

THESIS SUMMARY

to Ph.D. dissertation

Gábor Bódis

**The role of design
in future-proof tourism destinations**

Positioning and narrating a micro-Danube region

Supervisors:

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Full Professor

Budapest, 2023

**Institute of Sustainable Development
Department of Tourism**

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“Tourism is the most narrated visual encounter ever in the world, enabling us to get to know ourselves in the reflection of the social and the natural environment in which we are immersed.”

Gábor Bódis, Transdanube Travel Stories,
Closure Conference, Linz, 24. November, 2022

I. Research background, research relevance

This dissertation brings together two areas: **Tourism** and **Design**. The dominant conceptual backbone of the merger is the **Learning** process that is present in both fields. For new destinations, such as the Ipoly Valley that have not yet been invented and which, due to their geographical location, cannot be developed within the traditional administrative framework, the TLA as a tourism learning area is an organisational model. Design can support this model with the tools of design-thinking. And Learning as a shared intersection between Tourism and Design can position the place through branding based on relevant product portfolios as well as earlier and existing narratives that will be developed in the future (Figure 1). What is special about this thesis is that it leaves room for the visualisation of science.

Some attempts have been made to explore the tourism potential of the micro-region discussed. Despite its geographical diversity, it is somewhat backward and unknown in the shadow of the Danube Bend, but the cultural links rooted in the Hungarian language and customs due to its borderless accessibility today are interesting. These two conditions continue to inspire those who live in the region, those who think about its development and the author of this study.

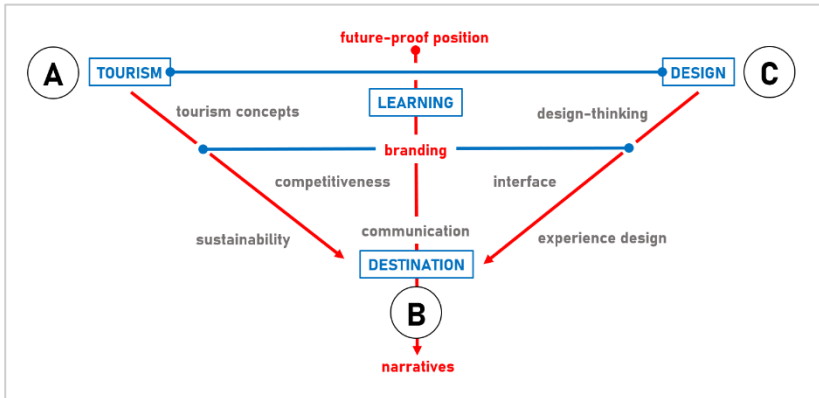


Figure 1: Visual merging of key areas of the dissertation (own design)

1.1 Research objectives

The fundamental professional, scientific and academic, but a certainly practical goal of the author is to influence the daily and operational work at local and regional levels of tourism communication and branding in Hungary in the sense that destinations can effectively plan and design their communication both horizontally and vertically. Thus, the Danube itself is linked to the theme as a horizontal macro-entity, and the most renowned and practised experts have been involved in its interpretation for tourism. The Ipoly Valley, as a transversal micro-destination, provides the vertical perspective, which the author has based on the stake-holders of the space concerned. Generally speaking, in the course of any Learning process, we start with the questions: what, how and why. This dissertation draws on this triad of learning questions by associating the interdependent process of Expression, Representation and Involvement with the Information-, Experience- and Capacity-Design challenges and roles of Tourism destinations.

By looking at the whole process and the points of integration, and thus reach their target groups with the right segmentation and narratives, embedded in the principles of sustainability, the main mission is to gain higher and wider professional recognition in this area as a tourism developer and researcher, to be able to further invent, adapt as well as interpret intellectual approaches and models. To have a soft and gentle approach of treating rivers as female creatures, the author does the same with the Danube. The geographical space of the analysis is partially the Danube herself and partially the Danube Bend with one of the possible entry points in focus: the Ipoly Valley. The complete and concise understanding of design in the Hungarian tourism sector is still in its infancy or better to say early stage. In international contexts, however, design - a design-oriented approach and thinking - is already evident at many points and levels (in strategies, concepts, master plans, physical environment design, urbanism, impact assessments, environmental studies, etc.). Design in other words is not just about graphics, images and visual communications, but also it is about some more holistic processes in which stakeholders are involved (Haskett, 2005). The primary goal of the research is to find answers to the question of how to generate a story, what makes a story new but systemic, interesting and appealing, what gives it its uniqueness.

1.2 Research problem areas

The author of the thesis draws the research question areas on the triple guiding thread in the context of exploratory learning processes, which is the ultimate driver of tourism, and design. The research focuses on three strategic problem areas, and follow the Expression—Representation—Involvement conceptual spine derived from Universal Design for Learning (Figure 2):

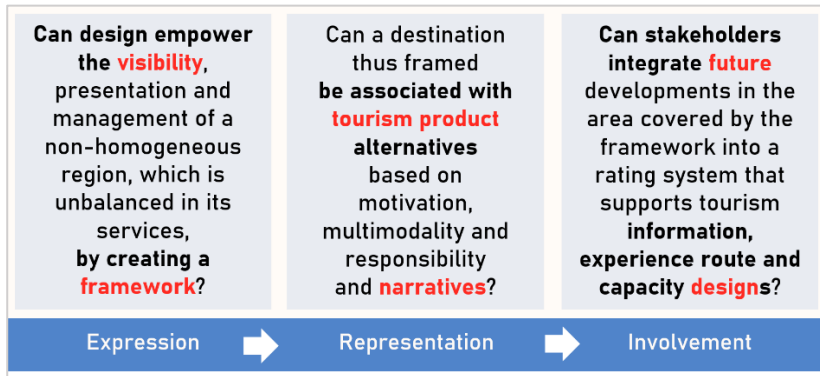


Figure 2: Research problem areas visualized (own design)

- **Problem area 1, Expression:** *Multiple means of expression and action;*
- **Problem area 2, Representation:** *Multiple means of representation;*
- **Problem area 3, Involvement:** *Multiple means of involvement.*

1.3 Tourism, Design and Learning

Tourism is often an integral part of learning. On the one hand, visitors are able to acquire new and new knowledge very actively, on the other hand, they learn passively by simply comparing or just observing calmly (Gössling, 2017). Visitors experience new natural or man-made physical and social environments in business and leisure contexts (Hall, 2005; Pearce–Lee, 2005), through the processes of visual consumption based on impressions (Urry, 1995). This raises the issues about how tourism shapes the understanding of sustainability in destinations. In order to be able to interpret a visitation from the context of the learning process (that is, the discovery), it is worth examining the relevant design theories as well. Tourism as a sector has come to the emergence of newtourism, (Michalkó, 2023) see Point 2.3.

Design. The author highlights the connection between design and creativity. Creativity is a set of abilities that surely integrates the following: imagination, inspiration, intuition and improvisation.

The improvisation is emphasized here because the small group discussions and workshops used as one of the pillars of the primary research were created with the aim that the region can define itself and rise from the shadow that, for example, is cast on it by better-known destinations. And one of the means of standing out is creativity and joint, group improvisation. As a result of group improvisation, more complex and mutually inducing questions and suggestions arise and come together, since in addition to individual performances, there is also interaction between the members of the group, which can respond to the given question, situation or suggestion (Sawyer, 2000). When we talk about creativity-supporting workshops or knowledge transfer, such as those that the author has carried out in practice in the Ipoly Valley region, it can be seen that divergent thinking is best able to support new and previously non-existent creations if the convergent thinking of the participants is also there, or it is facilitated by the person leading the workshop, in this case the researcher. The 4Ps of creativity were formulated to provide a framework for its interpretation (Rhodes, 1961). With the help of Person-Process-Place-Product creativity components, the already mentioned UDL and TLA connection induces further thoughts:

- PROCESS: the development is based on **design-thinking** (performance);
- PRODUCT: means of **expression** (experience routes and products);
- PLACE: means of **representation** (nature, culture, economy contexts);
- PEOPLE: multiple means of **involvement** (motivations, segmentation).

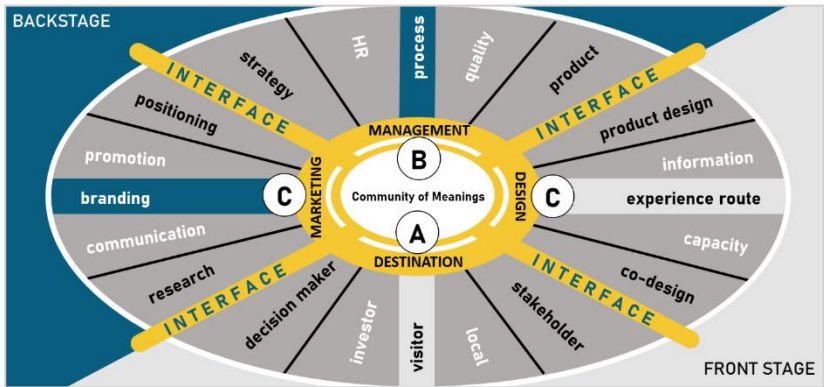


Figure 3: Community of Meanings composition and the interfaces between the relevant areas and fields (own design and adaptation; source: Stefan, 2005)

The most important illustration and meta-conceptual basis of the dissertation is Figure 3. The above map illustrates the meaning community and its determining relationship factors. The dark blue colour indicates the level of the previous triangle of competence. The backstage is where the value discovery, design and service work take place, and the front stage is where the value is located and consumed. The two spaces are connected by the interface surface, which represents the depth of value transfer and the number of touchpoints. Breaking down the linkages further into actors and tasks, linking design (C) to management (B) (product design / product management) or linking design (C) to destination and visitors (A) (stakeholder involvement in co-design) will contribute to the successful and complete realisation of the Community of Meanings.

The encounter between host and guest societies is all about giving today's modern and prepared, knowledgeable tourist a first-hand, authentic, original experience, unique to the place, without leaving behind the tools and services

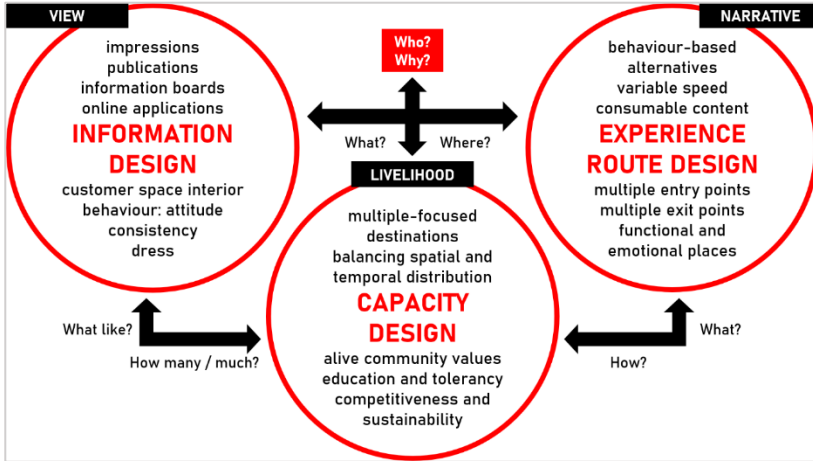


Figure 4: The framing of design in destination management (own design)

that comfortably define their lifestyle: they want to experience the unprecedented by extending their lifestyle (Hao–Xiao, 2021).

At the epicentre of the reflection is the triple challenge or set of tasks defined by **Information Design** (designing the visual and presentation), **Experience Route Design** (customer journey design: designing the content and consumption) and finally **Capacity Design** (designing the identification and immersion) in the activities of a tourist destination. Of course, the role of the planned architectural work is very decisive here, as it can reduce or eliminate potential or legitimate conflict points. It is in this triple framework of tasks that the area to be developed should be mapped. I use the illustration (Figure 4) to give a sense of the framework, indicating the reciprocity and the relationship between the different areas, while at the same time drawing them into questions and question words that ennoble the aforementioned planning processes. These are the basic questions of behaviour-based segmentation, and if we can answer the two question words in the core (Who? and Why?).

Learning. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning (information and experience value exchange) for all people based on scientific insights (destination managers) into how humans (visitors) learn. The reasoning is organized around the most basic question words (What, How, Why). It really matters how the management of the place designs the information and content. UDL describes information design as a system of representation tools: **What = multiple means of representation.** In the case of destinations, this means the set of values that is important for the community, authentic and new for the visitor, i.e. one of the brand-building elements. Continuing the thought process with the next brand element, the identity, in the same system, the question of how is the creation of narratives and the delivery of stories to the consumer through appropriate languages, visuals and channels: **How = multiple means of expression and action.** In the field of destination work, this is called visitor experience route design. Finally, when we talk about capacity design, our main question-word will be the why. Who and why identifies him- or herself with a place or an attraction, what is the degree and level of involvement and fascination. It is possible to relieve the visitor load and stress at certain points of the space, if the management does not invite everyone, but those who want to have a deeper experience and live it. Analysing this learning process, we call it the **Why = multiple means of engagement.**

1.4 The narrative contexts

The author examined the context of the narratives in accordance with the research goals. Considering that the stories associated with the Ipoly Valley occur in quite a large number both in the scientific literature and in the press of the time, it is reasonable to group the narratives as it appears in Figure 5.

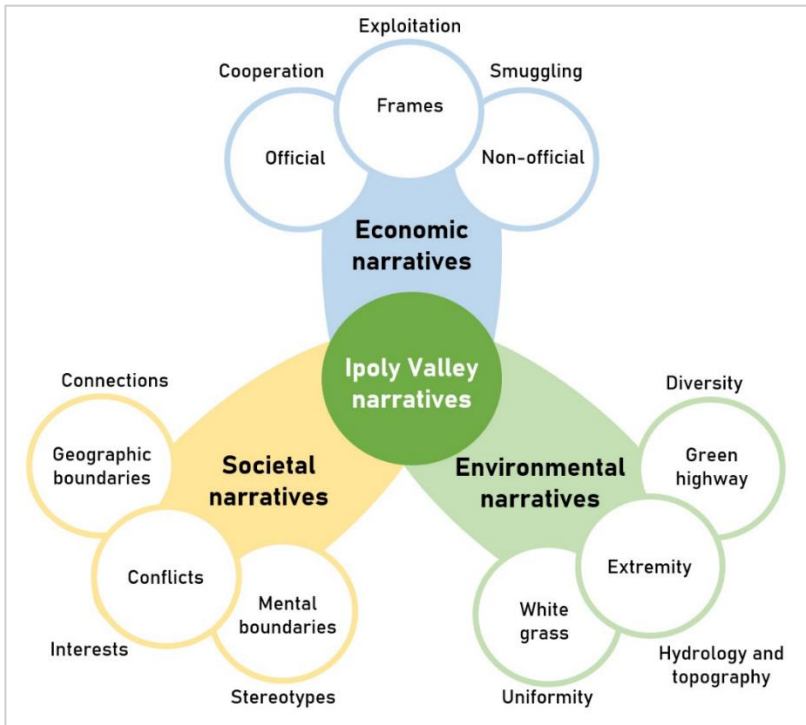


Figure 5: Environmental, social and economic narratives around the Ipoly Valley based on the Economic, social and natural nexus of tourism sustainability (source: Farjami, 2019; own design)

The drama of the narrative context is conveyed by the keywords assigned to each branch by the author: Extremity, Conflicts and Frames. The importance of narratives (stories told) and their motivational effects can perhaps be understood the best through films. In the context of film tourism, several studies (Mitev–Irimiás–Michalkó, 2018) investigate the motivations for visiting the locations of certain stories and narratives. Story-taking, such as reading, film watching, audio listening (Gerrig, 1993) can be compared to the travel experience.

The traveller is removed from his/her original, everyday world and, upon arriving in another world, which may be a world of fantasy, is influenced by factors that, upon his/her return, result in a slightly changed self. This process is described in the literature as transport, the individual or individuals involved are the passengers who have been transported. This is the narrative transport.

II. Research design and methodology

2.1 Patchwork dissertation

The author summarizes the advantages of his patchwork dissertation according to the set of points of assessment (Sinner–Irwin–Jokela, 2018):

Chart 1: Advantages of the patchwork-type dissertation (excerpt)

ENCOUNTERING	ENFLESHING	ENTAGLING
<p>Difference: Just as one of the conditions for the visibility of a tourist encounter is astonishment, sight, contrast, touching the visitor, the first characteristic of the dissertation related to tourism, defined by the author, is the encounter that involves the reader, the reviewer, and later any user in a non-traditional intellectual adventure.</p>	<p>Insights: The dissertation provides a deeper interpretation of many concepts through insights, and also suggests that the narratives of the region can be established with the help of the addressed stakeholders and experts. Some insights are given by the examples as well as the cases mentioned.</p>	<p>Qualitative: The methodology of the research is qualitative because the connections and the creation of additional products are based on the approach in which the author interprets the macro-destination narratives and then introduces them into the vertical, micro-situations together with the respondents and those involved.</p>

2.2 Conceptual framework

The flow chart (Figure 6) outlines the logic and the conceptual multi-channel backbone of destination design.

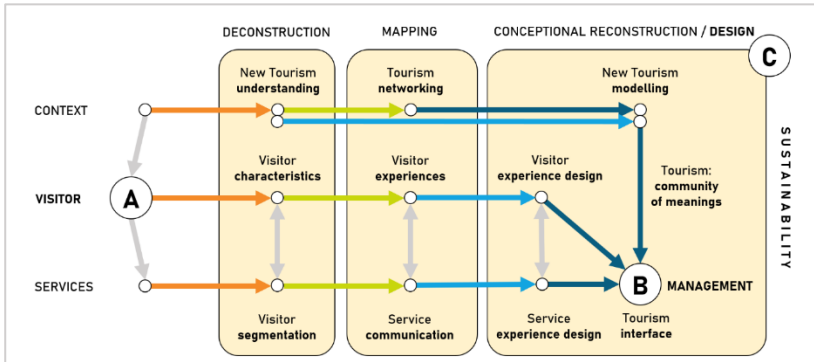


Figure 6: Destination design flow to sustainable development (own design)

The Context (top level) contributes to the exploration and design of tourism and related systems. Level (A) remains the Visitor level, in which we are moving from the left box to the central one, from the characteristics to the experiences. The Services or management level is the lowest one, providing the foundation for segmentation, communication, contents and narratives: altogether the design of experiential journeys, reaching the total management sphere (B). The process that describes the interpretation of values (community of meanings) are given by (C), the model approach in the Design box. Following the boxes from Deconstruction (understanding in detail), the context is interpreted in the box marked with the word Mapping, while the Conceptualisation box provides the creative steps.

2.3 Newtourism, TLA framework

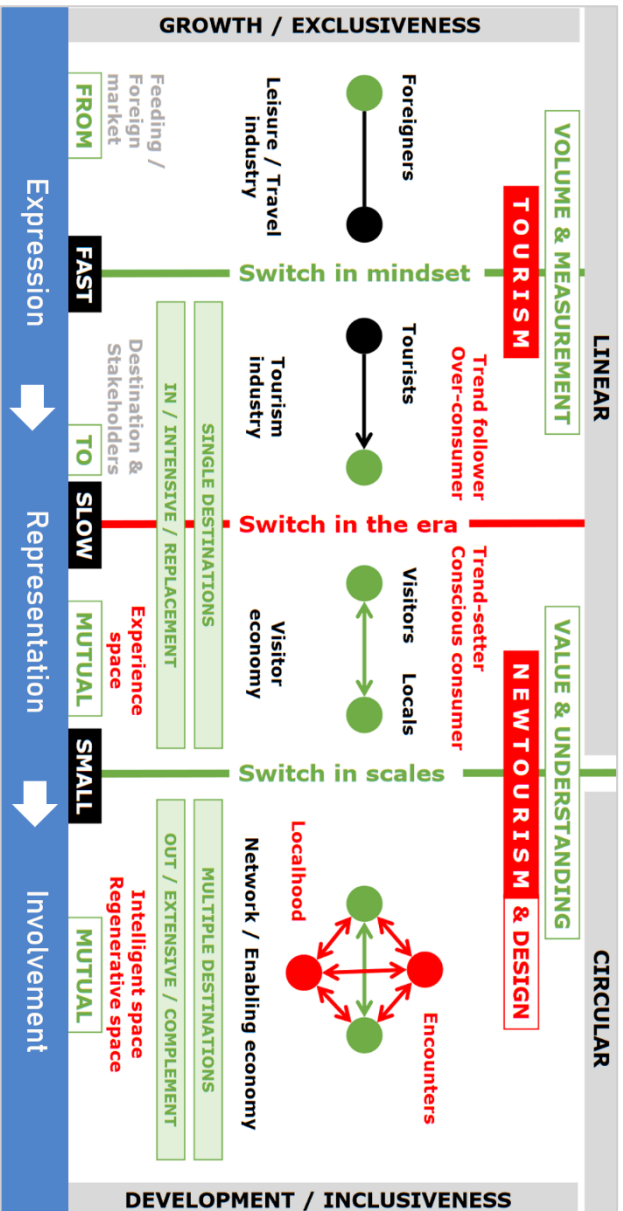


Figure 7: Conceptual Evolution of Tourism (own design; source: Bódis, 2023)

What is the "new normal" for the world of travellers in a post-pandemic world? Should we strive to return to where and how things are and were, where all known vulnerabilities and shortcomings persist, or is there something better that can be achieved? If we choose the latter, the question is what it is and how we get there. The Lake Balaton region has seen a strong development- and profit-driven shift in approach after 2016, but in parallel, or even in excess of this, the region now needs to change in scale. It must be taken back! And the basic unit of scale is the local place, the local dweller (localhood). The conceptual evolution towards a switch in scales is illustrated on a timeline of Figure 7.

In cases where administrative borders have to be crossed, because visitors cross them, e.g. national borders, regional borders, district borders, it is worth choosing the most flexible destination management model (TLA). This situation and approach is true for the Ipoly-bank area, as it connects Slovakian and Hungarian areas, cannot be developed from national or governmental levels from the top, but tourism can be well-built from the bottom and with the involvement of stakeholders at both the top and bottom levels, based on a round table and equal representations and votes. A Tourism Learning Area (TLA) is a concept of a multi-stakeholder, inter-sectional partnership approach aimed at improving human potential for running the tourism sector at the local/regional or cross-border levels (Januszewska, 2008). The TLA approach involves a wide spectrum of regional stakeholders and brings them together in a combined top-down/bottom-up (mix) process to form cohesive information and collaboration networks. A TLA can respond to today's challenges in the tourism sector by developing inter- and intra-destination collaboration alongside a range of learning opportunities.

2.4 Adventure tourism

The adventure tourism along the Danube outlines the triple desire that the destination can offer visitors, by satisfying them, feelings of their encounter, identification and fulfilment. The model (Bódis, 2019) used in the dissertation distinguishes three levels. Beyond the needs, capabilities are defined in the diagram, and at the bottom, active tourism products are placed to exploit or strengthen individual/physical carrying capacities. Next is the level of community/spiritual or attachment and emotional capacities, where the tourist participates in the programmes along some kind of community-definable theme. They move from the rural to the urban, from the party to the scientific, to the point of committing to a value system and increasingly embracing it. It is more than a city stroll to make a purposeful cultural discovery, and even to make a pilgrimage to a place is as much a test of physical fitness as it is a test of the need to express our spiritual belonging in community. At the highest level of the model is the level of appreciation in which the individual can gain the recognition of the community, achieve his or her goals and thus also of the self. This is done by not only exploiting the values of the community or society in an increasingly broad sense, but also by building on them, caring for them, taking some responsibility for the future.

2.5 Project evaluation system

The evaluation criteria for the projects, compiled and synthesised by the author during the personal visits and workshops, are presented in a transparent summary set of charts for easy comparison in the Appendix of the dissertation.

2.6 Future-proof destinations

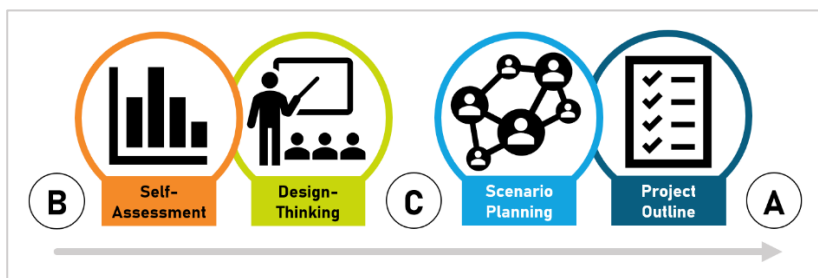
Future capability, or future-proofness is decisive to position a Destination (B). The structure of the present dissertation mainly projects the future potential on the narratives, using branding to bring together the disciplines of Tourism (A) and Design (C). The processing and presentation of future consciousness is also essential for the theoretical definition of future-proofness. There are a number of scientific models and experiments in the making, in the early stages of publication, or already half-developed in an attempt to describe, simplify and systematise what the post-COVID-19 tourist is looking for. The models took part in the joint creations of the guided workshops.

2.7 In-depth expert interviews

The selection of interviewees was also conscious in the sense that the process had to follow the philosophy that this dissertation can claim as its own. Based on the relationship between the macro-destination and the micro-destination, the first step was to interview professionals who could interpret and see the Danube as a continental destination. After that the author asked the Hungarian professionals who live and work along the Danube, who see the Danube as a region, the Western and Eastern meanings as well as the Hungarian characteristics, both touristic and natural or in a cultural context. Finally, the leading managers of those destinations which, so to speak, include the Ipoly Valley micro-region, and even, as an alternative, with its new and additional elements, is able to free up the two typical, iconic settlements of the Danube Bend, Esztergom and Szentendre from overtourism.

2.8 Moderated stakeholder workshops

Since the long-term goal is for Ipoly Valley to be a functioning professional organization, managed by community representatives, one of the defining elements of the research was the illustration and practice of this already during the exploratory work. Of course, a suitable moderator is also needed to lead the workshops. In this case, the moderator and the person evaluating the data were the same person, the author of the dissertation. The author also considers it of utmost importance that the structure of the workshop reflects the essentials that will be necessary in the subsequent destination creation process, and as a result, it is based on the same competence level scheme that is echoed in many places in the dissertation (Figure 8).



*Figure 8: Moderated competence-based workshop content flow design
(own design, adapted; source: Brozzi–Rauch–Riedl–Matt, 2021).*

III. Results of the dissertation

3.1 Theoretical contributions

- Destination tourism product audit and contextualisation
- Destination frame design and conceptualisation

3.2 Practical contributions

- Destination function design and conceptualisation
- Synthesised evaluation of development projects
- Thematic tourism matrix of the destination
- Proposed experience routes and their added values for visitors
- Destination emotion design and branding alternatives
- Value Proposition Design carried out in the workshops

3.3 Narratives for the design area

The narratives that the destination management organization to be established in the future can incorporate into its communication and brand strategy in order to reach each target group is:

"Active & Mental Transformation by the Twin Pearls of Danube".

Chart 2: Narratives that the micro-destination may use in the future (excerpt)

CLASSIC	EXPLORE	TRENDY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • blue and yellow • traditions, heritage • balanced and balancing • provides the 'still' • bridging the differences • outlook, sacredness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • colourful and alternative • tension: hilly and flat • tension: low and high • communal and individual • experimental • challenges the 'sparkling' • powerful and active 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • green and blue • off the beaten • hidden, non-official • extremely sporty • transformative • 'still + sparkling': 2in1 • ownable stories • highlighting the contrasts • api-house, mill houses • rose therapies

The most exciting question clearly is: Who tells Which story and Why? (De Fina, 2008). This dissertation was to link the micro and macro contexts in consumable narratives. As a result, if we understand the request: Who comes to Which part of the destination and Why?, then we can get the answer (Figure 4). It has also been proven that storytelling can strengthen the cohesion of communities and increase the number and quality of interactions within the community. Macro-narratives are necessary because our society is institutionalized, and the people living in it are able to express their values individually or in a community. Clear and simple wording is essential for the human being when we communicate and exchange information between each other representing distant cultures sometimes. When we, as visitors, arrive at a specific place where there are local values, identities and promises, the micro-narratives are more effective, but the transition is only uninterrupted if the larger-scale narratives are also flashed. In this case, the brain does not experience the stories as a conflict, but as a connected whole.

3.4 Limitations and further research

It cannot be said that the author was stingy with the visual topic support, which at first glance is really a striking feature of the dissertation. At the same time, this represents a limitation, because many examples that are tangentially related to the topic, but could have made the processing even more complete, unfortunately either did not make it into the work, or had to be removed due to the supervisors' or opponent's suggestions. Of course, it would have been nice to give more space to the conceptual development of tourism, to present it in more detail, but the limitations of the volume gave only a limited opportunity for this, and they appear in the dissertation more in relation to today's transformations.

It is also worth talking about possible future research, because it is justified to examine what direction the development ideas of a given area take after the passage of time, during the realization of the tenders, and how well the final implementation proves not only from a natural and social point of view, but also from an economic point of view, operational, from a management point of view, even just looking at human resources and the success of involving regional actors, as sustainable, profitable and competitive in the long term.

- Further DMO or supplier content analyses
- Further CGC analyses
- Further comparative studies

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