



DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURIST BRAND "STARA ZAGORA, BULGARIA"

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ABSTRACT

Stara Zagora, Bulgaria has a rich cultural history, folklore traditions, natural features, industrial heritage and a number of sporting achievements. It is part of the rich history of our country in the formation of the Bulgarian identity.

For decades, the local community has been trying to build and impose a brand on the tourist market that would attract potential tourists. Potential tourists, whose permanent residence and place of work are outside Stara Zagora, outline a different profile of the city as a tourist destination

Methods used: survey, regional analysis and synthesis.

Main results: the study of the attitudes of the local population and potential tourists reveals the intersection between the messages of the local community and the expectations of tourists.

Keywords: alternative tourism, brand, tourist destination

INTRODUCTION

In the decision-making process for any journey in the field of tourism, the brand identity of a destination or tourist site plays a crucial role.

The specialized literature makes a clear distinction between concepts such as image, brand, and reputation, with many authors offering their own interpretations of these terms. (1–4)

It is generally accepted that image is related to a destination's favorable reputation and the recognizability of its competitive advantages, which shape tourists' preferences. At the same time, "the unique positioning of a tourist destination and the establishment of its image is closely linked to the development of its brand." Furthermore, "a brand can successfully elevate the image of a destination, but image alone cannot build a brand." (5)

The phrase "Image is the present, brand is the past, and reputation is your future" has gained wide popularity. (6)

According to the Tourism Act in Bulgaria, the brand represents a unique combination of emotional and rational perceptions of a destination and the type of product it offers—distinguishing it from competing destinations as the most suitable for specific target market segments. (7)

In academic literature, branding is seen primarily as a means to create in the consumer's mind a sense of uniqueness about a product or service offered to a potential buyer. In practice, branding can apply to any category—products, services, individuals, activities, and even countries or nations. (8)

Some scholars argue that "the unique positioning of a tourism destination and the establishment of its image are closely related to the development of its brand." It is commonly accepted that the creation of a tourism brand must consider local perceptions of the place and must be discussed and adopted by the local

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community, local leaders, and local authorities. (5)

According to other authors, “the vision for sustainable tourism development” requires in-depth research into tourism dynamics at both local and regional levels. Detailed study of the impacts of tourism development on destinations and specific places is essential. Overall, Bulgarian tourism would benefit if the interest of potential tourists were directed toward specific towns, villages, and destinations within the country. (9)

The consistency – or inconsistency – between marketing, advertising, and PR messages used to promote a given place and the actual situation on the ground, as well as the values and attitudes of the local population, determine whether tourists will return, and whether they will recommend a particular city or cultural site. (10) While a brand should be embraced by the local community, the destination's image according to potential tourists must also be taken into account in its development.

Identifying and developing a successful brand campaign should aim to communicate and demonstrate to potential tourists the uniqueness of the locality and its positioning within a specific market niche. The campaign must reflect the current state of the tourism market, align with modern tourist demands, and be easily perceived. It is crucial that no other city or locality can offer a similar product. This, in turn, would not only attract visitors and tourists but also enhance the social status of the city.

METHODS

Survey, regional analysis and synthesis. To collect empirical data, a structured questionnaire was used with the following sections:

- Demographic profile of respondents
- Awareness of the symbols of the city of Stara Zagora
- Attractiveness of Stara Zagora as a tourist destination; significance of its tourist landmarks

RESULTS

To date, Stara Zagora has yet to secure its place on Bulgaria's tourism map and to establish itself as a unique destination. Over the past decades,

STOYKOVA B.

there have been multiple attempts to develop a brand for the country's fifth-largest city. However, these efforts have lacked consistency. The local municipality, tourism organizations, associations, and businesses spontaneously respond to each new idea. When an idea fails to establish itself on the tourism market, it is quickly replaced with the next one.

During the second decade of the 21st century, numerous proposals emerged from the local community to build and promote a brand for Stara Zagora to attract potential tourists.

In 2012, then-Member of Parliament and businessman Plamen Rusev proposed that the city be declared "the center of the Universe" – an idea he even patented. The project's main goal was to attract more tourists.

The initiative was widely publicized in the media. The Bulgarian National Television (BNT) aired a series of interviews (11), including:

- Dr. Alexey Stoev, Director of the local observatory, who highlighted the fact that the first astronomical observatory in Bulgaria was established in Stara Zagora.

Full quote: “We are closely connected with space and the Universe, and as such a modern city, we should be able to say - and have the right to say - Stara Zagora is the center of the Universe.”

- Other local residents also voiced their support, proudly stating that after every trip, they always return to the center of the Universe.

Plamen Rusev, a leading hotelier and restaurateur in Stara Zagora, officially patented his idea. He branded his company vehicles and placed billboards at the entrances to the city that read: “Welcome to Stara Zagora – The Center of the Universe.” (12) **(Image 1)**

In the years that followed, the idea continued to evolve. A donation fund was established with the aim of building a monument marking the "Center of the Universe." According to the initiators, monuments that denote the end or the center of the world attract numerous tourists. However, no city has yet been officially recognized as the Center of the Universe. (13-15)



Image 1. Plamen Rusev in front of one of the branded company vehicles (The photograph is presented in its original format, with the text on it in Bulgarian). Photo: Sashka Panayotova (12)

The Municipal Council of Stara Zagora approved the launch of a competition for the creation of the monument "Stara Zagora – Center of the Universe." The proposal was adopted by majority vote at a regular session of the local parliament. In September 2019, an official competition titled "PROJECT-CONCEPT COMPETITION FOR A SYMBOL: CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE" was

announced on the official website of the Municipality of Stara Zagora. (16) **(Image 2)** The competition was also commented on by the then Minister of Tourism, Nikolina Angelkova, who stated that "it is extremely important for local communities to propose interesting and innovative initiatives that will benefit the tourism sector." (17)

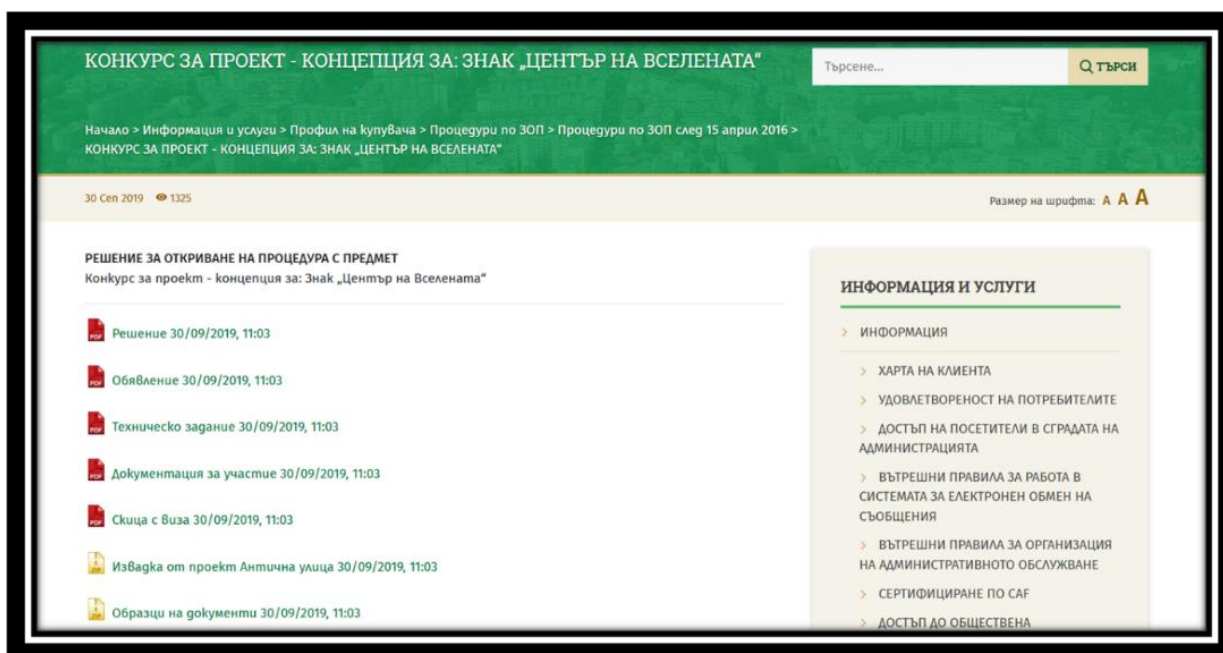


Image 2. Announcement for the project-concept competition for the symbol "Center of the Universe" (The photograph is presented in its original format, with the text on it in Bulgarian). See Official website of the Municipality of Stara Zagora (16)

In the same year, the procedure was terminated. **(Image 3)**

Over the years, the local community has repeatedly returned to the idea of Stara Zagora as the center of the universe. In 2023, during the third edition of the youth science and space festival "Hello, Space! Bulgaria Calling!", held at Sofia Tech Park, the local observatory was represented

with several pavilions under the slogans "Stara Zagora – the space capital of Bulgaria" and "Stara Zagora – center of the universe." (18) In 2024, a group of students from the Film and Theatre Arts program "In Focus" at Veselin Hanchev Primary School No. IX in Stara Zagora created a promotional video for the city titled "Stara Zagora – Center of the Universe." (19)



ОБЩИНА СТАРА ЗАГОРА

РЕШЕНИЕ

№ 10-00-2575/19.11.2019 г.

На основание чл. 22, ал. 1, т. 8, чл. 108, т. 4 и чл. 110, ал. 1, т. 1 от ЗОП и във връзка с Решение № 10-00-1987/26.09.2019 г. на ВРИД Кмет на Община Стара Загора за откриване на процедура за възлагане на обществена поръчка чрез открит конкурс за проект по Закона за обществените поръчки, с предмет: **КОНЦЕПЦИЯ ЗА: Знак „Център на Вселената“** публикувано обявление в РОП на 30.09.2019 г., с уникален № 00774-2019-0054.

ПРЕКРАТЯВАМ

процедура за възлагане на обществена поръчка чрез открит конкурс за проект с предмет: **КОНЦЕПЦИЯ ЗА: Знак „Център на Вселената“**

Мотиви и основание:

В рамките на определения от Възложителя срок, не е постъпил нито един конкурсен проект.

Налице е хипотезата на чл. 110, ал. 1, т. 1 предл. 1 от ЗОП, а именно Възложителят прекратява процедурата с мотивирано решение, когато не е подаден нито един конкурсен проект.

Настоящото решение може да бъде обжалвано по реда на чл. 196 и сл. от ЗОП пред Комисията за защита на конкуренцията относно неговата законосъобразност в 10-дневен срок от получаването му.

Image 3. Announcement for the termination of the project-concept competition for the symbol “Center of the Universe” (The photograph is presented in its original format, with the text on it in Bulgarian). See Official website of the Municipality of Stara Zagora (16)

Numerous international documents that regulate the tourism development of individual destinations place particular emphasis on the interests of local communities. For instance, the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism emphasizes that communities located in areas where heritage-related resources are found possess specific rights and responsibilities in managing them. The interaction between natural and cultural wealth and tourism is dynamic and constantly evolving, generating both opportunities and challenges. (20)

In Bulgarian academic literature, it is widely accepted that the creation of a brand for any settlement should not only reflect its representation as a tourist destination but should also consider public opinion and local cultural development. (10)

In this regard, an author-conducted survey from 2013 titled “Recognition of the Symbols of the City of Stara Zagora” produced the following results (**Figure 1**):

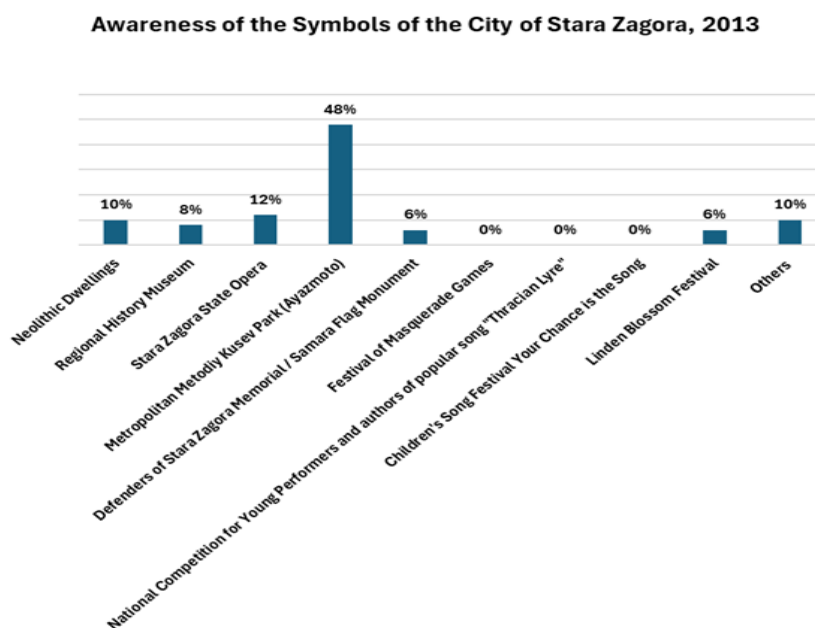


Figure 1. Awareness of the symbols of the city of Stara Zagora, 2013

Among the main landmarks, Ayazmoto (officially Mitropolit Metodi Kusev Park) clearly stands out as the most recognizable symbol of Stara Zagora (48%). It is followed by the Stara Zagora State Opera (12%) and the Neolithic Dwellings Museum (10%).

It should be noted that the study was conducted among students at Trakia University, enrolled in tourism-related programs, and residing in Stara Zagora. The surveyed students identified Ayazmoto Park as the most recognizable local landmark. According to local legend, this is where Prince Boris I converted to Christianity. (21-22) Additionally, the park includes several key attractions such as the Stara Zagora Zoo, the Summer Theater, the Hall of Laughter with its distorted mirrors, the “Frog” fountain, and the residence of the Stara Zagora Metropolitan. Nearby is the Beroe sports complex.

Stara Zagora’s rich cultural and historical heritage also allows for the development of other concepts

aimed at highlighting the city’s historical significance in the formation of the Bulgarian state. For example, in 2015, at the initiative of Mayor Zhivko Todorov, a 300-meter-long national flag – the largest in the country – was carried on Bulgaria’s national holiday, March 3, from the municipality to the Memorial Complex “Defenders of Stara Zagora.”

The “Defenders of Stara Zagora” Memorial, also known as the “Samara Flag,” is one of the city’s iconic monuments and is part of Bulgaria’s Top 100 National Tourist Sites. It was inaugurated in 1977 to mark the centennial of the battles for Stara Zagora. Historical records indicate that it was here that Bulgarian volunteers, led by the bearer of the Samara Flag, received their baptism by fire. Many flag bearers perished but never allowed the flag to fall into enemy hands.

For over a decade now, the march held on March 3 continues to attract participants, including both locals and many guests of the city. (Image 4)



Image 4. Announcement for the festive march on the occasion of Bulgaria’s National Holiday, March 3 (The photograph is presented in its original format, with the text on it in Bulgarian). See Official website of the Municipality of Stara Zagora (23)

In the new decade, efforts have been made to revive the emblematic “Festivals under the Linden Trees,” popular in the early 21st century. The

initiative “Weekends in Stara Zagora” has also been launched. (Image 5)



Image 5. Announcement for the organization of cultural events in Stara Zagora (The photograph is presented in its original format, with the text on it in Bulgarian). See Official website of the Municipality of Stara Zagora (24)

In 2020, Manuela Gerenova, lifestyle editor at the popular website WebCafe, published an article titled “Stara Zagora on Three Planets and a Portion of Pig’s Ears.” (25) Thus, a local delicacy – pig’s ears – gained visibility in public

discourse, recognized by many city visitors as a culinary “masterpiece.” In 2024, the author expanded her article, adding more attractions for potential visitors to enjoy. (26)



Image 6. Publication on a popular site (The photograph is presented in its original format, with the text on it in Bulgarian). See the Web Media Group page (25)

In 2025, the first Festival of the Stara Zagora Delicacy – Pig’s Ears – was held. Under the striking headline “Pig’s Ears at the Center of the Universe,” the media widely covered the event. The festival sparked significant interest, drawing 10,000 visitors who consumed more than 1.5 tons of pig’s ears. The organizers noted

several issues, including the fact that not all attendees were able to taste the rapidly depleted delicacy. It is worth noting the strong interest shown by visitors from Shumen, Haskovo, Plovdiv, Chirpan, Dimitrovgrad, Sofia, and many other locations. (27-29) (Images 7, 8)

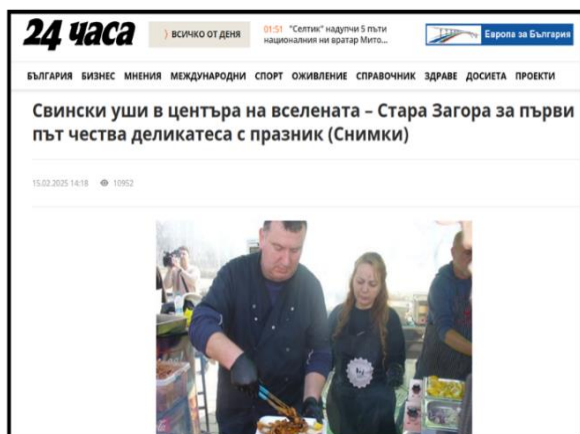


Image 7. Culinary tastings (The photograph is presented in its original format, with the text on it in Bulgarian). Photo: Vanyo Stoilov (28)

The event invitation on the official website of the Municipality of Stara Zagora noted that in the field of culinary tourism, pig’s ears have become emblematic of the city and have promoted it as a destination for decades. There is an expressed expectation that this attractive event will become annual and be included in the city’s cultural calendar. (30)

Academic literature supports the notion that studying the attitudes of the local population



Image 8. Culinary tastings (The photograph is presented in its original format, with the text on it in Bulgarian). Photo: Radio Stara Zagora (29)

and their perceptions of place can reveal a profile that differs significantly from the one constructed by state and tourism institutions. (10) However, data from the recent event in Stara Zagora suggest that external visitors’ interests may diverge from the symbolism offered by the local community.

In this context, a popular local journalist noted that the first Pig’s Ear Festival in Stara Zagora sparked an “intellectual debate – is it

appropriate for a city vying to be the European Capital of Culture in 2032 to host a pig's ear festival?" It was ultimately concluded that the delicacy is indeed part of the city's cultural heritage. (31)

The events and festivals described above have reached a broad public audience and are part of the rich cultural calendar organized in Stara Zagora since the beginning of the 21st century. For the purposes of this study, a new survey titled "Recognition of the Symbols of Stara Zagora – 2025" was conducted. The survey was carried out between May and June 2025. Participants in the Scientific Conference with International Participation "30 Years of Trakia University," held on May 16–17, 2025, were also invited to participate.

Analysis of the Collected Data. Results

(Figure 2):

A total of 61 valid questionnaires were collected. The sample consisted of 68% women and 32% men. The age distribution ranged widely – from under 18 (2%) to over 60 (3%). Most respondents were aged 41–59 (43%), followed by those aged 26–40 (32%), and 18–

25 (20%). Social status was consistent with these demographics. The largest share were employed (82%), followed by students (27%) and only 2% unemployed.

Respondents reported income ranging from below the 2025 minimum wage of 1,077 BGN to above the maximum insurable income of 3,750 BGN. Approximately 33% reported earnings up to 3,750 BGN, and 22% up to 2,000 BGN. About 12% reported earnings below the minimum wage, and 15% above the maximum. To account for both locals' and tourists' viewpoints, the study included both groups – 57% were permanent residents of Stara Zagora, while 38% resided in other locations in Bulgaria.

The 2025 results echoed the findings of the 2013 survey. In 2025, 49% of respondents identified Mitropolit Metodiy Kusev Park (Ayazmoto) as the most recognizable symbol of the city, compared to 48% in 2013. Thus, in both surveys, nearly half of respondents recognized Ayazmoto as Stara Zagora's most prominent landmark.

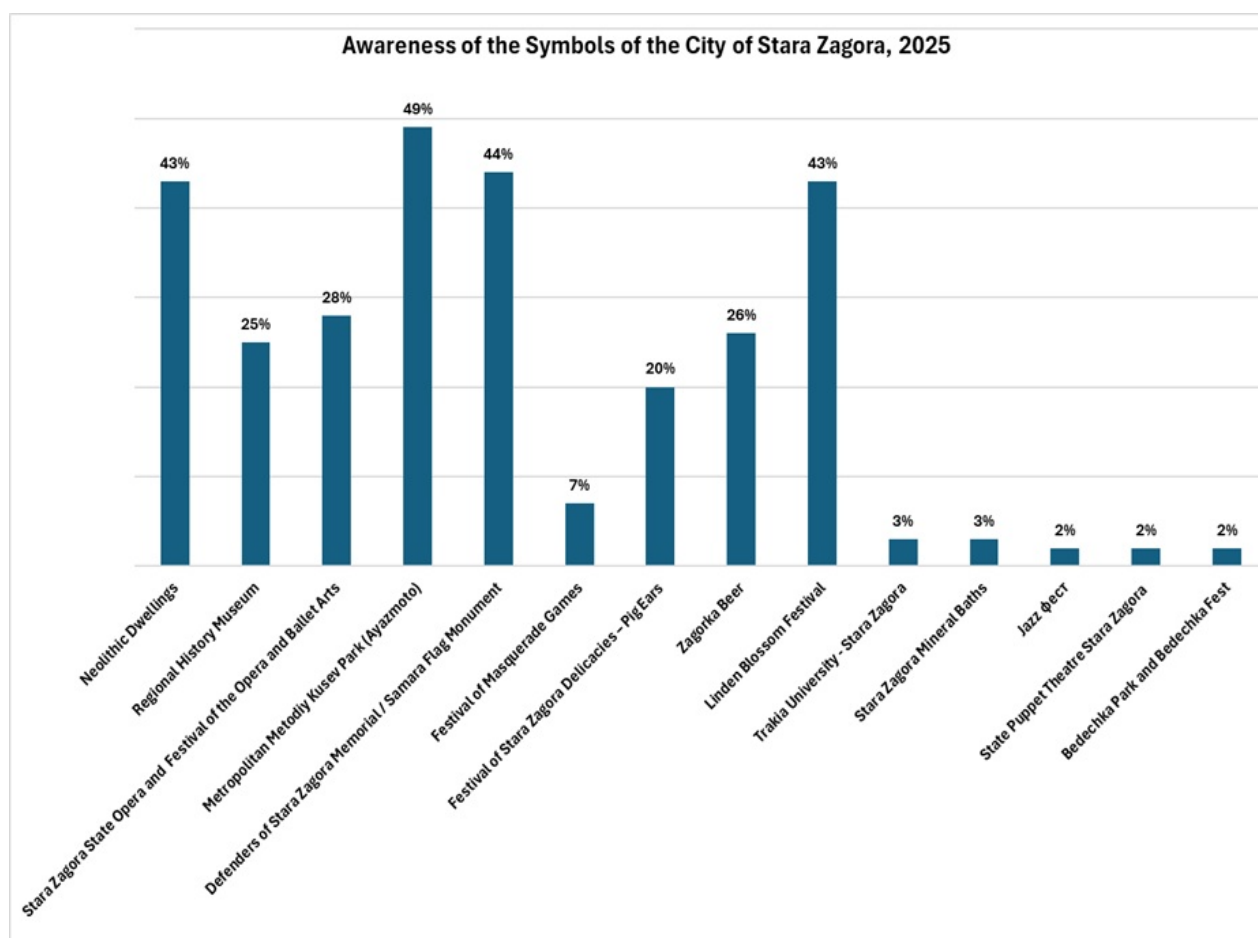


Figure 2. Awareness of the symbols of the city of Stara Zagora, 2025

In the final survey question, participants were asked to rank the city's landmarks by importance.

The Samara Flag followed with 44%, then the Neolithic Dwellings and the Linden Festivals, each receiving 43%.

Notably, the newly created culinary festival – the Pig's Ear Festival – which debuted in 2025, was recognized by 20% of respondents. In contrast, other festivals with several past editions, such as the Jazz Fest and Bedechka Fest, received only 2% each.

As multiple responses were allowed, the total exceeds 100%.

The “Defenders of Stara Zagora” Memorial (Samara Flag) ranked first, followed by the Regional Historical Museum. In third place were the Stara Zagora State Opera and the Festival of Opera and Ballet Arts. The Neolithic Dwellings ranked fourth, and Ayazmoto fifth. The Pig's Ear Festival placed sixth.

Respondents also mentioned other attractions likely to interest tourists, including: the Festival of Masquerade Games, Zagorka Beer, the Linden Festivals, the Beer Museum, St. Nicholas Church, the Hall of Laughter, the zoo, the city's clocks, the Antique Forum, the Museum of Religions (Eski Mosque), the Geo Milev House Museum, the House of the Architect, and the two museums at Trakia University – the Horse and Equestrian Sports Museum and the Anatomy Museum.

Nearby attractions such as Stara Zagora Mineral Baths and the Virgin Mary's Footprint site were also mentioned.

DISCUSSION

As a result of the conducted study, the following findings and recommendations were formulated:

- Based on the awareness of the symbols of the city of Stara Zagora, the attractiveness of the city's tourist landmarks should be identified and ranked in order of significance from the perspective of potential tourists and local residents.
- The target group to which the Municipality of Stara Zagora should direct its tourism efforts must be clearly defined. Based on this, the interests of relevant stakeholders should also be identified.
- Few survey-based studies have been carried out on this subject. A comprehensive database

should be developed through analysis and evaluation of tourists' experiences, including their positive emotional responses (such as patriotic pride, aesthetic appreciation, gastronomic enjoyment, etc.).

- The duration of tourist stays should be extended by enhancing the designated brand and complementing it with sub-brands. The overall strategy should further address the development of appropriate infrastructure and superstructure, as well as supplementary tourist attractions.

CONCLUSION

In today's modern global economy, there is ongoing competition for investment, human resources, customers, visitors, and attention. Tourist destinations have also become active participants in this competition.

The national brand of any country is an aggregate of its cities, towns, and even its smallest settlements. It is defined by the people who form these communities, by the traditions and values they uphold, and by the history that has accumulated over centuries.

Every place, every corner of our country, has the potential to develop and promote its own brand and identity, rooted in its culture and local lifestyle. This could attract potential tourists and position it prominently on the national tourist map.

Stara Zagora is still in the process of discovering and establishing its brand to enter the tourism market. Today's tourism market is demand-driven—dominated by the preferences of the consumer rather than the seller. Therefore, it is imperative to formulate an appropriate strategy that enables the city to enter the consciousness of potential visitors, to foster their loyalty, and to encourage them to not only recommend the destination but also to return with their friends and family.

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