

**THE BALATON AS A BRAND**  
**(EXPERIENCES OF A QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY)**

**A BALATON, MINT MÁRKA**  
**(EGY KÉRDŐÍVES FELMÉRÉS TAPASZTALATAI)**

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**Abstract**

The authors of this study examined the destination image of Lake Balaton which region is one of the top tourist destinations in Hungary. The empirical research was designed to obtain answers to two questions: whether the image of the region well recognizable and the much-discussed "Balaton-brand" could be formed? Research results indicate the different views about the region's image of the various stakeholders, the lack of effective communication between tourism operators and those professionals are not sufficiently aware of tourists' views.

The touristic region of Balaton has had an important role in the tourism of Hungary and the tourism supply of the region has undergone a huge transformation in the past period. In spite of these positive changes the main characteristic of the Balaton is still the shortness of its high season which is characterized by bathing in the lake. To enhance competitiveness, apart from broadening complex services it is necessary to introduce a clear Balaton brand and image on both internal and international markets.

**Keywords:** tourism destination, Balaton-brand, communication, image

**Abstract**

A szerzők a tanulmányban Magyarország egyik legjelentősebb turisztikai desztinációjának, a Balaton régióinak imázsát vizsgálták. Az empirikus kutatás célja az volt, hogy választ kapjanak két kérdésre: vajon a térség imázsa jól felismerhető-e, illetve a sokat emlegetett „Balaton-márka” kialakítható-e? A kutatás eredményei rámutatnak arra, hogy a térség imázsával kapcsolatban a különböző érintettek eltérően vélekednek, hogy a turizmus szereplői között nincs hatékony kommunikáció, hogy a turisták véleményét a szakemberek nem kellő mélységben ismerik.

A Balaton turisztikai régiója jelentős szerepet tölt be Magyarország turizmusában és a térség turisztikai kínálata az elmúlt időszakban sokat változott. A pozitív változások ellenére azonban a Balaton fő jellemzője továbbra is a rövid szezon és a vízparti fürdőzésre alapozott turizmus. A versenyképesség fokozásához a komplex szolgáltatások bővítése mellett elengedhetetlen az egyértelmű Balaton-márka és imázs bevezetése a belföldi és külföldi piacokon egyaránt.

**Kulcsszavak:** turisztikai desztináció, Balaton-márka, kommunikáció, imázs

*“The Balaton marketing is not appropriate, as it failed to appear as a unified brand and product in the tourism market.” (Buday-Sántha, 2007).*

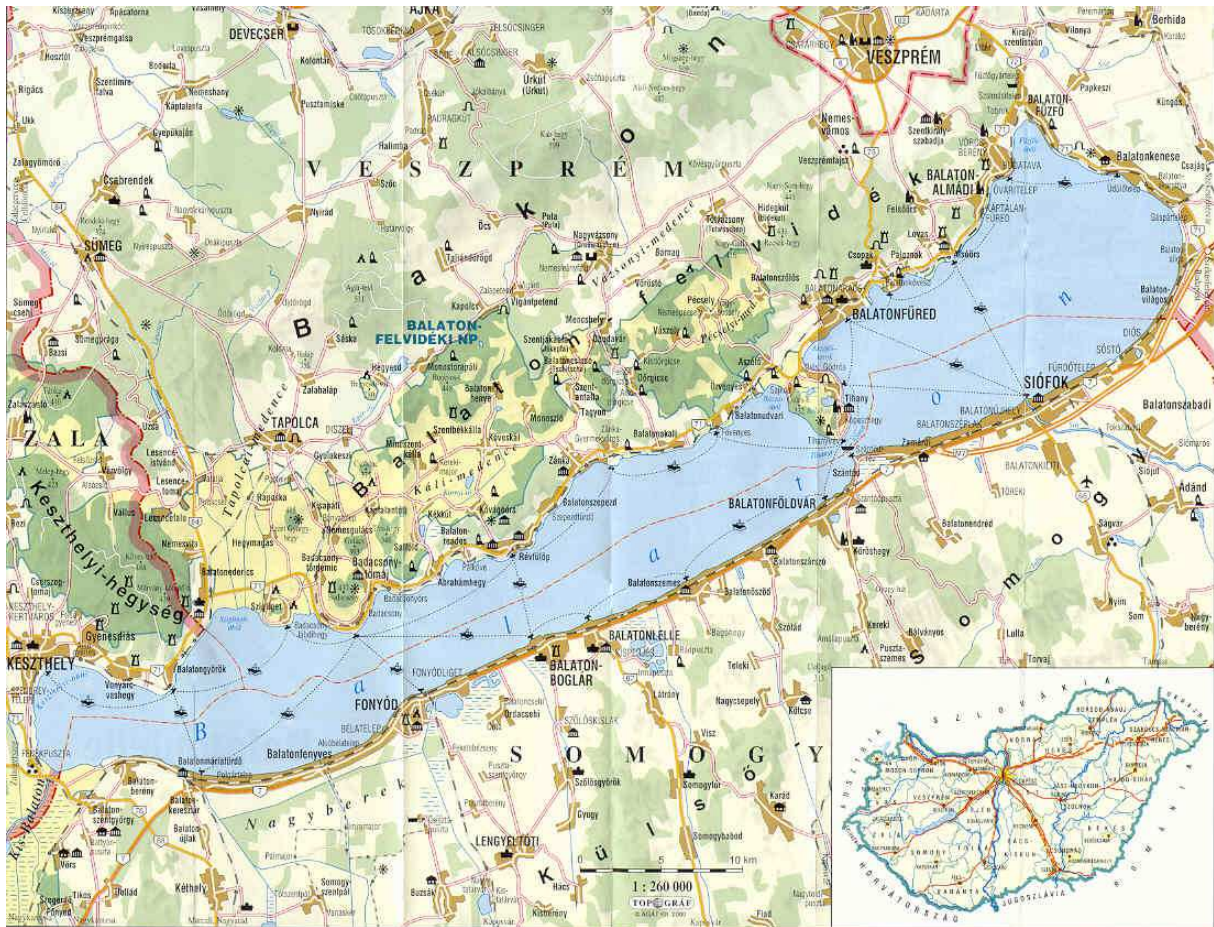
## INTRODUCTION

The above quoted statement is from six years ago though as if it would have been made today. This can be said despite the local professionals and tourism organizations made a lot of efforts what in the region during the past six years for the Balaton destination appear worthy in the international and domestic tourism market. Due to this inconsistency we would like to know more about what might be behind this phenomenon and why not felt significant progress on this issue?

The present study is part of a larger research. It is related to only one specific part of this research: it evaluates the marketing activity of the local tourism destination management organizations (DMOs) that operate in the Balaton region, which is a key activity of the management.

The Balaton region plays an important role in the tourism of Hungary. The Balaton Lake is the largest freshwater lake in Central Europe and one of the greatest natural treasures in Hungary. After Budapest, in the domestic tourism, this is the second most important destination. Its attraction due to pleasant water temperature, favorable climatic endowments and variety of beautiful landscapes. Its value is determined by not only the beauty of the land, the sand spit on the southern coast, the vineyards in the Balaton Highlands, but also determined by the high quality of its water. The lake surface is 600 km<sup>2</sup> and the coastline length is 235 km, the water mass is two billion m<sup>3</sup> (Picture 1). 179 settlements are situated in the Balaton tourism region with permanent population of 274,068 persons.

**Figure 1** The Lake of Balaton



Source: [www.google.hu](http://www.google.hu)

From ecological aspects, the environment around the lake is extremely diverse, the natural and landscape values are uniquely rich. The reed framed shallow lake basins has valuable flora and fauna. In the region there are large areas protected under the Balaton Uplands National Park, the Natura 2000 and the Ramsar Convention. Here can be find the so called witness mountains with volcanic origin (basalt), the typical karst topography areas and rock forms and the red sandstone formations (typical local construction materials). The whole region with unparalleled scenic qualities, with built cultural heritage and preserved historical monuments is an outstanding pearl, an open-air museum of Hungary.

A substantial proportion of the Balaton's "revenue generation" comes from the tourism industry, which is also shown by the dominance of tourism and other enterprises (from the related sectors) operating in the Balaton region. In addition, the proportion of trade and service, real estate, business services and construction industry is significant and these businesses are largely tied to tourism.

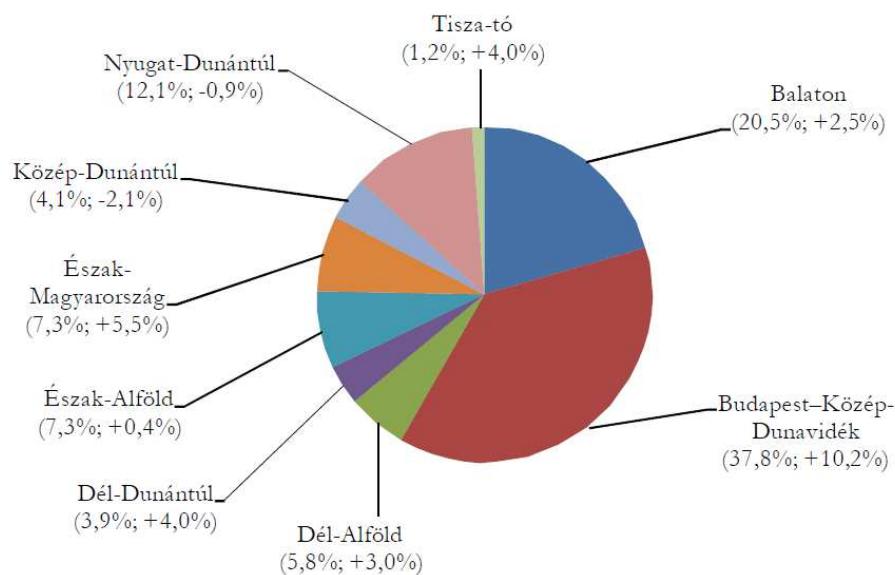
24.8% of the Hungarian commercial capacity is located in the Balaton region. According to the KSH data (*Hungarian Central Statistical Office*), in the past 12 years, 20%-27% of the

total guest nights of commercial accommodation were recorded in the region, which is after experiencing a decline since 2000, clearly shows a steady increase from 2005.

The data in Fig. 2 1 shows the proportions in 2012 (Hungarian Tourism Ltd., 2013). As a result of the expansion of domestic tourism, nearly three-quarters of the guests, visiting the region, were Hungarian visitors with nearly two-thirds of the registered guest nights. The domestic tourism marketing mainly concentrated in hotels: in 2012, almost 70% of the 953 thousand domestic customers were realized in hotels, 12% at pensions or holiday houses and 10% stayed at a camping.

The majority of foreign visitors come from Germany (28.7%) and Austria (15.7%). However, the visitors number increased greatly from Ukraine, Russia and the Asian continent but decreased by 20% from Denmark and Romania. From the Asian continents, the visitors came from mainly China (7,451 guests) and their number and guest nights spent here exceeded the previous year by one and a half times.

**Figure 2** Number of guest nights spent in commercial accommodation according to touristic regions in Hungary, in 2012 (portion in 2012, change 2012/2011)



Source: the authors' work based on KSH data

The tourist offer of the region has changed a lot over the past two decades as major health tourism developments were implemented with public support, the Balaton bicycle network was expanded, the M7 motorway was completed which leads to the Slovenian and the Croatian borders, an international airport was opened and developed in Sármellék, significant developments were made at the beaches, the sailing ports were extended and accommodation and services were developed as well. Despite the positive changes, however, the main feature

of the Balaton region is still the short season, which is limited to 4-8 weeks, on which the water-based coastal tourism can be built.

A positive result is that the background settlements in the region are increasingly getting involved in tourism. In the case of domestic tourism, the respondents from the 18-49 age group most commonly associated to the Balaton thinking about holiday travel, according to a comprehensive survey (Hungarian Tourism Ltd., 2013). The tourism industry in Hungary considers the Balaton as "ambassador" of Hungary, since the foreign tourists associate to Hungary hearing the word of Balaton. In addition to the expansion of domestic guests new markets have emerged, especially from the nearby countries: Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Russia and Poland. The examination of tourist's satisfaction traveling to the region showed that the average satisfaction was 89.8 out of the 100-point scale.

Over the past few years the destination position had a positive change in the market and the region has a generally good perception according to specialists' opinion. According to them, there are no real competitors to the Balaton on the internal market. In the recent years the position of the region is strengthening due to local cooperation, advertising campaigns and improvements in quality and capacity. The Balaton has major competitors on the international market in neighboring countries: e.g. the Croatian and Bulgarian coast, the Austrian part of Neusiedl, the Garda and the Wörth region. These competitors have more complex and more intensive marketing activities, in which they concentrate more on improving services instead of maintaining their current level (Hungarian Tourism Ltd., 2013).

The Balaton, on the basis of its endowments, is an excellent tourism destination with great potentials which are waiting for exploiting. This requires enhancing the existing cooperation, spreading strategic thinking and effective communication in which the DMOs have prominent role. To enhance the competitiveness, in addition to the expansion of complex services, is essential to introduce a clear Balaton brand and image on the domestic and international markets as well, according to the above-mentioned survey (Hungarian Tourism Ltd., 2013).

### **LITERATURE ANALYSIS: VISION – NATURALLY, BALATON!**

Several studies revealed in the international literature over the past few years which have been carried out to understand the nature of destination branding. Although in defining of destination branding attributes, such as brand personality, image and elements of this image, significant advances have been made, there is still not clearly accepted definitions between researchers and experts and there is no clear view either to how these elements work with the

destination brand (Hudson - Ritchie, 2009). Nevertheless there is a consensus among the experts in the process of creating a destination brand and its components. In the proposed implementation of multistage branding models (Morgan et al, 2003; Knapp - Sherwin, 2005), the following four steps are the same during the development process.

Step 1: An evaluation of the current status of destination brand.

Step 2: Creating brand identity and brand promise.

Step 3: Communicating the brand promise.

Step 4: Measuring the effectiveness of brand building.

In Step 1, the core values of destination and destination brand will be determined in which an objective point of view is created, taking into account the opinions of tourists, event organizers, members of the DMOs and tour operators (etc.). In step 2, two substantive elements of brand's "personality" have to be built up: one is the logically arranged main characteristics and the other is the emotional associations and expected benefits. The communication can be built around these elements, in which the brand promise is supported by the emotional and physical characteristics (in Step 3). These promises can be experienced as advantage and pleasure by the visitors during their destination-stay. During the promotion organization a variety of communication campaign, advertisement and message are formulated (including logo, story, name, etc.). As attention is increasingly directed at the experiences, since the importance of the experiences is rising in the travel decisions, marketing messages should focus on those experiences (Williams, 2006). In Step 4, the appearance of this created brand has to be evaluated in the markets. This is a very difficult task. It essentially means a continuous monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the communication. The development of tourist traffic measurement is one of the most commonly used methods, mostly connected to each promotional campaign. Another but more complicated method is to investigate the visitors' attitude to the destination-brand in which it is determined how visitors prefer a specific brand against other destination-brands.

The main characteristic of a successful destination is that it conveys the promise of unforgettable travel experience, which cannot be separated from the destination, closely linked to it (Blain et. 2005). Experiencing the brand in this way can help the consolidation of a specific emotional connection that can be formed between visitors and the destination. This may contribute reduction of the sense of tourists' risk related their traveling, promise of the specialty and uniqueness, and it can also result in more "tourist's spending". There is no guarantee that this four-step model mentioned above may be the key to success but some destinations, such as Las Vegas, New Zealand, India or Australia, had followed similar



strategy in their brand building process to create unforgettable destinations experience (Hudson - Ritchie, 2009).

A study published in 2013 (Ekinçi et al, 2013) examined the relationship between the symbolic meaning of tourist destinations brands and the brand loyalty linked to them. The study identified the main dimensions: the so-called self-congruence (which expresses the compliance of the individual and the destination), the brand identification and the lifestyle-congruence (the compliance of the lifestyle and the destination), which have impact on the destinations' brand loyalty. The research showed that the tourists' loyalty related to the destination-brands is based basically not on the functional characteristics (e.g. quality of services, accommodation, destination location, beach, sunshine, climate, etc.) but rather on that the destination can fulfill the individual expectations of self-image, social identity and lifestyle improvement. In other words, these factors play an important part in developing brand loyalty. It means: the chances are higher that an individual will visit a destination again if the image formed in the individual and the image conveyed by the destination brand are close to each other. The brand identification can also positively influence the brand loyalty. Visitors can also use their favorite tourist destination to express their social class which also increases the chance of revisiting the destination. The situation is similar in the case of lifestyles as well. Chances are much higher to visit a destination again when the individuals' lifestyle or desired lifestyle and the lifestyle conveyed by the destination brand are suitable for each other.

In Hungarian literature several studies has been presented in the past decade, regarding the Balaton brand. The "Balaton-brand" was defined in the region's development strategy (2007-2013) as follows: **"... in Central Europe, the Balaton region is the model region for naturalness and high quality of life...** a healing destination ... a healing lake image is developed where the lake and thermal springs with medicinal waters, the micro-climate, the healing and healthy local products and services for experiencing active leisure time await visitors all year round and curing the local people as well ..."

 (Vital Pro Ltd., 2005).

In the Balaton tourism development concept, creating the sustainable and competitive tourism of the region were defined as a primary long-term objective (LT Consorg Ltd., 2005). The key element of this is the competitiveness, the specific identity and Balaton brand which identify it and a well-established tourism industry with high-quality services. The main objective of the strategy, for the period of 2007-2013, was to start a new phase in developing of the regional tourism. The sub-goal is in achieving this strategic *"to create a tourism*

*destination management (TDM) system in the region"*, for creating the basic conditions for sustainable development and designing the destination brand image (LT Consorg Ltd., 2005).

The brand is a key element of tourism demand, one of the final goals of destination marketing activity and an indicator of market success. The supply, the tourism products or destinations only have a chance to take into account in travel decisions when these are clearly recognizable for the visitors and promise a clear benefit (attraction and experience). Brand creation and brand management are considered to be the highest level of the art of marketing among international specialists: "Brand creation is an art and the cornerstone of marketing" (Kotler, 1998).

Branding is very popular in the tourism business, thus it is not a surprise that tourism destinations also consider it more and more important for their own distinction and identification. The *destination brand* is a name, symbol, logo, trade mark or other graphic image that identifies and distinguishes the destination; moreover it conveys the promise of the travel experience which can be uniquely associated with the destination. The brand also helps in strengthening the memories of experiences after the journey (Ritchie - Crouch, 2003).

Branding experiences is one of the most influential marketing activities. For customers the quality of products or services is not the only determining element to consider but the overall satisfaction on product usability is determining also. As the travel experience includes chains of many services and behavioral manifestations (Otto - Ritchie, 1995), the attention of the marketing needs to focus on the advantages of travel experience offered by the destination (and its brand). It is not easy to decide on which aspect of the experiences offered by the destination should be used during branding. A distinction must be made between the basic, the secondary and the peripheral elements of the experiences.

Strengthening the destination as a brand is a very important task for every stakeholder as the often mentioned synergic effect can be easily captured here. However, as the interest of the tourism providers and other stakeholders is generally low in destination branding, image and positioning, it would be necessary to give information and enhance cooperation in order to raise awareness about these elements and help providers to introduce these steps in their own marketing activities (Holczer, 2011).

The positioning is an outstanding task for accessing a tourism destination to the market what must be carried out by the destination management. By carrying out the destination positioning, identifying and differentiating characteristics are also created. As positioning always needs to be fitted to the expectations of selected market segments, the destination needs to be positioned on every market.



The aim of positioning is to form a precise image of the product or the brand in the visitor's mind. So the most important is how the consumer perceives the product and not the information was transferred or what product attributes has been developed. The success of positioning thus cannot be measured in profitability or market share but the change in the consumer's behavior. In the autumn of 2005 the M.A.S.T. Market and Public Opinion Research Society carried out a series representative research with seven focus groups. Based on the results, the Hungarians have a basically positive and multicolour picture about the Balaton and consider it as their national treasure. The most common associations are related to water and relaxation: the Hungarian sea, water, holiday, vacation, travelling and bathing were mentioned in first place. The landscape, the natural resources and the elements of local cultural heritage were mentioned as the main values of the region. It was found that the image within the Hungarians is a good starting point for marketing activities and successful brand strategy (MAST, 2006).

The research was repeated in 2009. The positive image of Balaton was even more improved and became clearer during the past few years. This was concluded from those associations which could be captured in the personalization of the lake, the image montages, the general and personal attitudes. This is also supported by the fact that in 2005 the Hungarian population considered the role of Balaton is decreasing in tourism, by 2009 clearly believed that the destination is playing an increasing role in the economy again. The improvements of the Balaton tourism supply were evaluated positively (water quality, beach development, hotel development, tidiness, continued bike route construction, programs' development): thanks for the expansion of spa services and programs more and more people are visiting the region outside of the summer period (Sulyok, 2010).

In the summer of 2012, the Hungarian Tourism Ltd. conducted a survey among tourists staying in the region and the results showed that the previously formed image about the Balaton has a positive change in one-third of the visitors and the majority of them has experienced what they expected. The positive change was even higher in the case of foreign tourists. According to local experts, interviewed during this research, the Balaton region has a positive perception and has no competitors in Hungary. Among the foreign tourists, however, a declining tendency can be observed in destination popularity, which is mainly caused by that, the realized improvements could not adjust to the changing needs and the Balaton promotion in abroad was not intense enough during the recent time. The SWOT analysis based on this survey has underlined the sense of "ownerless" of the region and the lack of

Balaton brand and identity introduced in Hungary and abroad (Hungarian Tourism Ltd., 2013).

## **MATERIAL AND THE METHODOLOGY OF EVALUATING THE QUESTIONNAIRES**

The geographical area of the examined destination was the Balaton region. The existence and efficient, effective work of local DMOs is a priority issue for creating a sustainable and competitive tourism destination. Evaluating the operation of TDM system, it is equally important to take account the opinion of tourists, professionals and members of TDM organizations. Within the research in 2011 and 2012, three different questionnaire surveys were carried out in the Balaton region among the members and employees of local DMOs and among Hungarian tourists, staying in the destination. The planned size of the sample was 500 questionnaires, containing:

- 400 domestic tourists,
- 80 DMOs' members,
- 20 DMOs' employees.

The number of returned questionnaires was 199, representing 39.8% return-ratio. The composition of the returned questionnaires was as follows:

- tourists: 158 (39.5% of return-ratio),
- members of DMOs: 32 (40% of return-ratio),
- employees of DMOs: 9 (45% return-rate).

The time period of interrogation was made to the following schedule:

- tourists: between 01/07/2011 and 10/31/2011,
- members of DMOs: between 01/04/2012 and 30/06/2012,
- employees of DMOs: between 04/01/2012 and 06/30/2012.

The survey is not representative for the examined region therefore we may draw conclusions from the results only in general.

The survey questions focused on the effectiveness of the management of 19 destination tourism organizations (DMOs) operating in the region. This study, however, is only directed to a narrow area that is analyzing the effectiveness of marketing activities of these tourism associations. The main objective of the study is to evaluate the results of the questions. As recommended by Piskóti (2002), we have assumed in the framing and processing of the survey that the recognizability of local and regional image clearly shows the effectiveness of

the regional marketing activities. The questionnaire included open and closed type questions. The structure and the content of the questionnaires, sent the target groups, were identical to carry out comparative analyzes.

### ***The process of sampling procedure***

To complete the questionnaires we personally searched for the following organizations.

- Each of the 19 DMOs and their related Tourist Information offices in the Balaton region. The query was conducted with their help among the employees, members and domestic tourists visiting the Tourism Offices.
- Five commercial accommodation facility in the Balaton region (Hotel Club Tihany – Tihany, Hotel Panorama – Balatongyörök, Hotel Fit – Hévíz, Hotel Azúr– Siófok, Ramada Hotel & Resort Lake – Balatonalmádi). We could expand the number of tourists with the help of three of these accommodations.

Tourists and members were personally asking by the collaboration of DMOs' employees and the hotels receptionists involved in the survey. Overall, the questionnaires were received from 14 DMOs and three commercial accommodations.

### ***Limitations of the research***

Among the *tourists*, the research sample covered only those tourists who visited the area during the investigation. The reason of this, the experiences of tourism services and tourist information offices were only meaningful for those who stayed in the area at the time of the research.

In the case of *members*, the research covered only those who had enough time to complete the questionnaire. We tried to choose the period of inquiry, when probably they were not too busy with tourists so they could have more time and greater willingness to participate in the research.

In the case of *DMOs' employees* the research sample covered only those professionals who worked for organizations operating in the region which was only 19 at the time of the study.

The questionnaires provided anonymity, was not controlled, so responses were received from a variety of target groups in a not predictable way. As a result, the responses could only draw general conclusions about the region which can provide hopefully a good starting point for a more comprehensive analysis in the future which may contribute to the achievement of competitiveness and sustainability of regional tourism (in our case the Balaton tourism).

During the evaluation of the results of the questionnaires we used distribution ratio known from descriptive statistics and basic statistics, moreover association test and factor analysis known from inductive statistics were performed as well. The examination was prepared with spreadsheets and SPSS 20 statistical program package. The tests were prepared with EXCEL program and SPSS 20 statistical package.

During the examination we have applied homogeneous data ratios, whose common characteristic is that the compared data, as it can be seen from the name of the group, homogeneous with the same unit and they are only differ in temporal, spatial or other criteria. This group includes the distribution rate is used by us, which shows the percentage represented by the share and the distribution between the parts of the whole (Szűcs, ed., 2002).

Examination of the relationship between a large number of variables included in a multivariate statistical analysis. To ensure effective analysis multiple variable statistics uses advanced mathematical methods. We applied the component analysis and the factor analysis of them. The goal of factor analysis is to find a common factor or factors that influence the majority of the examined variables. The presence of common factor(s) – the so-called hypothetical variables – can be concluded from the connection with the studied variables. Usually several studied variables can be combined in a common factor, such, which variables have an effect collectively on one variable (Szűcs, ed., 2002).

## ***RESULTS AND EVALUATION***

The evaluation of recognizability and preference of local and regional image (such as a regional brand) gives an advanced but a good approach about the effectiveness of marketing activities in tourism destinations. The analysis of the marketing activity of DMOs operating in the Balaton region basically focused on *effectiveness of conveying the settlement's identity*. The first line of Fig. 3 presents the opinions of employees, members and tourists. The tourists declared most positively, 75% were able to identify local image in the region while the numbers of employees and members were significantly lower (56 and 47%).

**Figure 3** Comparison between the recognizability of the identities of settlements and the destination

Source: own research

Those who answered ‘yes’ could determine precisely what the perceived or the communicated identity expresses, which in the latter case signals a higher level of image building awareness. The significant difference in the level of perception of the target groups can be explained by the high difference in the number of the questionnaires but it can also indicate that an unconscious identity building can be behind the higher proportion of the image perceived by the tourists. This latter opinion appears to be confirmed by the differences of the opinions among employees and members as well. As the rate of image identified by members is lower than the employees’, it is assumed that the communication activity of image building of DMOs is lower than it would be necessary, which may be related to the intensity of the relationship between DMOs and their members. (This was proved by an other parts of the research.)

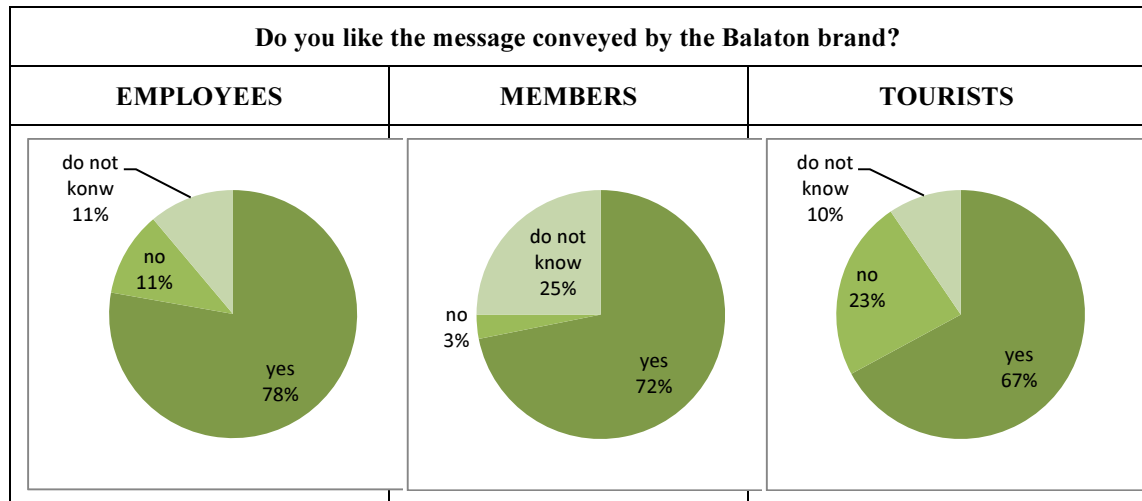
For the question, *"Can you identify a micro-regional identity?"* (bottom line of Fig. 3), we received also very different results in relation to the target groups. In this case, the employees had the most positive opinion (56%), followed by the tourists with 39%. Members’ opinion is lower than the value of the other two groups, it is only a total of 12%.

One of the key tasks of DMOs is entering the settlements to the tourism-market as a part of their own micro-region, which becomes possible as a result of cooperation with other settlements in their smaller destination. However, the employees’ high "no" response (44 %) suggests in general that conscious image building is not carried out in all micro-regional level

during the regional marketing activities. This is confirmed by the responses of tourists as well, as only 39% of total respondents could identify micro-regional image compared to the 75% of local image. Employees had better opinions about both of local and micro-regional image forming compared to the members (Fig. 3). This leads to the conclusion that the work of experts carrying out image building is becoming more conscious. Since the employees' perception of image-formation in local and micro-regional level was the same, we can assume that this consciousness is presented in the fact that settlements are considered to be parts of their own destinations and this reveal in their promotion activities.

Much less members can identify a micro-region identity, only 12%. This may be due to the lack of communication between DMOs and their members, as they have a better opinion about the recognizability of their own settlements' image (47%). The fact that members cannot know too much about the characteristics and image of their micro-region can indicate that the DMOs do not communicate and do not raise awareness of their marketing activity sufficiently carried out in cooperation with the neighboring DMOs.

The survey also examined the perceptibility of the regional identity of Balaton. We formulated more questions about this topic. The answers given for the first question *“Do you like the message, image and experience conveyed by the Balaton brand?”* (Fig. 4) show significant differences in the three target groups. The tourists were the most critical: only 67% liked, 23% did not like it at all and 10% did not know the "Balaton brand". Extends the number of "Does not know the Balaton brand" nearly a quarter of members (23%) and 11% of employees as well (the latter value may be somehow misleading since the “no” answer was only one out of nine respond). The values measured among members and employees can make us conclude that there is insecurity in the communication activities between the local DMOs and the regional marketing organization as well. It can cause further thinking that 23% of the tourists and 11% of the employees does not like the message conveyed by the “Balaton brand” (Fig. 4). We will return to the reasons of this phenomenon in a latter part of this study.

**Figure 4** Do you like the message conveyed by the Balaton brand?

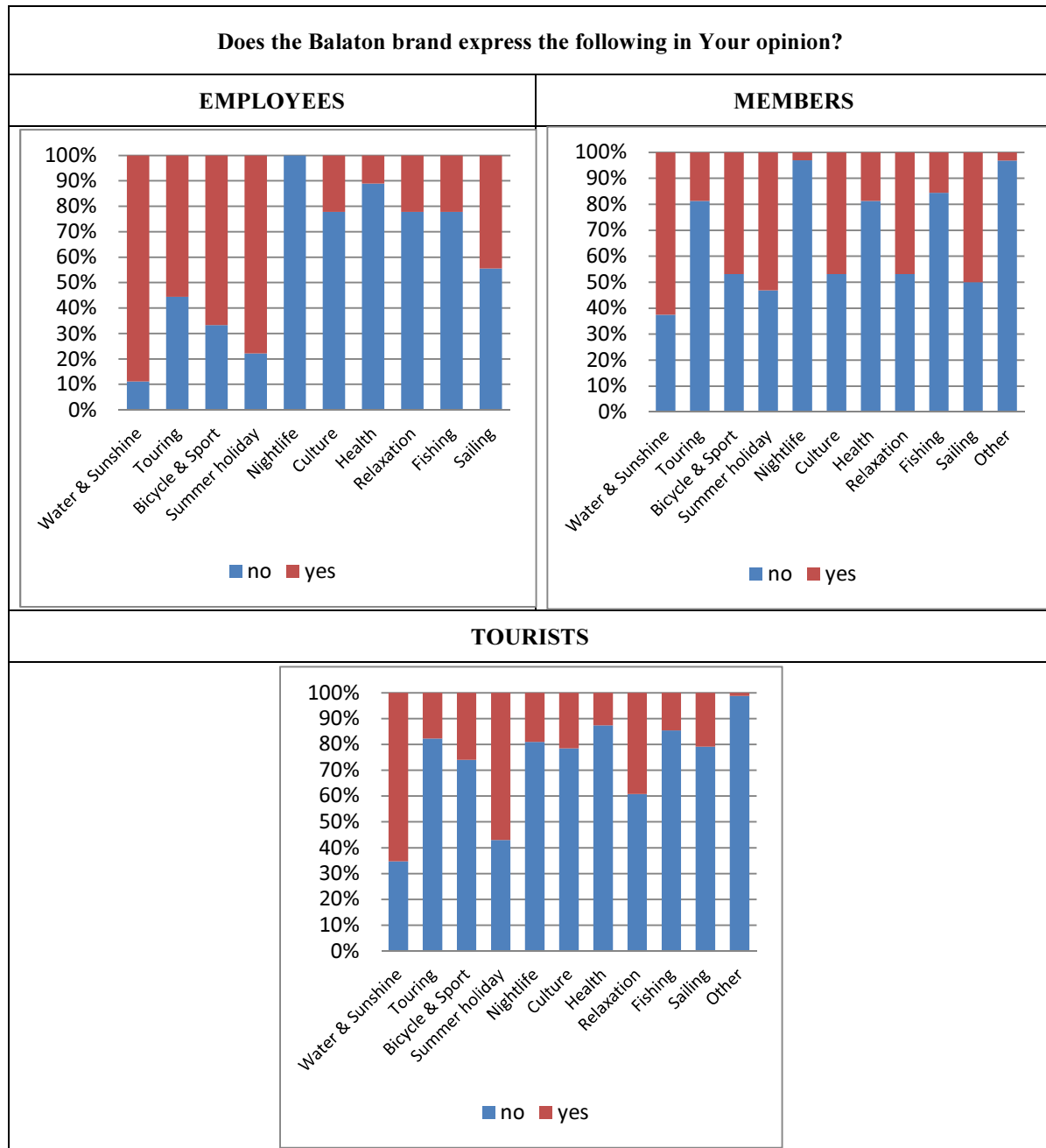
Source: own study

The result of the association examination carried out about this question is  $V=0.17$  which shows a loose connection between the three examined groups and the fact whether they like the message, image and experience conveyed by the “Balaton-brand”. The same can be seen in the case of groups of the supply side ( $V=0.196$ ). These values enforce the opinion that the flow of information is uncertain or not effective enough between the groups of the sides of supply and demand.

Those who know the “Balaton-brand” have identified its character (*Fig. 5*). More answers could be given to the question. Most of them chose the “*water and sunshine*” (8 employees, 20 members, 103 tourists). This was followed by the “*summer holiday*” (7 employees, 17 members, 90 tourists).



**Figure 5** What can the experience conveyed by the Balaton brand identified with?



Source: own research

The target groups had different opinions about the other characteristics.

- *Tourists* primarily consider the Balaton region as the destination of "relaxation" (62 people), "sport" (41 people), "culture" (34 persons) and "sailing" (33 people). This is followed by "night life" (30 people), "touring" (28 people) and "fishing" (23 people). The "health" is at the end of this ranking with 20 votes.
- According to the opinion of the *members*, the Balaton is very typical of the experience of "sailing" (16 people) and "sport", "culture" and "relaxation", each with 15-15 vote.

It follows by *"touring"* and *"health"* with 6-6 votes, and *"fishing"* with five votes. In their opinion *"nightlife"* is the least typical of the region (1 person).

- According to the employees, the destination can be most defined by *"sport"* (6 persons), *"touring"* (5 people) and *"sailing"* (4 people) as well. The *"fishing"*, *"culture"* and *"recreation"* all have 2-2 vote and *"health"* has only 1 vote. The *"nightlife"* was not selected by anyone.
- Among *other specifications*, the tourists have mentioned *wine and winetasting*, the members – besides wine – also associated to *gastronomy*.

Compared the perception of ranking features, it can be said that the first two characteristics, ***"water and sunshine"*** and ***"summer holiday"*** are the main profile of the region. In the importance of other characteristic, there are differences between the opinion of the groups of supply side (members and employees) and between supply and demand (tourists).

- The most striking difference between groups on the supply side is in assessing the role of *"culture"* and *"touring"*. According to members, culture has stronger characteristic in the destination but employees believe that touring is stronger. The demand side considers that culture is stronger than touring as well.
- The character of *"recreation"* is mentioned at the beginning of the ranking by members and tourists and at the end by employees.
- The last three characteristics (*"fishing"*, *"health"* and *"nightlife"*) are the same among the three groups but there are differences in their order. The order of importance is health, fishing and nightlife according to *members*, fishing and health according to *employees*, and nightlife, fishing and health according to *tourists*.

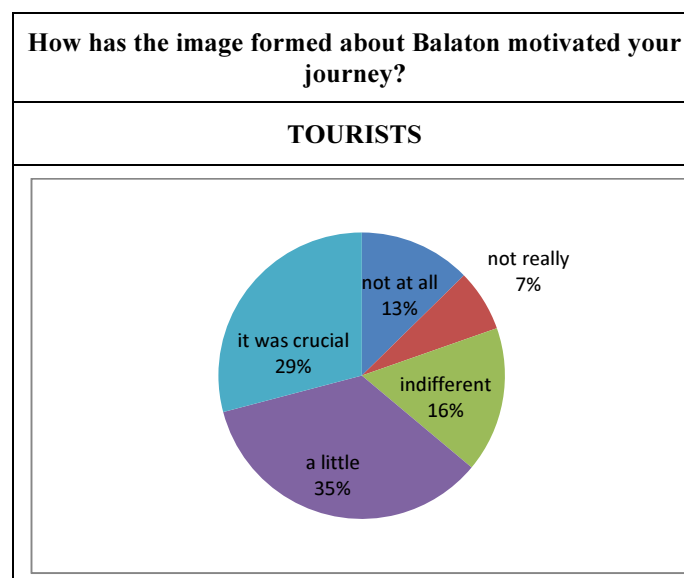
The association test shows a very weak relation between the examined groups ( $V=0.149$ ) and the elements to identify the messages, image, experiences conveyed by the Balaton brand. An association test was carried out between members and employees with the value of  $V=0.219$ , which is though stronger but still shows a very weak relation.

The model was significant, so we ran a factor analysis of the responses of tourists. For the first time (after varimax rotation) 4 experience-factors (adventure-features) were pointed out by the program, which explained 58.2% of the total variance, which did not achieve the desired 60% variance criterion level. After studying the Scree Plot figure we ran the factor analysis for five factors. At that time, 67.7% of the variance was explained by the established factors. The five factors, in the following order 16.6%, 14.2%, 13.1%, 12.7 % and 11.1%,

explained the variance of the variables, a total of 67.7% which can be considered high. The first factor contains the *elements of active leisure time (hiking, cycling and sports) and culture*. In the second factor, the factors of *water sports* were arranged: fishing and sailing. The third factor includes the experiences associated with the *summer beach* (water and sunlight, summer holiday). In the fourth factor contains the components of physical, mental health and recreation, and the fifth factor the feature of nightlife. Inefficient communication activity can be the reason of the differences of the conveyed image and main characteristics. This can be traced back to the insufficient recognition of the opinion of the demand side and local population and members as well as their ineffective opinion shaping. In other words, awareness, conception and joint thinking are missing.

We asked tourists how the message conveyed by the “Balaton-brand” has influenced, motivated them in their decision to travel to the destination. According to the distribution ratios (Fig. 5.) for more than half of the respondents it was decisive in the travel decisions, 29% said it was very important and 35 % said it had less important role. Some had the opinion that it did not matter at all (13%), or it was not really important (7%) or it was neutral (16%). We used a five-pointed Likert scale for the evaluation and we calculated their average. 1 stood for “did not motivate me at all” while 5 meant “it was decisive”. The result had a medium average: 3.61.

**Figure 6** How has the image formed about Balaton motivate your journey?

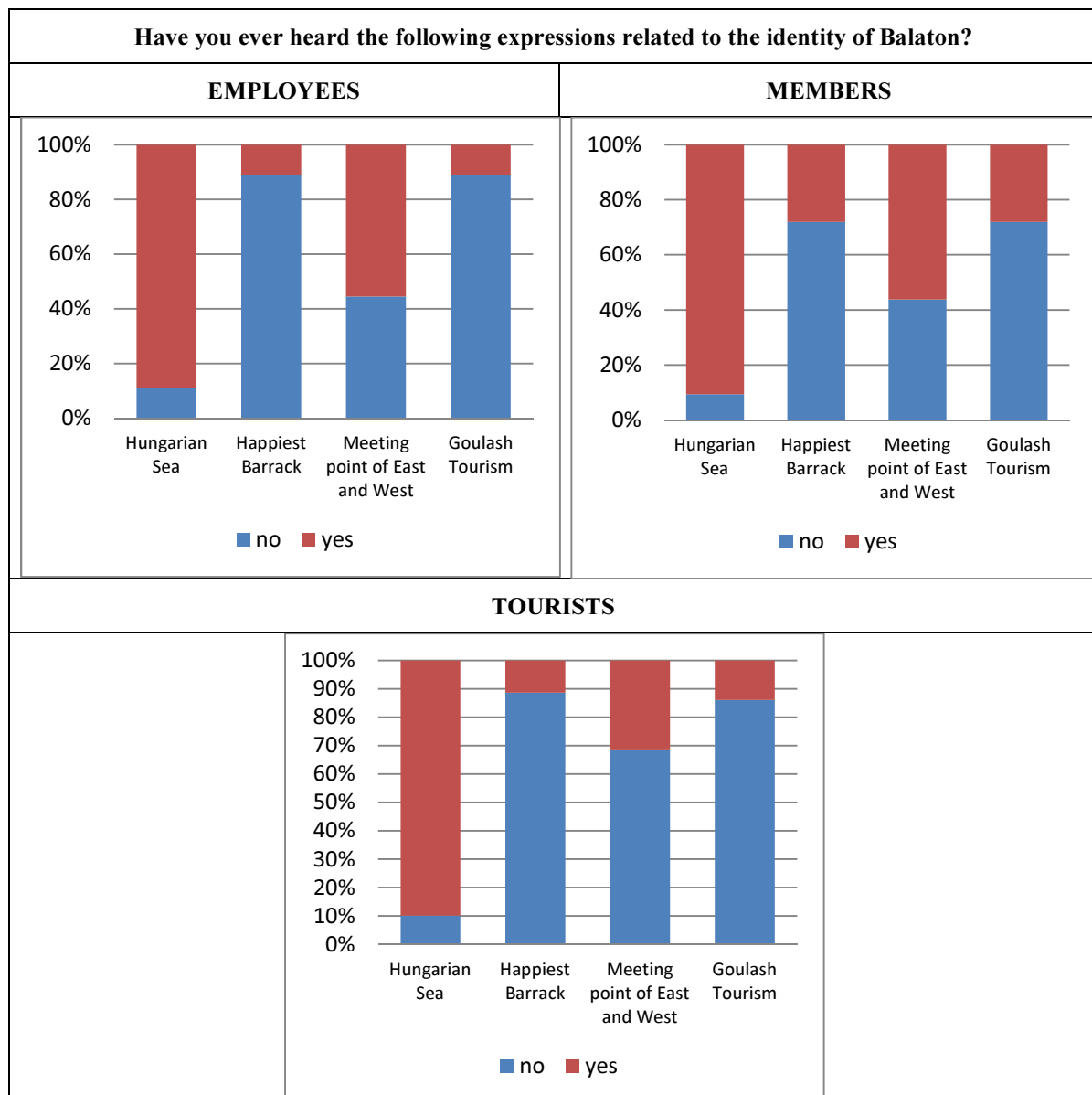


Resource: own research

With the last two questions of the questionnaire, we were curious whether the identified characteristics, during different periods of the last century, with Hungary and the Balaton

region, nowadays how well known or how correct. With this, we wanted to determine whether the region could get rid of the primarily political signals or not. The question “*Have you heard about one of the identity images related to the Balaton?*” (Fig. 7) had the following results: the “*Hungarian sea*” expression was known in all three target groups, 91% of the members, 89% of the employees and 90% of the tourists confirmed this. The other well-known phrase, the “*Meeting point of East-West*”, was familiar to 56% of the members and employees and 39% of the tourists. The “*Happiest barrack*” and “*Goulash tourism*” expressions were the least known among the interviewed.

**Figure 7** Have you ever heard the following expressions related to the identity of Balaton?



Resource: own research



The evaluation of the recognizability of the settlement's or destination's image can be preliminary, but of good directions. The research has examined the recognizability of the destination's image on three levels: settlement, micro-region and Balaton-region among members of the scope-groups. By comparing the results it became possible to state that tourists can identify settlements in a positive way. Members were the ones who could least identify settlements and micro-regions. Employees could give a positive answer in the same ratio in both cases. This latter is a sign that the profession thinks of the settlements as parts of the micro-region, which is a positive change in the attitude when entering the market. The scale of less favorable opinion of members, however, can be a warning, as this can partially mean that the profession has an inefficient communication with its members, does not convey its steps of marketing related activities and its directions, and it does not emphasize forming its members' opinion. To determine this, further investigations should be made.

In order to identify the regional identity, we asked whether the message of the "Balaton brand" can be liked. The results show that this message is most popular among the professionals. However a major portion of tourists does not like this message. One reason of this could be due to an ineffective marketing communication and another, that the "Balaton" is not identical with the presented picture in the media for almost a quarter of the tourists. There is another result worth to take into consideration: one quarter of the members do not know this "Balaton brand". These members live by the Balaton, so the answer "I don't know the brand" with such a high ratio raises awareness to severe lack of communication. Justifying this, additional research should be conducted.

For the questions related to the content of the "Balaton brand" all three groups classified "*water and sunshine*" and "*summer holiday*" among the first places. The scope groups are somewhat different when it comes to determining the importance of the other characteristics. Among the groups on the supply side the largest difference is about the roles of *culture and touring in nature*. Members say that the nature of culture is stronger, while employees say that touring in nature is more important. The demand side considers culture a more important characteristic than touring. *Relaxation* is mentioned by members and tourists at top of the list, employees towards the end. The last three characteristics are the same, there is a difference only in their order (fishing, health and nightlife).

Our results support the Balaton researches conducted by Hungarian Tourism Ltd. and Balaton Regional DM Organization in 2012. During the evaluation of these researches it was concluded that there is no unequivocal "Balaton brand" and identity introduced inland and abroad, which is a serious deficiency in further developing the destination's tourism. Those

interviewed have underlined the natural beauty of the destination, the characteristic landscape, the possibilities for relaxation, bathing and cultural events (*Hungarian Tourism Ltd., 2013*).

We asked tourists how has the message conveyed by the “Balaton” brand motivate them when choosing to travel to the Balaton region. More than half of the answerers was influenced by the identity when making their travel-related decision. One third of those interviewed said that it was not really important, or neutral. The average value of the answers can support the fact that even if the identity plays part in the motivation of those travelling to the Balaton region, it is not as characteristic as it could be hoped for, or as we would like it to be.

Among the expressions used in the socialist era “*Hungarian sea*” is still found expressive by all three groups. In our opinion this expression is free of any politic content; it emphasizes the natural characteristics and significance of the lake that we can be proud of.

As the final conclusion of the study we can say that until touristic organizations and their members cannot convey the Balaton image authentically besides the identity of the settlement, the identification and the recognition of these will also be problematic for tourists as well.

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