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# CHALLENGES IN TOURIST DESTINATION BRANDING IN SERBIA: THE CASE OF PROLOM BANJA

Izazovi brendiranja turističke destinacije u Srbiji – primer  
Prolom banje

## Abstract

Competition among tourist destinations is becoming more prevalent as many destinations offer the same or similar attractions, which is why destination branding is becoming one of the primary goals of destination management and marketing. A brand has also become an important factor because it gives added value and commits to providing potential tourists with experience of something special in a specific destination. Therefore, it is important to create a perception of distinctiveness of a destination in the minds of tourists. Branding allows a tourist destination to achieve numerous economic effects, primarily reflected in the increase in the number of tourists, development of business, as well as in attracting new investments. Previous research conducted in our country has not sufficiently addressed tourist destination branding, which directed this research paper toward the challenges of branding tourist destinations in Serbia, with special reference to Prolom Banja – one of the destinations specializing in health tourism. This research aims to determine tourist perception of Prolom Banja, as well as to identify key elements that can influence the branding of Prolom Banja as a destination specializing in health tourism. The study was conducted in February 2019 using the survey method – questionnaire technique. The study sample consisted of 195 respondents. Using optimal statistical methods, the collected data were analyzed and the results of the research were presented. The findings show that tourists have a positive perception of Prolom Banja, while the healing Prolom water, employees, undisturbed natural beauty, wellness, and treatment center offer have been identified as significant elements that can influence the branding of Prolom Banja. Implications, research limitations and suggestions for future research were also presented.

**Keywords:** *brand, tourist destinations, destination branding, recognition, Prolom Banja.*

## Sažetak

Konkurencija između turističkih destinacija je sve prisutnija jer mnoge destinacije nude iste ili slične sadržaje, te stoga brendiranje destinacije postaje jedan od primarnih ciljeva destinacijskog menadžmenta i marketinga. Upravo iz tog razloga brend postaje važan faktor jer daje dodatnu vrednost i obećanje potencijalnim turistima da će u destinaciji doživjeti nešto posebno. Zbog toga je važno da se u svesti turista kreira percepcija o posebnosti destinacije. Brendiranjem turistička destinacija ostvaruje brojne privredne efekte koji se pre svega ogledaju u povećanju broja turista, zaposlenosti, kao i privlačenju novih investicija. Dosadašnja istraživanja kod nas nisu se u dovoljnoj meri bavila brendiranjem turističkih destinacija, što je usmerilo predmet istraživanja u ovom radu prema izazovima brendiranja turističkih destinacija u Srbiji, sa posebnim osvrtom na Prolom banju, koja je jedna od destinacija zdravstvenog turizma. Cilj ovog istraživanja je da se utvrdi kakva je percepcija Prolom banje u svesti turista, kao i da se identifikuju ključni elementi koji mogu uticati na brendiranje Prolom banje kao destinacije zdravstvenog turizma. Istraživanje je sprovedeno tokom februara meseca 2019. godine upotrebom metode ispitivanja, tehnikom upitnika, na uzorku od 195 ispitanika. Na osnovu prikupljenih podataka, primenom optimalnih statističkih metoda, izvršena je analiza i prezentovani su rezultati istraživanja. Nalazi istraživanja ukazuju na pozitivnu percepciju koju Prolom banja ima u svesti turista, a lekovita Prolom voda, zaposleni, netaknute prirodne lepote, *wellness* i lečilišna ponuda su identifikovani kao značajni elementi koji mogu uticati na brendiranje Prolom banje. Predočene su implikacije, ograničenja istraživanja i predlozi za buduća istraživanja.

**Ključne reči:** *brend, turističke destinacije, brendiranje destinacija, prepoznatljivost, Prolom banja.*

## Introduction

Competition among tourist destinations is rapidly increasing, and tourist destination branding is one of the key challenges in the struggle to gain competitive advantage in the tourism market. Tourist destination branding is a concept that started developing at the end of the 20th century. It integrates all the characteristics of a specific destination into a single unit, which conveys a unique identity and makes the destination stand out from its competitors [74]. In other words, the goal of destination branding is to create the perception of uniqueness and distinctiveness of a destination in the minds of tourists [40]. There are many scientific papers addressing the general issue of destination branding [8], [22], [20], [29], [58], [73]. In contrast, the number of research papers on health tourism branding is very small/limited [9].

According to the World Tourism Organization and the European Travel Commission, health tourism is an important segment of tourism in which the fundamental motive for traveling is the desire to improve one's well-being and beauty, as well as to prevent diseases [78]. Accordingly, many researchers use the term health tourism as an umbrella term for all health-related tourism activities [24], [23], [36], [47]. Therefore, health tourism consists of two subcategories: wellness and medical tourism [62], [78]. As a type of tourism activity, wellness tourism aims to contribute to disease prevention, general health promotion, holistic access to health, healthy nutrition, and mental and spiritual balance [71]; in other words, in most cases wellness denotes a healthy balance between mind and body leading to the generally improved state of well-being [47], [61]. Medical tourism refers to traveling to a foreign country to undergo specialized medical treatments, involving more affordable prices, better access to and quality of care [80]. The issue of branding tourist destinations in Serbia is an insufficiently researched topic/area, which directed this research paper toward the importance of branding tourist destinations, with special reference to Prolom Banja, a health tourism destination in Serbia. It started developing in the 1970s, and today, in terms of tourist traffic, it is the most visited tourist destination in the Toplica District [21].

The aim of this paper is to study and determine tourist perception of Prolom Banja, as well as to identify the key elements that can influence Prolom Banja's branding as a destination specializing in health tourism. Accordingly, the overall objective was accomplished through the following specific objectives: to explore the perception of Prolom Banja in the minds of tourists; to analyze the impact of different elements (image, quality, loyalty and recognition) on destination branding and to examine whether there are any differences in the attitudes of respondents who visited Prolom Banja only once compared to those who visited it several times.

In accordance with the subject of research and its objectives, the literature review in the field of branding and destination branding was conducted and the methodology and results of the research were presented. The paper ends with conclusions and implications, followed by research limitations and suggestions for future research.

## Literature review

### Branding and destination branding

In the current tourism market, destination brand development has become a strategic instrument used worldwide due to the increasing competitiveness among tourist destinations [20]. That is why destination branding has garnered a lot of attention, both among researchers and destination marketing managers. It is now more important than ever for tourism destinations to create a unique identity in order to differentiate themselves from the competition [41]. This is closely linked to destination branding. Accordingly, one way for healthcare destinations to achieve diversity and uniqueness in the tourism market is to offer high-quality services and create a strong wellness brand [6]. Destination branding can be defined as choosing to use consistent elements or their combination (name, symbol, logo, slogan, design, where the name is the most important part) to identify a destination and make it stand out by building a positive image [10], while a destination brand is defined as a set of perceptions a tourist has about a place that influences their attitudes toward the destination [10], [33]. Moreover, a destination brand can assist tourists in enhancing their perception of the destination after

they gain travel experience [74]. All the while, it should be kept in mind that in addition to experience-based perceptions, perceptions can also be based on rumors or prejudices. Tourists perceive these elements as a unique combination of functional and psychological components of the destination brand. Konecnik and Gartner [35] distinguish recognizability, image, quality and loyalty as four key components that affect destination branding. These components will be addressed below.

Destination brand recognition refers to what tourists know or think they know about a certain destination [35], that is, it refers to tourists' ability to think of and recognize the destination and its power in their minds [22]. Therefore, one of the key goals in building a destination brand is destination recognition [75]. Furthermore, brand recognition does not only include tourists hearing about the destination, but also means that the destination is more likely to be on their shortlist of places to visit [15]. A recognizable destination brand in the market is most easily identified and differentiated from competing brands through the use of attractive destination attributes and visual elements of brand identity [58].

The image as an element of a tourist destination represents one of the most important factors influencing potential tourists when choosing a destination. Destination image is a complex phenomenon and several authors have said that it is often rather vaguely defined when it comes to tourist destinations [17], [53], [75]. Destination image can be defined as a concept of attitudes that include a set of beliefs, ideas and impressions that tourists have about a particular tourist destination [4], [73]. Numerous studies confirm that destination image plays a key role in shaping tourists' preferences when it comes to specific tourist destinations [8], [39]. Destination marketing managers use this element to make their brand stand out from competing destinations [74]. The importance of image for destination marketing is reflected in the fact that the overall destination image is an essential element in destination loyalty and in encouraging tourists to visit the destination again [13], [58].

The brand must have a certain quality used to positively promote a tourist destination. Destination quality refers to the perception of tourists and the ability of the

destination to meet their expectations [18]. Bigović [7] explains that the first dimension of quality encompasses personal interaction (friendship, efficiency, reliability, etc.), the second refers to the characteristics of the processes themselves (ambient conditions, equipment, etc.), while the third dimension includes the results arising from the related processes (accommodation, food and drink, recreation, etc.). Accordingly, in the overall assessment of the quality of the destination, tourists rate products, services, ambiance and their own experiences. Chen and Tsai [11] explain that quality, as a standard assessment element of the service process, is an important factor in tourist satisfaction, which further influences their loyalty. According to the research conducted in Thailand by Han et al., the quality of the health/wellness destination is largely dependent on the overall satisfaction of international tourists, as well as on their desire and intention to visit the destination again. [25].

Brand loyalty is believed to be a major dimension of the brand's market value; however, it has not been investigated enough from the tourist's aspect and the aspect of their loyalty to the destination [2], [48]. Loyalty can be defined as a degree of consumer's devotion to a particular brand [52]. Brand loyalty represents the likelihood that consumers will use a particular type of brand in the future, regardless of the market opportunities and efforts of competitors offering the same or similar products [75]. Numerous studies link tourist satisfaction with service and loyalty to a destination [13], [19], [28], [43], [70], [79], as well as their intentions to visit it again [1], [51], [54] and positive word-of-mouth communication [25], [31], [55], [72], [77]. According to Pike [51], the highest level of destination loyalty is manifested through tourist's intention to visit the destination, repeat the visit, and recommend that their friends visit it. Destination image and quality represent essential elements influencing tourist loyalty and intention to repeat their visit, which numerous previous studies have confirmed [7], [11], [29].

### Health tourism in Serbia

Over the past decades, health tourism, or wellness as its integral part, has been an important segment of the

growing tourism industry that has emerged in response to tourists' needs and desires to improve their overall well-being and health [14], [38]. According to predictions, the average growth rate of wellness tourism will rise above 9%, which is almost 50% higher than the average growth rate of international tourism. Therefore, we can say that it is the fastest-growing segment in the entire tourism industry [27], [26].

With over 50 spas and 1,000 springs, about 500 of which are cold and hot mineral water springs, as well as natural mineral gases and medicinal mud, Serbia has enormous potential in health/wellness tourism [76]. Serbia's health tourism is characterized by traditional forms, such as patient treatment and care and rehabilitation, implemented in specialized hospitals located in spas which also offer other forms for regaining and maintaining good health and psychophysical ability with the help of thermal mineral water, air and medicinal mud [44], [45], [49]. In order to compete in the market, spas in Serbia must take into account the experiences of other countries and current tendencies in the development of health tourism. Many destinations around the world have recognized the opportunity to develop health tourism. To meet the demands of modern tourists, health tourism destinations today offer a variety of services that can meet different tourist needs and expectations. Slovenia is a great example because it has extremely developed health tourism. Terme Olimia in Podčetrtek is one of the most visited Slovenian health destinations where investors and owners (mainly state-owned companies and funds) have invested a lot of money to turn a small thermal source into a modern wellness center [60]. Health tourism is, in fact, the most important segment of Slovenian tourism, since it generates on average a quarter of the annual tourism revenue [56].

In Serbia, health tourism accounts for 17% of total tourist turnover [66]. The number of domestic and international tourists is increasing with each passing year. The increase in tourist traffic is related to the beginning of modernization of our traditional spas which, in addition to their basic function of healing, introduce wellness programs in their offer. Thus, they are slowly turning into destinations for not only treatment and rehabilitation, but also for rest and relaxation [28]. However, despite considerable potential for

the development of health tourism, Serbia is still one of the underdeveloped destinations. Continued transformation of Serbia's spas from traditional spas to modern centers of wellness tourism is of crucial importance for future improvement of this type of tourism [5].

### Prolom Banja

Prolom Banja is a health tourism destination in Serbia, located in the municipality of Kuršumlija. Its development began in the 1970s. It is known for its healing Prolom water, which is one of the most famous mineral water brands in Serbia. In addition to the traditional forms of maintaining good health and psychophysical ability, Prolom Banja offers mineral water, clean air and healing mud, a rich wellness program since 2007 and a new wellness center opened in the middle of 2017, spanning over 2,100 square feet. In recent years, wellness tourism has increasingly been developing in spas in Serbia, Vrnjačka Banja taking the lead in this field, followed by Prolom, Lukovska Banja, Sokobanja and others [44].

Accommodation facilities in Prolom Banja meet the needs of increasingly demanding tourists. In addition to a small number of private accommodation facilities which are not categorized and operate in a gray area, hotel accommodation is most frequently used, which can be seen in the following table.

**Table 1: Accommodation facilities in Prolom Banja**

ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES	Number of rooms	Number of beds	Category
Radan Hotel	212	386	3-star
Gareto Konak Hotel	37	84	-

Source: [21].

In this destination, tourists stay in two hotels, which have a maximum capacity of 249 rooms and 470 beds – private accommodation not included. The Radan Hotel has 212 rooms situated in 3 buildings, two of which are connected to the medical and wellness center. The old Radan Hotel (containing 28 beds) was built in 1968, while the lower annex (60 rooms and 128 beds) with a spa was built in 1976. In 1977, Prolom Banja was declared a natural health resort [21]. The upper annex (135 rooms, 270 beds) and a modern bathroom were built in 1989 [21]. All rooms

in the hotel have healing water, which is also used for heating. The entire hotel complex was renovated in the last few years, combining accommodation, modern medical and wellness treatments and amenities for recreation and entertainment. It is now categorized as a three-star hotel. The hotel and the whole spa complex are managed by the joint-stock company Planinka from Kuršumljia – a strategic tourism developer in the municipality of Kuršumljia. The second hotel in Prolom Banja, the Gareto Konak Hotel, founded in 1963, now includes 3 suites and 34 rooms with 84 beds [21].

Health tourism in Serbia is characterized by the predominance of domestic tourists, with international tourists accounting for only 18% of the total number [49]. This trend is also evident in Prolom Banja, as illustrated by the following table.

Analysis of the data from the previous table reveals the trend of growth in the number of domestic and international tourists in the observed period. A significant increase in the number of tourists has been observed in the last two years, as a positive effect of opening a new wellness center and applying the concept of individual approach to each guest, in which employees represent the pillar and the most important link. High degree of

seasonal concentration and the longest stays are two most significant characteristics of health destinations in Serbia [49]. However, Prolom Banja does not have a distinct high season, bearing in mind that tourist traffic is almost uniform throughout the year, except in December when there are fewest visitors, as opposed to July and August when the number of visits and overnight stays is the biggest. The average length of tourist stay in Prolom Banja in the observed period was 5.24 days, with domestic tourists staying 5.76 days and international ones 3.06 days. These data support the statement on the length of stay in health destinations [49], given that the average length of stay in Serbia in 2018 was 2.72 days [46].

The following table shows the structure of foreign tourist arrivals by country of origin.

Observing the structure of international tourists, it can be concluded that the overall structure mainly includes tourists from Southeastern Europe, namely North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. They are followed by the tourists from the Russian Federation, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, and Switzerland. The other countries shown in the previous table do not have a significant impact on the structure of foreign tourists. Also, 60% of Prolom Banja's foreign

**Table 2: Tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Prolom Banja (2014-2018)**

	TOURIST ARRIVALS			TOURIST OVERNIGHT STAYS			AVERAGE NUMBER OF TOURIST NIGHTS		
	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign
2014	11731	9552	2179	58756	51998	6758	5	5.4	3.1
2015	14363	11284	3079	73609	64921	8668	5.1	5.8	2.8
2016	14078	11725	2353	78164	70616	7548	5.5	6	3.2
2017	15862	12742	3120	87378	77509	9689	5.6	6.1	3.2
2018	17718	14234	3484	88662	78079	10593	5	5.5	3

Source: Authors' calculations based on the Statistical Release [67], [68], [69], [70], [71].

**Table 3: Tourist arrivals in Prolom Banja by country of origin (2018)**

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	Arrivals	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	Arrivals	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	Arrivals
North Macedonia	1259	USA	29	United Kingdom	10
Bulgaria	938	Netherlands	28	Albania	9
BIH	160	Other European countries	27	Denmark	6
Montenegro	130	Australia	27	Ukraine	6
Russian Federation	110	Italy	24	Belgium	6
Croatia	62	Other non-European countries	21	Norway	6
Germany	46	Poland	20	Czech Republic	3
Slovenia	43	Canada	19	Spain	2
Austria	42	France	19	Slovakia	2
Switzerland	41	Romania	15	Hungary	1

Source: Authors' calculations based on the recapitulation obtained from the Radan Hotel [30].



tourists make reservations directly or through bookings, while the rest come through travel agencies and other organizations [30].

## Methodology

This research aims to determine the manner in which tourists perceive Prolom Banja, as well as to identify the key elements that can influence the branding of Prolom Banja as a destination specializing in spa tourism. The primary data were obtained using the survey method – questionnaire technique, used to systematically collect data or personal opinion from a group of respondents.

The main hypothesis underlying this research reads as follows: Prolom Banja is known as a destination for treatment, recreation and rest. From the main hypothesis, the following secondary hypotheses were drawn:

- H1: Prolom water influences the overall image of Prolom Banja as a destination specializing in spa tourism.
- H2: Respondents' views on the quality of Prolom Banja as a destination specializing in spa tourism vary significantly depending on the number of times they visited the spa.
- H3: The level of loyalty respondents show towards Prolom Banja as a destination specializing in spa tourism varies significantly depending on the number of times they visited the spa.
- H4: There is positive correlation between the image and recognition of Prolom Banja as a destination specializing in spa tourism.
- H5: There is positive correlation between the image of and respondents' loyalty to Prolom Banja as a destination specializing in spa tourism.

For the purpose of the research, a literature-review-based questionnaire was created [32], [34], [74], taking into account the specificities of Prolom Banja. The questionnaire contains 16 open-ended and closed-ended questions, divided into three segments. The first segment refers to the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents, such as gender, age, and education, the residence also being one of the important parameters in the research. The second segment involves questions related to the information about the destination itself, such as

the number of visits and overnight stays in Prolom Banja, reasons for visiting the spa, sources of information that led to the trip, escort on the trip, number of visits to the destination, accommodation, as well as transportation to the destination. The third segment refers to the degree of agreement/disagreement with the claims about the varied image of the destination, quality, loyalty and recognition of Prolom Banja as a tourist destination. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neutral; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree).

The study was conducted in February 2019 on a sample of 195 respondents, through an online questionnaire, distributed through the official Facebook profile of Prolom Banja, as well as through field research – with the assistance of the marketing service of the Radan Hotel. Respondents were told that participation in the research was anonymous and voluntary and that the results would be used solely for scientific and research purposes.

The following statistical techniques and methods were applied in the statistical data processing and testing of hypotheses:

- descriptive statistical measures – frequencies and percentages were used to describe the research sample;
- measures of variability – arithmetic mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) were used to show the scores for the questionnaires;
- Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to test the association between variables;
- Student's t-test was used to show the significance of differences between scores for individual variables.

Statistical analyses were conducted using the SPSS 20.0 statistical package (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences for Windows 20.0).

## Analysis and discussion of results

Statistical data processing included a sample of 195 respondents. All completed questionnaires were valid. The sociodemographic characteristics of respondents are shown in the following table.

In the total number of respondents, there are more female (63.6%) than male respondents (34.4%). In terms

**Table 4: The sociodemographic characteristics of respondents**

VARIABLES	Frequency	Percentage
<b>GENDER</b>		
Male	71	36.4
Female	124	63.6
<b>EDUCATION</b>		
Primary school	-	-
Secondary school	59	30.3
College/Higher education	103	52.8
Master's degree/Ph.D.	33	16.9
<b>AGE</b>		
Up to 19	-	-
19 – 24	23	11.8
25 – 34	50	25.6
35 – 44	76	38.9
45 – 59	36	18.5
Over 60	10	5.2
<b>COUNTRY OF ORIGIN</b>		
Serbia	178	91.3
North Macedonia	10	5.13
BIH	3	1.54
Switzerland	1	0.5
Austria	1	0.5
Italy	1	0.5
USA	1	0.5

Source: Authors' calculations based on SPSS 20.0.

of education, they are generally highly educated, given that the majority of respondents (52.8%) belong to the higher education or college category, followed by the high school category (30.3%), while only 16.9% of respondents have a master's degree or a Ph.D. When it comes to their age, most respondents are between 35 to 44 years of age (38.9%), while those aged 25 to 34 occupy the second place (25.6%). The fewest respondents are older than 60 – only 5.1% of them, which is understandable given the age and willingness of this category of visitors to participate in the research. Participants in the study came from the Republic of Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Switzerland and the USA. The majority of respondents come from all parts of the Republic of Serbia (91.3%). However, there were also 8.7% of foreign respondents, predominantly from the former Yugoslav republics, who participated in the study. Therefore, we can conclude that the sample is representative and varied, bearing in mind that the field survey was conducted in February when there are fewer visitors than in the summer tourist season.

Using the obtained results, a description of the characteristics of respondents based on their visits to Prolom Banja is presented below.

**Table 5: Respondents' characteristics based on the number of visits to the destination**

VARIABLES	Frequency	Percentage
<b>NUMBER OF VISITS</b>		
Once	49	25.1
Twice	44	22.6
Three and more times	102	52.3
<b>SOURCES OF INFORMATION</b>		
Travel agency	1	0.5
Tourist fairs	3	1.5
Media	13	6.7
Internet/social networks	56	28.7
Friend's recommendation	62	31.8
Personal experience	59	30.3
Other	1	0.5
<b>MOTIVE FOR VISITING</b>		
Rest and relaxation	130	66.7
Healing power of Prolom water	40	20.5
Maintaining good health	23	11.8
Other	1	0.5
<b>TRAVELED WITH</b>		
Alone	10	5.1
Partner	62	31.8
Family	82	42.1
Friends	41	21
<b>MEANS OF TRAVEL TO THE DESTINATION</b>		
Car	171	87.7
Bus	24	12.3
<b>NUMBER OF OVERNIGHT STAYS</b>		
1 – 3	90	46.2
4 – 7	61	31.3
8 – 14	36	18.5
15 – 21	8	4.1
Over 22	-	-
<b>TYPE OF ACCOMMODATION</b>		
Hotel accommodation	161	82.6
Private accommodation	31	15.9
Other	2	1

Source: Authors' calculations based on SPSS 20.0.

The majority of respondents visited Prolom Banja three or more times (52.3%), while the number of respondents who visited the spa once and twice was almost identical (25.1% and 22.6%, respectively). Speaking of the number of overnight stays, the majority of respondents stayed between one and three days (46.1%) and four and seven days (31.3%). The 8-to-14-day-long stays occupy the third place with 16.9%, while very few visitors stayed in the spa for more than 15 days – only 2.5% of the respondents. The number and duration of visits were studied jointly, leading to the conclusion that visitors usually stay for a short time and are happy to come back to this destination.

Respondents (67.1%) single out rest and relaxation as the most important motive behind their visit to Prolom Banja, while the healing power of Prolom water takes the

second place (20.5%), immediately followed by staying healthy (11.8%). This can be closely linked to the second motive, which is why these two can be studied jointly.

While researching the source of information which led the visitors to choose Prolom Banja, friends' recommendations (31.8%), personal experience (30.3%) and the internet and social networks (28.7%) proved to have had the greatest influence on visitors. Additionally, information obtained through the media (6.7%), from travel agencies (0.5%) and tourist fairs (1%) also have an interesting role in attracting visitors.

Visitors usually come to Prolom Banja either with their families (42%) or with their partners (31.8%). Visiting the spa with friends or acquaintances takes the third place, while in only 5.1% do visitors come to the spa alone. This is supported by the observation that in most cases (87.7%) visitors travel to the destination by car, while only a small number of them (12.3%) take the bus.

Speaking about the type of accommodation that the visitors prefer, the study shows that 82.6% of visitors stay at the Radan Hotel, which is a good indicator of the quality and comfort provided by this hotel – an example and embodiment of Prolom Banja's beauty. Only 15.9% of respondents stay in private accommodation.

The analysis of the results begins with determining the reliability and consistency of the claims about the dimensions of image, quality, loyalty and recognition of Prolom Banja as a destination specializing in spa tourism. The reliability and consistency of the claims are calculated using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Its values range from 0 to 1, where values greater than 0.7 indicate adequate reliability and consistency of the claims.

**Table 6: Cronbach's alpha coefficient values**

VARIABLES	Number of statements	Cronbach's alpha
Destination image	5	.896
Destination quality	8	.929
Destination loyalty	4	.860
Destination recognition	9	.928

Source: Authors' calculations based on SPSS 20.0.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient values in this study ranged from 0.86 (loyalty) to 0.929 (destination quality). For claims describing the destination image, Cronbach's alpha stands at 0.896, while for the ones describing Prolom

Banja's recognition relative to other destinations, it amounts to 0.928. The values obtained indicate adequate reliability and internal consistency of the claims.

A summary of the descriptive statistical analysis of attitudes and claims regarding image, quality, loyalty, and recognition is shown below. The results of the descriptive statistical analysis on the image of Prolom Banja as a tourist destination will be presented first.

**Table 7: Descriptive statistical analysis of destination image**

DESTINATION IMAGE	M	SD
Prolom Banja is known/unique for its healing spring water	4.63	.791
Prolom Banja is surrounded by natural beauty	4.48	.839
Prolom Banja has a high level of safety	4.31	.879
The local population of Prolom Banja is welcoming	4.25	.916
Prolom Banja has excellent conditions for recreation (sports facilities, indoor and outdoor pools, hiking trails, etc.)	4.34	.918

Source: Authors' calculations based on SPSS 20.0.

Based on this table, it can be concluded that all the claims in the destination image variable have a high score of over 4. Therefore, according to visitors, all claims have a high influence on creating a positive image of Prolom Banja as a tourist destination. The healing Prolom water has the highest score and influence when it comes to creating a positive image of Prolom Banja (4.63). The obtained result implies that Prolom water influences the overall image of Prolom Banja as a tourist destination, thus confirming the first hypothesis (H1). Another significant finding relates to the fact that respondents highly scored the following statement: "Prolom Banja is surrounded by natural beauty" (4.48), which positively affects the image of Prolom Banja. The hospitality of the local population in Prolom Banja, however, obtained the lowest score (4.25). Nevertheless, this result is not negative and does not have a bad connotation with regard to image building. The obtained results indicate that, according to all the observed elements in the variable, respondents, i.e. tourists, have a positive image of Prolom Banja.

The results of the descriptive statistical analysis of the quality of Prolom Banja will be shown next.

The findings of the descriptive statistical analysis on the quality of Prolom Banja as a tourist destination indicate that the respondents rate staff service (4.55) and



**Table 8: Descriptive statistical analysis of destination quality**

DESTINATION QUALITY	M	SD
Prolom Banja has high-quality accommodation	4.14	1.008
Prolom Banja has a high-quality gastronomic offer	4.15	1.037
Prolom Banja has high-quality wellness services	4.46	.845
Prolom Banja employees provide a high level of service	4.55	.754
Prolom Banja has high-quality infrastructure	3.72	1.101
The safety of Prolom Banja tourists is high	4.24	.919
The level of cleanliness in Prolom Banja is high	4.31	.896
The price/quality ratio in Prolom Banja is at a high level	3.93	1.060

Source: Authors' calculations based on SPSS 20.0.

wellness services (4.46) as the most important quality indicators, taking into account that in recent years Prolom Banja has made significant investments in the modernization of the wellness complex, which is part of the Radan Hotel. Respondents also highly rate the level of cleanliness (4.31) and safety (4.24), while the quality of accommodation (4.14) and gastronomic offer (4.15) received almost identical scores. They are least satisfied with the quality of the infrastructure (3.72) and the price/quality ratio (3.93).

The following table shows the results of the descriptive statistical analysis of the extent of respondents' loyalty to Prolom Banja.

**Table 9: Descriptive statistical analysis of destination loyalty**

DESTINATION LOYALTY	M	SD
I will visit Prolom Banja again	4.47	.869
I will gladly recommend Prolom Banja to my friends	4.53	.827
Prolom Banja offers more services than other similar destinations	3.77	1.127
I will visit Prolom Banja again even if the prices of services increase	3.38	1.297

Source: Authors' calculations based on SPSS 20.0.

Based on the obtained results, a high level of respondents' loyalty to Prolom Banja is observed, i.e. high scores indicate that they will visit Prolom Banja again (4.47) and that they will gladly recommend this destination to their friends (4.53). This means that the respondents were satisfied with the services provided in the destination and that Prolom Banja met their expectations. On the other hand, when it comes to assessing whether Prolom Banja offers more services than other similar destinations and

whether tourists would visit it even if prices of services increase, the results were not so good (3.77 and 3.38, respectively). The findings indicate the need for Prolom Banja to continue to work on its authenticity and enhance its offer in order to be more competitive when compared to other destinations in Serbia. The increase in the number of loyal tourists is unquestionably a key factor for the success of a tourist destination [25].

The summary of the results of the descriptive statistical analysis of the recognition of Prolom Banja in relation to other destinations specializing in health tourism is presented below.

**Table 10: Descriptive statistical analysis of destination recognition**

DESTINATION RECOGNITION	M	SD
Accommodation quality	3.87	1.074
Medical offer	4.32	.875
Healing power of Prolom water	4.65	.775
Wellness offer	4.39	.921
Gastronomic offer	3.99	1.043
Hospitality of the local population	4.14	.925
Hospitality of the employees	4.57	.824
Intact natural beauty	4.44	.885
Price/quality ratio	3.83	1.120

Source: Authors' calculations based on SPSS 20.0.

The descriptive statistical analysis of Prolom Banja's recognition indicates that the main asset of its recognizability and uniqueness is the healing power of Prolom water (4.65), which is a separate brand and the main element of its tourism offer. It is a very important factor in the building of image and brand of Prolom Banja as a destination specializing in spa tourism. As regards recognition, bearing in mind that people are one of key dimensions of a tourist destination, the employees occupy the second place with a score of 4.57. Intact natural beauty (4.44) is a very important recognition factor. Due to the construction of a brand-new modern wellness center and the changes to the existing one, the wellness offer (4.39) occupies an equally important place in the recognition of this destination. First and foremost, Prolom Banja is distinguished by its recognizable healing Prolom water, followed by the hospitality of its employees, intact natural beauty, wellness and medical offer. On the other hand, quality of accommodation (3.87) and price/quality ratio (3.83) have somewhat lower scores.

Further analysis of the results obtained by a t-test shows the differences between the arithmetic means of scores given by the respondents who visited Prolom Banja once and those who visited it three or more times. The quality, loyalty and recognition variables of Prolom Banja in relation to competing spa destinations were analyzed.

Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that all the quality indicators observed by the respondents who visited Prolom Banja three or more times have higher scores compared to the ones given by the respondents who visited the destination only once. The reason for this result lies in the difference between the delivered and perceived quality of the destination. The obtained results are in line with the results of the previous research, which confirmed that the level of satisfaction with quality significantly differs between tourists who are visiting the destination for the first time and those who have visited it more than once [3], [50]. The respondents identified employees as the indicator of quality of Prolom Banja; and this is also in line with the results of the previous research which identified employees and their communication with tourists as a key indicator of quality [16], [57]. Research

results show that there are statistical differences among the quality of accommodation ( $t = -2.311, p = .022$ ), quality of infrastructure ( $t = -2.727, p = .007$ ), cleanliness ( $t = -1.993, p = .048$ ) and price/quality ratio ( $t = -2.712, p = .007$ ). All of these destination quality indicators were rated lower by the respondents who visited the destination only once compared to those who visited it three or more times. The obtained results confirm the second (H2) hypothesis.

The results from the previous table indicate that the respondents with more considerable prior experience have significantly different opinions from those who are visiting the destination for the first time. Speaking of the statistically significant differences, the results show that there are differences in the respondents' intention to visit Prolom Banja again ( $t = -2.338, p = .021$ ), their intention to recommend the destination to their friends ( $t = -1.196, p = .029$ ) and to visit Prolom Banja even if prices of services increase ( $t = -4.161, p = .000$ ). Furthermore, it can be concluded that respondents show a high degree of loyalty to Prolom Banja. In this regard, the obtained results are in agreement with the findings of Kozak's study [37], which explored the British tourists' previous

**Table 11: Differences in arithmetic means of destination quality scores depending on the number of visits of respondents**

DESTINATION QUALITY	Number of visits		t-test	Sig.
	Once	Three or more times		
	M	M		
Prolom Banja has high-quality accommodation	3.91	4.30	-2.311	.022**
Prolom Banja has a high-quality gastronomic offer	3.95	4.29	-1.930	.056
Prolom Banja has high-quality wellness services	4.27	4.53	-1.742	.084
Prolom Banja employees provide a high level of service	4.52	4.53	-.048	.962
Prolom Banja has high-quality infrastructure	3.34	3.88	-2.727	.007**
The safety of Prolom Banja tourists is high	4.18	4.35	-1.049	.296
The level of cleanliness in Prolom Banja is high	4.11	4.44	-1.993	.048**
The price/quality ratio in Prolom Banja is at a high level	3.59	4.09	-2.712	.007**

Source: Authors' calculations based on SPSS 20.0.

\*\* Statistical significance at the level of 0.05.

**Table 12: Differences in arithmetic means of destination loyalty scores depending on the number of visits of respondents**

DESTINATION LOYALTY	Number of visits		t-test	Sig.
	Once	Three or more times		
	M	M		
I will visit Prolom Banja again	4.27	4.61	-2.338	.021**
I will gladly recommend Prolom Banja to my friends	4.39	4.67	-1.196	.029**
Prolom Banja offers more services than other similar destinations	3.69	3.98	-1.438	.154
I will visit Prolom Banja again even if the prices of services increase	2.90	3.80	-4.161	.000**

Source: Authors' calculations based on SPSS 20.0.

\*\* Statistical significance at the level of 0.05.

experiences and future intentions to visit Majorca and Turkey again. Kozak attained an identical result – tourists who visited the destination for the first time showed a lower likelihood of repeating the visit than tourists with more previous experience. Chi [12] conducted a study to analyze the difference in destination loyalty between first-time tourists and repeat visitors. Study findings indicate a higher degree of loyalty among tourists with previous experience than among the first-time tourists. Similar research was conducted by Shavanddasht and Allan [59], who investigated the previous experiences and future intentions of tourists in the field of health tourism; the results of this research correspond with the results of the abovementioned studies. Specifically, the hypothesis that tourists with more prior experience differ significantly from first-time tourists, including by their degree of loyalty, has been confirmed. According to the obtained results, it can be said that the loyalty of respondents to Prolom Banja differs significantly depending on their previous experience, thus confirming the third hypothesis (H3).

The findings from the previous table indicate a similar situation as with the destination quality variable. Namely, the respondents who visited Prolom Banja three or more times attached greater significance and importance to all the elements of Prolom Banja’s recognition, while the results of respondents who visited the destination only once showed much lower scores. Most recognition elements have statistically significant differences, except for the wellness offer and employee hospitality.

**Table 13: Differences in arithmetic means of destination recognition scores depending on the number of visits of respondents**

DESTINATION RECOGNITION	Number of visits		t-test	Sig.
	Once	Three or more times		
	M	M		
Accommodation quality	3.52	4.10	-3.282	.001**
Medical offer	4.14	4.47	-2.286	.024**
Healing power of Prolom water	4.50	4.68	-1.271	.026**
Wellness offer	4.20	4.50	-1.903	.059
Gastronomic offer	3.75	4.17	-2.409	.017**
Hospitality of the local population	3.89	4.33	-2.847	.005**
Hospitality of the employees	4.55	4.66	0.092	.927
Intact natural beauty	4.23	4.54	-1.987	.049**
Price/quality ratio	3.50	3.99	-2.487	.014**

Source: Authors’ calculations based on SPSS 20.0.  
 \*\* Statistical significance at the level of 0.05.

Based on the results presented in table 10, taking into account respondents’ views and their repeated visits to the destination, the following elements were identified as the ones that influence the recognition and building of Prolom Banja’s brand and image as a spa tourism destination: the healing powers of Prolom water, employees, intact natural beauty, wellness and spa offer. By these elements Prolom Banja can most easily be distinguished from the competing health destinations.

To test the fourth and fifth hypotheses, the strength of association between the image, quality, loyalty, and recognition variables was measured. The following table shows the correlations between the observed variables.

**Table 14: Pearson’s correlation coefficient between the observed variables**

VARIABLES	Image	Quality	Loyalty	Recognition
Image	1	.738**	.499**	.712**
Quality	.738**	1	.732**	.857**
Loyalty	.499**	.732**	1	.715**
Recognition	.712**	.857**	.715**	1

Source: Authors’ calculations based on SPSS 20.0.  
 \*\* Correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

Coefficient above 0.6 indicates a high degree of correlation between the variables, a score between 0.4 and 0.6 shows moderate correlation, and a score below 0.4 indicates weak correlation. The findings of the correlation analysis presented in the previous table show the statistically significant values of the Pearson’s coefficient. There is a statistically significant high degree of correlation among the observed variables, except between the image and loyalty variables, which show moderate correlation. The

results of the correlation analysis revealed a high degree of correlation between the quality and recognition of Prolom Banja as a tourist destination compared to the competition (0.857), as well as between the quality and image of Prolom Banja (0.738). There is also a high degree of correlation between recognizability and loyalty (0.715) and between image and recognition (0.712), which confirms the fourth (H4) hypothesis. Moderate correlation is present only between the image of and loyalty to Prolom Banja as a tourist destination (0.499). In this case, because of moderate correlation, the fifth (H5) hypothesis can be conditionally verified.

## Conclusion

The need for destination branding is becoming more noticeable as many destinations offer quality content and services, but might not have market recognition. In this sense, destinations can be similar, and this is where the brand becomes an important factor because it gives added value and commits to providing potential tourists with experience of something special in a certain destination that will make it worth visiting. Therefore, it is important to create a perception of distinctiveness of the destination in the minds of tourists. Destinations which have a recognizable image and are positively perceived by tourists are more likely to be found on their shortlist [42].

Research findings indicate that tourists perceive Prolom Banja positively. Respondents singled out rest and relaxation as the main motives for visiting Prolom Banja, followed by the healing powers of Prolom water and maintaining good health. They believe that the healing Prolom water, natural beauty and hospitality of the local population have a high influence on creating a positive image of Prolom Banja as a destination specializing in spa tourism. Accordingly, it can be concluded that respondents have a positive image of Prolom Banja. This conclusion is in line with numerous studies that have confirmed that destination image plays a crucial role in shaping tourists' preferences [8], [22], [63], [81].

Respondents ranked employees as the first indicator of the quality of Prolom Banja, followed by wellness services, cleanliness and quality of accommodation. A very

important factor with regard to the quality of service is communication and attitude of employees towards tourists because tourists require service that enables easy use of the offered content, from the first contact to using various tourist facilities later on. Based on the conducted research, and taking into account respondents' views, it is concluded that the healing Prolom water, employees, intact natural beauty, wellness and medical offer are all elements that are identified as significant and recognizable. Prolom water occupies the first place, as it is a major contributor to the tourist offer. On the one hand, it is an integral part of the brand of Prolom Banja, while, on the other, it has its own, separate brand that creates additional value for tourists.

This research may also have implications for other destinations, given that the key components influencing destination branding have been identified and tested and can be used as such by destination management and marketing to create better destination recognition, leading to increased tourist traffic, employment of local population and capital investment. Bearing in mind the fact that Serbia has great potential for the development of health tourism, it is of the utmost importance that the health/wellness destinations conduct the same or similar research in order to implement an adequate branding strategy. Also, practical implications may be useful, first and foremost, for the marketing of Prolom Banja, i.e. the company (Planinka from Kuršumlija) which runs all the main activities in Prolom Banja. The use of the existing brand of Prolom water and integration of the elements identified in this research are of crucial importance for the successful creation of the brand of Prolom Banja as a tourist destination. Branding, as a marketing and management process, has to fulfill all tourists' expectations regarding the quality of products and services offered by Prolom Banja as a tourist destination.

It is also necessary to point out certain limitations of this research, such as the fact that it was conducted on a modest sample, bearing in mind that the survey was carried out in February when there are much fewer tourists. Another limitation refers to the research scope, which only included Prolom Banja. Therefore, one of the recommendations for further research may be to widen the scope of the research, both in terms of sample size



and health destinations, and to explore the possibility of branding Serbia as a health and wellness destination, particularly taking into account its significant potential.

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