Can publicly visible pro-environmental initiatives improve the organic environmental image of destinations?

Iana Bilynets\textsuperscript{a}, Ljubica Knezevic Cvelbar\textsuperscript{a} and Sara Dolnicarb

\textsuperscript{a}School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia; \textsuperscript{b}UQ Business School, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Destination image formation theory postulates that the way tourists perceive a destination – the destination’s image – affects tourists’ destination choice. Organic destination image – which develops naturally, without an active effort by anyone to shape destination image – is more powerful than destination image induced through marketing because tourists are sceptical about the information conveyed to them through marketing communication channels. Theory predicts that destinations cannot control organic image. We challenge this assumption by hypothesizing that visible environmental initiatives at the destination are positively associated with the organic destination image of being environmentally sustainable. Results indicate that destinations may indeed be able to proactively and deliberately manage their organic image. Tourists who notice pro-environmental initiatives at the destination and pay attention to them perceive the destination as more environmentally friendly and sustainable when they depart. With organic image being a key driver of destination choice, implementation of pro-environmental initiatives becomes a rational marketing investment. This is particularly important given the increasing environmental concern of consumers. The invaluable side effect of redirecting “green marketing dollars” towards “green action dollars” is the improved environmental performance of the destination, which contributes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

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\textbf{Introduction}

Positioning stands at the core of every tourism organisation’s strategic marketing plan. The positioning of a destination reflects how tourists – or specific target segments of tourists – perceive the destination. According to destination formation theory (Crompton, 1979), tourists make destination choices based on their perception of a destination. If a destination is perceived as attractive along specific attributes that matter to tourists (or targeted tourist segments), people will choose this destination over others. Typical generic destination image attributes include: safe, friendly, clean, vivid, boring, etc. More specific attributes of interest to destinations that target specific market segments could include: great for adventure tourists, active nightlife, great cultural offers, etc.
One attribute that is becoming increasingly important is environmental sustainability. Public awareness of environmental issues is increasing (European Commission, 2017). As a consequence, tourists are likely to perceive environmentally sustainable destinations as more attractive, which may affect destination competitiveness (Mihalič, 2000, 2016). Not surprisingly, therefore, destinations invest in green marketing (marketing targeted at enhancing a destination’s image as being environmentally sustainable). Rarely, however, do destinations implement publicly visible environmental initiatives to proactively build their image as an environmentally sustainable destination. This is despite recent research concluding that environmental image impacts destination loyalty (S. W. Lee & Xue, 2020) as well as pro-environmental behaviour at the destination by tourists (W. Lee & Jeong, 2018; Su & Swanson, 2017) and residents (Su et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020). Using environmental initiatives in an attempt to position a destination as environmentally sustainable, therefore, has two advantages: it leads to a real reduction in the environmental harm caused, and it prevents tourists from perceiving pro-environmental claims as greenwash (Rahman et al., 2015) – assuming tourists notice the pro-environmental initiatives put into place. From a theoretical perspective, implementing pro-environmental initiatives has the power to change the organic image of a destination (Gunn, 1972). Organic image is more difficult to change proactively by a tourist destination because, by definition, it does not respond to typical marketing actions, such as advertising and promotion. Implementation of pro-environmental initiatives – instead of advertising one’s green credentials – can represent a powerful tool of image management. But even if tourists notice pro-environmental initiatives at the destination, it is unclear whether they affect tourists’ perception of the destination, shaping organic image. We hypothesize that noticing pro-environmental initiatives at the destination will be positively associated with tourists perceiving the destination as organically environmentally friendly (Hypothesis 1.1) and sustainable (Hypothesis 1.2).

The theoretical contribution of the study is to test whether pro-environmental initiatives put in place at tourist destinations are associated with an organic image of the destination being more environmentally friendly and sustainable. The conceptual framework guiding our investigation is shown in Figure 1: a destination’s image consists of organic and induced image (Gunn, 1972, 1988). Organic image is more powerful than induced image because consumers process marketing materials with scepticism. Theory predicts that only “accidental” information –
information not controlled by the destination – can affect organic image. We challenge this assumption, proposing instead that implementing visible environmental initiatives at the destination – an activity under the full control of the destination – can affect organic image and, consequently, be used to reposition a destination as environmentally friendly. This hypothesis has not been proposed and not empirically tested to date, thus representing the key theoretical contribution of this study.

Practically, the study is of immediate value to tourism destinations and tourism businesses around the world: if tourists pay attention to environmental initiatives, remember pro-environmental initiatives, and if those initiatives affect organic image – the type of image that is not accessible to manipulation by traditional marketing – tourism destinations and businesses have a strong incentive to adopt pro-environmental initiatives. This, in turn, helps reduce the substantial environmental burden caused by the tourism industry now and into the future.

**Literature review**

**Organic image formation**

Destination image – rather than objective reality – drives tourists’ destination choices (Chon, 1990). Theoretically, destination image forms as an aggregate of tourist beliefs and expectations about the destination (Crompton, 1979). Gunn (1972, 1988) distinguishes between organic and induced image. Organic image forms as a result of existing non-tourism related communication, such as reading books, press, watching movies and television, word-of-mouth and information from the actual visits to the destination, while the induced image is a result of destination marketing and promotion (Gunn, 1972). If destination image is based on organic image, the consistency between image and experience at the destination is higher (Gartner, 1994). It is important to distinguish between organic and induced image because it suggests that people have an image of the destination even if they have not visited it and have not received any promotional information about destination yet (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Induced image results from the communication created by tourism stakeholders and it reflects the supply-side efforts to create image on the markets. In contrast, organic image does not depend on promotional activities of tourism stakeholders, but rather is the result of collective destination activities across a range of domains.

Image formation is a multistage process: first, organic accumulation of mental images takes place, followed by the further accumulation of induced images and modification of the existing image. The tourist makes the decision to travel, travels to the destination, participates in destination experiences, returns from the destination, and accumulates new images based on their experience in the destination (Gunn, 1988). Gunn suggests that destinations have very little impact on the organic image but can change induced image through promotion. Building upon Gunn’s typology, Gartner (1994) distinguishes between image-creating agents, which can also be induced or organic in nature. Such agents are Overt Induced I (traditional advertising), Overt Induced II (information from tour operators), Covert Induced I (traditional advertising through the second party – a recognizable spokesperson), Covert Induced II (second party through unbiased reports), Autonomous (news, features in popular culture), Unsolicited Organic (random word-of-mouth), Solicited Organic (word-of-mouth collected when interest in destination appears) and Organic (actual visit to destination). In this study, we are primarily interested in organic image created by organic image-creating agents – an actual visit to the destination.

To evaluate changes in destination image, we compared pre-visit and post-visit image perceptions along several destination attributes. We used an established approach to brand image measurements: assessment of destination attributes based on descriptive characteristics (Keller, 2013) such as safe, friendly, clean, environmentally friendly, expensive.
If tourists notice pro-environmental initiatives at the destination (which are “accidental” information, however, under control of the destination that implements them), changes captured by the post-visit image measurement can be associated with the organic image of the destination, as pictured in the conceptual framework (Figure 1).

**Environmental image of the destination**

Destinations around the globe direct resources towards creating a positive environmental image, assuming it will increase market demand (Cooper Villagran, 2017). Environmental image is the total environmental perception tourists have about a specific destination (W. Lee & Jeong, 2018); it is linked to tourists’ perception of environmental conservation, environmentally sustainable practices (Insch, 2011), environmental commitments and environmental concerns of the destination (Chen, 2010). The environment of the destination is often the core element of its image (Insch, 2011). Some destinations choose to build their entire brand on their environmental credentials. New Zealand is such an example. New Zealand communicates that it is clean and green (Insch, 2011). Similarly, Slovenia promotes itself as a green, active and healthy destination and integrates a green message in its logo (Slovenian Tourist Board, 2019).

Very few studies investigate the environmental image at the destination level. Existing research explores how the environmental image is related to tourist pro-environmental behaviour (W. Lee & Jeong, 2018; Su & Swanson, 2017), destination loyalty (S. W. Lee & Xue, 2020) and destination brand equity (Bigné et al., 2020). Su and Swanson (2017) find a positive relationship between perception of environmental responsibility and tourists’ pro-environmental behaviour. W. Lee and Jeong (2018) find a positive relationship between the environmental image of the national park and hikers’ pro-environmental behaviour. Bigné et al. (2020) find that online reviews commenting on the environmental responsibility of mountain destinations have a higher positive impact on destination brand equity among tourists with high environmental values. Cooper Villagran (2017) explored the formation of green destination image in Chilean Patagonia, identifying that tourists associate features such as landscapes, conservation activities in protected areas, food and architecture with the image of the destination as environmentally sustainable. However, these studies focus mostly on nature-based destinations, with only one study (S. W. Lee & Xue, 2020) investigating the urban environment.

**Pro-environmental initiatives and environmental image**

Pro-environmental initiatives taken by a destination are visible activities, processes and practices, which allow a destination to minimize negative impacts on the environment (Cooper, 1998; J. S. Lee et al., 2010). Such activities include eco-friendly water and waste management, sustainable mobility (e.g., biking and e-mobility), using energy from renewable sources, having in place recycling systems, reducing the use of single-use plastic etc.

As opposed to pro-environmental initiatives, green credentials are “communication systems intended to influence consumer behaviour towards greater consideration of environmental concerns” (Gössling & Buckley, 2016, p. 359). They provide guidelines for good environmental practices and communicate the environmental efforts of service providers to consumers. Ecolabels are an example of green credentials; they may add value to the product and guide consumers in choosing a pro-environmental alternative (Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Mihalić, 2000; Millar et al., 2012). In practice, companies use ecolabels as marketing tools (Gössling & Buckley, 2016; Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016). Green credentials are communicated by destinations as an outcome of their destination-wide environmental efforts (e.g., winning an award for implementation of the pro-environmental project). Yet, there is a risk that tourism actors exaggerate their own green credentials to win customers (Insch, 2011). This leads to greenwashing – selective
communication of environmental performance highlighting the positive outcomes while hiding the negative ones (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). Tourists are sensitive to greenwashing. Their scepticism increases if they cannot find credible information and evidence about environmental initiatives (Rahman et al., 2015). Information overload can also evoke scepticism and result in ignoring green credentials (Kozak & Nield, 2004). Greenwash scepticism can be minimized if a service provider supports green communication with visible evidence (Hanks et al., 2016).

According to information processing theory, simpler messages are more credible (Chaiken, 1980; Hanks et al., 2016). The subjective ease of information processing is referred to as processing fluency (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). Processing fluency is higher and the level of scepticism about sustainability communication is lower in the nature-based context because people receive more cues associated with natural attributes (Hanks et al., 2016). This means that positioning an urban destination as environmentally friendly is harder than positioning a nature-based destination in this way. It is for this reason that actual visual cues providing tourists with evidence of pro-environmental actions are critically important for city destinations. Tourists are more likely to perceive the destination as pro-environmental if they experience user-friendly bike renting or waste recycling opportunities, for example, than if they are only informed via communication messages about the destination's green credentials.

Although previous research has not investigated the effect of real pro-environmental initiatives on the environmental image of a destination, some insights have been gained into how green practices affect the environmental image of tourism businesses. Mayer et al. (2012) studied the perception of environmental performance of airline companies. Passengers evaluated the environmental friendliness of airlines and the efficiency of their environmental initiatives. Results indicate that tangible parameters, such as having a newer fleet, were more influential in terms of environmental image than vague aspects, such as the airline’s positive attitude towards the environment. Namkung and Jang (2017, 2013) used hypothetical scenarios to describe green restaurant practices. They presented food-focused (sustainable supply and ingredients) and environmentally-focused green practices (energy efficiency, plastic reduction, etc.), concluding that such initiatives can improve the green image of the restaurant. Such a green image increases willingness to pay, especially in upscale restaurants. In contrast, Jeong and Jang (2010) find that green marketing is more efficient than real pro-environmental initiatives in improving the environmentally sustainable brand image of Starbucks.

**Methodology**

**Study context**

We needed to conduct the research in a destination where tourists could encounter pro-environmental initiatives. We selected Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia with 300,000 residents. In recent years, Ljubljana developed into a popular tourist destination, with the number of tourists and overnight stays doubling from 2014 to 2019 to reach 1.02 million tourists and 2.18 million overnight stays (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2019). Ljubljana, like Slovenia as a whole, has been very proactive in introducing environmentally sustainable initiatives and, as a consequence, has been awarded numerous domestic and international awards, including: Green Capital of Europe (European Commission, 2016); Global TOP 100 Sustainable Destinations (Ljubljana Tourism, 2019a); World Travel Market Responsible Tourism Award for the development of sustainable tourism (City of Ljubljana, 2017); European Capital of Smart Tourism for sustainability and digitalization (City of Ljubljana, 2019b; Ljubljana Tourism, 2018); Best Food Destination for its Green Supply Chains project (encouraging the use of locally sourced food in hotels and restaurants) at International Tourism and Travel Awards at World Travel Market in London (Ljubljana Tourism, 2019b); World Travel & Tourism Council Tourism for Tomorrow award for being “redesigned with sustainability in mind” (Slovenian Convention Bureau, 2015), etc.
The city administration is dedicated to sustainable development. Between 2016 and 2020, the city introduced more than 700 pro-environmental initiatives to improve the sustainable lifestyle of its residents and sustainable experiences of tourists (City of Ljubljana, 2020). Ljubljana’s vision is to become one of the most sustainable lifestyle destinations in the world (Ljubljana Tourism, 2020). Some of the most visible pro-environmental initiatives include a traffic-free city centre (converted into a pedestrian zone in 2008 and supported by free electric vehicles for groups with reduced mobility). Pedestrian areas have been increased six-fold over the past decade, now covering more than ten hectares of the city centre. The city is also bike-friendly, offering 300 km of the bike pathways, 600 bikes for co-sharing and 61 bike co-sharing points across the city. Ljubljana also offers 390 km of public transportation lines, 280 busses that run on methane, electric cars to rent, and park-and-ride system linked to public transportation routes (City of Ljubljana, 2020). The city has extensive green areas (542 m² per inhabitant) and one of the highest rates of waste separation in the European Union (68% in 2018) (Ljubljana Tourism, 2020). Containers for residential waste are tidy and located underground in the city centre; they have the same colour coding for waste separation as the public dustbins and create good visibility for the recycling initiatives in Ljubljana. The city also has an innovative e-car sharing system with more than 200 e-vehicles for co-sharing on more than 80 locations within the city. In the last three years, more than 3,500 trees were planted in the city (City of Ljubljana, 2020). These are just some of the pro-environmental initiatives taking place in Ljubljana that are visible and easy to engage for tourists, and which make Ljubljana a highly suitable destination for our study.

Fieldwork administration

We collected data in August 2019. Data collection took place in an airport shuttle bus and during the waiting time for the airport shuttle bus (Bilynets et al., 2021), also at the Ljubljana bus station. Tourists who agreed to participate completed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. We included two subsamples of tourists. Both samples have never visited Ljubljana before. One sample was recruited before their arrival in Ljubljana, the second sample at the time of departure from Ljubljana. To participate in the study, tourists had to be able to complete the questionnaire in English. Slovenians were excluded. This data collection protocol was approved by the third author’s university’s human research ethics committee under approval number #2019001734. Visitors completed 372 questionnaires (233 pre-visit, 139 post-visit). There is no reason to believe that travellers arriving at the airport are more or less environmentally friendly than those arriving by other means of transport. If anything, one could argue they are less environmentally friendly, in which case it would be more difficult to achieve a change in pro-environmental organic image in our study.

Questionnaire

Respondents assessed Ljubljana along the following pre-defined image attributes: safe, friendly, clean, environmentally friendly, boring, sustainable, crowded, expensive, and having a post-communist vibe. The attributes of interest were environmentally friendly and sustainable. The remaining attributes were included to conceal our primary research interest in the environmental image, and to serve as validation items to ensure changes were not measurement artefacts. Tourists recorded their responses using a visual analogue scale: a horizontal line with the endpoints labelled verbally as “Not at all” and “Totally”. We have chosen this particular response format despite prior work showing the superiority of using a full binary answer format in destination image measurement (Dolnicar & Grün, 2013) because we needed to be able to detect even the smallest of image differences in the pre- and the post-visit respondent cohorts. Respondents indicated their perception of Ljubljana along the horizontal line by marking the position that
best reflected their perception with a cross. The distance from the left endpoint to the cross in millimetres (0–100) served as the perception value entered in the data set. Respondents used this answer format to evaluate all image attributes. All analyses were conducted on the item level; no summated scales across items were used.

To determine potential reasons of a change in the perception of Ljubljana with respect to those attributes that reflect Ljubljana’s commitment to the environment (environmentally friendly, sustainable), post-visit respondents had the opportunity to list or describe in as much detail as they wanted – in an open-ended question – any pro-environmental initiatives they may have noticed while spending time in Ljubljana (unaided recall). After the open-ended question, post-visit respondents saw a list of pro-environmental initiatives. They ticked the initiatives they noticed (aided recall).

We captured respondents’ organized environmentalism by asking them to respond with “Yes” or “No” to the following questions: “I am a member of a pro-environmental organisation”, “I donate money to a pro-environmental organisation” and “I volunteer for a pro-environmental organisation” (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2017). Answering at least one of these statements positively classified a respondent as an organized environmentalist. We measured environmental values using the Environmental Portrait Value Scale (Bouman et al., 2018). The scale contains 17 items describing a person. Tourists chose from six answer options, ranging from “Not like me at all” to “Very much like me”. The purpose of collecting these data was to check if the pre-visit and post-visit samples were similar in value orientation and environmental activism.

At the end of the questionnaire, tourists provided information about their socio-demographic profiles, including gender, age, education, work status, income level, country of residence and nationality.

**Data analysis**

The pre- and post-visit sample characteristics – gender, age, education, work status, income level, type of guest, the purpose of the trip, environmental activism, and value orientation are presented in Table 1. We have more females and younger population responding. They are highly educated, most of them employed with average or above-average income. They travel as independent leisure guests and do not actively participate in environmental activism. We calculated t-tests for the numeric and chi-square tests for the categorical variables to test for differences between the pre-visit and post-visit groups. As there is no statistically significant difference between pre- and post-visit subsamples, we did not weight the data or control for any socio-demographic characteristics during data analysis.

**Results**

**Changes in organic destination image**

We conducted independent-samples t-tests to identify differences in perception of Ljubljana between pre-visit and post-visit tourists. This test determined whether the means of two groups are the same or different (Table 2). The overall destination image of Ljubljana is positive, before and after a visit. After having visited Ljubljana, tourists perceived Ljubljana as safer (Mpre = 80.3; SD = 17.2; Mpost = 90.2; SD = 11.3; p < .001), friendlier (Mpre = 79.8; SD = 17; Mpost = 85.4; SD = 13.8; p < .001), cleaner (Mpre = 80; SD = 16.1; Mpost = 85.2; SD = 14.6; p < .001), more environmentally friendly (Mpre = 76.1; SD = 19.7; Mpost = 86.7; SD = 13.3; p < .001), more sustainable (Mpre = 62.6; SD = 20.3; Mpost = 75; SD = 17.9; p < .001), and more crowded (Mpre = 35.6; SD = 22.9; Mpost = 52.1; SD = 26.5; p < .001) (Figure 2). The only attribute that changed in the opposite direction after the visit was the attribute post-communist vibe (Mpre = 44.6; SD = 23.0; Mpost = 35.8; SD = 22.9; p < .001). We used this attribute deliberately to check whether respondents would
rate all attributes higher after their visit. This is clearly not the case, strengthening conclusions in relation to changes in the attributes which signal an environmentally sustainable image. Experiencing Ljubljana did not change the perceptions of the city being boring \((M_{pre}=23.6; SD=23.9; M_{post}=20.3; SD=21.7; p=.21)\), or expensive \((M_{pre}=43.6; SD=22.5; M_{post}=45.6; SD=23.5; p=.45)\). Table 2 contains the detailed perception values for all attributes before and after the visit to Ljubljana. The positive characteristics of the destination: **safety, friendliness, cleanliness,**
being *environmentally friendly, sustainability* were evaluated in two upper quartiles of the scale. The highest-ranked attributes before the visit were *safe, friendly* and *clean*, while the highest-ranked attributes after the visit were *safe, environmentally friendly, friendly* and *clean*. As for the negative characteristics – *boring, crowded, expensive, post-communist vibe* – the values were lower, with the highest average achieved by any attribute being 44.6 for pre-visit tourists assessing the attribute *post-communist vibe*, and 52.1 for post-visit tourists assessing *crowded*.

In terms of change in perceptions, the biggest difference between pre-visit and post-visit occurred in *crowded* (16.4 points), *sustainable* (12.4 points) and *environmentally friendly* (10.7 points). These results indicate that visiting the destination improves the positive image perception of Ljubljana. All positive characteristics were rated higher by post-visit tourists than by pre-visit. The perception of Ljubljana having a *post-communist vibe* dropped after the visit; *crowded* increased.

From the data above we can conclude that the biggest difference is the perception of Ljubljana as *sustainable* and *environmentally friendly*, among all the positive image attributes that we have analysed. These findings support our hypotheses – noticing pro-environmental initiatives is associated with tourists’ perception of the organic environmental image of the destination as more environmentally friendly (Hypothesis 1.1) and sustainable (Hypothesis 1.2).

**Pro-environmental initiatives noticed by visitors in Ljubljana**

To ensure that survey respondents noticed the pro-environmental initiatives, we generated a dummy variable for each tourist indicating an affirmative response to the unaided or aided recall
question. The results show that 128 (of 139) post-visit tourists (92% of survey participants) noticed at least one pro-environmental initiative.

First, we asked the post-visit sample of tourists whether they have noticed any pro-environmental initiatives in Ljubljana in an open question. This is important to ensure that any image changes captured by the destination image attributes can be caused by the pro-environmental initiatives in place in Ljubljana. The open-ended question required respondents to recall initiatives without any assistance (unaided recall). Tourists reported noticing good waste management and recycling systems. Ljubljana has an innovative waste management system: waste is hidden below the surface, with bins located above the subterranean collection points. Residents have electronic cards, allowing them to open the lids of the waste bins. Tourists commented on the “super waste management practices” in our survey and on user-generated content platforms, such as TripAdvisor. Of the 139 tourists who completed the post-visit survey, 32 (23%) mentioned the waste collection and recycling system.

Sustainable transportation was also mentioned by many tourists. They noticed a distinct lack of cars driving around the city centre, viewing the large pedestrian-only spaces as a sustainable initiative. Tourists also noticed the electric car sharing system that is available throughout Ljubljana and for transport to and from the airport. Tourists can rent an electric car using their mobile phone, and leave the car at the green parking spaces marked across the city. Tourists also noticed electric buses operating in the city and driving tourists around the city centre and to the castle. In addition to the busses, there are also so-called Kavalirs: small golf-cart-like electric vehicles used by tourists and locals for transportation around the city centre. The word "Kavalir” (cavalier in English) refers to an attentive person, traditionally a gentleman, who displays courteous and helpful behaviour to a lady in his company. In relation to transport, tourists also reported using the Urbana card for local transport and the bike renting system (bicikeLJ), as well as park-and-ride system. At least one area relating to green public transport was mentioned by 27 (19%) post-visit respondents.

Another publicly visible initiative is the food waste management system on Ljubljana’s fresh products market. The market is open Monday to Saturday. Its primary purpose is the trading of fresh fruit and vegetables in a stall setup, but every Friday, spring to autumn, local restaurants have the Open Kitchen event and sell a wide variety of foods. Up to 12,000 people visit the Open Kitchen market on any given Friday during the season; many of them tourists. The local council provides recycling bins and employs a staff member to teach visitors how to correctly separate their waste. Tourists appreciated this initiative and noted it as a good sustainable practice. They also noticed a wide variety of vegetarian and vegan restaurants and vegetarian and vegan food offers. After their visit to Ljubljana, nine tourists (7%) mentioned green food practices.

Tourists also noticed less publicly visible initiatives, including beehives on the rooftop of hotels in Ljubljana, room cleaning on-demand only, and the use of the solar panels in hotels. Such initiatives were mentioned in the unaided recall open-ended question by nine (7%) post-visit respondents.

Drinking water fountains around the city were also noticed by tourists. Ljubljana’s Tourism Board launched the water fountain project in 2018 (City of Ljubljana, 2019a), consisting of a network of drinking water fountains located across town as well as maps informing people about the location of the fountains and discouraging them from using plastic bottles. Water from these fountains is free, fresh and drinkable. Tourists stated that the availability of drinking water helped them to avoid plastic bottles, and enabled them to enjoy free drinking water in the city. Seven study participants (5%) mentioned the drinking water fountains in the unaided recall question.

After the open-ended question asking about pro-environmental initiatives in unaided format, we also offered post-visit respondents a list of initiatives implemented in Ljubljana. Respondents used a full binary answer format (yes/no) to indicate which of those initiatives they noticed during their visit. This represents an aided recall measure of pro-environmental initiatives. Most
noticed were bike lanes (84% of post-visit respondents noticed them), followed by waste bins (82%), local food offers (76%), drinking fountains (73%) and electric transport (56%).

Discussion

Contribution

This study shows that pro-environmental initiatives influence the organic environmental image of a destination. Destinations around the globe invest significant financial and human resources to create and reinforce attractive induced destination image. In our study, we focus specifically on the environmental sustainability attributes of the destination image. We show empirically that the perception of a destination as being environmentally friendly and sustainable can be influenced by putting in place pro-environmental initiatives at the destination, which are noticed by tourists. Our results show that tourists’ perceptions change after the visit, and tourists can clearly recall and name the pro-environmental initiatives they saw at the destination, supporting our hypotheses. Experiencing pro-environmental initiatives influences the organic image of a destination, providing empirical evidence for the fact that – contrary to theoretical predictions – organic image can be pro-actively influenced by destinations.

This paper uses a simple idea – to investigate how pro-environmental initiatives impact the organic destination image formation. This is the first study empirically testing whether this is possible. Innovative is also the choice of destination. Prior work focuses mostly on nature-based destinations and their environmental image (e.g. Cooper Villagran, 2017; W. Lee & Jeong, 2018; Su & Swanson, 2017). Our study focuses on a city destination – a context that is not as readily associated with environmental sustainability by consumers.

The theoretical contribution lies in providing – for the first time – empirical evidence on how a destination’s organic image of being environmentally friendly and sustainable can be pro-actively managed by the destination. Organic image forms as a result of encounters of tourist with the destination, and not from marketing and promotion. Visiting a destination is one of the ways that contribute to organic image formation. In theory, organic image cannot be controlled by the destination (Gunn, 1972, 1988). We show that this is not necessarily the case. Destinations still cannot control what tourists experience during their visit, but they can adopt environmental initiatives and implement them in ways that are as visible as possible to tourists. The case of Ljubljana provides proof of principles for the effectiveness of this approach. Public visibility of pro-environmental initiatives also reduces scepticism towards advertising messages: tourists are more likely to believe the sustainability messages they receive and pay more attention to them when they see that destination is really taking action to protect the environment. As a consequence, green credentials and green marketing are likely to be more trusted. Among the most commonly noticed green initiatives in our study were biking facilities and recycling infrastructure – they are relatively easy to implement, but the effect of their visibility exceeds their individual utilitarian functions.

Implications

The practical implications of our study are important for destination managers – implementation of pro-environmental initiatives is noticed and appreciated by tourists. Our study provides the empirical evidence required for destination management to invest in actual pro-environmental initiatives. This approach, as opposed to a communication-focused approach, leads not only to destination image improvement but also to a tangible reduction of the environmental footprint of tourism at the destination.

Real pro-environmental initiatives are also easily comprehended by tourists. People prefer “easy” affective over the “difficult” cognitive messages (Cooper Villagran, 2017; Wehrli et al.,
Real pro-environmental initiatives at a destination serve as messages with high processing fluency (Hanks et al., 2016), and are likely to be more efficient in forming the environmental image of the destination. Examples of real pro-environmental initiatives include: offering local food in restaurants, installing visible recycling bins, selling locally produced souvenirs, making available sustainable transportation options, extending pedestrian areas and bike lanes, installing drinking water fountains around the city. All these initiatives are also beneficial to residents, ensuring local support.

Given the nature of tourist experiences at a destination – characterized by a short visit, hedonic motivation and heuristic information processing – tourists are less likely to engage in activities that require more effort. They are also unlikely to invest time to analyse environmental sustainability strategies of destinations. This is why destinations should make acting pro-environmentally as convenient as possible. Tourists will appreciate a “feel-good” effect from acting pro-environmentally (Venhoeven et al., 2016), even if their motivation is not initially pro-environmental.

Tourism activities, despite satisfying hedonic motives mostly, can also offer an opportunity for promoting more sustainable behaviours. Destinations, along with sharing informational messages, can offer unique possibilities to get first-hand experiences with environmentally friendly practices. When travelling, a person is more open to new experiences, and destinations can encourage pro-environmental action.

Limitations and directions for further research

Our study has a number of limitations. First, it is limited to one destination. Second, as recognized green destinations, Ljubljana and Slovenia may attract a special segment of tourists who value pro-environmental initiatives. In this case, the extent to which the initiatives are noticed may be higher than we would expect it to be in the general tourist population. Note, however, that this does not affect the findings related to the change in pro-environmental perception. Another limitation is that – as is the case with most image studies – we cannot conclude from this study that implementing publicly visible pro-environmental initiatives increases the number of tourists visiting a destination. Our conclusions are limited to changes in the image. Image, however, is known to drive destination choice (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Milman & Pizam, 1995).

We also cannot provide evidence that changes in the environmental image do not result from induced, green marketing messages that tourists receive during their stay in the destination. However, unaided control questions of noticing specific initiatives indicate that the environmental image after the visit results from seen evidence – organic agents, which, as we assume, might also improve the perception of information from green marketing initiatives.

This study focuses on international tourists. Replicating the study for domestic tourists may reveal differences in image processing. For domestic visitors, encounters with destination are multiple, especially in a small country like Slovenia. It would be difficult to get a sample of domestic first-time visitors in Slovenia, however, it can be applied to the other destinations. Previous research shows that destination image perception depends on cultural factors, and can be different for tourists from different societies (Beerli & Martín, 2004). Another direction for future research is to test how noticing pro-environmental initiatives at the destination impacts tourist pro-environmental behaviour. Future research would also benefit from including multiple destinations with different level of pro-environmental efforts, and investigating the interaction effects of organic and induced image.

Conclusions

Previous research shows that today’s tourists are well informed about environmental issues, and – as a result – critical of environmental declarations by service providers. Because the
environmental image is a factor affecting destination competitiveness, environmental claims are very common in destination marketing. For visitors, such claims may lead to information overload and an increased scepticism towards the sincerity of environmental efforts of the destination. Implementing publicly visible initiatives, which reduce environmental damage, avoids any possibility of being accused of greenwashing. If such initiatives are noticed by tourists, and if they improve tourists’ perceptions of the environmental sustainability of the destination, they offer an excellent and genuinely environmentally friendly positioning strategy. Our findings are supported by information processing theory: developing communication messages congruent with tangible evidence - such as visible pro-environmental initiatives in public spaces - helps destinations to reduce scepticism towards their environmental messages. Tourists believe it when they see it.

In this study, we demonstrate that tourists indeed do pay attention to the pro-environmental initiatives at destinations, and that noticing publicly visible initiatives positively influences the image of the destination as being environmentally friendly and sustainable. These results also provide the empirical evidence required to encourage other destinations interested in improving their image as environmentally sustainable to implement publicly visible pro-environmental initiatives. They should consider redirecting their green marketing budget towards implementing real sustainability initiatives which will have a real positive influence in terms of reducing the negative impact of tourism on the environment. Therein lies the practical value of our study. Implementing pro-environmental initiatives has a number of positive outcomes: reduction in the extent of environmental damage caused, opportunities for tourist to learn about behaving in an environmentally friendly way, avoidance of greenwash scepticism, and improvement of the environmental image of the destination and consequently, its competitiveness, especially among the increasing number of environmentally aware consumers.

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**ORCID**

Iana Bilynets [http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0700-3119](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0700-3119)
Ljubica Knezevic Cvelbar [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6086-5979](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6086-5979)
Sara Dolnicar [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5176-3161](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5176-3161)

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