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OHRID BETWEEN IDENTITIES: IMAGE, EXPERIENCE, AND TOURIST PERCEPTION

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between destination image and tourist perception of Ohrid (N. Macedonia). While Ohrid projects an image as a place of natural, cultural and spiritual heritage, affirmed by its UNESCO World Heritage status and significance—tourist perceptions vary significantly across domestic and foreign visitor groups. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys, social media analysis and data mining, to see how tourists actually experience the city. Findings reveal a strong appreciation among foreign tourists for Ohrid's nature and culture, in contrast to domestic tourists who often associate the destination only as a basic tourism weekend and/or seasonal getaway destination. A growing difference is observed between Ohrid's promoted identity and its actual tourism practices, mainly during the peak summer season characterized by mass tourism, overcrowding, and large-scale commercial events. These contradictions highlight the need for a more coherent and sustainable tourism strategy that bridges the gap between image, perception, and actual experience.

Keywords: Ohrid, destination image, tourist perception, overtourism, tourism identity

JEL classification: Z32, R11, M30

INTRODUCTION

The most photographed scene in N. Macedonia is the view of the Church of St. John Kaneo in Ohrid, with Lake Ohrid in the background. This image captures the essence of Ohrid's real geographical and touristic identity—a unique blend of nature and deep cultural-historical layers. In a time when the Macedonian national identity is persistently contested, Ohrid—well positioned as part of the national iconography—holds a symbolic imperative: to hold its place within the national narrative and to embody the uniqueness of the nation itself, but also to develop into world renown tourist destination. With its imposing history and geography, Ohrid has developed a recognizable identity and image. However, in the context of intensified global tourism and competitiveness, the city's broader identity is often conflated with its identity as a tourist destination. While the city enjoys high recognition among both domestic and international visitors, the perception of Ohrid varies significantly across these groups, despite its well-established tourism image.

The significance of destination image in tourism cannot be overstated, as it directly influences tourists' perceptions, preferences, and travel decisions (Puh, 2014).

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Destination image is broadly conceptualized as the perception of a particular place held by the tourism market, combining both cognitive assessments of the destination's attributes and affective responses to its overall appeal (Aksoy & Kiyici, 2011; Aziz & Zainol, 2011). This image does not emerge in isolation but is the outcome of a complex and dynamic process shaped by various influences—such as media representations, prior personal experiences, and interpersonal communications (Alvarez & Campo, 2014). As Aksoy and Kiyici (2011) underline, the cultivation of a favorable tourism image demands sustained, strategic efforts that align a destination's characteristics with evolving tourist expectations in order to ensure long-term sustainability. Also, destination image is linked with the satisfaction of residents toward their surroundings and the emotional attachment to the place, which consequently relates to the broader concept of livability at a destination. These locals, who often act as informal “destination ambassadors,” guide other people's decisions on where to travel through personal networks. Besides this traditional way of influence, social media now provides another platform for them to share authentic content related to specific places that enhances value and competitiveness (Sürücü & Avcı, 2023). Thus, place perception acts twofold: conveying worth outside and molding inner community sense. It mirrors the thoughts and feelings linked by people and affects visitor actions through the journey cycle—building hopes before coming, contentment during the stay, and recollection plus personal recommendations later on. In short, it provides a complex portrayal of the destination covering its past, cultural, and social-economic aspects (Sürücü & Avcı, 2023).

A well-defined and distinctive image can significantly affect travel decision-making (Chen et al. 2022), support the formation of strong destination brands, attract new visitor segments, and contribute to the sustainable development of the urban tourism sector. A tourism destination can be understood as an “individually produced amalgam of tourism amenities and services and a wide range of public goods” (Buhalis, 2000; Bakker et al. 2020), further emphasizing the integrated and dynamic nature of destinations in the modern tourism industry.

Understanding the role of perception is fundamental to the study of destination image. Broadly speaking, perception is the lens through which individuals interpret and understand the world around them (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). In academic terms, it is defined as the process by which an individual selects, organizes, and interprets stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). However, the perception of a tourist destination is often shaped by a combination of personal experiences, individual travel preferences, attitudes, aspirations, and the extent to which those aspirations are completed. Tourists' perception of a destination can differ significantly from its officially constructed or promoted tourism image. Also, issue of perception by tourists and visitors is highly important since it enables tourism policy makers to create new insights and tailor new strategic approaches that may increase the number of visits and night spent in the destination (Petrevska, 2019). The primary objective of this paper is to investigate the variation in tourists' perceptions of Ohrid as a destination—focusing on differences between domestic and international visitors—and to critically compare the projected tourism image with the actual tourism practices experienced on site.

1. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to investigate the perception of Ohrid as a tourist destination by analyzing differences between domestic and foreign visitors. It also explores the growing difference between the city's projected tourism image and the actual visitor experience.

The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys, qualitative content analysis, and secondary statistical data to enable a multidimensional view of Ohrid's tourism image and perception.

A structured survey including questions on travel motivation, accommodation type, satisfaction with infrastructure and services, and general perceptions of value for money. Respondents evaluated their experiences on Likert-scale items and open-ended comments. The results offered insights into common criticisms, particularly regarding pricing, cleanliness, and service quality. A data mining analysis was conducted using more than 1,200 user-generated comments from the social media platform X (formerly Twitter), placed over a five-year period. Foreign tourist perception was examined using findings from three prior studies, supplemented with a user generated reviews on TripAdvisor.

2. THE IMAGE OF THE CITY (OF LIGHT)

Located in the southwestern part of N.Macedonia on the shores of Lake Ohrid, serves as the administrative center of the Municipality of Ohrid, which has a population of 51,428 according to the 2021 census (State Statistical Office, 2022). Perceived as part of the national identity, Ohrid also stands as a symbol of the country's natural, spiritual, and cultural heritage. Its essence is captured through various labels such as "Slavic Jerusalem," "Second Jerusalem," and "City of Light," among others. In the introductory section of the official Visit Ohrid brochure, Mayor of Ohrid, Kiril Pecakov reflects on this identity with key phrases such as "the lost piece of paradise," "somewhere different," and "the largest spiritual, cultural and tourist center of Macedonia." Ohrid and Lake Ohrid, recognized as a single geographical and cultural entity, were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979, further validating their global cultural and natural value. It is recognized for its continuous habitation since prehistoric times and its exceptionally preserved urban and architectural heritage (Criterion i). The city embodies the spiritual and artistic legacy of Byzantine civilization, with churches like St. Sophia and St. John Kaneo holding globally significant frescoes and icons (Criterion iii). Its urban fabric illustrates key historical phases, including the establishment of the first Slavonic university in the Balkans (Criterion iv). Additionally, Lake Ohrid's ecological uniqueness—being one of the oldest freshwater lakes in the world with over 200 endemic species—fulfills Criterion vii, confirming the site's outstanding natural and aesthetic value.

Ohrid began developing its tourism profile during the Yugoslav period (Debarliev&Mitrovska, 2016), becoming one of the most prominent domestic destinations in socialist Yugoslavia, and later, in Republic of Macedonia. According to Petrevska& Collins-Kreiner (2020), the city's tourism development follows a double-cycle Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model. During Sub-Period I (1956–1990), tourism underwent the classic TALC phases from exploration to decline, with growth

driven by socialist investment and domestic travel. Sub-Period II (1991–2001) was marked by post-Yugoslav transition, regional instability, and economic restructuring. Sub-Period III (2002–2017) brought renewed growth through investment in tourism infrastructure, marketing, and air transport accessibility, resulting in a 64.6% increase in tourist arrivals by 2017. (Petrevska& Collins-Kreiner, 2020).

Recent data confirm Ohrid’s ongoing tourism growth. In 2023, the municipality recorded 1,144,000 overnight stays, of which 712,917 (62.3%) were by domestic tourists and 431,083 by foreign visitors. In 2024, this figure increased to 1,194,516, with 752,455 domestic and 442,061 foreign overnight stays. The number of visitors also rose significantly: from 337,138 in 2023 (145,416 domestic; 191,722 foreign) to 363,281 in 2024 (147,478 domestic; 215,803 foreign), representing an overall increase of 7.8%—with a 1.4% growth in domestic and a 12.6% rise in foreign visitors (Municipality of Ohrid, online).

Seasonality remains a key feature of Ohrid’s tourism. In July and August 2023, 734,400 overnight stays were recorded, accounting for 64.2% of the annual total. In the same months of 2024, this figure grew to 783,462 overnight stays, or 65.6% of the year’s total (Municipality of Ohrid, online). Visitors reflect a similar pattern: in July and August 2023, 138,077 tourists arrived (41% of the annual total), while in 2024, 150,386 tourists were recorded during the same period, making up 41.4% of the total.

The seasonality of tourism in Ohrid aligns with the system’s incepted summer vacation period, as well as with tourists’ preferences for recreational summer-oriented tourism. In addition, the tourist peak season is marked by a concentration of events and activities that are central to Ohrid’s cultural calendar. Among them is the renowned Ohrid Summer Festival, widely considered the most important cultural festival in North Macedonia (Strezovski&Gramatnikovski, 2013), and a major pull factor for culturally motivated travel to the city.

However, Ohrid also hosts events that are “in between” its developed tourist identity and image, and the shifting preferences of both domestic and regional (mainly Balkan) tourists. One such example is Ohrid Calling, the largest electronic music festival in the country. This festival, known for its loud and engaging atmosphere and its association with younger audiences and their subcultural identity, diverges from the city’s established cultural-tourism image.

In addition, the days around August 1st have become an unofficial period reserved for performances by regional pop/folk artists, mainly coming from the post Yugoslav sphere. As an example, in 2024, Serbian singer Aleksandra Prijović performed at the “BiljaniniIzvori” stadium in front of an audience of 12,000, setting a new concert attendance record for Ohrid (Petrevska&Martinovska, 2024). Accompanying these events is a broader visual and social landscape in the city—street stalls, arcade games, and a bustling atmosphere reminiscent of a late-1980s Hollywood movie summer scene.

3. DOMESTIC TOURIST PERCEPTION OF OHRID

When it comes to Ohrid, the perception of domestic tourists reveals a complex and often contradictory experience. To investigate this, a survey was conducted with 227 respondents, who answered a structured set of questions. The results indicate that Ohrid continues to be regarded as a symbolic and culturally significant destination, appreciated primarily for its natural beauty and cultural heritage.

Although 75% of participants would recommend Ohrid to friends and family, 70% believe that prices do not correspond to the quality of services provided. "Prices" were cited as the most common point of criticism, with Greece frequently mentioned as a more attractive and cost-effective alternative. Most respondents visited Ohrid with family or friends, motivated primarily by cultural tourism and relaxation, and stayed mostly in apartments or private accommodations.

While the overall satisfaction level was relatively high, with an average rating of 3.6 out of 5, specific aspects such as infrastructure and cleanliness received more critical feedback. Over 40% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with urban maintenance, and gave low ratings (2 or 3 out of 5) for streets, parking, and public transportation. The attitude of the local population was perceived as mostly positive, though some responses revealed divided opinions on hospitality and service culture. In closing remarks, respondents frequently described Ohrid as "beautiful," "historic," but also "expensive" and "disappointing". In addition to the survey, a data mining analysis was conducted using over 1,200 user comments on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) written over a five-year period. The vast majority of comments echoed several recurring themes: "Ohrid is too expensive," "Ohrid is beautiful but overpriced," and "poor quality, overpriced services." Many users also directly compared Ohrid unfavorably with Greece, citing a contrast in service quality and value for money. A particularly viral trend in this online discourse involves the sharing of photos of fiscal receipts, meant to highlight excessive prices in cafes, restaurants, and other tourism-related services.

The perception that Ohrid is overpriced and/or not good enough hasn't appeared overnight—it has been building up for years, spreading as a narrative through social media, the mainstream media, and even some public campaigns that may not have intended to send that message. One notable example is the 2012 national campaign titled "*You Are the Face of Your Country! We All Benefit from Tourism,*" which used a series of satirical videos to point out on a negative service practice in the tourism sector. The campaign caricatured figures such as the endemic slow waiter, the rude and overcharging city taxi driver, and the inhospitable bed-and-breakfast owner who was portrayed as rude, aggressive, and unable to speak any language other than Macedonian. While humorous in tone, with the aim of pointing out to people—especially those engaged in tourism—their mistakes and shortcomings, in order to help them improve and thereby contribute to the overall quality of tourism, the campaign ultimately reflected Macedonian citizens' own perception and maybe frustration with domestic tourism practices, with Ohrid at the center.

4. FOREIGN TOURIST PERCEPTION OF OHRID

To examine the perception of foreign tourists toward Ohrid, the study draws on findings from previous research conducted by three different sets of authors (Petrevska&Matlievska, 2018; Debarliev&Mitrovska, 2016; Blazeska et al, 2018). In addition, the findings were supplemented and updated through an analysis of user-generated reviews collected and examined from the travel platform TripAdvisor. Taken together, these sources offer a comprehensive and reliable overview of how foreign tourists perceive the city of Ohrid.

According to Debarliev&Mitrovska, both service providers ("creators") and tourists/citizens ("consumers") perceive Ohrid's natural and cultural heritage as the

primary motivators for visits, scoring these aspects between 4.7 and 4.9 on a 5-point scale. In contrast, nightlife and low prices scored significantly lower, with notable divergence in how the two groups rated nightlife (creators: 2.3; consumers: 2.7).

The survey conducted by Petrevska and Matlievska of 250 foreign tourists in Ohrid revealed that the city is predominantly perceived as a historic and legendary destination, with cultural heritage being the strongest pull factor (64% agreement). Sightseeing is a secondary motivator (30%), while religious motives rank significantly lower (55% disagreement). The study identified recreational tourists as the dominant group, aligning with Ohrid's leisure-oriented image, while a notable segment of existential tourists is drawn by the city's cultural legacy, reinforcing its image as the "Jerusalem of the Balkans." (Petrevska, 2024)

According to the findings of Blazevska et al, while foreign tourists demonstrate strong affinity for Ohrid's natural and cultural heritage, infrastructural deficits—such as poor public transport, underused airport capacity, and misaligned accommodation categorization—undermine the destination's overall quality.

An analysis of TripAdvisor, a leading user-generated travel platform, reveals valuable insights into how foreign tourists perceive Ohrid's key attractions. Under the category "Things to Do", 49 distinct activities and sites are listed for Ohrid, with user ratings and keywords offering qualitative evidence of tourist sentiment.

The three highest-ranked attractions in Ohrid, based on user reviews, highlight the city's strong aesthetic and cultural appeal. Lake Ohrid, with 2,276 reviews and an average rating of 4.7 out of 5, stands out as the city's most iconic site, praised in overwhelmingly positive terms such as "amazing" and "beautiful," reflecting its deep visual and experiential impact. The Monastery of Saint Naum, rated 4.4 out of 5 from 1,381 reviews, is recognized as a major cultural and religious landmark, frequently described as "stunning" and "beautiful" for both its architectural and natural setting. Meanwhile, St. Jovan Kaneo, with 902 reviews and a 4.6 average rating, reinforces Ohrid's spiritual and scenic identity, often referred to as "great," "stunning," and "breathtaking," confirming its position as a must-see attraction for visitors.

The predominance of superlative language and consistent 4.4–4.7 scores across key landmarks indicates a strong emotional connection and high satisfaction among visitors. This data reinforces the perception of Ohrid as a place of spiritual, and historical richness, with Lake Ohrid as its experiential centerpiece.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data show that foreign tourists predominantly associate Ohrid with its natural scenery and rich cultural-historical heritage, which stand out as the city's most compelling attractions. Most visitors are characterized as recreational tourists, primarily drawn by the opportunity to relax and enjoy the lakeside setting. At the same time, a notable portion of tourists exhibit deeper motivations, aligning with the existential typology—seeking cultural enrichment and spiritual meaning through Ohrid's religious landmarks and historical legacy. These ratings generated from the user content mined from Tripadvisor confirm a high level of satisfaction with Ohrid's core attractions.

Ohrid's image as a city of natural beauty and deep cultural roots remains its strongest asset. The consistent ranking of these elements as key motivators and the high satisfaction expressed in online reviews validate its positioning in the international

tourism market. This aligns with destination image theory, which emphasizes the importance of aligning cognitive and affective perceptions to build a coherent and competitive tourist brand (Aksoy & Kiyici, 2011).

The destination image is framed as a crucial determinant of tourist behavior (Puh, 2014; Aksoy & Kiyici, 2011). In Ohrid's case, its image as the "Jerusalem of the Balkans" reflects the combination of historical continuity, religious importance, and aesthetic value, supported by its UNESCO World Heritage status.

Dissatisfaction with the price-to-quality ratio remains a dominant concern among domestic tourists, as reflected in both survey results and online commentary. The prevailing perception is that Ohrid is an overpriced destination, especially when the value received does not align with the price paid. This perception is rooted in how local visitors experience Ohrid—as a basic tourism product, typically associated with beach leisure, short weekend getaways, and recreational swimming. In contrast, the city increasingly attempts to position itself as an advanced, elite cultural tourism destination, appealing to global markets through its UNESCO heritage and spiritual significance. However, this elevated self-image is not fully acknowledged or accepted by domestic tourists, who continue to compare Ohrid with other destinations that offer similar basic seaside experiences—often at more competitive prices, such as Greece. A more recent signal of dissatisfaction but among foreign tourist emerged in spring 2025, when a Polish tour operator—previously organizing direct tourist flights to Ohrid—cancelled its arrangements due to significantly increased hotel prices (SDK.mk, 2025). The operator cited a lack of alignment between the price level and the actual service quality as a key factor. This withdrawal suggests that even among foreign markets traditionally satisfied with Ohrid's offer, pricing inconsistencies are beginning to generate pushback, signaling potential challenges for the destination's long-term competitiveness.

Data for 2023 and 2024 shows continuous growth in both foreign and domestic visitors. Overnight stays increased from 1,144,000 in 2023 to 1,194,516 in 2024, with a 12.6% rise in foreign visitor numbers. However, seasonality remains extreme: over 64% of all overnight stays occur in July and August, therefore Ohrid is increasingly facing the pressures of overtourism, a development that directly contradicts the cultivated image the city and the state seek to promote. The concept of overtourism refers to situations in which both residents and visitors perceive that tourist numbers have surpassed the destination's capacity, resulting in a deterioration of quality of life for locals and diminished experience for tourists (Milano, 2024). While local communities generally express positive attitudes toward tourism—often viewing it as a vehicle for economic opportunity—these perceptions are not static. As destinations advance through various phases of the tourism lifecycle, residents' tolerance and support can shift, particularly when the costs begin to outweigh the perceived benefits (Gursoy et al. 2010; Qu et al. 2011; Maziriri et al. 2021). In Ohrid's case, such shifts may already be emerging as mass tourism increasingly collides with the city's heritage-based identity.

Despite its strong symbolic identity, Ohrid faces a widening gap between its projected image and the actual tourist experience. Notably, during the peak tourist season, the city hosts a series of events and manifestations, with a dominant focus on pop and folk concerts by regionally popular artists, primarily from the post-Yugoslav cultural landscape. In 2024, the most prominent cultural event in Ohrid was a concert by Serbian singer Aleksandra Prijović, attended by more than 12,000. While such

programming clearly has a strong commercial impact, it is largely incompatible with the strategic efforts to position Ohrid as a center of cultural tourism—both for domestic and international audiences. The content and tone of these events diverge significantly from the city’s intended identity as a refined and heritage-based tourist destination.

To remain competitive as a tourist destination, Ohrid must align its projected image with its actual tourism practices, placing stronger emphasis on a cultural-based development model. This requires not only a clear conceptualization and positioning of the city within the framework of heritage and cultural tourism, but also a strategic response to its identified weaknesses—particularly in terms of infrastructure connectivity, seasonal dependency, and the quality of tourism services.

CONCLUSION

The city of Ohrid represents multilayered tourism destination—one that carries a nurtured image as a center of natural and cultural heritage, yet experiences a divergent set of perceptions among its visitors. While foreign tourists often recognize and acknowledge Ohrid’s natural and cultural value, domestic tourists tend to experience it only on as a basic recreational tourism: a place for a weekend getaway, and seasonal summer leisure. This divide reveals a difference in the positioning, between the projected image of the city and the actual tourism practices that dominate during peak season.

On one hand, Ohrid aspires to establish itself as known destination for heritage-based, elite cultural tourism, supported by its UNESCO status, architectural legacy, and spiritual significance. On the other hand, the dominant tourism pattern reflects a reality of mass regional tourism, characterized by summer beach tourism, hyped pop/folk concerts, and season peak urban saturation. These parallel narratives not only shape differing tourist experiences, but also risk diluting the city’s long-term strategic positioning.

To resolve this growing gap, Ohrid must critically address the misalignment between identity, image, and tourism practice, making sure that the development of tourism infrastructure and cultural programming reflects a coherent vision. Balancing authenticity with economic viability, and managing tourism in a way that works well with both its heritage and the lived experience of residents, is essential for sustaining Ohrid’s unique place in the regional and global tourism.

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