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Defining and Managing City Brand Essence: Case Study of Vranje

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INTRODUCTION

City branding history can be traced to early historical periods, when the first major human settlements appeared. However, the practice of city branding did not get its modern form until the nineteenth century (Kavaratzis, 2004). At that time, cities began to pay more attention to their public appearance, that is, to undertake individual promotional activities. Later, in the second half of the twentieth century, along with the strengthening of competition in the location market, city branding became even more significant and meaningful. Concepts that were adopted modeled the branding of corporations, but over time, new and specific patterns appeared in the practice of city branding. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the scope of empirical and conceptual knowledge on city branding has further increased, which is understandable given that, due to growing globalisation, the competition among cities has never been so fierce (Ciuculescu & Luca, 2022). In other words, cities use branding as an instrument in order to improve their competitiveness, i.e. to achieve a prominent position in the consciousness of target groups (Ahn, 2021). For that reason, in the previous decade, city branding has received a lot of attention not only in academic circles, but also in practice (Ma et al., 2021). More and more cities are making planned efforts to promote their attractiveness to various stakeholders (Rodrigues & Schmidt, 2021).

This paper outlines the importance of the brand essence for a city and analyzes the process of determining and managing the city brand essence. The paper provides the theoretical foundation of city branding as well as actual research conducted in Vranje with two target groups: residents and visitors. In addition to academic publications on the issue of city branding, this paper attempts to highlight practical tools and the essence of the branding process itself using the city of Vranje as an example.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first part of the paper were presented some of the most important definitions of brand essence and were formulated the basic postulates related to this topic. The second part of the paper tackled the most commonly used methodologies that

Abstract: The paper highlights that in the process of identifying the brand essence, it is not enough to simply carry out quantitative research, but an in-depth study of the city's history and culture is also necessary - language, customs, myths, legends, symbols, values, and lifestyle. Valid responses on specially designed questionnaire for this research were collected in the city of Vranje from 389 participants (195 valid responses by residents and 194 by the visitors) while 16 participants participated in qualitative research (focus groups and semi-structured in-depth interviews). Determining the city brand essence requires the application of different research methods and techniques to understand the overall city's tradition and culture. A complete success in city branding can only be achieved if the brand essence is clearly defined, i.e. if this „core" generates enough of the brand's internal energy. Proposed solutions should provide an easier „orientation" in finding and managing the brand essence of the city. In this way, it is possible to discover the „heart and soul" of cities and activate their hidden potentials for brand development.

Keywords: *Brand, City Branding, City Brand Essence, Genius Loci, Brand Pyramid Model*

are used in the process of researching and determining the brand essence. In the next segment, this issue was discussed in the context of the city of Vranje in Republic of Serbia, where is explained how the brand essence of this city was „discovered" through quantitative and qualitative research. Finally, after presentation of results and discussing certain aspects of finding city brand essence, several most important conclusions and recommendations were formulated.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW: BRAND ESSENCE

Brand essence (Brand core, Brand kernel, Brand code, Brand mantra) is a term in general branding theory and practice that has been differently interpreted. Hugh Davidson (1987) uses the term „Brand core" with belief that brands have an „Inner core" and „Outer core". The inner core is made of essential qualities that significantly define the brand. If these qualities change, the integrity of the brand will be altered or damaged. The outer core consists of qualities that are not that important and can be altered if needed in certain stages of brand development. Similarly, Jean-Noël Kapferer (1994) describes the brand essence as a „kernel" (Brand kernel), which has a special „genetic programme". According to this author, brand's external manifestations can be changed and adapted to current trends, but that the „kernel" must be respected. Kevin Keller (2007) uses the term „Brand mantra" synonymously with „Core brand promise" and defines them as three to five words which express the most important aspects of a brand and key brand associations. This author believes that the purpose of brand mantra is to set brand boundaries, as well as to clearly express the uniqueness of the brand. He states that the primary goal of brand mantra is to delineate what the brand is supposed to represent in a meaningful, relevant and brief manner within the organisation. In this way, it becomes the guiding idea of a brand. In literature, apart from the term „Brand essence", „Core ideology" is also used by Collins and Porras (2004) to denote the only thing which the company should not change. Lynn Upshaw (1995) uses the term „Brand essence" in the context of building brand identity. In that sense, it treats it as a „centre", a basic value that marks the brand and permeates all other aspects of the brand, as the „core of core". Tim Kelly (1998), who defined this term as „the core value or set of values that brand stands for", or as „Brand DNA", shares the same view. Brand essence keeps all brand elements and brand activities together. The famous brand experts, Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), sees this term as the „soul of a brand" that should be timeless, that is, it should resonate the energy of a brand while the brand exists. He believes that brand essence should include all aspects of a brand and association related to the brand, and express them in one or few words in the form of brand essence statement.

Based on the previous remarks, it can be concluded that the concept of „brand essence" has been differently named and defined. This shows that this notion is rather „elusive", or abstract and difficult to determine. However, it is perfectly clear that, without a clearly defined essence, the brand represents an „empty shell". Brand essence could be described as the main source of brand energy, its inspiration and driving force. It is an „elementary particle" which forms a brand, the purpose, or the reason for brand's existence (*raison d'être*). Everything starts and ends with it. Brand essence is basically an idea and emotion that can be verbalised (Urde, 2016).

In literature on city branding, there is not much written about the brand essence. However, in this respect, the term „sense of place" or „spirit of a place" (lat. *Genius loci*) is most commonly used. The term „spirit of a place" in its original meaning has a profound religious meaning and represents the deity that protects the city („protector of the city"). On the basis of the belief in this deity or mythological being, the inhabitants began to celebrate its powers, characteristics and character. In this way, the city gained recognition, which is expressed in its material and non-material shapes. The material forms are monuments, temples, sanctuaries and symbols dedicated to the city's protector. On the other hand, myths, legends, rituals, festivities and ceremonies represent an intangible testimony of the history of the city. The meaning of the term „spirit of a place" has been modified and extended, and nowadays this term is mostly used in architecture, mainly in the context of the preservation and revitalisation of the old city parts, i.e. heritage and tradition in the broader sense (Vogler & Vittori, 2006). In addition to the development of theory and practice of location branding, this term has been increasingly used as a synonym for the location brand essence, i.e. the city brand essence (Skinner, 2011). In accordance with this understanding, the city brand essence or the spirit of a city is determined by the material (buildings, sites, landscapes) and non-material elements (memories, stories, rituals, festivals, knowledge, values, scents). It gives a deeper meaning to a place and affects its character. It practically exists in all cultures

of the world through interaction between people, who tend to fulfill their social needs. Communities that inhabit a place, especially traditional societies, are extremely devoted to the preservation of its vitality, continuity and spirituality (International Council on Monuments and Sites, 2008). Nicola Dempsey (2008) studied the notion of the „spirit of a place" from the point of view of an architect, city planner and urbanist. This author noted that the „spirit of a city", or the city essence, can be recognised in the physical environment, and it is created spontaneously - it cannot be designed (Dempsey, 2008). Jurate Markeviciene (2008) also shares this view and concludes that the „genius loci" is not created but experienced. Anetta Kepczynska-Walczak and Marek Walczak (2013) believe that the term „spirit of a place" is very complex and abstract, and therefore it is very difficult to identify, define and explain it. Every city is specific and has its own unique „spirit of a place" that distinguishes it from other cities. Without it, the connection between people and cities would be lost, which would have a negative effect on the quality of life in that city. Also, the „spirit of a city" represents the foundation on which the city's brand develops. Brand essence represents very important concept for better understanding brands and brand activities (Barnham, 2018). The business knowledge and practice is becoming adjusted and applied in the process of city branding (Björner & Aronsson, 2022; Rinaldi et al., 2021). The successful city brand needs to be focused on harmonizing the interests of various stakeholders, but also all available tangible and intangible resources (Ahn, 2021). Each city has its brand authenticity that increases brand equity, influences on trust and loyalty, and provide added value to stakeholders (Södergren, 2021).

It is more difficult to determine city brand essence than the brand essence of products, services or corporations, because a city is a very complex structure. In order to determine the city essence, it is necessary to completely „immerse" yourself in the past, culture and tradition, to understand the city lifestyle, the mentality of people who lived and still live in it.
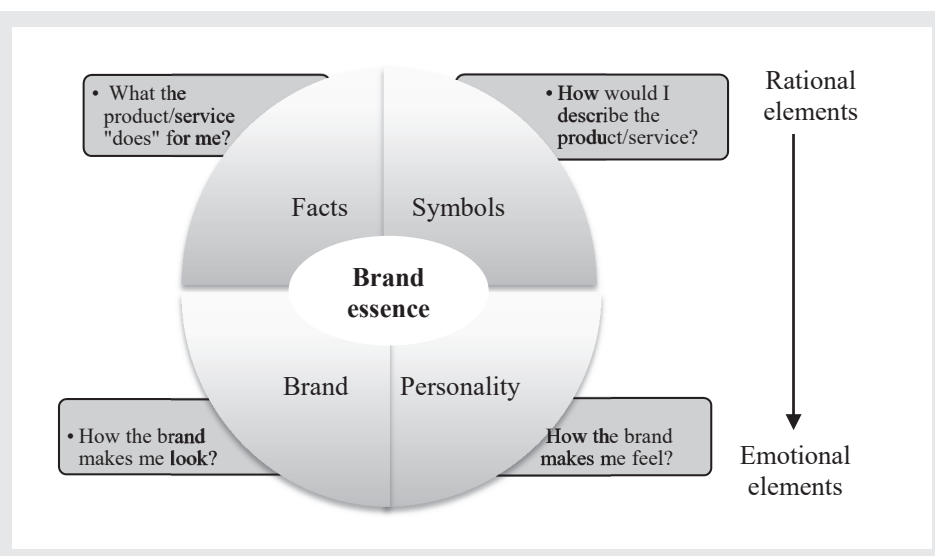
2. MODELS FOR DETERMINING CITY BRAND ESSENCE

In the general branding theory, Brand Essence Wheel, so-called „wheel", is used as a useful tool for determining the brand essence. This model appears in several versions in literature. It is most frequently shown as a circular diagram whose upper half illustrates the rational, and the lower half emotional brand elements. In the center of this circle is the brand essence, that equally contains both the rational and emotional components of a brand (Figure 1).

This model can also be applied in city branding, but it needs to be modified. When it comes to the rational level, facts and symbols should be determined for a city instead of a product or service, and on the emotional level city brand personality should be defined. In fact, research has shown that the brand personality concept can be successfully applied in city branding (Glinska & Kilon, 2014).

A similar, but very simplified model of brand essence, which has only three elements is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Circular Moder for determining brand essence (Brand Essence Wheel)

- What the product/service "does" for me?
- How would I describe the product/service?

Facts   Symbols

Brand essence

Brand   Personality

- How the brand makes me look?
- How the brand makes me feel?

Rational elements

Emotional elements

Source: Adapted from Ted Bates Worldwide (1993)

Figure 2. Brand model in the shape of concentric circles

- Brand Core
- Brand Space
- Brand Shell
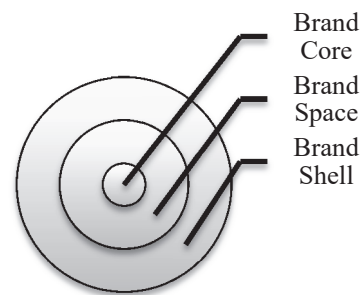
Source: Adapted from Hoffman & Forcher Marketing Research (2018)

Brand shell is the „surface" of a brand. Those are the brand forms which a user sees - brand attributes, i.e. its characteristics, and visual features (logo, sign, packaging, colors). Also, different forms of brand communication with the environment can be perceived at this level. Below is the brand space that contains a deeper sense of a brand. Here are the values of a brand, its benefits and brand-related ideas. Also, users' associations that the brand causes are also in this area. The brand space cannot be seen from the outside, but the elements in this level determine the meaning of a brand. Finally, brand core, which contains the brand purpose or the reason of its existence, is in the centre. The brand core is usually emotionally deep-seated. City brand essence can also be shown based on this model. The elements that affect residents, visitors and investors' perception of the city are on the surface. Below are the elements that determine people's opinion of the city. Finally, at the deepest level, in the brand core, is the essence that determines how people feel about the city.

Heather Skinner (2011) constructed a special model that shows the city brand essence (The Place Brand Essence Model). At the heart of this model is the natural environment, that is, the physical elements of a city. The invisible elements of a place (cultural, historical, political and social) are placed around this nucleus, while sensory elements are on the surface (Figure 3).

Based on Figure 3, it can be concluded that the author believes that the city brand essence, or the spirit of a place, is not simply an imaginary expression of a physical location. There exist a „trinity" between physical, non-material (historical, cultural, political, and social backgrounds), and sensory elements (symbols, staged spectacles, smells, sounds, etc.).

In practice, Brand Pyramid is the most frequently used as a tool for determining and displaying the brand essence (Figure 4). Rational attributes are at the first level of this pyramid, while the emotional attributes are at the next level. After that, at the third level, it is necessary to define the personality (character) of a brand, and then a positioning statement. At the very top, it is necessary to find the brand essence.

Figure 3. The Place Brand Essence Model

- Sensory elements, staged spectacles, symbolic elements
- Historical, cultural, political and social elements
- Natural environment, physical elements
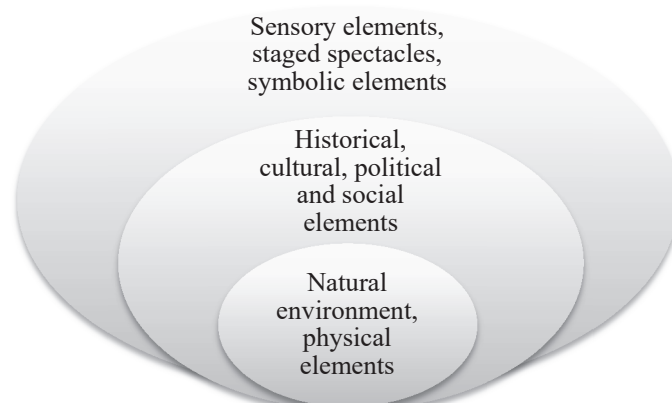
Source: Adapted from Skinner (2011, p. 288)

Figure 4. Brand Pyramid Model

Brand Essence

Brand Positioning

Brand Personality

Emotional attributes of a brand

Rational attributes of a brand
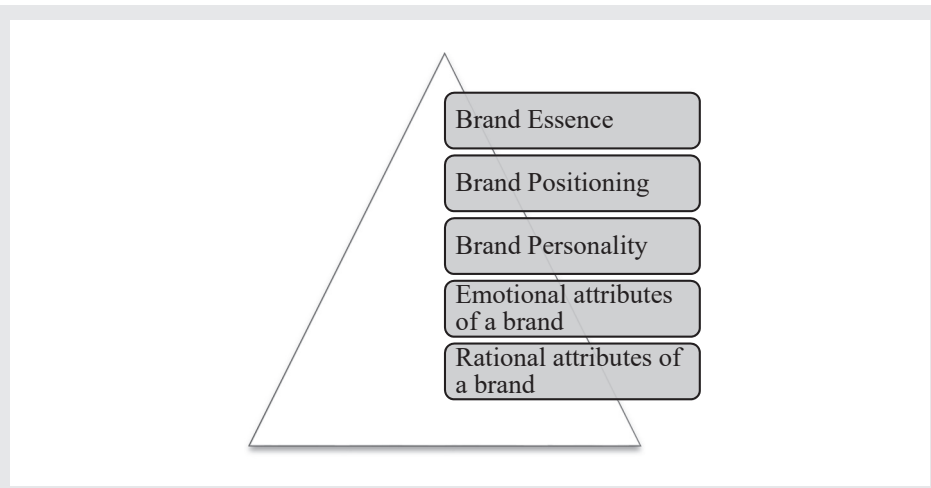
Source: Adapted from Acorn Tourism Consulting (2010)

In a circular diagram, the start is from the centre (brand essence) and then the logic moves towards the shell, which contains the visible elements of a brand. On the other hand, the brand pyramid model is usually used to show the hierarchical structure of the brand. The most important level is at the top of the pyramid. In this case, the brand essence is at the highest level, and below are brand positioning, brand personality, emotional and rational attributes of a brand. This means that it is necessary to first determine the brand essence, and then harmonise all other elements and brand decisions. This approach was applied in the branding project of Vranje, a city in the south of Republic of Serbia.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research is to discover and establish brand essence of the city of Vranje. This city is located in southern Republisc of Serbia and occupies an area of 860 km². According to the 2015 data, there are 81986 inhabitants in Vranje. Vranje is the first city in Serbia that adopted a brand strategy, which includes several basic segments: (1) mission; (2) vision; (3) brand identity; (4) brand positioning; and (5) brand architecture.

Research Methodology. Research was conducted in the city of Vranje and consisted two phases. The *first phase* of the research was quantitative research with specially designed questionnaire that consisted of ten questions. The first three questions were close-ended profiling questions related to gender, age and level of education of the respondents. The next five questions were semi-open and served to identify the important

characteristics of Vranje, which differs it from other cities. The last two questions are open-ended and enabled the residents and visitors of Vranje to freely express their first associations regarding Vranje. This questionnaire was tested and distributed in paper and electronic form, in Serbian and English. A total of 195 valid questionnaires filled in by residents and 194 questionnaires filled in by the visitors of Vranje was collected. The collected responses were processed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences – SPSS, version 21.0. (Armonk, NY: IBM Corporation). *The second phase* of the research encompassed several qualitative techniques (focus groups, semi-structured in-depth interviews).The participants in qualitative research (a total of 16 members) were employees in the city administration of Vranje, in the Tourist Organization, National Museum, Archive, public and utility companies and local media. Based on the discussion within the participants, a more complete interpretation and deeper understanding of the results obtained by the quantitative research (in the first phase of research) was provided. In addition, three in-depth interviews with city managers were carried out and several other elements, that define the „spirit of the city", i.e. the brand essence of Vranje, were identified in this way.

Sample description. Key characteristics of participants in the research are presented in following tables. As it is shown in Table 1, there were slightly more women than men in both group of participants – residents and visitors.

Regarding the age structure, the largest number of participants aged between 36 and 45 in both group of participants – residents and visitors (Table 2). The age structure of the residents is very similar

Table 1. Gender structure of participants in the quantitative research

Gender	Residents		Visitors	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Women	100	51.3	102	52.6
Men	95	48.7	90	46.4
No response	0	0.0	2	1.0
Total	195	100.0	194	100.0

Source: Authors

Table 2. Age structure of the participants in the quantitative research

Age category	Residents		Visitors	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
18 – 25 years of age	33	16.9	31	16.0
26 –35 years of age	43	22.1	35	18.0
36 – 45 years of age	52	26.7	55	28.4
46 – 55 years of age	31	15.9	40	20.6
Over 55 years of age	36	18.5	33	17.0
Total	195	100.0	194	100.0

Source: Authors

Table 3. Educational structure of the participants in the quantitative research

| Level of education	Residents		Visitors	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Primary school	2	1.0	7	3.6
Secondary school	58	29.7	63	32.5
Post-secondary education	21	10.8	41	21.1
Bachelor's and Master's degree	109	55.9	76	39.2
PhD studies	5	2.6	7	3.6
Total	195	100.0	194	100.0

Source: Authors

to the age structure of visitors of Vranje. However, it can be concluded that the residents are somewhat younger (about 66% of the respondents in this group are younger than 46) compared to the visitors (about 62% of the respondents are younger than 46).

When it comes to the level of education (Table 3), more than a half (56%) of Vranje residents have bachelor's and master's degree, while this percentage is considerably lower among the visitors (39%). The differences can also be seen in other educational categories. These differences are slightly lower in the category „Primary school" (1% of residents, 4% of visitors), and even in the category „Secondary school" (residents 30%, visitors 33%). However, the biggest disproportions are in the „Post-secondary education" category. Only 11% of the residents who participated in the research have this level of education, while this percentage is quite high (21%) among the visitors.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the conducted survey, within the field research, residents and visitors were questioned about material heritage of the city of Vranje. A total of 12 different responses with the most important historical monuments and buildings in Vranje from different historical periods were provided in this question (Figure 5). The results showed that residents and visitors of Vranje believe that the house of Borisav Stanković, the famous Serbian writer, is the most important material feature of the city. In addition, two localities were listed (Vranjska banja and Besna Kobila Mountain). Vranjska banja, which has the status of a city municipality, is known for its healing thermal springs, and Besna Kobila mountain is one of the highest mountains in Serbia and offers great opportunities for the development of various forms of tourism.

Figure 5. Responses regarding material heritage of Vranje (in percentage)
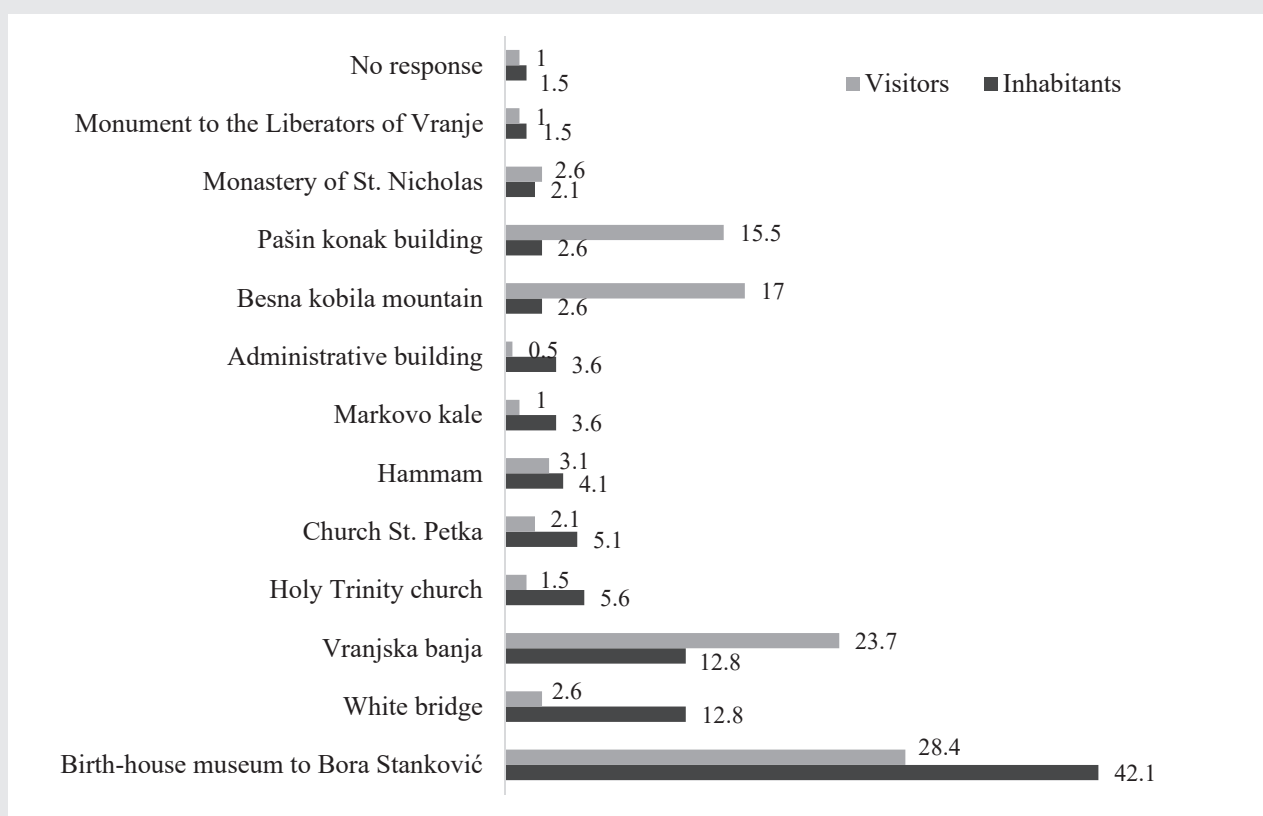
Source: Authors

The Figure 5 shows that the attitudes of residents and visitors about the material heritage of Vranje are significantly different. For example, the survey showed that the inhabitants are particularly fond of the White Bridge, one of the city's symbols (12.8% of the inhabitants believe that this bridge is the most important feature of Vranje), which is a significantly higher number in relation to visitors (only 3.1% of visitors share this opinion). On the other hand, visitors prefer Vranjska Banja, Besna kobila mountain and Pašin konak building. These differences were expected and present in other similar studies. For example, the inhabitants, domestic visitors and foreign tourists have completely different opinions about Belgrade, which is understandable because the city is viewed from different angles, i.e. on the basis of different information and experiences (Čomić & Vičić, 2013, p. 21-22).

Research results showed that Vranje is quite past-oriented. The oldest monuments and buildings in Vranje date back to the thirteenth century, but the residents and visitors of Vranje are most connected with the material heritage from the mid-nineteenth century, and somewhat later. The White Bridge was built in 1844, the house of Borisav Stanković in 1855, while the church Holy Trinity was rebuilt in the period from 1858 to 1860. Although just a few buildings from that period have been preserved, they faithfully reflect the brand essence, i.e. „genius loci" of Vranje.

The non-material elements of the brand essence of Vranje were discovered during the field research, based on the question „What should Vranje be most proud of?". Eight possible responses were offered, and the respondents had the opportunity to choose a maximum of three responses. Most residents and visitors of Vranje chose the answer „History and Tradition" (Figure 6).

The results of the research indicate that Vranje is deeply „immersed" in its history and tradition. The most significant elements of its tradition are musical heritage, i.e. specific melos (songs and dances), as well as the rich cuisine (authentic specialties from Vranje), traditions and customs (festivities), and the way of life that was determined by the mentality of people living in Vranje. Therefore, the results of this research have shown that residents and visitors perceive Vranje in a specific way - as a place that is filled with tradition and culture, i.e. as a place that offers a special atmosphere (relaxation, pleasure, hospitality, kindness, affection,

Figure 6. Responses regarding non-material elements of brand essence in Vranje (in percentage)
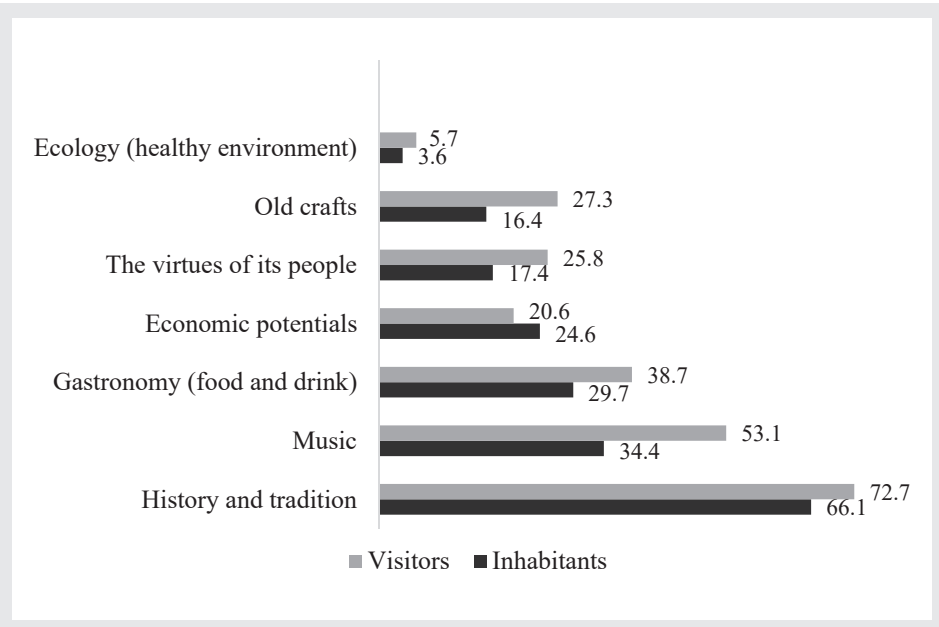
Source: Authors

enjoyment in traditional music, dancing and unusual gastronomic offer). In other words, this city conveys authentic „vibrations" from the past, which have been nourished and preserved as a part of cultural heritage by generations of people from Vranje. Most of these „vibrations" originate from the period when one of the most notable people from Vranje lived, the famous Serbian writer Borisav Stanković (1876 - 1927). This is understandable, bearing in mind that he authentically presented and celebrated the spirit of old Vranje, which is still present. In this way, the main „guideline" that leads to the city brand essence has been revealed.

After the first phase of field research, several qualitative techniques (focus groups, semi-structured in-depth interviews) were applied in search of the brand essence. At this second stage of the research, it was confirmed that the brand essence of Vranje lies in a special emotional content that is deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the people from Vranje. Finally, after several iterations, we found a word that mostly speaks about Vranje, a word which cannot be separated from Vranje - „merak". This word is undoubtedly the brand essence of Vranje.

The word „merak" in its original meaning describes fineness, complexity, subtlety, softness and gentleness. However, this word signifies much more than that, so it is very difficult to explain its full meaning. This word includes several dimensions such as enjoyment, relaxation, satisfaction, yearning, desire, something elevated, like nirvana, a sense of priceless value. In addition, this word signifies a dose of desire, melancholy,

sadness, worry, but it also can denote pleasure derived from simple joys. This is how this term was defined by English experts, who studied words that describe happiness, well-being, love, and other positive emotions, and cannot be translated into English. They made a list of 216 words used in the world, which do not have equivalents in English. "Merak" is among these words (Lomas, 2016).

In Vranje, „merak" denotes a particular lifestyle, a special atmosphere, or the mood that can be felt in the city and found in its „genetic code". Every citizen of Vranje knows very well what merak is. He learnt it from his ancestors and will pass it on to his descendents. On the other hand, most visitors quickly identify this specific emotional content. Simply, it is impossible to imagine Vranje without „merak". There is no better word to describe this city. In accordance with this brand essence, the brand personality was defined, as well as the visible brand elements such as the logo and slogan („Vranje - the city with a soul") (Vranje City – Brand Strategy 2018-2023). In this way, starting from the essence, all brand components have been connected and the conditions for city development in the upcoming period have been created. Also, „merak", as the brand essence of Vranje, should directly affect the tone and visualisation of every communication medium used in promotional campaigns. This word contains many meanings and associations, many „images" and „music", it provides great opportunities for creating attractive promotional content (print ads, TV and radio spots, social media advertis-

ing, etc.). Based on this, the city brand position has been built, which clearly distinguishes it from the competition in the location market.

5. DISCUSSION

On the basis of the insight into the relevant literature and acquired practical experience, it could be concluded that determining the city brand essence requires the application of different research methods and techniques in order to understand the city's tradition and culture. Without defining the brand essence, every branding process would be „shallow", i.e. weak and short-term. Visible elements can draw attention, but that is not enough for the development of a strong brand. A complete success in city branding can only be achieved if the brand essence is clearly defined, i.e. if this „core" generates enough of the brand's internal energy. It should be emphasised that this energy is not inexhaustible, and must be preserved and restored. That means that city administration should regard the city brand as one of the most important forms of city property, and should constantly invest in these purposes.

When determining the city brand essence, or identifying „the spirit of a place" (genius loci), a challenge, which is not easy to overcome, may arise. For example, Skinner and Gould (2007) tried to (re)brand cities with extremely turbulent past, filled with discords, tensions and conflicts (so-called post-conflict societies). In such cases, there are often significant differences on religious, national and social grounds. Cities that are burdened with these problems are very complex and difficult to understand. This, to a large extent, makes it difficult to determine the city brand essence, because it is necessary to express all the complexity in one, or few words, that are acceptable to everyone. It is necessary to „reconcile" profound differences and present the city in a new way, in order to distance it from the past and orientate towards future. This change requires the application of the so-called Janus strategy, named after Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, and endings. He is usually depicted as having two faces, since he looks to the future and to the past. This brand strategy was also applied in Vranje (although this city is not burdened with profound divisions and differences). The main reason for the application of the Janus strategy is that the results of the research showed that the people of Vranje greatly appreciate the history of their city, carefully preserve their tradition, but that they do not want their city to be exclusively oriented towards the

past. Therefore, it is stated in the brand strategy of the city that Vranje should be regarded as a two-centric city. Industrial development should be forced within the industrial or business zones, that will offer favorable conditions for the (re)affirmation of industrial concept and fostering entrepreneurship, while the old core of the city should attract visitors and generate the development of tourism.

During the realisation of the project „Vranje as a brand", another dilemma arose. All the participants within the focus group agreed that the best term to describe the city brand essence is „merak". However, during the discussion it was noted that this word cannot be translated into English, so they wondered whether foreign visitors would be confused, that is, how they would react to such brand essence. In search of the answer to this question, it is necessary to take into account that the city brand essence, as a rule, does not appear in promotional materials, and that the slogan has the main role in communication (Vranje - a city with a soul). In addition, the city brand essence can be perceived in a spiritual way. It can be seen, heard and felt in the city. Emotions represent a universal form of communication. They can be understood without translation. So, based on these premises, it was concluded that the word „merak" can be used to express the city brand essence, in spite of the fact that it cannot be translated into English.

In the process of determining the city brand essence, it is necessary to particularly pay attention to ethical principles. Some consultants, who are engaged in city branding projects, are inclined to change myths and legends, and even to adapt historical facts that refer to a particular city, only to achieve brand objectives. In addition, they modify the authentic cultural content according to the tastes of the target groups, trying to commercialise the elements of cultural heritage as much as possible. This creates a „distorted" folklore that can be called „fakelore". Such actions are usually justified by attempts to „modernise" the city's tradition and culture, and thus „approach" the visitors in order to become more popular and economically more successful. However, in this way, the „spirit of a place" is eroded and the city is moving away from its essence. In the long run, such practices will cause more harm than good to the city.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the importance of brand essence and analyzes the process of defining and managing the

city brand essence in the city of Vranje, Republic of Serbia. Research consisted of two parts – quantitative research in which participated 195 residents and 194 visitors of Vranje, and qualitative research in which participated 16 employees in the city administration of Vranje, in the Tourist Organization, National Museum, Archive, public and utility companies and local media.

The results of conducted research showed that residents, but also visitors, perceive Vranje in a specific way - as a place that is filled with tradition and culture, a place that offers a special atmosphere (relaxation, pleasure, hospitality, kindness, affection, enjoyment in traditional music, dancing and unusual gastronomic offer). Analysis of results from qualitative research (focus groups, semi-structured in-depth interviews) confirmed that the brand essence of Vranje lies in a special emotional content that is deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the people from Vranje. Finally, after several iterations, it was found a word that

mostly speaks about Vranje, a word which cannot be separated from Vranje - „merak". In this city, „merak" denotes a particular lifestyle, a special atmosphere, or the mood that can be felt in the city and found in its „genetic code". This term includes several dimensions such as enjoyment, relaxation, satisfaction, yearning, a sense of priceless value.

Based on the insight into the relevant literature, but also the gained experiences during research, certain dilemmas, that accompany the process of determining the city brand essence, have been pointed out in this paper. Proposed attitudes and solutions, which should certainly be examined in future research, should provide an easier „orientation" in finding the brand essence. In this way, it is possible to discover the „heart and soul" of cities and activate their hidden potentials for brand development. Furthermore, future researches should ecompass a larger sample in the process of identifying the city brand essence, but also the other cities.

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Apstrakt

Definisanje i upravljanje suštinom brenda grada: Studija slučaja Vranja

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U radu je ukazano da u procesu identifikacije suštine brenda grada nije dovoljno samo kvantitativno istraživanje, već je neophodno dubinsko proučavanje istorije i kulture grada - jezika, običaja, mitova, legendi, simbola, vrednosti i stila života. U kvantitativnom istraživanju koje je sprovedeno primenom posebno dizajniranog upitnika u gradu Vranju učestvovalo je 389 učesnika (195 stanovnika i 194 posetilaca) dok je 16 učesnika učestvovalo u kvalitativnom istraživanju (fokus grupe i polustrukturirani dubinski intervjui). Utvrđivanje suštine brenda grada zahteva primenu različitih istraživačkih metoda i tehnika kako bi se razumela celokupna tradicija i kultura grada. Potpun uspeh u brendiranju grada može se postići samo ako je suština brenda jasno definisana. Ovaj rad proširuje postojeća istraživanja vezana za definisanje suštine brenda grada. Predloženi stavovi i rešenja predstavljaju značajan alat u pronalaženju suštine brenda grada. Na ovaj način je moguće otkriti „srce i dušu" gradova i aktivirati sve njihove skrivene potencijale za razvoj brenda.

Ključne reči: *brend, brend grada, suština brenda grada, duh grada, model piramide brenda*

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