INTERNATIONAL TOURISM FAIRS AS A PLATFORM FOR REGIONAL BRANDING: ANALYSIS OF VISITOR EXPERIENCES AT THE MUNICIPALITY OF STRUGA'S BOOTH IN THE TIRANA AND PRISHTINA FAIRS 2026

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Abstract

This study examines the role of international tourism fairs as platforms for regional branding through an analysis of visitor experiences at the Municipality of Struga's booth during the Tourism Fair Albania in Tirana and the Kosovo International Tourism Fair in Prishtina in 2026. The research evaluated how booth design, hospitality and communication, and promotional materials influenced perceptions of Struga as a tourism destination. A mixed-method case study approach was employed, combining visitor surveys, stakeholder questionnaires, and thematic analysis. Data were collected from 441 visitors and 30 fair organizers and tourism professionals. The findings revealed positive evaluations of Struga's participation at both events. Hospitality and communication received the highest ratings, followed by destination image, booth design, and promotional materials. Correlation analysis identified positive relationships between destination image and all branding dimensions. Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that hospitality and communication represented the strongest predictor of destination image, while booth design and promotional materials also contributed significantly to visitor perceptions. The organizers' survey confirmed these findings, emphasizing interaction quality as the principal factor affecting destination visibility and branding effectiveness. Previous visitors to Struga reported more favorable perceptions than first-time observers. Overall, the results confirm that international tourism fairs are effective instruments for destination promotion, visibility enhancement, and regional branding. For the Municipality of Struga, participation in the fairs strengthened destination awareness, improved visitor perceptions, and supported the development of a competitive tourism identity within the Western Balkans tourism market.

Keywords: destination branding; international tourism fairs; visitor experience; destination image; Struga.

1. Introduction

International tourism fairs are recognized as strategic arenas for destinations to enhance visibility and competitiveness in global markets (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005). For small municipalities, participation in such events is not limited to promotion but represents a crucial step in regional branding (Anholt, 2007). Branding in tourism is understood as the creation of a distinctive identity that differentiates destinations and influences visitor perceptions (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Recent scholarship emphasizes that branding has shifted towards digital, dialogic, and AI-driven engagement, where user-generated content and influencer marketing play decisive roles (Chatzigeorgiou, Christou, & Simeli, 2025).

The booth at international fairs functions as a tangible interface where design, hospitality, and information delivery converge to shape visitor experiences (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2004). Booth design, as part of the servicescape, directly influences perceptions of quality and destination image (Bitner, 1992). In the exhibition industry, experiential booth design has been shown to enhance satisfaction and loyalty (Wu & Liang, 2009). Equally important is representative interaction, where staff hospitality and communication shape perceived value and service quality (Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002; Lin, 2004). Promotional materials as brochures, slogans, and digital media, play a decisive role in reinforcing destination identity and engaging visitors (Hudson & Hudson, 2013; Mariani & Borghi, 2020).

The Municipality of Struga, North Macedonia, participated in the Tirana (Iceberg Exhibitions TFA, 2026) and Pristina (KITF, 2026) Tourism Fairs 2026, aiming to strengthen its regional profile and communicate its cultural and natural assets. By analyzing visitor experiences at

Struga's booth, this study investigates how fairs operate as branding platforms and how booth design, representative interaction, and promotional materials affect the perception of Struga as a tourism destination (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2010). This paper contributes to the academic discourse on destination branding, tourism marketing, and visitor experience analysis, offering insights into the effectiveness of fair participation for small municipalities seeking regional and international recognition (Olins, 2002; Meek & Wilk, 2025).

2. Literature review

Recent scholarship on destination branding emphasizes the shift from traditional promotion to experiential and digital strategies. Studies show that branding is increasingly tied to visitor perceptions and experiences, where authenticity and sustainability play a central role (Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Mariani, 2021). More recent analyses highlight how social media and AI-driven personalization reshape destination identity, making visitor engagement a co-created process (Chatzigeorgiou, Christou, & Simeli, 2025; Meek & Wilk, 2025).

Visitor experience has emerged as a critical dimension in tourism research. It is not only about physical presence at a destination but also about the emotional, cultural, and digital interactions that shape perceptions. Survey-based studies confirm that booth design, representative interaction, and promotional materials at fairs directly influence visitor impressions and destination image (Chen, Liu, Sui, & Solangi, 2025).

Digital transformation has significantly reshaped the way destinations construct their identity. Chatzigeorgiou, Christou & Simeli (2025) illustrate how dialogue with visitors and user-generated content have replaced one-way communication, turning visitor experience at fairs into a crucial element of destination image. This is particularly relevant for Struga, where participation in the fairs of Tirana and Prishtina enables direct interaction and strengthens cultural identity.

Hasan, Andriani & Hasanah (2025) explore regional branding strategies and demonstrate that visitor perceptions are closely tied to how municipalities build their image through events and digital marketing. Their findings suggest that Struga's presence at fairs is not merely promotional, but a strategic effort to shape regional identity and enhance visitor interest.

An emerging perspective is the concept of destination brand experience, encompassing emotional, sensory, and behavioral responses of visitors. Wei & Zainol (2026) synthesize the literature on this topic, showing that visitor experience is a complex construct that directly influences loyalty and destination image. This is especially applicable to international fairs, where visitors encounter the destination through booths, promotional materials, and representative interactions.

Collectively, these contributions highlight that visitor experience at international fairs is a powerful mechanism for building destination image. For Struga, participation in Tirana and Prishtina fairs represents more than regional exposure; it is an opportunity to create authentic and sustainable experiences that visitors further share across social networks and digital platforms. Destination branding thus becomes a co-created process, with visitors actively shaping the tourism identity.

The body of scholarship reviewed highlights that destination branding is increasingly influenced by digital transformation, visitor engagement, and sustainability, with international fairs emerging as vital platforms for co-creation. These perspectives provide a solid conceptual basis for the present study, directing the methodological focus toward analyzing how Struga's participation in international fairs contributes to its branding strategy, shapes visitor perceptions, and strengthens its long-term positioning within the Western Balkans tourism landscape.

3. Methodology of research

This study employs a qualitative case study design, focusing on Struga's participation in international tourism fairs in Tirana and Prishtina. The case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how fairs function as platforms for destination branding, visitor experience, and regional positioning, a method widely recommended for tourism research where contextual depth is essential (Yin, 2018).

Two complementary methods are used: semi-structured interviews with fair organizers and tourism stakeholders to capture institutional perspectives and professional insights, and visitor surveys distributed during and after the fairs to assess perceptions, emotional responses, and impressions of Struga's branding. Interviews are particularly effective in uncovering strategic intentions and organizational practices (Bryman, 2016), while surveys provide measurable data on visitor experiences and perceptions, aligning with approaches in destination image studies (Chen, Liu, Sui, & Solangi, 2025).

Participants include organizers of the Tirana and Prishtina fairs, as well as a purposive sample of visitors attending the events, ensuring diversity in age, nationality, and travel motivations. Purposive sampling is appropriate in tourism studies where the aim is to capture a range of visitor perspectives rather than statistical generalization (Patton, 2015).

Data will be analyzed through thematic coding, identifying recurring patterns related to branding strategies, visitor experiences, and perceptions of authenticity. Thematic analysis has been widely applied in tourism branding research to uncover underlying meanings and visitor narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Triangulation across interviews and surveys ensures methodological rigor and validity, a practice emphasized in tourism research to strengthen credibility and reduce bias (Denzin, 2017).

All participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, with consent obtained prior to interviews and surveys, while anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained in line with academic research standards. Ethical considerations are central to tourism research, particularly when dealing with visitor perceptions and institutional stakeholders (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019).

The choice of interviews and surveys reflects the study's focus on capturing both institutional perspectives and visitor experiences, providing a holistic understanding of how Struga's participation in international fairs contributes to destination branding and regional positioning. This approach avoids reliance on internal municipal documentation, which may not fully capture visitor-centered dynamics, and instead emphasizes co-created experiences as highlighted in recent branding literature (Wei & Zainol, 2026; Chatzigeorgiou, Christou & Simeli, 2025).

The findings of this study reveal several important dimensions of Struga's participation in international tourism fairs. Visitor surveys conducted during the Tourism Fair Albania (11–12 February 2026, Tirana) and the Kosovo International Tourism Fair (17–18 April 2026, Prishtina) indicate that the fairs serve as effective platforms for shaping perceptions of Struga as a cultural and natural destination, with respondents highlighting authenticity, hospitality, and scenic value as recurring themes. Emotional responses collected during the fairs suggest that direct engagement with Struga's promotional materials and representatives enhances trust and curiosity, reinforcing the destination's appeal.

Interviews with fair organizers and tourism stakeholders further emphasize the strategic role of fairs in positioning destinations within the competitive Western Balkans market, noting that co-creation and interactive branding activities are increasingly valued by visitors.

To ensure methodological rigor, the collected data were analyzed using a combination of statistical models:

- Frequency distributions and percentages to summarize demographic variables and visitor behavior.
- Chi-square tests (χ^2) to examine associations between categorical variables, such as prior visits to Struga and perceptions of its image.
- Independent samples t-tests and ANOVA to compare differences across demographic groups (e.g., age categories and evaluation of booth design).
- Correlation analysis to identify relationships between booth design, hospitality, promotional materials, and destination image.
- Regression models to assess the predictive impact of booth design, hospitality, and promotional materials on overall visitor perceptions.

Thematic analysis of the collected data identifies three dominant patterns:

1. The fairs contribute to strengthening Struga's visibility and recognition among regional and international audiences.
2. Visitor perceptions are shaped not only by promotional content but also by interpersonal encounters and experiential elements.
3. Sustainability emerges as an underlying factor influencing branding effectiveness.

Together, these findings demonstrate that Struga's involvement in international fairs plays a significant role in consolidating its branding strategy, enhancing visitor perceptions, and supporting its long-term positioning in the regional tourism landscape.

A structured questionnaire was administered to visitors attending the tourism fairs in Tirana and Prishtina during 2026. A total of 441 valid questionnaires were collected and included in the analysis. Of these, 221 respondents (50.1%) were surveyed during the Tourism Fair Albania, held in Tirana on 11–12 February 2026, while 220 respondents (49.9%) participated during the Kosova International Tourism Fair (KITF), held in Prishtina on 17–18 April 2026. The nearly equal distribution of respondents between the two fairs provides a balanced basis for comparative analysis and enhances the reliability of the findings.

4. Results and interpretation

A total of 441 valid questionnaires were collected during the two tourism fairs under examination. Of these, 221 respondents (50.1%) were surveyed at the Tourism Fair Albania held in Tirana on 11–12 February 2026, while 220 respondents (49.9%) participated in the Kosovo International Tourism Fair held in Prishtina on 17–18 April 2026. The almost equal distribution of respondents between the two fairs ensured a balanced representation and facilitated comparative analysis.

The demographic profile of respondents indicates that the largest proportion belonged to the adult age category (30–44 years), representing 35.6% of the sample, followed by young visitors aged 18–29 years (29.9%). Respondents aged 45–59 years accounted for 22.9%, while senior visitors aged over 60 years represented 11.6% of the total sample. This distribution suggests that the fairs attracted predominantly economically active individuals who may represent potential tourism consumers and decision-makers.

Analysis of visitor engagement revealed that 46.0% of respondents spent between five and ten minutes at Struga's booth, while 34.3% remained for more than ten minutes. Only 19.7% spent less than five minutes at the stand. These findings indicate a relatively high level of visitor engagement, suggesting that the promotional presentation was successful in attracting and retaining visitor attention.

The results further show that 56.0% of respondents had previously visited Struga, whereas 44.0% had never visited the destination. This finding is particularly significant, as it allows for

the comparison of perceptions between previous visitors and individuals whose impressions were formed primarily through the fair experience.

The descriptive statistical analysis demonstrated a generally positive evaluation of Struga's presentation. Hospitality and communication achieved the highest mean score (M = 4.47; SD = 0.65), followed by destination image (M = 4.38; SD = 0.69) and booth design (M = 4.32; SD = 0.71). Promotional materials also received favorable evaluations (M = 4.11; SD = 0.81). These results indicate that interpersonal communication played the most important role in influencing visitor perceptions of the destination.

When respondents were asked to identify the most impressive element of the presentation, hospitality emerged as the dominant factor (34.5%), followed by visual design (26.3%), tourism information (24.7%), and other elements (14.5%). The prominence of hospitality confirms the importance of direct human interaction in destination branding activities and reinforces the role of representatives as ambassadors of the destination.

To examine the relationships between the evaluated dimensions of the booth and destination image, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results revealed strong positive correlations between destination image and hospitality (r = 0.768), booth design (r = 0.712), and promotional materials (r = 0.683). These coefficients indicate that improvements in the quality of presentation are associated with a more favorable perception of Struga as a tourism destination.

The Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated using the following formula:

$$r = \frac{\sum(X-\bar{X})(Y-\bar{Y})}{\sqrt{\sum(X-\bar{X})^2 \sum(Y-\bar{Y})^2}} \qquad (1)$$

where $r$represents the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables.

To further investigate these relationships, a multiple linear regression model was applied. The model was specified as:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \varepsilon \qquad (2)$$

where:

- Y= Destination Image
- X_1= Booth Design
- X_2= Hospitality and Communication
- X_3= Promotional Materials
- ε= Error term

The analysis revealed that hospitality and communication represented the strongest predictor of destination image ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$), followed by booth design ($\beta = 0.291$, $p < 0.001$) and promotional materials ($\beta = 0.238$, $p < 0.001$). The regression model explained 68.4% of the total variance in destination image ($R^2 = 0.684$), indicating a substantial explanatory power.

In addition, a Chi-square test was performed to determine whether previous visits to Struga influenced destination image perception. The test yielded statistically significant results ($\chi^2(4) = 18.76$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that respondents who had previously visited Struga held more positive perceptions of the destination than first-time observers.

The Chi-square statistic was calculated using the following formula:

$$\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O-E)^2}{E} \qquad (3)$$

where Orepresents observed frequencies and Erepresents expected frequencies.

Overall, the statistical analysis indicates that Struga's participation in the Tourism Fair Albania and the Kosovo International Tourism Fair generated highly positive visitor evaluations. The findings demonstrate that hospitality, booth design, and promotional materials significantly contribute to destination image formation, while previous experience with the destination further strengthens positive perceptions.

These results support the argument that international tourism fairs represent effective platforms for regional branding and play a substantial role in enhancing Struga's visibility and attractiveness within the Western Balkans tourism market.

In addition to the visitor survey, a second questionnaire was administered to fair organizers and tourism stakeholders involved in the organization and management of the Tourism Fair Albania, held in Tirana on 11–12 February 2026, and the Kosova International Tourism Fair (KITF), held in Prishtina on 17–18 April 2026. A total of 30 respondents participated in this survey, including 15 representatives from Tirana and 15 representatives from Prishtina. The questionnaire was designed to assess professional perspectives regarding Struga's participation, the effectiveness of its promotional activities, and the role of international tourism fairs in destination branding and regional positioning.

Descriptive analysis revealed generally positive evaluations of Struga's participation in both fairs. The highest ratings were recorded for the interaction between Struga's representatives and visitors ($M = 4.63$; $SD = 0.49$), followed by the overall evaluation of participation ($M = 4.57$; $SD = 0.51$) and the effectiveness of attracting visitors ($M = 4.50$; $SD = 0.57$). The visual presentation of the booth ($M = 4.43$; $SD = 0.63$) and the quality of promotional materials ($M = 4.30$; $SD = 0.70$) also received favorable assessments.

These findings indicate that tourism professionals perceived Struga's presence as well-organized, attractive, and capable of generating visitor interest. More importantly, they suggest that interpersonal communication and destination representation were considered the strongest components of the municipality's promotional approach.

When respondents were asked about the importance of tourism fairs for destination branding, the overwhelming majority identified fairs as highly important instruments for tourism promotion. The average score for this variable reached 4.73 ($SD = 0.45$), confirming the widespread recognition of international fairs as strategic branding platforms.

Furthermore, 93.3% of respondents stated that Struga's participation contributed directly to increasing destination visibility, while only 6.7% expressed neutral or uncertain views. This finding highlights a strong consensus among tourism professionals regarding the promotional value of participation in international tourism fairs.

Regarding comparative performance, most organizers evaluated Struga's participation as either stronger or much stronger than the average destination represented at the fairs. This suggests that Struga successfully differentiated itself from competing destinations through effective communication, destination storytelling, and exhibition presentation.

Analysis of the strongest aspect of Struga's presentation revealed that hospitality and communication were identified as the most influential factors (40.0%), followed by cultural identity presentation (23.3%), booth design (16.7%), tourism information (13.3%), and promotional materials (6.7%). These results closely mirror the perceptions expressed by visitors, further supporting the importance of human interaction in destination branding processes.

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between organizational variables and perceived destination visibility. Positive correlations were identified between booth presentation and destination visibility ($r = 0.71$), between promotional materials and destination visibility ($r = 0.66$), and between interaction quality and destination visibility ($r = 0.79$). The strongest relationship was found between visitor interaction and

destination visibility, indicating that communication-based strategies play a central role in creating positive destination awareness.
The Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated using the following formula:

$$r = \frac{\sum(X-\bar{X})(Y-\bar{Y})}{\sqrt{\sum(X-\bar{X})^2 \sum(Y-\bar{Y})^2}} \qquad (4)$$

Multiple linear regression analysis was performed to determine which organizational factors most strongly influenced destination visibility. The model was specified as:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \varepsilon \qquad (5)$$

where:

- Y= Destination Visibility
- X_1= Booth Presentation
- X_2= Interaction Quality
- X_3= Promotional Materials

The results demonstrated that interaction quality was the strongest predictor of destination visibility ($\beta = 0.46$, p < 0.001), followed by booth presentation ($\beta = 0.29$, p = 0.003) and promotional materials ($\beta = 0.21$, p = 0.014). The model explained 72.1% of the variance in destination visibility ($R^2 = 0.721$), indicating a high explanatory capacity.
Overall, the findings from the organizers' survey reinforce the conclusions drawn from the visitor survey. Both groups identified hospitality, communication, and presentation quality as the principal factors shaping perceptions of Struga. The convergence of professional and visitor perspectives strengthens the validity of the findings and supports the argument that international tourism fairs represent effective mechanisms for destination branding, visibility enhancement, and regional positioning. For the Municipality of Struga, participation in the Tourism Fair Albania and the Kosovo International Tourism Fair appears to have generated substantial branding benefits and contributed to the promotion of a positive and competitive tourism image.
An interesting convergence emerged between the visitor survey (n = 441) and the organizers' survey (n = 30). Both groups identified hospitality and communication as the most influential factors shaping destination perception. While visitors evaluated hospitality with the highest mean score (M = 4.47), organizers also considered interaction quality the strongest contributor to destination visibility (β = 0.46). This consistency strengthens the reliability of the findings and suggests that interpersonal engagement represents the principal mechanism through which Struga communicates its tourism identity during international fairs.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study are broadly consistent with previous research on destination branding and visitor experience. The high evaluation of hospitality and communication supports the argument that interpersonal interaction represents a critical component of destination image formation. Similar conclusions were reached by Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, and Voss (2002), who found that service-related interactions significantly influence perceived value and visitor attitudes. Likewise, Lin (2004) emphasized that positive encounters with destination representatives contribute substantially to the overall tourism experience.
The strong relationship identified between booth design and destination image is also consistent with the concept of servicescape proposed by Bitner (1992), which argues that

physical environments influence perceptions, emotions, and behavioral intentions. In the context of tourism fairs, the exhibition stand functions as a temporary representation of the destination itself, making visual presentation a key branding instrument.

The positive contribution of promotional materials to destination image aligns with the findings of Hudson and Hudson (2013), who demonstrated that communication tools, visual content, and promotional storytelling play an important role in attracting visitor attention and shaping destination awareness. Furthermore, Mariani and Borghi (2020) highlighted that tourism-related information disseminated during promotional events often influences future travel intentions and destination perceptions.

The results also reinforce the arguments of Blain, Levy, and Ritchie (2005), who described destination branding as a process through which visitors develop associations with places based on both direct and indirect experiences. In the present study, respondents who had previously visited Struga reported more positive perceptions than first-time respondents, suggesting that personal experience strengthens destination image and loyalty.

The significance of international tourism fairs as branding platforms is further supported by Wu and Liang (2009), who found that experiential marketing activities at exhibitions positively affect visitor satisfaction and destination attractiveness. The findings of the current study confirm that direct interaction with promotional materials, destination representatives, and cultural narratives contributes to enhancing the visibility and competitiveness of tourism destinations.

The results indicate that visitors generally held positive perceptions of Struga's presentation, with hospitality and communication receiving the highest evaluations among all assessed dimensions. Booth design, promotional materials, and interpersonal interaction were found to play an important role in shaping destination image and influencing visitor impressions. The statistical analysis further confirmed that these factors were significantly associated with perceptions of Struga as an attractive tourism destination.

The correlation and regression analyses demonstrated that hospitality and communication were the strongest predictors of destination image, followed by booth design and the quality of promotional materials. These findings suggest that successful destination branding depends not only on visual presentation but also on meaningful interaction between destination representatives and potential visitors. In this regard, the human dimension of promotion emerged as a decisive element in the branding process.

The organizers' survey reinforced these findings. Tourism professionals and fair stakeholders evaluated Struga's participation positively and emphasized the importance of tourism fairs as strategic instruments for increasing destination visibility and strengthening regional identity. The convergence of visitor and organizer perceptions provides additional support for the reliability of the findings and highlights the effectiveness of Struga's participation in both events.

From a practical perspective, the study suggests that future participation in tourism fairs should continue to emphasize professional communication, attractive booth design, and high-quality promotional materials. Particular attention should be given to presenting Struga's cultural heritage, natural attractions, and tourism experiences in ways that create memorable and authentic interactions with visitors.

Despite the positive findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focused on two tourism fairs and relied primarily on survey-based data. Future research could expand the geographical scope of analysis, include additional tourism events, and employ longitudinal approaches to examine the long-term impact of fair participation on destination branding and visitor behavior.

The statistical evidence presented in this study supports the broader destination branding literature, suggesting that hospitality, visual presentation, and effective communication jointly

contribute to stronger destination image formation. For Struga, participation in the Tourism Fair Albania and the Kosovo International Tourism Fair appears to represent an effective mechanism for increasing visibility, strengthening regional branding, and reinforcing positive visitor perceptions.

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