WHERE MEMORIES TAKE SHAPE: THE ROLE OF SOUVENIRS IN CREATING UNFORGETTABLE TOURIST EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Ensuring memorable tourist experiences represents a key factor of competitiveness in tourism. In modern tourism, souvenirs go beyond the role of simple objects and become symbols of personal experience and traveler identity. They serve as material traces of a journey that connect people, places, and memories. Studying the role and significance of souvenirs is highly important for adequate tourism planning and development. From the perspective of tourism demand, tourists' satisfaction with souvenir purchases influences their loyalty to a destination. The research was conducted with the intention of pointing out the role that souvenirs play as a gift, a memory, and tangible evidence of the tourist experience. Accordingly, a survey was designed and carried out among tourists who, within the past year, traveled at least once and purchased a souvenir. The goal is to determine, based on the collected responses and their analysis in the statistical software SPSS, whether souvenirs strengthen tourists' emotional connection to a destination and to what extent their authenticity affects repeat visits.

Keywords: memorable tourism experience, souvenirs, gift, revisit intention, authenticity

INTRODUCTION

The concept of authenticity is widely used to understand tourist motivations and experiences, and can refer to the authenticity of objects, tourist destinations, gastronomic specialties, etc., but also to souvenirs. The value of souvenirs has a huge impact on the tourism industry [24], becoming an integral part of tourist experiences over the years.
The word souvenir comes from the French language, from the verb *se souvenir*, which means "to remember". In its original sense, a souvenir is something that serves as a reminder - of a place, experience or person, while in a broader sense, it refers to a memory. Today, it generally refers to an item brought back from a trip or significant location, which serves as a memento of that experience. They are closely related to specific tourist destinations and often depict local landmarks, cultural symbols or traditional motifs [10]. Authentic souvenirs must integrate culture and history to represent the identity of the destination, be handmade, have a unique, attractive presentation, and require local skills of local craftsmen [24].
However, there are different views on the authenticity of souvenirs. Namely, according to Cohen [5], souvenirs represent an example of commodification of culture, indicating that authenticity in modern society has a "loose" meaning, since it is the result of the process of cultural staging and interaction between hosts and tourists. Bernardo, Sousa & Kastenholz [2] point out that directing attention to the perception of authenticity within

each culture precisely through tourism enables the process of cultural commodification of everyday objects, among which are souvenirs. Consequently, souvenirs should not be viewed exclusively as tangible objects which travelers bring back from their travels or give as gifts to others, but as bearers of more complex cultural meanings. Ivkov-Džigurski, Kovačević & Zakić [37] emphasize that souvenirs are an integral part of the cultural heritage of the local population and that they play a key role in shaping the tourist product.

Certain studies indicate that souvenirs, in addition to their role as material memories of a tourist destination, also have a symbolic function, representing the experience and emotions associated with travel [18], [7]. In fact, Brennan & Savage [3] consider souvenirs to be essential to the tourist experience. This is agreed by Swanson & Horridge [30], as well as Sthapit, Coudounaris & Bjork [27], who state that many tourists feel that their trips would be incomplete if they did not purchase souvenirs. So, the souvenir is an important component of the tourist experience and most tourists bring memories and souvenirs as proof. Wilkins [34] points out that people like to remember special moments in their lives and to keep evidence of those special moments. How important the concept of creating an authentic tourist experience is is also confirmed by the fact that the earliest research pointed out that tourism is aimed at creating experiences which represent the essence of travel, whereby tourist experiences are often perceived as extraordinary and different from everyday routine [4]. This approach is confirmed by Kim & So [11], stating that experiences represent the essence and central aspect of the tourism industry. Tourist experiences are defined as pleasant, memorable and interesting experiences.

A little more than a decade ago, Kim & So [11] introduced the concept of a memorable tourist experience, defined as a tourist experience that is positively remembered and recalled after the end of the tourist trip [8]. Many theoreticians in the field of tourism agree that in modern business conditions, providing an unforgettable tourist experience is of key importance for competitiveness in the tourism industry [36], [26]. Hosany, Sthapit & Björk [8] point out that the study of unforgettable tourist experience is not only theoretically relevant, but also practically useful for the tourism industry. Unforgettable tourist experiences can be a key component of a destination's competitiveness, and tourism service providers can gain numerous advantages if they encourage the creation of such experiences [28].

In the context of tourism, from a dynamic perspective, memory plays a key role in understanding individuals' memories of tourism experiences of personal importance [12]. The memory of tourist experiences is a decisive factor in the future behavior of tourists and decision-making when choosing destinations [12]. An experience which remains in the memory emphasizes its uniqueness. For example, travelers who experience a satisfying and memorable tourist experience at a certain destination are likely to share their impressions and experiences with others [21].

Authentic souvenirs are a type of product of cultural exchange and interaction between producers - local residents and tourists. The more tourists are interested in the host culture, the more likely they are to buy souvenirs [23]. Tourists' satisfaction with souvenir shopping experiences is an important factor of destination loyalty [27], [29]. From the destination side, the souvenir business brings local communities very important additional economic income [9] and provides a way to preserve and develop culture [4].

The goal of the research is to examine the role and importance of souvenirs in the formation of a deeper emotional bond between tourists and the destination, that is, to determine whether and to what extent souvenirs contribute to evoking emotions,

preserving memories and encouraging the intention to visit the destination again. This approach is of particular importance for the carriers of the tourist offer, especially those who are directly involved in the creation and placement of souvenirs, since the paper provides clear guidelines as to which values should be nurtured and how to attract different segments of tourist demand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early research, carried out from the 1980s to the beginning of the 21st century, was mainly concerned with explaining the evolution of souvenirs, describing the development of the regional souvenir business, as well as analyzing the interaction between the souvenir business and social, economic and cultural aspects. In this period, the first researches were published that dealt with the typology of souvenirs, as well as their functions, meanings and values.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been an increase in the number of studies which study souvenirs as significant tourist attractions, viewed from different perspectives. Research attention has been directed towards tourists themselves, their attitudes and motives for purchasing souvenirs, but also towards other important tourism issues which are directly related to souvenirs, such as destination revisit intention and place attachment, destination image, rural tourism, the impact of tourism vendors on the cultural tourism experience, as well as the sustainability of the destination economy, culture and environment [23].

Wilkins [34] emphasizes that the motivations for purchasing souvenirs go beyond the purchase of the item itself because souvenirs actually function as material symbols of meaning and memories associated with the tourist experience. He deals with assessments of the behavior of tourists when buying souvenirs, that is, the influence of gender on purchased souvenirs and motivations for their purchase. The research identifies the key importance of souvenirs as proof of experience, as well as their role as gifts and memories of the trip itself.

Sthapit, Coudounaris & Björk [27] indicate that the pleasure and co-creation of experiences during on-site souvenir shopping in a tourist destination create unforgettable experiences and that such memories enhance tourists' sense of attachment to the destination. Speaking about the importance of authenticity, the study of Brennan and Savage [3] is particularly noteworthy, which emphasizes the need to protect the intellectual property rights of indigenous communities, especially in the context of artworks produced for the souvenir industry.

Paraskevaidis & Andriotis [20] show that souvenirs are more than material objects, that they function as social and cultural symbols, satisfying tourists' expectations and connecting the travel experience with meaning, authenticity and memories.

Shen & Lai [23] conducted a systematic review of souvenir literature, from 1981 to 2020, to identify research developments, major themes and existing gaps, and to suggest directions for future research. Based on the search of a large number of papers, they singled out the types of souvenirs which attract the interest of tourists and classified them into the following categories: "handicrafts", "crafts", "textiles", "handcrafts", "tourist art" and "postcards". Based on the available literature, it is noted that souvenirs have been part of tourism studies for almost 50 years, although most publications have been published in the last 20 years [2].

Seočanac et al. [22] indicate that gastronomic products often serve as souvenirs that not only preserve the memory of the experience, but also help tourists express their uniqueness and gain social recognition. This is confirmed by Vujić, T., Cvijanović & Vujić, M. [33], who claim that gastronomy, as a tourist attraction, has the power to attract tourists and make them loyal to it and the destination it is associated with.
Bernardo, Sousa & Kastenholz [2] considered 282 papers dealing with souvenirs. They sorted them into six main research topics: authenticity; shopping; symbolic value; shopping satisfaction; destination image and tourist experience. Souvenirs can be seen as items that provide cultural mediation between hosts and guests. The study conducted by Bernardo, Sousa & Kastenholz [2] is important for the tourism business sector, as it allows its stakeholders to better understand the physical (e.g. material and appearance) and psychological (e.g. meaning and representativeness) attributes of souvenirs, as well as their empirically proven capacity to influence tourists' attitudes and behavior during their visit to a destination, potentially improving destination and service experiences, and leading to increased purchases as well as loyalty.
Sthapit, Björk & Rasoolimanesh [26] conducted a study examining the relationship between memorable souvenir shopping experience, nostalgia, destination attachment and revisit intention.
Morgan & Pritchard [18] point out that souvenirs function as items that mediate tourist experiences through time and space, emphasizing the importance of materiality and memory in shaping tourist identities and performances. Swanson & Horridge [30] analyze how the motivation to travel affects the type of souvenirs which tourists buy, as well as the attributes of the product and the store where the souvenirs are purchased. Wilkins [34] also analyzes the motivations behind the purchase of souvenirs, including their role as records of memories, evidence of experience, and objects to be gifted to others. The same author points out that souvenirs play an important role as gifts for others, which expands the travel experience beyond the tourist himself.
The research conducted by Kumar, Trupp & Pratt [13] emphasizes that souvenirs are carriers of meaning and not just commercial products, because both tourists and sellers associate them with the identity, memory and culture of the destination.
Haldrup [7] shows that souvenirs are not only objects of memory, but also material bearers of affective and emotional relationships which continue to influence the tourist experience outside the destination itself - through everyday life and the emotional bonds they form with their owners.
However, Liu et al. [16] start from the idea that souvenirs are more than material objects - they are "destination echoes" that help tourists reconstruct memories, travel identity and personal experience of a place. These authors introduce the concept of souvenir locality, which implies a connection with the people, place and past of the destination (collective memory).

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the paper is to perform a statistical analysis of the data collected through survey research on the attitudes of tourists towards buying souvenirs and their influence on loyalty to the destination. Data were collected using an online structured questionnaire, using a random sample method. The survey questionnaire is composed of four parts and includes the respondents' demographic characteristics, travel habits, behavior when buying souvenirs and attitudes towards souvenirs measured by a five-point Likert scale

(23 statements). The research was conducted on a sample of 182 respondents, of which 171 respondents were included in the final analysis. Eleven respondents were excluded due to a negative answer to the initial, elimination question about buying souvenirs during the trip.

Data analysis was carried out using statistical software SPSS 26.0. Data processing included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and one-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) according to the age structure of the respondents.

In order to achieve the goal of the research, one main and two auxiliary hypotheses were set in the paper.

Main hypothesis (H): *The authenticity of souvenirs strengthens the emotional connection of tourists with the destination.*

Hypothesis H1: *Emotional connection with the destination has a positive effect on the loyalty of tourists (revisit and recommendation).*

Hypothesis H2: *There is a statistically significant difference in the perception of the importance of souvenirs depending on the age of the respondents.*

To test the hypotheses H and H1, a correlation analysis was used to determine the relationship between tourists' emotional connection with the destination and their loyalty, measured through the intention to revisit and the willingness to recommend the destination. Correlation analysis enables the identification of the strength and direction of connections between variables, thus empirically examining whether tourists with a greater emotional connection to the destination are more inclined to loyal behavior. One-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the existence of statistically significant differences in the souvenir buying behavior among respondents of different age categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the research, female respondents dominate, making up 80.7% of the total sample, while male respondents make up 19.3%. This gender structure is actually common in research related to tourism and souvenir shopping, where women traditionally show a greater interest in this topic. For example, Littrell et al. [17] tried to understand what influences the consumption of authentic handicrafts, concluding that age, travel experience and type of tourism (but not gender) are relevant. Unlike them, Wilkins [34] and Xu & McGehee [35] emphasized gender differences in the shopping behavior of tourists, which includes the purchase of souvenirs and other tourist items, which is also confirmed by this research. The results of the study conducted by Anderson & Littrell [1] are interesting and show that older women who travel with their spouses or friends made planned purchases of authentic souvenirs, while younger and middle-aged women who usually travel with children bought souvenirs unplanned and hastily.

When it comes to the age structure of respondents, the largest percentage of respondents belongs to the age group 26-35 years (34.5%) and 18-25 years (28.7%). Together, these two groups make up 63.2% of the sample, indicating that younger tourists dominate the survey. The youngest respondent is 16, and the oldest is 68. The available literature also indicates that demographic characteristics, especially the age of tourists, have a significant impact on their preferences and behaviors related to the purchase of souvenirs. For example, Tsai & Chen [32] showed that age differences influence preferences for souvenir attributes, such as appearance and price, while Dey [6] identified age as an important demographic factor shaping tourists' intentions to purchase souvenirs.

These findings support our results that older tourists value more the symbolic and authentic component of souvenirs compared to younger respondents (Table 1).

Table 1. One-Way ANOVA, differences in the age structure of respondents regarding their attitudes about souvenirs

Variables	**Young people** (Mean)	**Middle-aged people** (Mean)	**Elderly people** (Mean)	F	P
S7	2.44	2.73	3.67	13.70	0.001
S2	4.29	4.50	4.76	6.71	0.002
S5	2.88	2.85	3.45	5.21	0.006
S15	3.60	3.77	4.22	5.20	0.006
S21	3.31	3.46	3.94	4.84	0.009
S13	4.49	4.69	4.80	3.42	0.035

Legend: According to the age structure, the respondents were divided into three categories: young (≤30), middle-aged (31-45) and elderly (>45).

* S7 - The authenticity of souvenirs affects my overall impression of the destination; S2 - It is important to me that the souvenirs I buy reflect the local culture and tradition; S5 - I don't care if the souvenirs are commercialized; S15 - Souvenirs allow me to share my travel experience with others; S21 - The emotional value of souvenirs makes me want to revisit a certain destination that I visited during the previous year.; S13 - I like buying souvenirs because they remind me of the places I've been.

Analyzing the statements (S) in which there was a statistically significant difference among respondents according to age, it can be seen that older respondents attach much greater importance to the authenticity of souvenirs and their role in the representation of local culture. These findings suggest that with the increase in age, the need for a deeper, authentic tourist experience, which materializes through souvenirs and extends even after the end of the trip, also increases. In addition, they are characterized by a stronger emotional connection with souvenirs and a greater desire to visit the destination again. Based on the obtained results, which determined a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents in relation to age, *hypothesis H2 is accepted*.

It can be concluded that souvenirs for older tourists are not only an object of purchase, but bearers of personal memories and emotional ties with the destination, in contrast to younger respondents, where authenticity is emphasized to a lesser extent, as well as the emotional dimension of souvenirs, which may indicate a more pragmatic approach when buying souvenirs, as well as greater tolerance towards their commercialization. Such results are in line with modern trends in tourist consumption, according to which younger generations often give priority to the functionality, price or visual appeal of a product in relation to its symbolic meaning.

Dey [6], studying souvenir purchase intentions in craft-rich regions, points out that among demographic factors, age and frequency of travel significantly influence souvenir purchase intention, suggesting that different age groups manifest different motives and behaviors related to souvenirs. Similar results were observed in the research of Olalere [19], which indicates that the perception of the importance of certain attributes of souvenirs varies among tourists, with demographic characteristics, including age, influencing motives and preferences when purchasing souvenirs.

When it comes to travel habits, the largest number of respondents (56.1%) travel 2-3 times a year, 36.9% of respondents travel 4 or more times a year, while only 7% of respondents travel only once a year. Most respondents travel within the framework of organized tours (37.4%). Travels with family are represented by 29.8% of respondents, while 28.1% travel with friends. Independent trips are the least represented and make up 4.7% of the total sample.

Considering the main motive of the trip, the respondents first mention rest and recreation (55.6%), followed by business trips (21.6%), while cultural motives and visits to family/friends are less common, with 4.7% each.
Although it was possible to choose several answers to the question about the reasons for buying souvenirs, the two most common and dominant reasons were a gift for others (80.7%) and a personal memory (78.9%). These data indicate that souvenirs have a strong social and emotional function. Authenticity is an important purchasing criterion for 38% of respondents, while aesthetic appeal and proof of visit are less important, with a share of less than 10%. Most respondents (42.7%) buy 2-3 souvenirs per trip. The fact that more than a quarter of respondents (27.5%) buy more than five souvenirs per trip indicates a high level of involvement of respondents in buying souvenirs, which confirms the importance of souvenirs as an integral part of the tourist experience.
In order to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of attitudes about souvenirs on the tourist behavior of respondents, statistically significant correlations between relevant variables were analyzed in the continuation of the paper.

Table 2. Statistically significant correlations between souvenir attitudes and tourist behavior outcomes

Variable 1	Variable 2	r	p
S18	S19	0.784	<0.001
S9	S10	0.755	<0.001
S8	S9	0.701	<0.001
S17	S19	0.659	<0.001
S19	S21	0.618	<0.001
S20	S22	0.546	<0.001

Legend: Only statistically significant correlations ($p < 0.05$) with a correlation coefficient $r > 0.40$ were selected and shown.
S8 - Participating in making souvenirs would make my trip special (eg painting magnets and practical items, participating in preparing local products...); S9 - The souvenir would have a greater emotional value if I participated in making it; S10 - Participating in making souvenirs contributes to making the trip unforgettable; S17 - Souvenirs are a reminder of the accomplished tourist experience; S18 - Souvenirs have a strong emotional and nostalgic value for me; S19 - Souvenirs connect me emotionally with the places I visited; S20 - I would visit again a certain destination that I visited during the previous year; S21- The emotional value of souvenirs makes me want to revisit a certain destination that I visited during the previous year; S22 - Due to the overall impression, I would recommend the visited destination to others

The results of the correlation analysis indicate a strong interconnection of the affective, symbolic and behavioral dimensions of souvenirs, confirming that souvenirs go beyond the function of mere material objects and act as bearers of the destination's meaning and experience. The obtained results are in accordance with the opinion of the authors [16], who point out that souvenirs are not only material objects - they are "echoes of the destination" that encourage tourists to evoke memories and nurture a personal experience of the place.
The strongest correlation was recorded between the emotional value of souvenirs (S18) and emotional connection with places (S19) ($r = 0.784$, $p < 0.001$), which indicates that souvenirs which have a high emotional value significantly contribute to the development of a strong affective connection of tourists with the destination. This finding confirms the theoretical assumptions that souvenirs function as an "emotional bridge" between tourists and places, enabling the extension of the tourist experience even after returning home [26], [15], [16].
High correlations within the souvenir participation and experience dimension (S8, S9, S10) suggest that the perception of souvenirs as "special", "emotionally valuable" and

"unforgettable" is a coherent construct. This indicates that active and personal involvement in souvenir selection is key to its long-term meaning, which is consistent with approaches which emphasize the experiential and narrative value of souvenirs.
The significant correlation between the function of souvenirs as a reminder (S17) and the emotional connection with places (S19) ($r = 0.659$, $p < 0.001$) further confirms the role of souvenirs in preserving memories and reconstructing the meaning of travel. Souvenirs thus become material carriers of the collective and personal memory of the destination.
In order to gain a deeper understanding of the role of individual attitudes in shaping future tourist behavior, an analysis of predictors of the intention to revisit the destination was conducted, and the results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Predictors of revisit intention (attitude S20) in relation to other attitudes

Variables	r	p
S22	0.546	<0.001
S21	0.363	<0.001
S13	0.315	<0.001
S19	0.288	<0.001
S15	0.275	<0.001

Legend: S22 - Due to the overall impression, I would recommend the visited destination to others; S21- The emotional value of souvenirs makes me want to revisit a certain destination that I visited during the previous year; S13 - I like to buy souvenirs because they remind me of the places I've been; S19 - Souvenirs connect me emotionally with the places I visited; S15 - Souvenirs allow me to share my travel experience with others.

The analysis of correlations with the outcome variables of loyalty shows that the affective and symbolic dimensions of souvenirs are significantly related to the intention to revisit and recommend the destination. The connection between the emotional connection with the place (S19) and the desire to visit again (S21) ($r = 0.618$, $p < 0.001$) stands out, which indicates that souvenirs indirectly contribute to the loyalty of the destination by strengthening the tourist's emotional connection with the place.
The results also show that destination recommendation (S22) is a strong correlate of revisit intention ($r = 0.546$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that positive narratives about the experience, fueled by souvenirs, play an important role in spreading word-of-mouth. Although correlations with variables such as experience sharing and recalling places are of moderate intensity, their statistical significance confirms their role in the formation of loyalty. Based on the presented results, the main hypothesis (H): The authenticity of souvenirs strengthens the emotional connection of tourists with the destination *was accepted*, as well as hypothesis H1: Emotional connection with the destination has a positive effect on the loyalty of tourists (revisit and recommendation).
The aim of this research was to determine whether, and to what extent, souvenirs affect the emotional connection of tourists with the destination, as well as whether there is a correlation between the degree of emotional connection with the destination and the willingness of tourists to visit it again or recommend it to others.
In order to understand the relationship between souvenirs, emotions and loyalty, it was of particular importance to test hypothesis H2, which looked at the differences in the perception of the importance of souvenirs among different age groups. Bearing in mind that the results of the research showed that older tourists value the authenticity and symbolism of souvenirs to a greater extent, as well as that younger tourists made up the largest share in the sample, it is necessary to consider the relevant dimensions of souvenirs which can significantly contribute to younger tourists, especially members of generations

Y and Z, being recognized as a target segment in the area of souvenir purchases. Millennials (Generation Y) are often described as the experience generation. They have completely redefined the concept of travel, prioritizing meaningful, personalized experiences over material possessions. On the other hand, tourists belonging to Generation Z often prefer cheaper trips which allow them to explore the world without major financial burdens [14]. Accordingly, the views of the authors Torabian & Arai [31], who found that tourists prefer souvenirs made by local craftsmen from local materials, at an affordable price, are of importance. These authors agree with Cohen [5] that both tourists and souvenir sellers are "active creators of meaning" and that "authenticity" lies in the "eye of the beholder" [2:257]. Namely, considering that generations Y and Z have emerged as the most influential demographic groups in shaping the future of travel, it is necessary to additionally emphasize the possibility of active participation in the creation of souvenirs, that is, in the creation of an unforgettable experience. Consistent with these views, Sthapit, Björk & Rasoolimanesh [26] show that experience co-creation, tourist engagement and shopping satisfaction positively influence the memorability of souvenir shopping experiences. Such experiences, in turn, strengthen feelings of nostalgia, attachment to the destination and the intention to revisit, emphasizing the importance of souvenirs as material symbols of authentic and memorable tourist experiences.

That souvenirs indirectly contribute to the strengthening of loyalty through the creation of an emotional connection with the destination was confirmed based on the conducted statistical analyzes and the acceptance of hypotheses H and H1. Additionally, the importance of souvenirs is confirmed by the highest rated statements related to destination recommendation - "I would recommend the destination to others" (M=4.68) and the nostalgic value of souvenirs - "I like buying souvenirs because they remind me of the places I've been" (M=4.61). The fact that souvenirs can enhance the memorability of the experience and the intention to revisit was also confirmed by Sthapit & Björk [25], who found that the uniqueness and local representativeness of souvenirs are associated with enhanced memory of the trip and the intention to revisit the destination.

However, it should be emphasized that a souvenir, as an item which preserves the memory of a trip, cannot represent the primary goal of a trip, visit or stay. Its role is to contribute to the long-term memory of pleasant travel experiences, while at the same time it has the function of satisfying tourist needs and thus directly affects the increase in tourist consumption. A souvenir should, first of all, be an item that was produced in a given destination, as an authentic and credible symbol of its climate and local environment [37]. The local community, craftsmen and the nurturing of local crafts play a crucial role in strengthening the connection between souvenirs, emotions and loyalty to the destination. Liu et al. [16] point out that souvenirs that carry elements of the destination location help tourists preserve memories and prolong the feeling of satisfaction and well-being after the trip. These objects, through sentimental value and stories about experiences, function as material symbols of an authentic tourist experience and strengthen the emotional connection with the destination. The results of the conducted research confirm how important the authenticity, locality and appearance of souvenirs are. Namely, with the possibility of choosing more than one answer, art items stand out as the most represented type of souvenir (87.1%). In addition, a significant share is occupied by practical items (45%) and gastronomic products (39.2%). Also, the lowest rated statement is "I don't pay too much attention to the appearance of souvenirs, I take the first one I see" (M=1.27). Additionally, Sthapit, Coudounaris & Björk [27] point out that satisfaction and active participation in the very process of buying souvenirs during a stay contribute to the

creation of unforgettable shopping experiences, and that the role of sellers is extremely important in that process. The authors cite implications for souvenir retailing – for example, that retailers should offer a variety of products, improve the quality and appearance of window displays, and encourage interaction with customers to contribute to greater satisfaction and memorability of the experience. A study by Shen & Lai [23] contributes significantly to the creation of these experiences, which provides a good reference for souvenir suppliers, especially artisans, retailers and other micro-entrepreneurs, to understand tourist behavior related to souvenirs. It further helps these stakeholders to understand the importance of the souvenir industry and their work to the destination's economy, society and culture, and then to contribute to sustainability tourism.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research contribute to the understanding of the role that souvenirs play in the formation of destination loyalty. The central role of emotions was confirmed, i.e. the opinion of the respondents that souvenirs which encourage an emotional connection with the destination significantly contribute to the intention of revisiting and recommending. This is in line with the theory of emotional memory and the concept of nostalgia in tourism.

The identification of participatory experience (co-creation) as a distinct dimension has a special significance. The participation of tourists in the production of souvenirs represents an innovative approach which can significantly contribute to the unforgettable tourist experience and the formation of loyalty. This is of particular importance for attracting dominant demographic groups (Generations Y and Z).

The recommendations that this research provides can be especially useful for destination management and souvenir manufacturers, in the sense that they focus on the emotional value of souvenirs and create souvenirs which encourage nostalgia and emotional connection. Emphasizing authenticity can be of particular importance, especially for a certain segment of demand (older tourists) and the development of participatory programs - workshops for making souvenirs, offering personalization of souvenirs as a tourist product. It is also suggested that the holders of tourism development, as well as the sellers themselves, enrich the offer with creative content and perfect souvenirs as gifts, given that this is the dominant reason for purchase. Understanding the differences in the attitudes of tourists of different age groups can contribute to the adjustment of the souvenir offer, whereby the emphasis on authenticity, local production and emotional value could be particularly effective in attracting older tourists and encouraging their loyalty to the destination, while the concept of co-creation would be used in attracting younger tourists. The above has important implications for market segmentation and the design of souvenirs of a certain tourist destination, but also for strengthening the connection between souvenirs, emotions and loyalty of tourists.

The main limitation of this research relates primarily to the uneven gender structure of the sample (predominance of female respondents), which can limit the applicability of the results, that is, can lead to generalization. Also, for future research, it is necessary to further analyze the characteristics of souvenirs in order to more clearly define what is particularly important to tourists when buying souvenirs. Such an approach would greatly help in the creation of souvenirs that would attract the attention of different segments of tourist demand.

It is necessary to take a deeper look at the attitudes of generations Y and Z, especially when it comes to participation in the creation of souvenirs and unforgettable experiences. These generations increasingly strive for personalized, interactive and experiential forms of consumption, whereby they do not view souvenirs exclusively as material objects, but as part of the overall experience of the destination. Involving younger tourists in the process of creating souvenirs, through the aforementioned workshops, digital tools or direct cooperation with local producers, can contribute to strengthening their emotional connection with the destination and increasing the likelihood of repeat visits or recommendations to others. In this way, souvenirs become a tool for creating authentic and unforgettable experiences, adapted to the expectations of modern tourists.
Future research should include a more representative sample, a longitudinal design to monitor actual behavior (revisit), as well as qualitative methods for a deeper understanding of the emotional connection to souvenirs.

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