

Consumer Expectations in the Context of Unique Tourism Products

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In response to the contemporary trend of tourists actively seeking novel, unique, and distinctive experiences, this study explores the relationship between tourists' perceptions of the uniqueness of tourism products and their expectations. Specifically, it focuses on the coastal destinations of Piran and Portorož in Slovenia, analysing four unique experiences: Gourmet Olive Tours, Fonda Fish Garden, The Disappearance of Tartini's Violin, and E-bike Extravaganza Mareatour. Using a quantitative approach, the study supports the hypothesis that the perceived uniqueness of new tourism products significantly influences tourists' expectations. The findings support the hypothesis, revealing that the perceived uniqueness of an experience is closely tied to its incorporation of local character and a strong experiential or personal touch. For instance, the Gourmet Olive Tour experience, perceived as the most unique, offers tourists immersive encounters within a landscape park and interactions with a local olive family. Furthermore, the study identifies a hierarchy of expectations among tourists, ranging from increasing knowledge of the local offer, traditions, and history, to seeking unique activities and having confidence that the experience will meet their expectations. In conclusion, the research underscores that consumers harbour high expectations for unique experiences, underlining the importance of infusing tourism products with experiential and emotional elements. The positive correlation between perceived uniqueness and expectations underscores the imperative for crafting distinct and memorable tourism offerings. The study enriches our understanding of the relationship between perceived uniqueness and expectations, offering insights for destination marketers creating distinctive tourism products. It also provides recommendations for future research, enhancing scholarly discourse on tourism product development and consumer behaviour.

Keywords: consumer expectations, unique tourism products, destination, tourism experience



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Introduction

Today's consumers are looking for something new, unique, or different that leads to strong memories of the travel experience, and demand more than the typical forms of tourism (Kim et al., 2012). They desire a unique experience at the destination (Brown, 2005; Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). Before visiting a destination, potential visitors tend to look for communicative cues to find out whether it meets their tourism desires. Consumers have more complex choices than ever before and more channels through which to pursue them. Expectations are created in the minds of consumers based on their individual experiences and marketing communication promises. Moreover, these experiences are inherently subjective (Olson & Dover, 1979) and exist in the mind of a consumer who is emotionally, physically, intellectually, or even spiritually engaged (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Pine & Gilmore 1998). The increasing demand for experiences shows that it is no longer enough for destinations to compete with their facilities and amenities; they need to create differentiating experiences to continue attracting tourists (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In this context, the experience of a destination is increasingly its differentiator. For destination marketing and management strategies to be truly successful, creative ways should be sought to promote positive, unique, and high-quality tourism products that can efficiently attract tourists (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Jennings, 2006). Marketing researchers are working on the development of unique and highly differentiated products that have a high potential for market success, and are therefore including the attractive features in the product that strongly differentiate it from other products in its category and provide positive value to the consumer (Carpenter et al., 1994).

In addition, tourists are no longer satisfied with traditional services but want rich, varied experiences and often prefer products with a higher degree of uniqueness, such as innovative, novel, and customized products (Lynn & Harris, 1997; Tian et al., 2001) over products with a lower degree of uniqueness. Customers instinctively compare each new experience, whether positive or not, with their previous experiences and judge them accordingly. If the uniqueness of a tourism product relates to an as-yet-unknown

destination or a tourism product that has never been experienced before, expectations may be shaped by market conditions, competition, and the customer's situation. Expectations can therefore be formed before visiting a destination and experiencing a tourism product (Sánchez et al., 2006). In addition, customers can derive their expectations of tourism products from different types of external communication, such as blog posts, online consumer reviews, or social media comments expressing excitement about an experience, so potential tourists have high expectations. Uniqueness encompasses everything a customer expects from a tourism product, service, or provider. These promises of the uniqueness of a chosen tourism product evoke mental images that convey the possibility of having exactly the experiences and perceived values that they expected. Uniqueness is an important benefit consumers seek in tourism products; thus the focus of our study is to explore what consumers expect from unique tourism products. Since expectations – as opposed to actual experiences – determine the level of satisfaction of tourists, it is important to understand the expectations of potential tourists in the design and marketing of tourism experiences.

One of the most important strategic tools of a destination in securing its competitive position is the ability to communicate its attractions and highlight the uniqueness of its tourism products and adapt them to the needs and expectations of its potential customers. Therefore, understanding customer expectations and matching unique tourism products with their perceptions are of great importance for destination marketing strategy decisions.

The main objective of the study is to understand and explore consumer expectations related to unique tourism products from the consumer's perspective. In addition, the purpose is also to explore a theoretical framework for analysing consumer expectations related to unique tourism products. In particular, this study aims to identify the specific expectations of different unique products in the destination and to apply the results of the study in the context of the destination Slovenian Istria.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the literature on consumer expectations and unique tourism

products at the destination is reviewed. This is followed by the research methodology and the interpretation of the research results using the Slovenian region of Istria as an example. Finally, theoretical implications and recommendations for future research are given.

Literature Review

Consumer Expectations

In marketing literature, the term 'expectancy' refers to an individual's beliefs and predictions about how a product or service is likely to perform at a certain point in the future (Higgs et al., 2005). They are usually formed in the pre-purchase phase and are based on prior knowledge about the products or services gathered through non-experiential channels (i.e. advertising or word of mouth) and experiential channels (i.e. previous experiences) (Chen, Jiang, & Liu, 2023). Pre-trip expectations also play a crucial role in shaping post-trip satisfaction through the positive or negative discrepancy between expectations and perceived performance (Oliver, 1980; Xu & Zhang, 2016). Consumers instinctively compare any new experience, whether positive or not, with their previous experiences and judge them accordingly. In tourism, consumer experience expectations are the output between consumers and tourism systems before the trip. Tourism demand reflects the interplay of tourism needs and motivations. Larsen (2007) points out that part of tourists' expectations of their experiences are related to personal characteristics and that expectations of future trips are usually related to their perceptions.

Understanding consumer expectations may be difficult as tourism products involve various elements that co-exist, including emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual feelings of individuals (Shaw & Ivens, 2002). Those values and attitudes related to the choice of destinations, activities, products and services, transportation, and other tourism enablers can be distinguished by the proportion of cognition and emotion they contain. In expectancy theory, the attitude is motivated by the knowledge or belief of future reward and therefore is fundamentally cognitive, while drive theory is emotional (Gnoth, 1997), but both

theories are important in the context of tourism. Within expectancy theory, the most important elements that influence the customer's expectations regarding the offered tourism product are travel recommendations of others, the travel needs of the individual, travel experiences in the past, communication in the media and among providers, and prices during peak periods (Vroom, 1964). Nowadays, consumers' expectations no longer depend only on traditional word-of-mouth or marketing communication from travel agencies or destinations. The posts, texts, photos, or videos that tourists create about their travel experiences, as well as the content and reviews written by the website operator and other users, are important information for users planning their holiday activities (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), and thus these potential travellers can rely on the experiences of others when making their decisions. In other words, social media and user-generated content enable tourists to share their experiences, so that the content later affects the travel expectations of potential tourists and becomes a valuable source of tourism information (Yoo et al., 2011).

Tourism expectations are also significantly influenced by the design of the tourism product and the way tourists use the products offered by destinations, including the way they combine the product mix and the promised experiences. Tourists may have specific expectations, for example about the particular character of the destination's climate and culture, attractions, and sights. It is also argued that tourism product experiences are constructed to meet consumer demands by designing experiences ever more carefully to meet specific market expectations, which involves the detailed design of tourism products, encounters, and experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The current trend in tourism is to multiply and intensify impressions and emotions to surprise, amaze, or shock tourists with their experiences so that they are completely satisfied. This is especially true when these expectations relate to destinations that are still unknown or to a tourism product that has never been experienced before. From this point of view, the formation of customer expectations is important because it is an initial element of the purchase decision. In our case,

expectation can be seen as an attitude before consuming unique tourism products at the destination.

Unique Tourism Products

Contemporary tourists increasingly seek distinctive, innovative, and immersive experiences (Azevedo, 2009). Tourism products serve as significant draw factors motivating tourists to explore destinations. The structure of a tourism product is intricate, arising from a complex production process where the product and process are inseparably linked. A tourism product comprises a blend of tangible and intangible elements, encompassing natural, historical, and sociocultural factors, as well as accommodation, transportation, infrastructure, recreational opportunities, and shopping facilities (McIntosh & Goeldner, 1990).

Recent research delves into the concept of uniqueness in tourism products. From a marketing standpoint, unique products are those significantly differentiated from others in their category, with distinct sensory, visual, functional, emotional, or other attributes perceived positively by consumers (Li et al., 2015). This differentiation is pivotal for product success, with perceptible uniqueness enhancing sensory, functional, image, and emotional appeal, thereby adding positive value for consumers (Choi & Coughlan, 2006). The notion of uniqueness evokes positive consumer associations, emphasizing the desirability of the product. The key to uniqueness is the product's distinctiveness from others, aligning with marketing principles emphasizing product differentiation for success. A unique product is also 'one of a kind', possessing elements of novelty and rarity. In advertising, uniqueness translates to a unique selling proposition (USP) (Morrison, 2018), contributing to product differentiation.

In the tourism realm, historical, natural, cultural, and physical attributes underpin the development of unique products, like local cuisine or souvenirs, imbued with emotional significance that engages tourists in personal experiences (Spielmann et al., 2018). Local destination distinctiveness is crucial for crafting unique products, and preserving tourists' perceptions through sensory engagement with the destination's distinctive values (Spielmann et al., 2018). Tourist

experiences cater to higher-level needs such as novelty, excitement, prestige, socialization, and learning, enhancing overall well-being (Andrades & Dimanche, 2018).

Perceived uniqueness refers to the degree to which a consumer views a product as novel and original compared to similar offerings (Sundar et al., 2014). Scholars suggest that in promoting a tourism product, the initial step involves translating the essential qualities of the destination into visually appealing images for tourists (Jenkins, 1999; Tasci et al., 2007). Cornelissen (2005) emphasizes the importance of compiling and presenting the distinctive attributes of the destination, particularly through photographs on websites, brochures, and other marketing materials. Previous research indicates that the uniqueness of a product significantly influences consumer purchase intentions (Berger & Heath, 2007; Rubera et al., 2011). As tourism resources become increasingly homogeneous, recent evidence suggests that the uniqueness of tourism offerings significantly impacts tourist loyalty (Hikmah et al., 2018).

However, it is important to note that investigating causal relationships in such contexts can often be challenging. As suggested by the literature, regression models are commonly used to understand the relationship between variables, such as the impact of psychological antecedents on tourists' experience expectations (e.g. Hanh & Dung, 2023) and attitudinal antecedents influencing tourists' expectations (e.g. Ozturk & Qu, 2008).

Our research on unique experiences in the Slovenian Istria region focuses on experiences marketed under the Slovenia Unique Experiences (SUE) quality label (Slovenian Tourist Board, 2022). Slovenian tourism follows the common vision of Slovenia as a boutique green destination offering high-quality, distinctive, authentic green experiences with local character, thoughtful approach and service, and a strong experiential and personal touch.

Based on the theoretical framework and aiming to delve deeper into the concept of the uniqueness of tourism products from the consumers' viewpoint and their associated expectations, the main research hypothesis is formulated as follows: *The uniqueness of*

new tourism products in Piran & Portorož influences tourists' expectations of them.

Methodology

Sample Design and Data Collection

The empirical study was conducted in Piran and Portorož, an attractive tourist destination in Slovenian Istria. An online self-administered close-ended questionnaire served as the primary tool for data collection. Data collection was conducted in 2022. The target population, drawn from the online database of the Portorož Tourist Board, encompassed all tourists or potential visitors who have subscribed to the e-newsletter on www.portoroz.si, representing both major foreign markets (Italy, Austria, Germany) and domestic ones. The majority of the population of the database are visitors to the destination who have participated in destination experiences and used tourism services, or potential visitors who have participated in destination prize competitions in the last five years as part of the destination's promotional campaign in the main foreign and domestic markets. To a lesser extent, some potential visitors have signed up for the e-newsletter on www.portoroz.si.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative information for testing predefined hypotheses that had previously been established. As outlined by Larsen (2007), tourists' expectations of their experiences were typically shaped by interactions with travel systems, which might have included activities such as reading brochures, virtual experiences online, or past tourism encounters. The questionnaire's structure was centred on investigating consumers' expectations before visiting the destination.

Initially, respondents were presented with four distinct types of unique tourism products chosen by representatives of the Portorož Tourist Board:

A. *E-bike extravaganza Mareatour offers an e-bike extravaganza exploring scenic towns in Slovenian Istria along the Parenzana railway route. Stops include Forma Viva stone sculptures and Sečovlje Salina Landscape Park, followed by Istrian delicacies at selected restaurants.*

B. *Fonda Fish Garden offers guided tours for a unique experience exploring the distinct flavours of Piran sea bass.*

C. *The Disappearance of Tartini's Violin is a novel city quest, merging Escape Room dynamics with 3D avatars through augmented reality on Slovenian streets, to unravel the mystery of Tartini's violin disappearance – a challenge for intellect, creativity, and teamwork.*

D. *Experience Gourmet Olive Tours at Gramona family farm in Piran's hinterland offers a chance to savour freshly produced specialties amid olive groves with stunning views of Sečovlje salt pans. Tourists explore the intricacies of discovering the techniques behind tasting top-quality organic olive oil – an experience perfectly suited for those passionate about food.*

Each product was accompanied by a photograph and a brief description. Subsequently, respondents were asked to rate the uniqueness of each presented tourism product on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not unique at all) to 5 (very unique).

In the following step, respondents were requested to assess their expectations regarding unique tourism products in general. The expectation scale, derived from a tourist-based expectations questionnaire (Sheng & Chen, 2013), aligns with Schmitt's perspective (1999) and encompasses five experiential dimensions: senses, feelings, actions, thoughts, and related aspects. This scale was evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not agree at all) to 5 (totally agree).

A pilot study was conducted to ensure the questionnaire's comprehensiveness, resulting in minor adjustments to the wording of select items.

Data Analyses

Our selection of four independent variables 'uniqueness' in our model and their relationship to the dependent variable 'expectations' was grounded in their relevance and theoretical underpinnings. Each of these independent variables held significance within the context of tourism experiences. These variables were pivotal for comprehending the dependent variable and played a crucial role in elucidating variability within it. Moreover, from a practical standpoint, they address key inquiries within our research.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Uniqueness of Tourism Products and Consumer Expectations

Constructs/ Items	(1)	(2)
Uniqueness of tourism products		
Product A – E-bike Extravaganza Mareatour	3.92	0.878
Product B – Fonda Fish Garden	4.00	0.844
Product C – The Disappearance of Tartini's Violin	3.97	0.975
Product D – Gourmet Olive Tours	4.09	0.815
Consumer expectations regarding unique tourism products		
EXP 1 – to find some interesting characteristics of the cities and countryside, and unique activities	4.36	0.695
EXP 2 – to travel with companions with similar interests	4.05	0.875
EXP 3 – that the experience will meet my expectations and I will enjoy it	4.36	0.683
EXP 4 – that I will increase my knowledge of the local offer, tradition and history of the place	4.55	0.595

Notes Column headings are as follows: (1) mean, (2) standard deviation.

Table 1 displays the items and their descriptive statistics in relation to the uniqueness of four tourism products and consumer expectations. Following the results, among the four proposed unique tourism products offered in the destination Piran & Portorož, they consider the product D – Gourmet Olive Tours to be the most unique ($M=4.09$; $SD=0.815$), followed by product B – Fonda Fish Garden ($M=4.00$; $SD=0.844$), product C – The Disappearance of Tartini's Violin ($M=3.97$; $SD=0.975$) and lastly product A – E-Bike Extravaganza Mareatour ($M=3.92$; $SD=0.878$). Regarding the results of the study, all the products presented were perceived as unique by the respondents.

Following the descriptive statistics of consumer expectations, the highest expectations were related to increasing tourists' knowledge of the local offer, tradition, and history of the place ($M=4.55$; $SD=0.595$), which means that this expectation was rated very high. Expectations related to finding interesting characteristics of the cities and countryside and unique activities ($M=4.36$; $SD=0.695$), and that the experience will meet their expectations and they will enjoy it also received high (but not the highest) agreement ($M=4.36$; $SD=0.683$). Respondents also agree (but not totally agree) that unique tourism products can enable them to travel with companions with similar interests ($M=4.05$; $SD=0.875$).

Before analysing the proposed relationship between the constructs, an EFA factor analysis was conducted for the dataset for the items measuring *consumer expectations* using SPSS 28. The validity of the instrument was checked with EFA factor analysis using principal component analysis (PCA), which is commonly used to determine factors. The Kaiser-Meier-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test were applied to check the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The value of KMO was 0.718 and the value of Bartlett's test was significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that factor analysis was appropriate. All factor loadings exceeded 0.50 are significant, ranging from 0.670 to 0.833 ($p \leq 0.05$) and are higher than the recommended threshold of 0.40 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Thus, after conducting an EFA factor analysis for the construct measuring tourists' expectations, no item was removed as the analysis showed good measurement validity, leaving all four items for further study. The factor solution accounted for 59.626% of the total variance. Next, the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient was used to determine the internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.754, indicating an acceptable level of reliability. Table 2 provides factor loadings, eigenvalue, percentage of variance explained, and Cronbach's alpha for the factor 'consumer expectations'.

The uniqueness of each of the four proposed tourism products was considered as separate constructs and each was rated on a 5-point Likert scale for

Table 2 Exploratory Factor Analysis Results for Construct Consumer Expectations

Factor and items	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Factor: Consumer expectations regarding unique tourism products				
EXP 1 – to find some interesting characteristics of the cities and countryside, and unique activities	0.800			
EXP 2 – to travel with companions with similar interests	0.670	2.385	59.626	0.754
EXP 3 – that the experience will meet my expectations and I will enjoy it	0.775			
EXP 4 – that I will increase my knowledge of the local offer, tradition and history of the place	0.833			

Notes Column headings are as follows: (1) factor loadings, (2) eigenvalue, (3) variance (%), (4) Cronbach's Alpha.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Test for Sampling Adequacy = 0.718; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Sig. < 0.001.

uniqueness. An EFA was not conducted for these constructs as each product was measured using a 1-item scale.

Results and Discussion

The Sample Description

The sample consisted of a total of 362 respondents. After excluding outliers and incomplete responses, 230 valid surveys remained for data analysis, yielding a response rate of 63.5%. Table 3 shows the sample profile, indicating a gender distribution of 59.6% female and 40.4% male. The average age of respondents was 55 years (SD = 11.84), with the majority falling within the 46–55 age bracket (34.8%).

Regarding educational attainment, 2.6% of respondents attended primary school, while 27% attended high school or secondary school. Furthermore, 29.1% held an associate degree, 30% possessed a college or bachelor's degree, and 11.3% had attained a master's or PhD degree.

Research Results

In the final step, a regression analysis was performed to test the hypothesis. A multiple linear regression analysis was carried out to analyse the relationship between a single dependent (consumer expectations) and several independent variables (uniqueness of each of the four proposed tourism products). Thus, in the regression model, the uniqueness of each proposed tourism product was used as the independent variable, and consumer expectations as the dependent variable.

Before running the regression analysis, multicollinearity diagnostics were conducted to identify when one independent variable is a linear function of others.

The factor (VIF) values were in the range of 0.240 and 0.399, which is less than 2, thus it is confirmed that no multicollinearity issue exists among the constructs. This means that the independent variables included in the regression model are not highly correlated with each other. Therefore, the coefficients estimated by the regression analysis are likely to be reliable, and the model is not significantly affected by multicollinearity issues. This enhances the confidence in the results obtained from the regression analysis. These contribute to evaluating the overall fit and robustness of the regression model, thus providing a solid foundation for interpreting the results and drawing meaningful conclusions in the research paper.

Additionally, we conducted a test for heteroscedasticity in the regression analysis using the White test, which compares the errors (residuals) of the regression model with the independent variables to determine whether their variance is constant or not. Based on the values of the standardized residuals (Std. Residual), which is 0.0, and the standard error of standardized predicted values (Std. Predicted Value) ranging from -4.8 to 1.6 with a standard deviation of 1, we conclude that there are no observable signs of heteroscedasticity in the regression model. In our case, the test indicated that the variances were constant, meaning that they were equally distributed for each value of the independent variables.

Table 4 shows that the total variance can be explained by the regression model (R Square = 0.227), considering the influence of the uniqueness of each tourism product on consumer expectations in Piran & Portorož. Based on the regression analysis, we find

Table 3 Sample Profile

Category		N	%
Gender	Male	93	40.4
	Female	137	59.6
Age	18–25	6	2.6
	26–35	14	6.1
	36–45	24	10.4
	46–55	80	34.8
	56–65	66	28.7
	65 and older	40	17.4
	Total	230	100
Education	Elementary school	6	2.6
	High school or secondary school	62	27
	Associate degree	67	29.1
	College degree or Bachelor's degree	69	30
	Masters of Science or PhD	26	11.3
	Total	230	100

that the influence of the uniqueness of individual products can explain 24.1% of the variance in the value of consumer expectations. The regression model is statistically significant at the 0.001 level; therefore the regression model is appropriate ($F = 17.817$; $p < 0.001$).

Based on the Beta coefficients, which are statistically significant at the 0.05 level, the research results show that there was a strong relationship between product D (Gourmet Olive Tours) and tourists' expectations ($B = 0.250$), followed by the relationship between product A (E-bike Extravaganza Mareatour) and tourists' expectations ($B = 0.169$) and product B (Fonda Fish Garden) and tourists' expectations ($B = 0.152$). No statistical relationship was found between product C and tourists' expectations. The results of a multiple regression analysis show that the uniqueness of unique tourism products such as Gourmet Olive Tours, E-bike Extravaganza Mareatour, and Fonda Fish Garden positively influenced consumer expectations. That is, the higher the uniqueness of the products, the higher the tourists' expectations.

Thus, the proposed hypothesis of the research can be partially confirmed, meaning that the uniqueness of tourism products influences tourists' expectations.

Tourists who perceive tourism products (products A, B, and D) as more unique have higher expectations of them than tourists who do not perceive these products as unique.

Discussion

In the research, we included four unique experiences in the destination Slovenian Istria. Each experience contains elements that distinguish it from other experiences in the destination. On this basis, we consider each experience to be a unique experience. All four products were perceived as unique by the respondents, including Gourmet Olive Tours as the most unique, followed by Fonda Fish Garden, The Disappearance of Tartini's Violin, and E-bike Extravaganza Mareatour. From this, we can conclude that the olive grove experience contains all the above elements that make it unique for the tourist. The olive grove experience takes place in a landscaped park, in contact with a local olive family who have experience and knowledge, and the tourist is taught about the different varieties of olives, the production method of organic extra virgin olive oil, and other local products offered at the farm. Similarly, the unforgettable experience at the Fonda fish farm also includes elements such as its location on the edge of the landscape park of the salt pans, where a family of biologists has been cultivating and maintaining a fish garden with farmed sea bass for several generations, which are characterized by high quality due to the ecological way of feeding and cultivation. The story of the lost violin is closely connected with the town of Piran, which is considered a historical jewel of Venetian architecture on Slovenian soil, and the famous Venetian violinist and composer Giuseppe Tartini. The content appeals to a target audience interested in cultural tourism. In this case, there is no direct contact with the locals during the experience, so the local touch is not as strong as in the first two experiences. Moreover, this experience is conducted as an interactive game in the centre of Piran in a closed group.

From this, we can conclude that the perception of the uniqueness of the experience depends on the inclusion of local character and a strong experiential or personal touch. This can also be related to a quote of unknown source cited by many destinations:

Table 4 Regression Analysis Results

Items	Beta coefficient	P-value
Product A - E-bike Extravaganza Mareatour	0.169	0.010
Product B - Fonda Fish Garden	0.152	0.028
Product C - The Disappearance of Tartini's Violin	0.109	0.088
Product D - Gourmet Olive Tours	0.250	0.001

Notes Dependent variable: Consumer expectations Table 4 Adjusted R² = 0.227; p ≤ 0.001.

‘The tourist product is what we buy. The experience is what we live and remember for a lifetime’. Therefore, we can define the experience as a tourism product with a strong experiential value and a personal touch that the tourist remembers for a long time. A unique tourism product must also have a local character that distinguishes it from other similar products. Experiences must touch the heart and mind of the curious traveller and invite them to connect with the culture, landscape, people, and traditions. The tourist does not just consume the content but actively participates in it. This confirms the findings that the attitude and sense of place fostered by local people can also have a significant impact on the tourist’s experience (Nickerson, 2006). It is about the deep human desire to connect, to feel, to learn about the culture and the people, to be part of something, to feel the authenticity, and to take something away from their trip that they will remember.

In addition, the research results reveal that increasing knowledge about the local offers, traditions, and history of the place tops the list of tourists’ highest expectations (EXP4), followed by the expectation of finding interesting characteristics of the cities, countryside, and unique activities (EXP1) and the confidence that the experience will meet expectations and that they will enjoy it (EXP3). They also expect that the experience will take place in a circle of tourists with similar interests (EXP2). Proceeding from the previous definition of expectations, we can see that expectations arise before the experience or before the use of the tourist product in the place. High expectations related to increasing knowledge about the local offer, and unique activities arise from the perception of a unique experience as we defined it before, i.e. from

the authentic experience and the emotional touch that a unique experience involves. As mentioned earlier, we find that expectations are present even before the visitor arrives at the place and experiences or benefits from the tourism product. This is only possible based on high-quality videos, photos, and descriptions that they read before visiting the destination. Furthermore, they anticipate the experience to unfold in the presence of like-minded individuals, enabling the sharing of experiential and emotional connections. The research results show that users have high expectations for experiences and that the local aspect is strongly emphasized. From this, we can conclude that all materials used to describe the experiences considered in the study are of high quality and express uniqueness with a touch of locality.

Based on the results, we found that the perception of the uniqueness of a product has a positive influence on tourists’ expectations. The more tourists perceive a product as unique, the higher their expectations of it. This relationship can be explained by the statements made above that a unique experience includes a local touch and high experiential value as well as a personal touch, which creates high expectations. As we have already noted, the olive grove experience includes all the above components, the local environment and providers, and the acquisition of new skills that form the basis of a unique experience. The same applies to the experience of the Fonda Fish Garden, although the relationship is slightly weaker, which can be explained by the more difficult perception of the product, which is harder to understand from the descriptions and photos used. This applies to a slightly lesser extent to cycling, which is perhaps the least distinguished by its uniqueness, but is nevertheless perceived as a unique

tourism product that creates high expectations. However, users perceive cycling as an activity that can be done in different environments and is not as strongly experiential as the other two tourism products.

Since the research results show a positive relationship between the perception of the uniqueness of the new tourism products in Piran & Portorož and tourists' expectations of these products, the hypothesis can be confirmed. Additionally, this is in line with Morgan and Xu's (2009) findings that tourists who engage with the local culture create a unique and memorable tourism experience. Furthermore, we can confirm that tourism experiences can form and reinforce emotional connections or attachment to a place (Prayag & Ryan, 2012) and a sense of local uniqueness (Rivero, 2017), which is expressed in a unique tourism product.

Conclusions

We can conclude that consumers have high expectations when they choose unique experiences. Similarly, unique tourism products or experiences must include an experiential and an emotional touch that creates long-lasting impressions and a journey home, memories that can be shared with others, knowledge about new places visited, and learning about new cultures, which enables personal growth.

However, the study confirms that the perception of the uniqueness of a product has a positive influence on tourists' expectations. This result is an important contribution to the understanding of the uniqueness of tourism experiences and expectations from the consumer's perspective. It also has several implications for destination marketing practice. For example, destinations and tourism providers should possibly focus on improving the uniqueness of tourism experiences. It is interesting to note that consumers who choose a natural, unique product also enjoy the cultural scenes and local touch in the region. In addition, they enjoy the local cuisine that a destination has to offer and they emphasize the special and unique aspect of this cuisine. Consumers are looking for something that is different and suits their taste in culture and art. This reflects the view of Richards and Wilson (2006), who see creative tourism as an alternative to conventional tourism. Many consumers, ti-

red of the serial reproduction of culture in different destinations, are looking for uniqueness. Moreover, a place that offers unique tourism products should use visuals to convey a combination of different attributes of the place. As a practical tool for destination marketing, it is also suggested that marketing research should first identify the perceptions of the target market group and then determine the content and key attributes for designing unique products. The marketing process to develop a unique product for a destination is not always easy and presents particular challenges related to the complexity of the tourism product and the number of stakeholders involved in destination marketing. Although the facts that a tourist experiences are not explicitly known, one could assume that a good customized product must focus on uniqueness.

Before visiting a destination, potential tourists look for communicative cues to find out if the destination meets their own desires. Tourism is uniquely visual and Gilmore and Pine (2002) suggest that selling experiences requires a unique marketing strategy that engages consumers in a personal, memorable way. From the perspective of marketing and presenting the uniqueness of tourism products, to attract attention and raise expectations, high-quality descriptions, images, and videos must be used in communicating experiences that create a strong experiential and emotional note at the purchase stage, and which are considered unique experiences.

Although the study makes an important contribution to the existing knowledge and the role of tourists' expectations regarding unique tourism products, it is subject to certain limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, the word 'uniqueness' could have different meanings for consumers with different experience expectations, such as novel, innovative, exclusive, unusual, new, surprising, etc. Therefore, to stimulate consumers' imagination and motivation, it is suggested that marketing management apply custom marketing strategies for different target markets. Future research on understanding consumers' interpretation of uniqueness expectations for different target markets in constructing a meaningful tourism experience is therefore useful. Secondly, the research findings show that expectations are high for all the

experiences listed, which can also be influenced by the quality of the accompanying descriptions and photographs. However, this aspect needs to be explored in further studies. Thirdly, the study does not focus on the expectation-related aspect of satisfaction. For further research, it would be interesting to explore the role of expectations of unique experiences and satisfaction in more detail. In addition, the choice of unique tourism products was related to a single destination, namely Piran & Portorož in Slovenian Istria. For future studies, it would be interesting to investigate other innovative tourism products at these destinations, as there are many more new and novel products that could be attractive for the right target group. Also, the study of tourists' psychological needs, i.e. consumers' need for uniqueness when choosing unique tourism products, could be a possible topic for further studies.

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