indicated a slightly better perception on all the construct and image attributes of Albania. This finding aligns with previous research which determine that visitor experience affect the image formation as well as behavioral intention. Findings support the effect of visiting experience on all components of destination image, cognitive, affective and overall image (Su, Nguyen, Nguyen, & Tran, 2020; Rather, Hollebeek, & Rasoolimanesh, 2021; Piramanayagam, Rathore, & Seal, 2021)

Destination personal experience related to length of stay resulted to have effect on destination image, cognitive, affective, and overall image. Length of stay (nights of stay) is considered as one of determinants of deciding for vacations supporting findings of this study indicating that 'length of stay' has a significant effect on behavioural attitudes (Atsız et al. 2022). On the other side way of traveling does not have any impact on destination image and behavioural intention.

Ultimately, these research findings provide essential insights into how visiting experience affects behavioural outcomes. Destination marketers and managers also other industry stakeholders can strategically invest on satisfying the visitors in order to behavioural intention such as revisit or recommend other. A satisfied visitor is a turning one and an ambassador of the destination.

Satisfaction with the destination was not part of this study however a statement on 'satisfactory customer care on behalf of various professionals' was included in the image attributes. Descriptive findings denote that while visitors agreed at 67 % level, non-visitors have a 43 % agreement level on such attribute, indicating that visitors are more likely to leave the country in a satisfied mood.

6 CONTRIBUTION AND RECOMANDATIONS

6.1 Contributions to Theory

The study of perceived image and projected image has been a subject that has been extremely common in the tourism industry for over 30 years. Researchers until this point, have investigated a variety of features of destination image, such as the process by which it is generated, its static and dynamic properties, methods of measurement, and the effects that it has on consumer behaviour theories and destination marketing techniques. Additional topics that have been investigated in this research include the measurement of visitor satisfaction both before and after visits, as well as the impact of seasonality on the image of the destination. Other research has researched the relationships of country image and destination image as well the effect on behavioural income (Pike, 2002; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010; Zhang, Xu, Leung, & Cai, 2015; Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020).

This study attempts to validate the relationship of core components of destination image cognitive and affective image in a context of a developing destination with different characteristic and impacted by mix cultures, such as Mediterranean and Balkan. These components were considered as determinants of behavioural outcome toward this specific destination.

While the relationship between cognitive and affective component with behavioural outcome is in line with previous studies the relationship between destination awareness and destination image, and destination awareness and behavioral intention have differences.

This research considers destination awareness as determinant for both constructs, while other researchers have considered the relationship of destination image with behavioural probability as a mediating variable (Fernando & Yasri, 2023). Secondly, this study tested the effect of information sources on destination image and behaviour probability outcome. Unlike other studies, the findings indicated a differentiated source of information for each of the constructs (Shatnawi, Alawneh, Alananzeh, Khasawneh, & Masa'deh, 2023; Indahsari, Heriyadi, Afifah, Listiana, & Fauzan, 2023).

The purpose of this research was not to build a measurement scale, however the research methodology applied for determining the items resulted in a unique measurement scale for the identification of the perceived destination image. Previous studies have confirmed that measurement scales of a destination are unique, since destination image's dimensions and attributes may differ across different destinations (Ragb, Mahrous, & Ghoneim, 2020). The destination image scale is complete with all components of destination image and can be used to measure the perceived image of Albania in different contexts and other tourism markets.

Lastly, this research is a first pioneering attempt to analyse the image of Albania in both perspectives; projected by DMOs and perceived by Balkan travellers who reside in German speaking locations, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. There is no evidence of any systematic research that has been undertaken in Albania or any Western Balkan country to investigate the perception and behavioural intention of the German Speaking Market regarding a specific destination in this region.

This research has made substantial contributions to the theoretical progress in the field of tourism marketing and destination marketing studies in Albania. This study has developed a comprehensive framework that incorporates cognitive, affective, and conative/behavioural aspects to capture the complexities of visitors' mental representations and decision-making processes. The ongoing development of theoretical frameworks is influencing the focus of study on destination image, leading more specific studies in the specific destinations within Albania.

6.2 Revisited Conceptual Framework

The previous section figures out the advancements brought forth by this study in both theoretical aspect and the tourism sector. The conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 2 provides a solid groundwork for assessing the influence of destination awareness and destination image on behavioural attitudes. Nevertheless, the original concept has some implications. The variables included in the study were visitor experience, measured in terms of visit experience, number of visits, nights of stay, and mode of transportation. Although most variables had a significant impact on each other, the variables of travel type and number of visits did not exhibit a link. The overall image toward a destination, although it was strongly related to the awareness and emotional and cognitive aspects of how people perceive a location, did not have a noticeable effect on their desire to engage in specific behaviors related to that destination. Hence, to incorporate certain variables that were omitted in the original model, such as the source of information, a modified conceptual framework is introduced.
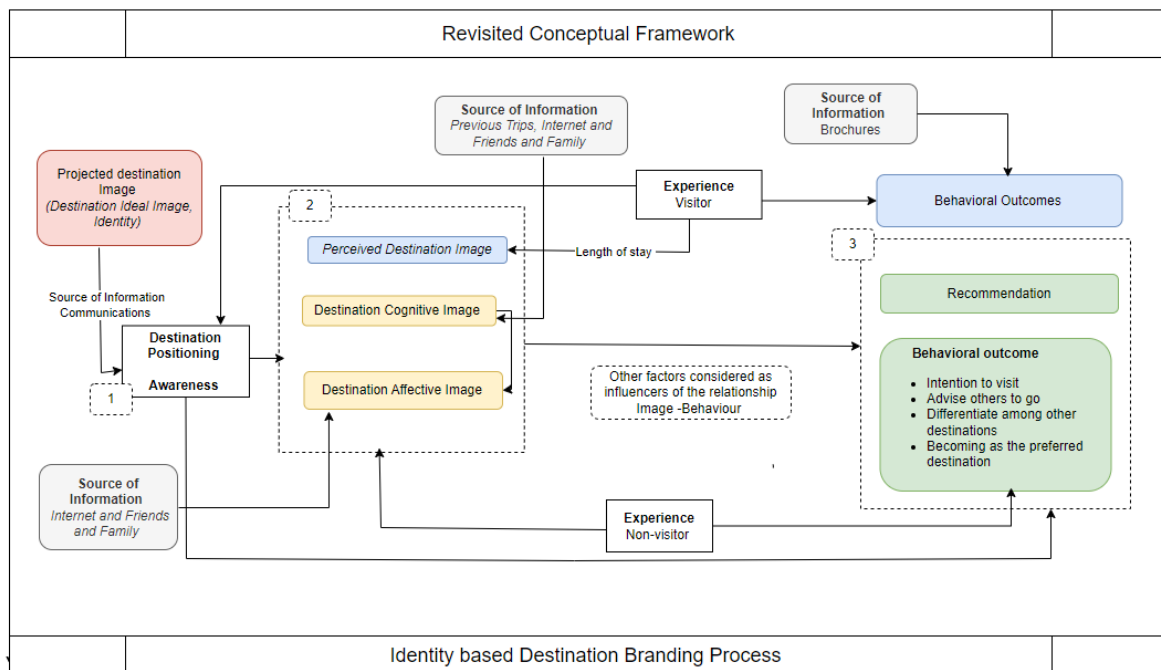
Figure 6.1 Revisited conceptual framework

The updated conceptual framework integrates recently identified variables that have been shown to impact behavioural outcomes. The revised conceptual framework is shown as a flow chart to precisely demonstrate the relationship among the three primary constructs:

destination awareness, destination perceived image (with its two key components), and behavioural outcomes. In addition, various indicators that affect these components are included in the model.

The conceptual framework begins with the projected destination image, which seeks to enhance destination awareness through many communication channels and sources as supported by literature. Destination Awareness - denoted as 1 in the model - is influenced also by visiting experience which effects how the travellers perceive the destination and how visiting and non-visiting experience influences the behaviour attitude toward the destination.

The perceived destination image compounded by two components cognitive and affective, labelled with 2 in the model, and influenced by experience indicates a significant effect on behavioural outcomes. On the other hand, the visiting experience influences the behavioural outcomes. Different from the case of non-visitors, it also affects the recommendation which indicates loyalty toward a destination. Other authors consider destination image as an indicator of satisfaction and loyalty (Králikova, Astrid, & Ryglová, 2020). Satisfaction with the destination was not in the focus of this research.

Behavioural outcomes identified with 3 in the compound by behavioural attitude concepts, such as -intention to visit- and -intention to advise- one additional concept -recommendation- was applied only to visitors. In the revisited conceptual model, behavioural outcomes is influenced by both the concepts of Destination Image and Destination Awareness. The model includes also other variables, such as differentiated sources of information that influence different variables. The length of stay in the model indicates the presence of influence on Destination Image.

Revisited concept model is a proposed as a framework for managing the destination. The model involves managing a destination by strategically using different sources of information to communicate the unique attributes of the destination. The goal is to enhance awareness of the destination, improve its image, and have a positive effect. The ultimate objective of this process is to attract a greater number of tourists who will visit and return to the destination. Each step should take into account the other variables that influence the relationship between Destination Image and Behavioural Intention.

6.3 Practical Implications

In practice, this study emphasises the criticality of marketing and promotional initiatives in shaping and managing the perception of Albania as an attractive tourist destination, as perceived by Albanian tourism authorities. In order to enhance the probability of individuals choosing to travel to a particular country, it is imperative to focus marketing endeavours on those particular characteristics of the location that evoke positive sentiments and emotions, considering the substantial influence that these attributes have on the destination's image.

Marketing endeavours ought to be concentrated on attributes that evoke positive emotions and forge a link between the destination and a setting that is perceived as exciting and pleasurable. Consequently, fostering a favourable perception of the location increases the probability of attracting tourists to Albania, potentially resulting in economic benefits. The formulation of a resilient destination brand that highlights the distinctive attributes of cognitive and affective components of image may amplify economic benefits for Albania and the tourism ecosystem.

The findings of the study, in addition to their significance in the scientific community, may also be of considerable use to policymakers in Albania and the Western Balkans. These individuals are able to assist these policymakers in comprehending the benefits that would result from undertaking actions to improve the perception of a specific destination among Europeans. The purpose of this study is to serve as a guide for the development and advancement of policies associated with the establishment and marketing of the Destination brand through the government.

The purpose of this study was to identify the most important characteristics of this location, which would provide a basis for the development of identity-based marketing strategies that would position Albania as a strong competitor in the tourism industry of the Mediterranean region, known for its intense level of competition.

Destination marketing professionals can enhance destination awareness by highlighting the critical significance of destination positioning. This involves various aspects that contribute to the overall perception of a location, such as affective and cognitive characteristics.

By developing targeted strategies, professionals can improve positioning statements and shape individuals' impressions of a destination.

The research findings provide essential insights into how destination awareness affects behavioural outcomes. Destination marketers and managers can strategically utilise awareness-building activities to shape and influence the behavioural habits of potential tourists, by recognizing the positive effect demonstrated in this study.

Empirical data indicate that tourists have a higher positive perception of the destination compared to non-visitors. Destination marketers, managers as well as other industry stakeholders can strategically invest in initiatives that satisfy the visitors, showing more positive attitude toward behavioural intention, which include revisiting or recommending it to the others.

This study suggests that a varied utilization of different types of information sources should be employed and promoted for different purposes. For instance, if the goal is to enhance perception about an image, various channels should be utilized. Behavioural intention was impacted only by brochures/travel guidebooks, meaning that when people want to decide for a destination, they need more intensive information. DMOs and destination promotors may design brochures/travel guidebooks which includes intensive information regarding the cognitive and affective attributes as well as information about what tourists can experience in Albania.

The research findings highlight the significance of undertaking further research and comprehensive assessment of sources and the credibility of unfavorable associations, particularly given that the majority of individuals voicing these opinions have not personally visited Albania. It is necessary to have more comprehensive and informed perspectives that take into account the country's shifting dynamics and challenge out-of-date beliefs or misconceptions.

The reviewed concept model might serve as a framework for the process of destination management. It suggests positioning through various information sources and communicating destination identity attributes with the aim of increasing destination awareness and improving destination image as well as impacting behaviour toward this

destination. The final goal of this process would be attracting more tourists who would visit and revisit Albania.

6.4 Limitations of the Research

The study sample was obtained through an online panel and acquired from a reputable market research firm located in Germany, which had panel data in all the countries on the focus of the study. It may be argued that the utilization of panel data is constrained due to the non-representativeness of participants in relation to the target population, however recently panel research and panel membership in developed countries is very common. Considering that study targeted the panel members individual residing in Germany, Austria and Switzerland who had travelled in Balkans in last three years the representative of this population is assured.

The limitation is the lack of information if they have visited or not Albania, there was a small number of panel participants, visitors of Albania, the target sample was limited to travellers in the Balkans, specifically including Croatia, Greece, and the Western Balkans. For this reason, the visitors of Albania represent only 25% of the entire sample. Considering that SEM requires a larger sample, the structural model is tested to all sample, but it was not feasible to evaluate the initial structural model for visitors. Therefore, in such case the structural model was tested into two groups, one with the total sample and one with the group of visitors of Albania. For testing the model with sample of visitors, author utilized the parcelling approach used for small samples. This process resulted in testing two SEM models; one with all participants in the survey and one with the sample consisting of visitors of Albania.

SEM analysis facilitates the identification of correlated variables, but it does not allow for the determination of causality in the relationship. The structural model suggests that there is a positive correlation between the affective destination image and the likelihood of behavioural outcomes. However, it doesn't prove that affective destination image is the only cause of behavioural probability due to a lack of control over additional factors (Malhotra, 2020). Tourism marketing research is intricate since additional extraneous variables, such as norms, values, and unpleasant experiences, can potentially influence the connection between destination image and behaviours outcome.

Nevertheless, the SEM technique continues to be valuable in comprehending connections in multivariate statistics. SEM possesses the capability to differentiate between indirect and direct associations, as well as to examine the connections between latent variables.

6.5 Directions for Future Research

This study confirmed the relationship that exists among cognitive and affective destination image and behavioural outcome, as well as relationship that exist among destination awareness both destination image components and behaviour outcome. It is necessary to evaluate the generalizability of the research findings to other nations, considering that the study's scope is limited to Albania. Moreover, it should be noted that the findings of this research pertain specifically to the impressions of German-speaking Balkan travellers. Hence, it is critical to acknowledge that the results might differ when the viewpoints of individuals of different nationalities are taken into account. Thus, it would be advantageous to evaluate the research model with samples representing various nationalities or cultural groups, as well as other international travellers, and with respect to various countries or destinations.

It would also be advantageous to conduct additional research to increase the knowledge of the relationship between destination image, destination awareness, and behavioural outcome. In future studies, destination awareness may be regarded as a moderator variable in relation to destination image and behavioural outcome. An extended explanation of the factors that influence the associations between destination image and behaviour probability could involve additional moderating variables, such as satisfaction with tourism experiences and social norms.

The study has not tested the relationship between information sources and destination awareness. Further research is required to test this relationship. Future research can focus on investigating if these results can be generalized to other markets or there is only specific to German speaking market culture.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Quantitative instrument Scripting

Study of the Perceived Destination Image - Case of Albania

My name is Sonila Cela and I am currently undertaking a research on Perceived Destination Image. This research is part of a PhD funded by Epoka University in Albania. This research is particularly interested in exploring how foreign tourists perceive Albania as a Destination. Participation is completely voluntary, and you are not obliged to take part, but I would deeply appreciate if you would find the time to complete the questionnaire which will take 10-15 minutes. Your responses will remain anonymous. The data collected from this interview will only serve for research purposes (statistical processing). If you have any question, please contact by email at scela@epoka.edu.al

Studie des wahrgenommenen Reisezielbildes –Fall Albanien

Mein Name ist Sonila Cela und ich führe derzeit eine Recherche zum wahrgenommenen Zielbild durch. Diese Forschung ist Teil eines von der Epoka University in Albanien finanzierten wissenschaftlichen Doktorgrades. Diese Forschung ist besonders daran interessiert zu erkunden, wie ausländische Touristen Albanien als Reiseziel wahrnehmen. Die Teilnahme ist völlig freiwillig und Sie sind nicht dazu verpflichtet. Ich würde es aber sehr schätzen, wenn Sie die Zeit finden würden, den Fragebogen auszufüllen, der 10-15 Minuten dauern wird. Ihre Antworten bleiben anonym. Die aus diesem Interview erhobenen Daten dienen ausschließlich Forschungszwecken (statistische Verarbeitung). Wenn Sie Fragen haben, wenden Sie sich bitte per E-Mail an scela@epoka.edu.al

S1. What is your gender?

1. Female ………F
2. Male ……..…..M

S1. Welches Geschlecht haben Sie?

3. Weiblich …….F
4. Männlich …….M

S2. What is your age?

S2. Wie alt sind Sie?

S3. What is your marital status?

1. Single ………………………1
2. Married………………………2
3. Other ……………………-oth-

S3. Wie ist Ihr Familienstand?

1. Single ………………………1
2. Verheiratet ………………………2
3. Sonstiges …………………sonst.

S4. Where are you from (Citizenship)?
1. Austria
2. Germany
3. Switzerland
4. Other (Specify) -oth-

S4. Woher kommen Sie (Staatsangehörigkeit)?
1. Österreich
2. Deutschland
3. Schweiz
4. Sonstiges (bitte angeben) -sonst.-

A. DESTINATION AWARENESS
A. Zielbewusstsein

Q1. When thinking of a tourism Destination in Western Balkans what comes to your mind first? (*One Answer*)

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F1. Was kommt Ihnen als erstes in den Sinn, wenn Sie an ein Reiseziel im westlichen Balkan denken? (*Eine Antwort*)

Q2. What about other tourist Destinations in Western Balkans? Which destinations come to your mind? More than one

F2. Was ist mit anderen Touristenzielen im Westbalkan? Welche Reiseziele fallen Ihnen ein?

Q3. Have you ever heard the tourism slogans following below?

Q.3		
Slogan awareness	**Yes**	**No**
Go your own way	1	2
Full of Life	1	2
…......... Ready for YOU!	1	2
The Heart Shaped and at your Fingertips	1	2
Taste life	1	2
Wild Beauty	1	2
See, Experience, Explore ….........	1	2
The place to be	1	2

F3. Haben Sie die folgenden Tourismus-Slogans gehört?

F.3		
Slogan-Bewusstsein	**Ja**	**Nein**
Gehen Sie Ihren eigenen Weg	1	2
Voller Leben	1	2
….. Bereit für dich!	1	2
Herzförmig an Ihren Fingerspitzen	1	2
Genießen Sie das Leben	1	2
Wilde Schönheit	1	2
Sehen, Erleben, Entdecken ……….	1	2
Der angesagte Ort	1	2

Q3.1. Can you define which slogan corresponds to which country?

	Q.4							
Slogan awareness	Go your own way	Full of Life	…......... ready for YOU!	The Heart Shaped and at your Fingertips	Taste life	Wild Beauty	See, Experience, Explore ….........	The Place to be
Albania	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Bosnia and Hercegovina	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Kosovo	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Montenegro	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
North Macedonia	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Serbia	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I don't know	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

F3.1. Können Sie definieren, welcher Slogan welchem Land entspricht?

Slogan-Bewusstsein	Gehen Sie Ihren eigenen Weg	Voller Leben	…….. bereit für dich!	Herzförmig an Ihren Fingerspitzen	Genießen Sie das Leben	Wilde Schönheit	Sehen, Erleben, Entdecken ……..	Der angesagte Ort
				F.4				
Albanien	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Bosnien und Herzegowina	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Kosovo	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Montenegro	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Nordmazedonien	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Serbien	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ich weiß nicht	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

B. TRAVEL BEHAVIOR CHARACTERISTICS:
B. Reiseverhalten Merkmale:

Q4. Have you ever visited Western Balkans?

1. Yes
2. No

F4. Waren Sie schon einmal auf dem Westbalkan?

1. Ja
2. Nein

Q5. Which countries have visited? (Select all that apply)

1. Albania
2. Bosnia and Hercegovina
3. Kosovo
4. Montenegro
5. North Macedonia
6. Serbia

F5. Welche Länder haben besucht? (Wählen Sie alle zutreffenden)

1. Albanien
2. Bosnien und Herzegowina
3. Kosovo
4. Montenegro
5. Nordmazedonien
6. Serbien

Q6. How many trips have you taken in Western Balkan during 2015-2022? _____ (# of trips)

F6. Wie oft sind Sie zwischen 2015 und 2022 in den Westbalkan gereist? _____ (Anzahl der Reisen)

Q7. What was the primary purpose of your last visit? (Check one)

1. Specifically, to visit the countries
2. The visit was a side trip or a stop on a trip to another primary destination
3. Visiting friends (VFR)
4. Business or combined business/pleasure trip
5. Special events or festival
6. Convention/Conference
7. Organized groups
8. Part of a tour

F7. Was war der Hauptzweck Ihres letzten Besuchs? (Ankreuzen)

1. Speziell, um die Länder zu besuchen
2. Der Besuch war ein Abstecher oder ein Zwischenstopp auf einer Reise zu einem anderen Hauptziel
3. Besuch bei Freunden (VFR)
4. Geschäfts- oder kombinierte Geschäfts-/Vergnügungsreise

5. Besondere Veranstaltungen oder Festivals
6. Konvention/Konferenz
7. Organisierte Gruppen
8. Teil einer Tour

Those who have visited Albania Q.5=1

Q8. How many trips have you taken in Albania during 2015-2022? _____ (# of trips)

F8. Wie oft sind Sie zwischen 2015 und 2022 nach Albanien gereist? _____ (Anzahl der Reisen)

Q9. Was your visit to Albania a:

1. Day trip
2. Overnight trip

F9. War Ihr Besuch in Albanien:

1. eine Tagestour
2. eine Nachtfahrt

Those who have an overnight trip Q9=2

Q10.   If an overnight trip, what type of accommodation did you use in the area?

1. Hotel/ Motel
2. Guesthouse
3. Bed & Breakfast
4. Cottage
5. Staying with friends or relatives in the area
6. Staying in my own property
7. Camper
8. Campground
-oth- Other Accommodation (please specify) _____

F10.   Wenn es sich um eine Übernachtungsreise handelt, welche Art von Unterkunftsmöglichkeit haben Sie in der Gegend genutzt?

1. Hotel/Motel
2. Gasthaus
3. Frühstückspension
4. Hütte
5. Aufenthalt bei Freunden oder Verwandten in der Gegend
6. Aufenthalt in meinem eigenen Eigentum
7. Wohnmobil
8. Campingplatz
-sonst.- Andere Unterkunftsmöglichkeit (bitte angeben) _____

Those who have visited Albania Q.5=1

Q11.   How many nights did you stay in Albania on your last trip? _____ (# of days)

F11.   Wie viele Nächte haben Sie bei Ihrer letzten Reise in Albanien verbracht? _____ (Anzahl der Tage)

Q12.   Were you traveling as:

1. Part of an organized group
2. Individual trip
3. Family

F12.   Waren Sie unterwegs als:

1. Teil einer organisierten Gruppe
2. Individuelle Reise
3. Familie

Q13.   Which was your way of travelling

1. Air (By plane)
2. Sea (By boat, ship etc.)
3. Earth (By car, bus etc.)

F13.   Das war deine Art zu reisen

1. Luft (mit dem Flugzeug)
2. Meer (mit Boot, Schiff usw.)
3. Landweg (mit dem Auto, Bus usw.)

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Q14. **What was the purpose of the last visit in Albania? THREE ANSWERS**

1. Seaside tourism
2. Mountain tourism
3. Cultural Tourism (Historical/archaeological)
4. Faith Tourism
5. Health Tourism
6. Adventure Tourism
7. Agro tourism
-oth- Other (specify)

F14. **Was war der Zweck des letzten Besuchs in Albanien? DREI ANTWORTEN**

1. Tourismus am Meer
2. Bergtourismus
3. Kulturtourismus (historisch/archäologisch)
4. Glaubenstourismus
5. Gesundheitstourismus
6. Abenteuer Tourismus
7. Agrotourismus
-sonst.- Andere (bitte angeben)

Q15. **In which area of Albania was the destination of the last visit in Albania?**

1. Central of Albania (Tirana, the capital, Durrës (seaside), Kruja (castle), Elbasan (castle), etc.)
2. South of Albania (Vlora (seaside and riviera), Saranda (Seaside), Gjirokastra(castle), Berati (castle, old city), etc.)
3. North of Albania (Shkodra castle and the lake, the alps (Theth, Valbona, Lepushe, Vermosh), Lezha, the castle, Dibra (Korabi, Lura), etc)
4. Don't Know/Do not response

F15. **In welcher Gegend Albaniens war das Ziel des letzten Besuchs in Albanien?**

1. Zentral Albanien (Tirana, die Hauptstadt, Durrës (Küste), Kruja (Burg), Elbasan (Burg), usw.)
2. Südalbanien (Vlora (Küste und Riviera), Saranda (Küste), Gjirokastra (Burg), Berati (Burg, Altstadt) usw.)
3. Nordalbanien (Shkodra Schloss und der See, die Alpen (Theth, Valbona, Lepushe, Vermosh), Lezha, das Schloss, Dibra (Korabi, Lura) usw.)
4. Weiß nicht/keine Antwort

Q16. **How much money did you spend on your trip? Write spending incurred within Albania (Enter approximate spending amount in EUR)**

1)_____ (€)

F16. **Wie viel Geld hast du für deine Reise ausgegeben? Schreiben Sie Ausgaben, die innerhalb Albaniens getätigt wurden (Geben Sie den ungefähren Ausgabenbetrag in EUR ein)**

1)_____(€)

BASE ALL
Q17. **I use the below information channels to learn about Albania…**

	Yes	No
Previous trips	1	0
Internet	1	0
Social Media	1	0
Brochures/travel guidebooks	1	0
Travel Agents	1	0
Friends, Family, relatives , and colleagues (Word of Mouth)	1	0
Advertisements	1	0
Tourism fair	1	0
Celebrities/Influencers	1	0

Ich nutze die untenstehenden Informationskanäle, um mich über Albanien zu informieren…

	Ja	Nein
Frühere Reisen	1	0
Internet	1	0
Sozialen Medien	1	0
Broschüren/Reiseführer	1	0
Reisebüro	1	0
Freunde, Familie, Verwandte und Kollegen (Mundpropaganda)	1	0
Anzeige	1	0
Tourismusmesse	1	0
Prominente/Influencer	1	0

BASE: Those who have travelled Q5=1

Q18. **While traveling within Albania, did you use any of the following local sources of information for travelers?**

	Yes	No
Hotel, motel, accommodation facilities Information	1	0
National Tourism Organization Website	1	0
City, Local Visitor Information Centers	1	0
Local People	1	0
Travel Agents	1	0

F18. **Haben Sie während Ihrer Reisen innerhalb Albaniens eine der folgenden lokalen Informationsquellen für Reisende genutzt?**

	Ja	Nein
Informationen zu Hotels, Motels, Unterkünften	1	0
Website der nationalen Tourismusorganisation	1	0
Stadt, lokale Besucherinformationszentren	1	0
Einheimische	1	0
Reisebüro	1	0

A. DESTINATION IMAGE
A. Zielbild

Base ALL

Q19. **What comes to mind when you first hear Albania? Please write down the first three adjectives or nouns that comes to your mind for Albania (being them positive or negative conotations)?**

F19. **Woran denken Sie, wenn Sie Albanien zum ersten Mal hören? Bitte schreiben Sie die ersten drei Adjektive oder Substantive auf, die Ihnen zu Albanien einfallen (seiend sie positive oder negative Konnotationen)?**

Q20. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements regarding Albania as a touristic destination:**

Destination Awareness	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I have heard of Albania as a destination	1	2	3	4	5
I have an opinion about Albania	1	2	3	4	5
This destination has a good name and reputation	1	2	3	4	5
I am aware of this destination (I can recognize the name of Albania among other destinations)	1	2	3	4	5
When I think about similar types of destinations, this destination comes to my mind immediately	1	2	3	4	5
Some characteristics of Albania come quickly to mind	1	2	3	4	5
I can recall a few important sites in Albania	1	2	3	4	5

F20. **Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Aussagen zu Albanien als Reiseziel zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen:**

Zielbewusstsein	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme zu	Stimme stark zu
Ich habe von Albanien als Reiseziel gehört	1	2	3	4	5
Ich habe eine Meinung zu Albanien	1	2	3	4	5
Dieses Reiseziel hat einen guten Namen und Ruf	1	2	3	4	5
Ich kenne dieses Reiseziel (ich kann den Namen Albanien unter anderen Reisezielen erkennen)	1	2	3	4	5
Wenn ich an ähnliche Reiseziele denke, fällt mir sofort dieses Reiseziel ein	1	2	3	4	5
Einige Eigenschaften Albaniens fallen einem schnell ein	1	2	3	4	5
Ich kann mich an einige wichtige Orte in Albanien erinnern	1	2	3	4	5

Q21. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following attributes of Albania:**

Natural Sources	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Beautiful Nature (scenic mountains Valleys, freshwater lakes, rivers)	1	2	3	4	5
National Parks, uniqueness flora and fauna	1	2	3	4	5
Beautiful and unspoiled beaches	1	2	3	4	5
Rugged Coastline and Sandy beaches	1	2	3	4	5
Pleasant weather (300 days of sunshine)	1	2	3	4	5

F21. **Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Attributen Albaniens zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen:**

Natürliche Quellen	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme zu	Stimme stark zu
Wunderschöne Natur (malerische Bergtäler, Süßwasserseen, Flüsse)	1	2	3	4	5
Nationalparks, Einzigartigkeit Flora und Fauna	1	2	3	4	5
Schöne und unberührte Strände	1	2	3	4	5
Zerklüftete Küste und Sandstrände	1	2	3	4	5
Angenehmes Wetter (300 Sonnentage)	1	2	3	4	5

Q22. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following attributes of Albania:**

Natural and built	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Beautiful Towns and attractive cities	1	2	3	4	5
High level of cleanliness (clean environment (beaches, parks, roads, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Good Quality of Transportation Infrastructure	1	2	3	4	5
Good Public Transportation Service	1	2	3	4	5
Easy Accessible destination	1	2	3	4	5
Tourist sites are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5

F22. **Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Attributen Albaniens zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen:**

Natürlich und gebaut	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme zu	Stimme stark zu
Schöne Städte und attraktive Städte	1	2	3	4	5
Hohe Sauberkeit (saubere Umgebung (Strände, Parks, Straßen usw.)	1	2	3	4	5
Gute Qualität der Verkehrsinfrastruktur	1	2	3	4	5
Guter öffentlicher Nahverkehr	1	2	3	4	5
Leicht zugängliches Ziel	1	2	3	4	5
Sehenswürdigkeiten sind leicht zugänglich	1	2	3	4	5

Q23. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following attributes of Albania:**

Leisure and Entertainment	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Good opportunities for recreational activities	1	2	3	4	5
Rich and fun night life	1	2	3	4	5
Variety Sports and physical Activities (hiking, swimming)	1	2	3	4	5
Camping opportunities	1	2	3	4	5
Interesting Events and Festivals	1	2	3	4	5
Good shopping facilities	1	2	3	4	5
Various tourist activities	1	2	3	4	5

F23. **Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Attributen Albaniens zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen:**

Freizeit und Unterhaltung	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme zu	Stimme stark zu
Gute Möglichkeiten für Freizeitaktivitäten	1	2	3	4	5
Reiches und lustiges Nachtleben	1	2	3	4	5
Vielzahl von Sportarten und körperliche Aktivitäten (Wandern, Schwimmen)	1	2	3	4	5
Campingmöglichkeiten	1	2	3	4	5
Interessante Events und Festivals	1	2	3	4	5
Gute Einkaufsmöglichkeiten	1	2	3	4	5
Verschiedene touristische Aktivitäten	1	2	3	4	5

Q24. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following attributes of Albania:**

Culture, History, Heritage and art	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Historical Museums and ethnographic exhibitions	1	2	3	4	5
Legends and myths	1	2	3	4	5
Rich Folklore and Culture, ISO-Polyphony	1	2	3	4	5
Traditional costumes and crafts	1	2	3	4	5
Heritage and Archeology (3 UNESCO cites)	1	2	3	4	5
Religion (Interreligious coexistence, Religious architecture, and places)	1	2	3	4	5

F24. **Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Attributen Albaniens zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen:**

Kultur, Geschichte, Erbe und Kunst	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme zu	Stimme stark zu
Historische Museen und ethnographische Ausstellungen	1	2	3	4	5
Legenden und Mythen	1	2	3	4	5
Reiche Folklore und Kultur, ISO-Polyphonie	1	2	3	4	5
Trachten und Kunsthandwerk	1	2	3	4	5
Kulturerbe und Archäologie (3 UNESCO-Stätte)	1	2	3	4	5
Religion (Interreligiöses Zusammenleben, Religiöse Architektur und Orte)	1	2	3	4	5

Q25. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following attributes of Albania:**

Tourist Infrastructure	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Variety of Accommodation Facilities (Hotels, Modern resorts, Guesthouses, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Nice coffee shops, restaurants and bars	1	2	3	4	5
Accessibility of tourist Information (Tourist Information Centers)	1	2	3	4	5
Abundant and updated information on the National Tourism Organization websites, and plenty of printing materials	1	2	3	4	5
Accessibility through Travel Agencies	1	2	3	4	5

F25. **Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Attributen Albaniens zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen:**

Touristische Infrastruktur	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme zu	Stimme stark zu
Vielzahl von Unterkunftsmöglichkeiten (Hotels,Moderne Resorts,Pensionen usw.)	1	2	3	4	5
Schöne Cafés, Restaurants und Bars	1	2	3	4	5
Erreichbarkeit von Touristeninformationen (Tourist Information Centers)	1	2	3	4	5
Umfangreiche und aktualisierte Informationen auf den Websites der Nationalen Tourismusorganisation und zahlreiche Druckmaterialien	1	2	3	4	5
Erreichbarkeit durch Reisebüros	1	2	3	4	5

Q26. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following attributes of Albania:**

Gastronomy	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
National traditional cuisine	1	2	3	4	5
Variety of Food, Drink, and viticulture	1	2	3	4	5
Fresh food, Agriculture gastronomy	1	2	3	4	5

F26. **Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Attributen Albaniens zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen:**

Gastronomie	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme zu	Stimme stark zu
Nationale traditionelle Küche	1	2	3	4	5
Vielfalt an Speisen, Getränken und Weinbau	1	2	3	4	5
Frische Lebensmittel, Landwirtschaft Gastronomie	1	2	3	4	5

Q27. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following attributes of Albania:**

Destination Image	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Friendly and hospitable local People	1	2	3	4	5
The country offers Safety and security for tourists	1	2	3	4	5
Family-oriented destination	1	2	3	4	5
I can have pleasant and exciting experiences at this destination	1	2	3	4	5
Good Value for money	1	2	3	4	5
Reasonable prices for food and accommodation	1	2	3	4	5
Reasonable prices for attractions and activities	1	2	3	4	5
Reasonable prices for transportation	1	2	3	4	5
Satisfactory customer care on behalf of various professionals (e.g. Waiters, hotel managers, tour guides)	1	2	3	4	5
Political stability	1	2	3	4	5

F27. **Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Attributen Albaniens zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen:**

Zielbild	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme zu	Stimme stark zu
Freundlicher und gastfreundlicher Einheimischer Personen	1	2	3	4	5
Das Land bietet Sicherheit und Geborgenheit für Touristen	1	2	3	4	5
Familienorientiertes Reiseziel	1	2	3	4	5
An dieser Destination kann ich angenehme und aufregende Erfahrungen machen	1	2	3	4	5
Gutes Preis-Leistungs-Verhältnis	1	2	3	4	5
Angemessene Preise für Verpflegung und Unterkunft	1	2	3	4	5
Angemessene Preise für Attraktionen und Aktivitäten	1	2	3	4	5
Angemessene Preise für den Transport	1	2	3	4	5
Zufriedenstellende Kundenbetreuung auf im Auftrag verschiedener Berufsgruppen (z. B. Kellner, Hotelmanager, Reiseführer)	1	2	3	4	5
Politische Stabilität	1	2	3	4	5

Q28.   Would you describe Albania as …? (Please circle the numbers below to show your closest feelings):

Distressing - 1	2	3	4	5	6	**Relaxing - 7**
Unpleasant - 1	2	3	4	5	6	**Pleasant - 7**
Boring - 1	2	3	4	5	6	**Exciting - 7**
Sleepy - 1	2	3	4	5	6	**Lively - 7**
Inhospitable - 1	2	3	4	5	6	**Welcoming - 7**

F28.   Würden Sie Albanien als … beschreiben? (Bitte kreisen Sie die Zahlen unten ein, um Ihre engsten Gefühle zu zeigen):

Beunruhigend - 1	2	3	4	5	6	**Entspannend - 7**
Unangenehm - 1	2	3	4	5	6	**Angenehm - 7**
Langweilig - 1	2	3	4	5	6	**Spannend - 7**
Schläfrig - 1	2	3	4	5	6	**Lebhaft - 7**
Unwirtlich - 1	2	3	4	5	6	**Begrüßenswert - 7**

Q29.   Overall, how would you describe the image that you have of Albania as a tourist destination?

Very unfavorable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very favorable

F29.   Wie würden Sie insgesamt Ihr Bild von Albanien als Reiseziel beschreiben?

Sehr ungünstig	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Sehr günstig

Q30.   How likely is it that you will recommend Albania to others as a tourist destination?

Very unlikely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very likely

F30.   Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass Sie Albanien als Reiseziel weiterempfehlen werden?

Sehr unwahrscheinlich	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Sehr wahrscheinlich

Q31.   How likely you would consider visiting Albania

Destination Consideration	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I would like to visit Albania in the future	1	2	3	4	5
I would advise other people to visit this destination	1	2	3	4	5
Albania provides more benefits than other similar Western Balkan destinations	1	2	3	4	5
It is one of the preferred destinations I want to visit	1	2	3	4	5

F31. **Wie wahrscheinlich würden Sie einen Besuch in Albanien in Betracht ziehen**

Zielüberlegung	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme zu	Stimme stark zu
Ich möchte Albanien in Zukunft besuchen	1	2	3	4	5
Ich würde anderen Leuten raten, dieses Reiseziel zu besuchen	1	2	3	4	5
Albanien bietet mehr Vorteile als andere ähnliche Reiseziele im Westbalkan	1	2	3	4	5
Es ist eines der bevorzugten Reiseziele, die ich besuchen möchte	1	2	3	4	5

Q32. **In general when deciding on a country to visit which are the main factors that indicate your destination choice?** *(Rank in an order from the most to least factor indicating destination choice)*

1. Previous trips
2. Recommended by friends and family
3. Overall Country Image
4. Value for Money
5. Accommodation Quality
6. Quality of Service
7. Security of the locals and tourists
8. Distance (being near my country)
9. New Destination (never visited before)

F32. **Was sind im Allgemeinen die Hauptfaktoren, die Ihre Wahl des Reiseziels bestimmen, wenn Sie sich für ein Land entscheiden, das Sie besuchen möchten?** *(Rang in einer Reihenfolge vom höchsten zum niedrigsten Faktor, der die Wahl des Reiseziels angibt)*

1. Frühere Reisen
2. Von Freunden und Familie empfohlen
3. Gesamtbild des Landes
4. Preis-Leistungs-Verhältnis
5. Unterkunftsqualität
6. Servicequalität
7. Sicherheit der Einheimischen und Touristen
8. Entfernung (in der Nähe meines Landes)
9. Neues Ziel (noch nie besucht)

D. ABOUT YOU:
D. Über Sie:

D1. Where do you live? City _____ State _____ Country _____

D1. Wo wohnen Sie? Stadt_____ Staat_____ Land _____

D2. How many members are you in your family? _____

D2. Wie viele Mitglieder sind Sie in Ihrer Familie? _____

D3. What level of education have you completed? (Select one)

1. High School
2. Technical School
3. College Degree (Undergraduate)
4. Master' Degree (Graduate)
5. PhD (Post Graduate Degree)
6. Other __-oth-

D3. Welchen Bildungsabschluss haben Sie? (Wähle eins)

1. Gesamtschule
2. Fachschule
3. Hochschulabschluss (Bachelor)
4. Master-Abschluss (Absolvent)
5. Promotion (Doktortitel)
6. Sonstiges__-sonst.-

D4. What was your total 2021 annual household income (from all sources and before taxes)?

1)_____ (€)   2) Choose not to answer

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D4. Wie hoch war Ihr gesamtes jährliches Haushaltseinkommen im Jahr 2021 (aus allen Quellen und vor Steuern)?

1)_____ **(€)**   2) Entscheiden Sie sich, nicht zu antworten

D5. Finally, if you would like to provide any further comments you might have about Albania. Your opinion on strengths and weakness of the country are appreciated. **(NOT MANDATORY)**

_____

_____

D5. Wenn Sie abschließend noch weitere Kommentare zu Albanien abgeben möchten. Ihre Meinung zu Stärken und Schwächen des Landes wird geschätzt. **(Nicht Verpflichtend)**

_____

_____

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION!

Vielen Dank für Ihren Beitrag!

Appendix B – Descriptive Statistics for Construct Items

Table A.1

Questionnaire Script

	Descriptive Statistics	Mean	Std. Deviation	Analysis N
Destination Awareness	Q20. I have heard of Albania as a destination	3.76	1.105	517
	Q20. I have an opinion about Albania	3.62	0.978	517
	Q20. This destination has a good name and reputation	3.19	1.094	517
	Q20. I am aware of this destination (I can recognize the name of Albania among other destinations)	3.48	1.169	517
	Q20. When I think about similar types of destinations, this destination comes to my mind immediately	3.05	1.144	517
	Q20. Some characteristics of Albania come quickly to mind	3.25	1.137	517
	Q20. I can recall a few important sites in Albania	2.97	1.240	517
Natural Resources	Q21. Beautiful Nature (scenic mountains Valleys, freshwater lakes, rivers)	3.85	0.955	517
	Q21. National Parks, uniqueness flora and fauna	3.58	0.940	517
	Q21. Beautiful and unspoiled beaches	3.60	0.988	517
	Q21. Rugged Coastline and Sandy beaches	3.57	0.953	517
	Q21. Pleasant weather (300 days of sunshine)	3.66	0.936	517
Natural and Built	Q22. Beautiful Towns and attractive cities	3.54	0.961	517
	Q22. High level of cleanliness (clean environment (beaches, parks, roads, etc.)	3.13	1.036	517
	Q22. Good Quality of Transportation Infrastructure	3.10	1.041	517
	Q22. Good Public Transportation Service	3.03	0.974	517
	Q22. Easy Accessible destination	3.21	1.006	517
	Q22. Tourist sites are easily accessible	3.42	0.921	517
Leisure and Entertainment	Q23. Good opportunities for recreational activities	3.52	0.959	517
	Q23. Rich and fun night life	3.32	0.972	517
	Q23. Variety Sports and physical Activities (hiking, swimming)	3.52	0.912	517
	Q23. Camping opportunities	3.40	0.907	517
	Q23. Interesting Events and Festivals	3.21	0.898	517
	Q23.Good shopping facilities	3.38	0.935	517
	Q23. Various tourist activities	3.53	0.920	517
Culture, History and Heritage	Q24. Historical Museums and ethnographic exhibitions	3.49	0.943	517
	Q24. Legends and myths	3.47	0.935	517
	Q24. Rich Folklore and Culture, ISO-Polyphony	3.54	0.949	517
	Q24. Traditional costumes and crafts	3.62	0.956	517

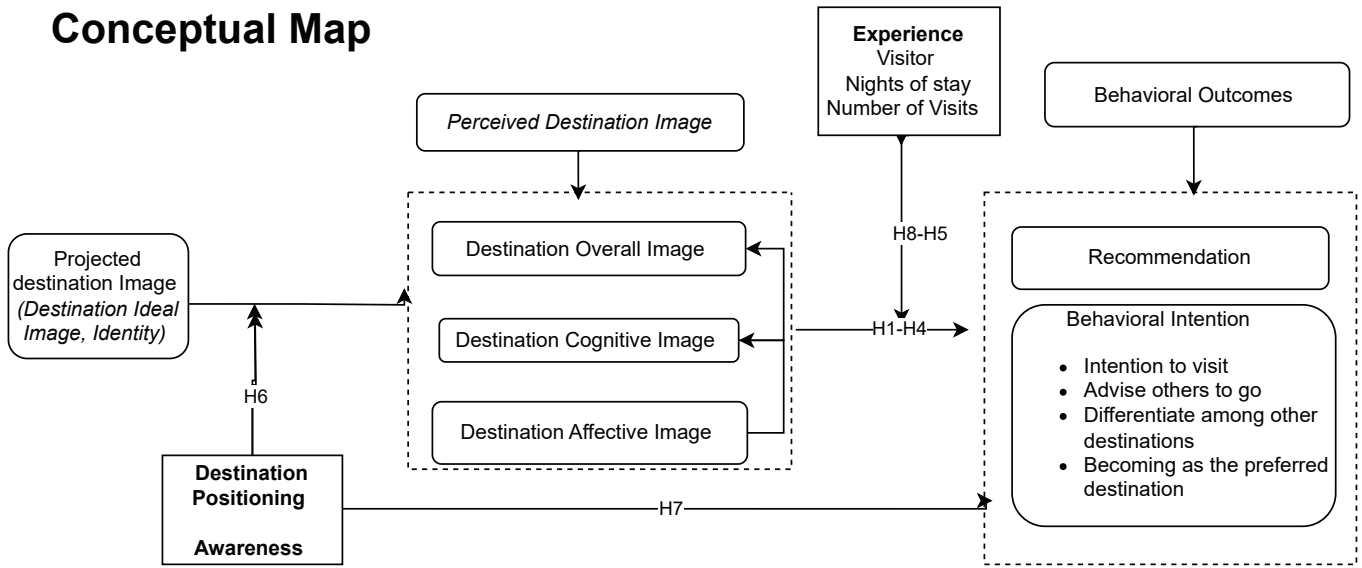|				
	Q24. Heritage and Archeology (3 UNESCO cites)	**3.58**	**0.956**	**517**
Tourist Infrastructure	Q24. Religion (Interreligious coexistence, Religious architecture, and places)	3.52	0.969	517
	Q25. Variety of Accommodation Facilities (Hotels, Modern resorts, Guesthouses, etc.)	3.48	0.963	517
	Q25.Nice coffee shops, restaurants and bars	3.61	0.965	517
	Q25. Accessibility of tourist Information (Tourist Information Centers)	3.42	0.921	517
	Q25.Abundant and updated information on the National Tourism Organization websites, and plenty of printing materials	3.40	0.932	517
Gastronomy	Q25. Accessibility through Travel Agencies	3.36	0.945	517
	Q26. National traditional cuisine	3.86	0.964	517
	Q26. Variety of Food, Drink, and viticulture	3.76	0.966	517
	Q26. Fresh food, Agriculture gastronomy	3.76	0.941	517
Atmosphere and Appeal	Q27. Friendly and hospitable local People	3.78	0.998	517
	Q27. The country offers Safety and security for tourists	3.28	1.049	517
	Q27. Family-oriented destination	3.30	1.010	517
	Q27. I can have pleasant and exciting experiences at this destination	3.57	0.941	517
Economic and Political Factors	Q27. Good Value for money	3.80	0.964	517
	Q27. Reasonable prices for food and accommodation	3.77	0.976	517
	Q27. Reasonable prices for attractions and activities	3.72	0.950	517
	Q27. Reasonable prices for transportation	3.64	0.931	517
	Q27. Satisfactory customer care on behalf of various professionals (e.g. Waiters, hotel managers, tour guides)	3.50	0.918	517
	Q27. Political stability	3.05	1.022	517
Experience, Atmosphere and appeal	Q28. Would you describe Albania as ? Distressing - Relaxing	4.50	1.458	517
	Q28. Would you describe Albania as …? Unpleasant - Pleasant	4.65	1.491	517
	Q28. Would you describe Albania as …? Boring - Exciting	4.83	1.475	517
	Q28. Would you describe Albania as …? Sleepy - Lively	4.83	1.431	517
	Q28. Would you describe Albania as …? Inhospitable - Welcoming	4.90	1.414	517
Overall Image	Q29. Overall, how would you describe the image that you have of Albania as a tourist destination?	4.80	1.395	517
Recommendation*	Q30. How likely is it that you will recommend Albania to others as a tourist destination?	5.25	1.671	130
Behavioural Intention and Consideration	Q31. I would like to visit Albania in the future	3.40	1.142	517
	Q31. How likely you would consider visiting Albania: - I would advise other people to visit this destination	3.40	1.110	517
	Q31. How likely you would consider visiting Albania: - Albania provides more benefits than other similar Western Balkan destinations	3.16	0.981	517
	Q31. How likely you would consider visiting Albania: - It is one of the preferred destinations I want to visit	3.18	1.098	517

Appendix C: Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

		Region			Gender		Group age					Visitors of Albania	
	Total	Austria	Germany	Switzerland	Female	Male	_18-24 years old	_25-34 years old	_35-44 years old	_45-54 years old	_55+ years old	Visitors	Non-Visitors
BASE	517	125	336	56*	256	261	61*	112	114	123	107	130	387
		24.20%	65.00%	10.8%*	49.50%	50.50%	11.8%*	21.70%	22.10%	23.80%	20.70%	25.10%	74.90%
18-24	61	20	31	10	32	29	61	0	0	0	0	23	38
	11.80%	16.00%	9.20%	17.90%	12.50%	11.10%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	17.70%	9.80%
25-34	112	32	66	14	71	41	0	112	0	0	0	35	77
	21.70%	25.60%	19.60%	25.00%	27.70%	15.70%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	26.90%	19.90%
35-44	114	27	74	13	66	48	0	0	114	0	0	29	85
	22.10%	21.60%	22.00%	23.20%	25.80%	18.40%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	22.30%	22.00%
45-54	123	29	84	10	46	77	0	0	0	123	0	25	98
	23.80%	23.20%	25.00%	17.90%	18.00%	29.50%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	19.20%	25.30%
55+	107	17	81	9	41	66	0	0	0	0	107	18	89
	20.70%	13.60%	24.10%	16.10%	16.00%	25.30%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	13.80%	23.00%
M.S.	41.77	39.09	43.27	38.78	39.49	44.01	21	29.5	39.5	49.5	60	38.3	42.94
Std Dev.	12.96	12.72	12.8	13.19	12.51	13.03	0	0	0	0	0	12.83	12.81
BASE	517	125	336	56*	256	261	61*	112	114	123	107	130	387
		24.20%	65.00%	10.8%*	49.50%	50.50%	11.8%*	21.70%	22.10%	23.80%	20.70%	25.10%	74.90%
Single	179	50	105	24	93	86	42	48	27	38	24	61	118
	34.60%	40.00%	31.30%	42.90%	36.30%	33.00%	68.90%	42.90%	23.70%	30.90%	22.40%	46.90%	30.50%
Married	278	52	198	28	126	152	12	46	75	69	76	59	219
	53.80%	41.60%	58.90%	50.00%	49.20%	58.20%	19.70%	41.10%	65.80%	56.10%	71.00%	45.40%	56.60%
Other	60	23	33	4	37	23	7	18	12	16	7	10	50
	11.60%	18.40%	9.80%	7.10%	14.50%	8.80%	11.50%	16.10%	10.50%	13.00%	6.50%	7.70%	12.90%
BASE	517	125	336	56*	256	261	61*	112	114	123	107	130	387
		24.20%	65.00%	10.8%*	49.50%	50.50%	11.8%*	21.70%	22.10%	23.80%	20.70%	25.10%	74.90%
High School	66	19	43	4	33	33	10	10	13	25	8	12	54
	12.80%	15.20%	12.80%	7.10%	12.90%	12.60%	16.40%	8.90%	11.40%	20.30%	7.50%	9.20%	14.00%
Technical School	200	43	136	21	96	104	19	40	36	48	57	51	149
	38.70%	34.40%	40.50%	37.50%	37.50%	39.80%	31.10%	35.70%	31.60%	39.00%	53.30%	39.20%	38.50%
College Degree (Undergraduate)	137	30	89	18	70	67	25	41	33	19	19	42	95
	26.50%	24.00%	26.50%	32.10%	27.30%	25.70%	41.00%	36.60%	28.90%	15.40%	17.80%	32.30%	24.50%
Master' Degree (Graduate)	89	24	55	10	43	46	5	15	27	23	19	21	68
	17.20%	19.20%	16.40%	17.90%	16.80%	17.60%	8.20%	13.40%	23.70%	18.70%	17.80%	16.20%	17.60%
PhD (Post Graduate Degree)	6	3	1	2	2	4	1	1	1	1	2	3	3
	1.20%	2.40%	0.30%	3.60%	0.80%	1.50%	1.60%	0.90%	0.90%	0.80%	1.90%	2.30%	0.80%

Other	19	6	12	1	12	7	1	5	4	7	2	1	18
		3.70%	4.80%	3.60%	1.80%	4.70%	2.70%	1.60%	4.50%	3.50%	5.70%	1.90%	0.80%
BASE	517	125	336	56*	256	261	61*	112	114	123	107	130	387
		24.20%	65.00%	10.8%*	49.50%	50.50%	11.8%*	21.70%	22.10%	23.80%	20.70%		74.90%
Up to 20,000 euro per year	43	13	26	4	29	14	5	15	8	7	8	11	32
	8.30%	10.40%	7.70%	7.10%	11.30%	5.40%	8.20%	13.40%	7.00%	5.70%	7.50%	8.50%	8.30%
20,001-40,000 per year	80	19	58	3	45	35	7	22	14	14	23	22	58
	15.50%	15.20%	17.30%	5.40%	17.60%	13.40%	11.50%	19.60%	12.30%	11.40%	21.50%	16.90%	15.00%
40,001-60,000 per year	75	17	58	0	36	39	2	11	21	21	20	16	59
	14.50%	13.60%	17.30%	0.00%	14.10%	14.90%	3.30%	9.80%	18.40%	17.10%	18.70%	12.30%	15.20%
60,001-80,000 per year	50	4	42	4	17	33	0	8	14	12	16	19	31
	9.70%	3.20%	12.50%	7.10%	6.60%	12.60%	0.00%	7.10%	12.30%	9.80%	15.00%	14.60%	8.00%
80,001-100,000 per year	32	6	20	6	10	22	6	5	9	4	8	6	26
	6.20%	4.80%	6.00%	10.70%	3.90%	8.40%	9.80%	4.50%	7.90%	3.30%	7.50%	4.60%	6.70%
100,001+ euro per year	25	2	15	8	9	16	1	2	7	10	5	6	19
	4.80%	1.60%	4.50%	14.30%	3.50%	6.10%	1.60%	1.80%	6.10%	8.10%	4.70%	4.60%	4.90%
Chose not to answer	212	64	117	31	110	102	40	49	41	55	27	50	162
	41.00%	51.20%	34.80%	55.40%	43.00%	39.10%	65.60%	43.80%	36.00%	44.70%	25.20%	38.50%	41.90%
M.S. (in euro)	58,441	50,524	57,200	88,631	48,900	67,202	53,232	49,823	64,301	64,831	55,817	59,167	58,183
Std Dev.	44,121	54,166	38,188	54,348	33,263	50,683	40,605	55,756	43,700	45,648	31,399	50,824	41,601
Total	517	125	336	56	256	261	61	112	114	123	107	130	387

Appendix D: Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Map

Identity Based Destination Branding Process

CURRICULUM VITAE

Sonila Çela holds the position of Managing Director at Data Centrum Research Institute, an esteemed research organization based in Albania. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Communication and Journalism from Marmara University and a Master of Science in Business Administration from Epoka University. She pursued her academic studies by obtaining a Ph.D. in Business Administration/Marketing from Epoka University. Sonila is a dynamic researcher and lecturer at Epoka University's Business Department, with a specialization in Marketing Research.

Sonila has held senior positions in PR and Communications, Quality Management, Commercial Reporting and Analyses, Marketing Communication, and Social Media Management throughout her diverse career. Her extensive practical experience greatly benefits her academic pursuits.

She is particularly interested in researching Destination Marketing and Destination Branding, focusing on strategies to improve the attractiveness and reputation of different destinations. In addition, she explores topics such as Integrated Marketing Communication, Image and Branding, Customer Satisfaction, and Consumer Behaviour, which demonstrate her diverse interests and expertise. Sonila's commitment to both academia and industry enhances her teaching and research, making her a valuable resource to the academic community and beyond.