

## TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS AND ONLINE REPUTATION: CONCEPTUALIZATION AND LITERATURE FRAMEWORK ANALYSIS\*

**Jelena Komšić**  
**Jelena Dorčić**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – Online public opinions, using various forms of social media, create huge challenges for the tourism industry. Significant theoretical findings are found concerning the impact of online reputation on tourism destination competitiveness. Theoretical and empirical studies have shown that online reviews and subjective experiences of travelers who have visited a specific tourist destination substantially affect visits to a destination. The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of tourism destination competitiveness and online reputation.

**Findings** – Findings of this study are based on the development of the scientific thought of the concepts of online reputation and tourism destination competitiveness. An analysis of journals and articles published in leading tourism and hospitality journals searched by using the keywords “competitiveness” and “reputation” showed that only 14 full-length articles on “reputation” were found relevant to the review. In terms of “competitiveness”, a total of 87 full-length articles related to tourism and hospitality were found in the main academic search database.

**Contribution** – The paper contributes to the existing literature of tourism destination competitiveness and online reputation with its theoretical presentation. It is expected that this research will make an important contribution by identifying research gaps and providing challenging directions for future research.

**Keywords:** tourism destination competitiveness, online reputation, online reviews, tourism and hospitality, literature review

### **INTRODUCTION**

The success of tourism destinations in world markets is influenced by their relative competitiveness. Their competitiveness is increasingly important to countries seeking to claim a growing slice of this expanding market and clearly this is of special interest to communities highly dependent on the prevailing state of the tourism sector and travel industry (dos Santos Estavão et al., 2015). As tourism has become the leading leisure activity in the 21st century, the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) Tourism 2020 Vision forecasts that international arrivals are expected to reach nearly 1.6 billion by the year 2020. Of these worldwide arrivals in 2020, 378 million will be long-haul travellers and 1.2 billion will be intraregional (UNWTO, 2002). International tourism receipts reached US\$ 1245 billion worldwide in 2014, up from US\$ 1197 billion in 2013, corresponding to an increase of 3,7% in real terms (taking into account exchange rate fluctuations and inflation). International tourist

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arrivals (overnight visitors) increased by 4,3% in 2014, reaching a total of 1133 million after topping the 1 billion mark in 2012 (UNWTO, 2015, 3).

Tourism destinations, in general, compete in attracting visitors, residents, and businesses. A tourism destination with a positive reputation finds it easier to vie for attention, resources, people, jobs, and money; a positive destination reputation builds destination competitiveness and cements a destination as somewhere worth visiting. This means that destinations looking to build or maintain strong reputations must consider development, and a sense of destination – all of which opens up potentially controversial questions of destination authenticity, brand narratives, leadership and authorship, performativity, story-telling, and aesthetics (Morgan et al., 2011, 3).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of tourism destination competitiveness and online reputation.

This paper aims: a) to define the concepts of competitiveness and reputation in the tourism and hospitality industry, b) to present a literature review of tourism destination competitiveness with developed indicators that affect tourism destination competitiveness, c) to identify an important literature gap, and d) to investigate the importance of online reputation in the tourism field applied to tourism destinations.

The focus of this study is explicitly on the tourism industry and consists of three parts. The following section gives an overview of definitions of tourism destination competitiveness and reputation. The next section lays out the critical analysis of published papers and a literature review of destination competitiveness and online reputation. The last section discusses the main conclusions and provides future directions for research.

## **1. CONCEPTUALIZATION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **1.1. Definition and concept of tourism destination competitiveness**

For many people, the concept of competitiveness implies a win/lose situation where one person, enterprise or nation outperforms the other (Garelli, 2006, 1). Competitiveness is a multidimensional concept. The word “competitiveness” originated from the Latin word, *competer*, which means involvement in a business rivalry for markets (Ajitabh and Momaya, K., 2004, 46). The definitions of competitiveness could be divided into macro and micro perspectives.

From a macro perspective this concept includes social, cultural and economic indicators that impact the performance of a country in international markets (dos Santos Estevão, Garcia and de Brito Filipe, 2015, 263). The OECD defines competitiveness as “the degree to which a nation can, under free trade and fair market conditions, produce goods and services which meet the test of international markets, while simultaneously maintaining and expanding the real incomes of its people over the long-term” (OECD, 1992, 237).

At a micro level, the understanding of competitiveness refers to a firm's ability to compete, to grow and to be profitable (Anca, 2012, 42). Firm-level competitiveness is one of the key concerns of today's business. Porter (1990, 33) says that the basic unit of analysis for understanding competition is the "industry". He also says that firms, not nations, compete in international markets. According to Porter's model a company should find better ways to compete by continually upgrading the firm's products and processes in order to create a competitive advantage.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that the concept of competitiveness is very complex and there seems to be no generally accepted definition.

Over the last few decades the interest in studying the competitiveness of tourism destinations has grown. In the tourism context, competitiveness has been considered as the "destination's ability to create and integrate value-added products that sustain its resources while maintaining market position relative to competitors" (Hassan, 2000, 239).

Dwyer, Forsyth and Rao (2000, 3) defined tourism competitiveness as "a general concept that encompasses price differentials coupled with exchange rate movements, productivity levels of various components of the tourist industry and qualitative factors affecting the attractiveness or otherwise of a destination". This definition highlighted the importance of the economic dimension of tourism competitiveness. However, Ritchie and Crouch (2003, 327) claimed that destination competitiveness is more complex and could be defined as the "ability to increase tourism expenditure, to increasingly attract visitors while providing them with satisfying, memorable experiences, and to do so in a profitable way, while enhancing the well-being of destination residents and preserving the natural capital of the destination for future generations". According to Dwyer and Kim (2003, 374) destination competitiveness is the "ability of a destination to deliver goods and services that perform better than other destinations on those aspects of the tourism experience considered to be important by tourists".

The OECD Tourism Committee defines destination competitiveness as "the ability of the place to optimise its attractiveness for residents and non-residents, to deliver quality, innovative, and attractive (e.g. providing good value for money) tourism services to consumers and to gain market shares on the domestic and global market places, while ensuring that the available resources supporting tourism are used efficiently and in a sustainable way" (Dupeyras, A. and MacCallum, 2013, 14).

The existing literature indicates that the concept of competitiveness could be viewed from various perspectives. Most of the competitiveness literature in general includes three major groups of thought: comparative advantage and/or price competitiveness perspective, strategy and management perspective, and historical and socio-cultural perspective (Dwyer and Kim, 2003, 371). Researchers suggested different indicators to define and measure competitiveness of each perspective.

Although there is a significant amount of research devoted to competitiveness, relatively few studies focus on evaluating competitiveness from the tourists' perspective (Chen et al., 2016, 59).

## 1.2. Definition and concept of (online) reputation

According to the Oxford Dictionary reputation is defined as “the beliefs or opinions that are generally held about someone or something” and “widespread belief that someone or something has a particular characteristic” (Online Oxford English dictionary). The word “reputation” comes from the Latin word “reputo” which consist of the prefix “re” and verb “puto”. “Puto” means having an opinion considering something in a specific way, at the same time acknowledging that others may have different opinions (Marchori and Cantoni, 2012, 142).

The concepts of identity, image and reputation are still very often used as almost synonymous. It is necessary to make a distinction between these three concepts. While identity represents the essence of a company and image what an individual think about a company, reputation could be viewed as the opinion shared among a group of stakeholders (Dowling, 2008, 5). Several studies tried to define and conceptualize reputation. Marchiori (2012, 1) started her dissertation with this thought: “*Reputation is a complex construct which reflects the dynamics of a modern society, that is, people use reputation to simplify information processing when they are overwhelmed by information*”. Marchiori and Lorenzo (2011) investigated the concept of reputation from psychological, sociological, economic, marketing and corporate communication perspectives. Their findings suggest that reputation is a social construct based on the stakeholders' cognitive perception related to the object (e.g. person, company, organization) that represents one of the most important factors of success.

Reputation plays an important role in the tourism industry. With the progress of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in tourism the importance of online presence of destinations has become extremely relevant. The Internet has become the most important channel for promotional and selling activities of destination management organizations (DMO), while at the same time the Internet has become the primary channel for tourists of getting information about a destination and all other activities involved in holiday planning. Tourists nowadays have the opportunity to express their own opinions and experiences online. The contents they provide (user-generated contents - UGC) can influence individuals in the process of choosing their holiday destination. Today, numerous platforms exist (blogs, virtual communities, wikis, social networks etc.) which offer consumer reviewing and rating products or services they consumed. Recent studies confirmed that consumers increasingly rely on electronic word of mouth (eWOM) to make a variety of decisions (De Ascaniis and Gretzel, 2013, 156). Compared to traditional WOM, thanks to the Internet, there are a lot of advantages to eWOM: speed and ease of access to information, availability for long periods of time and certain proximity.

The importance of online conversations, reviews and user-generated contents in managing destination reputation is highly important and there are many possibilities and challenges for future research in this promising research area.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW ANALYSIS

### 2.1. Analysis of published articles

Destination competitiveness has been described as “tourism’s holy grail” (Ritchie and Crouch, 2000, 5). An issue on tourism and travel competitiveness in *Tourism* (Volume 4, Issue 4, 1999) featured three papers at the destination level: price competitiveness, the role of Spanish public administrations, and the competitiveness of alpine destinations. *Tourism Management* then devoted a special issue to “The Competitive Destination” (Volume. 21, Issue 1, 2000). *Tourism Economics* published a special issue on tourism competitiveness, which was guest edited by Pashardes and Sinclair (2005). Among the seven papers in this issue, two papers made a particularly substantive contribution to the mainstream of destination competitiveness research.

Table 1 summarizes articles published from 1995 to 2015 in leading tourism and hospitality journals dealing with the concepts of competitiveness and reputation.

Table 1: **Published articles in leading tourism and hospitality journals on competitiveness and reputation from 1995 to 2015**

Journals/Publisher	Concepts	
	Competitiveness	Reputation
1. Annals of Tourism Research	3	-
2. Journal of Sustainable Tourism	4	-
3. Tourism Management	13	6
4. Journal of Travel Research	11	1
5. International Journal of Hospitality Management	1	3
6. International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality	16	3
7. Tourism Geographies	2	1
8. Cornell Hospitality Quarterly	-	-
9. Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research	1	-
10. Leisure sciences	-	-
11. Leisure Studies	-	-
12. International Journal of Tourism Research	4	-
13. Current Issues in Tourism	10	-
14. Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism	2	-
15. Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	3	-
16. Journal of leisure research	-	-
17. Tourism Economics	14	-
18. Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	3	-
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>14</b>

Source: Authors

The analysis of published articles in the top 18 rated leading tourism and hospitality journals searched for the keywords “competitiveness” and “reputation” showed that only 14 full-length articles on “reputation” were found relevant to the review. In terms of “competitiveness”, in total 87 full-length articles related to tourism and hospitality were found in the main academic search database. *The International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality* and *Tourism Economics* published the most articles related to the concept of competitiveness. It can also be noted that not much attention is given to the concept of reputation since only 6 articles were identified.

In addition, a literature review on tourism destination competitiveness with a substantial model and indicators will be presented. For this purpose, a variety of databases (e.g. EBSCOhost, SCOPUS, ScienceDirect, Emerald insight, Wiley) and journals with higher and lower impact factors were searched.

## **2.2. Tourism destination competitiveness – models and indicators**

The literature review of tourism destination competitiveness highlights a substantial number of concepts, models and determinants for measuring tourism destination competitiveness. (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003; Dwyer and Kim, 2003).

Destination competitiveness evaluation could be broadly divided into two main themes: model building/indicator construction and corresponding critique, and empirical measurement of destination competitiveness (Zhou et al., 2015, 74). The authors pointed out that the former tends to emphasize qualitative methods (Dwyer and Kim, 2003; Lall, 2001) and the latter adopts quantitative or mixed methods (Enright and Newton, 2004; Kao et al., 2008; Roberts and Stimson, 1998; Tseng and Chen, 2013). As competitiveness has been studied in the tourism-related sectors since the early 1990s, different methods were applied to establish the relative importance of the attributes.

A common weakness among most existing competitiveness studies is that the competitiveness attributes are not weighted. Not all attributes are equally important in terms of their contribution to the destinations' competitiveness.

Zhou et al. (2015, 72) stated that some scholars (Enright and Newton, 2004; Kim, Gou and Agrusa, 2005) have recognized the critical importance of weighting competitiveness attributes, and have also used visitor ratings of the importance of attributes on Likert type scales. The authors also stated that simply allocating weights is problematic because the relative importance is unknown and the consistency of respondents' ratings cannot be detected.

Ritchie and Crouch (2003) and Dwyer and Kim (2003) developed a framework for destination competitiveness. The models are complex, more reliable for destination marketers and managers, encompassing many unweighted indicators associated with the tourism destination competitiveness literature. Ritchie and Crouch (2003, 60) state that "it is important to recognise that models are not perfect and therefore should not be used in a cookbook fashion".

Crouch and Ritchie (1994, 1995, 1999) were the first to commence development of a general model of destination competitiveness. Their body of research and resulting model is comprehensively reported in Ritchie and Crouch (2003). The model linked together the macro and micro environment factors and consists of five components, which are core resources and attractions, supporting factors and resources, destination policy, planning and development, destination management, and qualifying and amplifying determinants. Each of these five categories is further broken down into sets of indicator.

Dwyer and Kim (2003) introduced a holistic approach to the determinants and indicators of destination competitiveness. Their indicators were categorized into five subgroups: endowed resources, supporting factors, destination management, situational conditions, and demand factors.

Hanafiah et al (2015, 3) critically reviewed the Crouch and Ritchie (2003) and Dwyer and Kim (2003) models and stated that one of the greatest weaknesses of the models were the exhaustive lists of tourism destination factors without the mechanism for prioritizing these criteria. Hanafiah et al (2015, 3) stated that the Crouch and Ritchie model does not pinpoint the causal relations in the tourism destination competitiveness model. Furthermore, the Dwyer and Kim (2003) model simplified and extended the previous model by not only integrating a number of determinants into extended categories, but taking demand conditions into consideration and determining destination competitiveness development of the elements serving to create socio-economic prosperity. Nevertheless, it is important to note that most of the selected determinants were not based on any empirical testing.

Go and Govers (1999) measured a destination's competitiveness position relative to other destinations along seven attributes: facilities, accessibility, quality of service, overall affordability, location image, climate and environment, and attractiveness.

Hassan's model (2000) provided indicators of destination competitiveness, but does so with a focus on environmental sustainability. The determinants are based upon demand orientation, comparative advantage, industry structure, and environmental conditions.

Significant attention was given to sustainable development and environmental management. Mihalic (2000) suggested that environmental quality refers to the quality of natural features of the destination that can, eventually, be deteriorated by human activities.

Price competitiveness is a key factor in the overall tourism competitiveness of a destination. Dwyer, Forsyth and Rao (2000, 527) stated that exchange rate movements, productivity levels of various components of the tourist industry, and qualitative factors affect the attractiveness of a destination.

Vengesai (2003) proposed a conceptual model for measuring tourism destination competitiveness and attractiveness. One of the indicators presented communication/promotion including reputation, branding and pricing.

Enright and Newton (2004) applied the Importance-Performance analysis in assessing the importance of the determinants of competitiveness as well as their competitiveness relative to those main competing destinations.

Gooroochurn and Sugiyarto (2005) discussed eight main quantitative indicators of tourism competitiveness under a Competitiveness Monitor (CM) initiated by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) for over 200 countries. The eight indicators are price, economic and social impacts, human resources, infrastructure, environment, technology, openness, and social development.

Mazanec et al. (2007) used an adapted version of the World Travel and Tourism Council's (WTTC) model of destination competitiveness (the CM). In total, three of the competitiveness indicators contributed to overall destination competitiveness: heritage and culture, economic Wealth (communication facilities and social competitiveness), and education.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) Geneva published the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report (TTCI) 2008 (World Economic Forum, 2008, 25) to explore the factors that drive the travel and tourism competitiveness of destinations. The TTCI is composed of 14 "pillars" of travel and tourism competitiveness, which include policy rules and regulations, environmental regulation, safety and security, health and hygiene, prioritization of travel and tourism, air transport infrastructure, ground transport infrastructure, tourism infrastructure, information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, price competitiveness in the travel and tourism industry, human resources, affinity for travel & tourism, and natural and cultural resources.

In addition, Gomezelj and Mihalic (2008) focused their research on environmental management using ingratiated resources, created resources, supporting factors, destination management, situational condition and demand conditions to assess tourism competitiveness.

Assaker (2011) adapted the CM framework and proposed the application of the economy, infrastructure, the environment and tourism as the significant determinants in explaining destination competitiveness.

Tseng and Chen (2013) constructed a framework for the evaluation of tourism destination competitiveness of cities in Taiwan using descriptive statistical analysis.

In contrary, Knezevic Cvelbar et al. (2015) developed productivity-related measures for destination competitiveness examination based on economic and tourism factors.

Cucculelli and Goffi (2015) extend the Ritchie and Crouch (2000) model of destination competitiveness by introducing a set of sustainability indicators and testing their role in explaining the competitiveness of a tourism destination. The authors used the following indicators: sustainable tourism destination management, general infrastructures, events and activities, responsible tourist behaviour, local empowerment in the tourism sector, destination marketing, quality of environmental and natural resources, gastronomy, historical and artistic feature, price-quality relationship, tourist accommodations, emphasis on maximising local economic development.

In addition, Table 2 shows a summarized list of tourism destination models and indicators.

**Table 2: Literature on tourism destination competitiveness (TDC) models and indicators**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>TDC indicators</b>	<b>Model focus</b>
Cucculelli and Goffi (2015)	Sustainable tourism destination management; general infrastructures; events and activities; responsible tourist behaviour; local empowerment in the tourism sector; destination marketing; quality of environmental and natural resources; gastronomy; historical and artistic features; price-quality relationship; tourist accommodations; emphasis on maximising local economic development	Sustainability indicators
Knezevic Cvelbar et al. (2015)	Economic based factors (macro-environment, general infrastructure, business environment); tourism-based factors (endowed resources, tourism infrastructure, destination management)	Productivity-related measure – total tourism contribution to GDP per employee in tourism – for destination competitiveness examination
Assaker et al. (2011)	Economy; environment; infrastructure; tourism	Cross-country, multi-group empirical analysis tourism causality network model
Gomezelj and Mihalic (2008)	Inherited resources; created resources; supporting factors; destination management; situational condition; demand conditions	Environmental management of tourist destinations
World Economic Forum (2008)	regulatory model; business environment and infrastructure; natural, cultural and human resources	Constructing a tourism competitiveness index (Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index)
Mazanec et al. (2007)	Heritage and culture; communication facilities; social competitiveness; education	Transformation from a definitional system into an explanatory destination competitiveness model
Gooroochurn and Sugiyarto (2005)	Price; economic openness; technological developments; structure; human development in tourism; social development; the environment; human resources	Competitiveness frameworks ranking destinations globally
Heath (2003)	Foundations; building blocks; the cement; the roof	Emphasis on human-related factors
Vengesayi (2003)	Intrinsic destination resources; activities; experience environment; supporting service; communication/promotion	Tourism destination competitiveness and attractiveness
Enright and Newton (2004)	Attractions and businesses	Quantitative model for measuring competitiveness
Dwyer and Kim (2003)	Resources; destination management; situational conditions; demand conditions; destination competitiveness; socio-economic prosperity	Integrated model of destination competitiveness
Hassan (2000)	Comparative advantages; demand orientation; industry structure; environmental conditions	Environmental sustainability

<b>Authors</b>	<b>TDC indicators</b>	<b>Model focus</b>
Go and Govers (2000)	Facilities; accessibility; quality of service; overall affordability; location image; climate and environment; attractiveness	Policy and strategy
Dwyer, Forsyth and Rao (2000)	Travel cost, ground cost, price competitiveness; i.e. food and drink, accommodation, shopping, entertainment, airfares, taxis, public transport, etc.	Price competitiveness
Crouch and Ritchie (1999)	Basic resources and attractions; destination management; supporting factors; tourism policy; planning; development	Comparative and competitive advantage
Kozak and Rimmington (1999)	Primary factors; specific factors	Competitiveness of tourist destinations

Source: Expanded data table taken from Hanafiah, M.H., Hemdi, M.A., Ahmad, I. (2015), "Reflections on Tourism Destination Competitiveness (TDC) Determinants", *Advanced Science Letters*, Vol. 21, No. 5, pp. 1571-1574.

Significant theoretical findings are found in the scientific literature concerning the impact of online reputation on tourism destination competitiveness.

Online public opinions, using various forms of social media, create huge challenges for the tourism industry. The authors, Marchiori et al. (2013, 170) emphasize that online reviews and subjective experiences of travelers who have visited a specific tourist destination substantially affect visits to a destination (Gretzel, 2006; Tussyadiah et al., 2011; Xiang and Gretzel, 2009; Yang et al., 2008), and that internet-based evaluation is becoming an essential tool for tourists in making travel decisions, while online reputation as an intangible resource represents a sustainable competitive advantage for a tourist destination.

As mentioned before, Vengesai (2003) puts forward a concept including the reputation of the tourism destination and how this strengthens competitiveness through its perceived attractiveness. The author emphasizes that, to tourists, visiting a reputable destination guarantees the quality and experience that they would enjoy, based on the past performance of the destination (Vengesai, 2003, 643).

A positive destination reputation builds destination competitiveness and creates a reservoir of goodwill. Morgan et al. (2011, 8) state that a positive place reputation becomes the key to destination competitiveness. Further, distilled to its essence, destination reputation is the culmination of three factors. First, conversation – reputation is something you talk about; secondly, discrimination – reputation is something you critically assess; and thirdly differentiation – reputation makes you distinctive.

Despite the importance of online reputation impact on tourism destination competitiveness, a significant deficiency in the tourism destination competitiveness models is found, particularly regarding the concept of tourism demand in the Integrated model for measuring destination competitiveness by authors Dwyer and Kim (2003).

### 3. CONCLUSION

In order to emphasize the literature gap, an overview of the published articles with tourism destination competitiveness models and indicators is given.

The aim of this study was to investigate the importance tourism destination competitiveness and online reputation.

Tourism destination development, marketing and destination reputation management have a hugely significant but complex relationship. The various connections between brand, image, reputation, identity, creative and competitive destinations are not well understood.

The findings of this study are based on the development of the scientific thought of the concepts of tourism destination competitiveness and online reputation.

The analysis of journals and articles published in leading tourism and hospitality journals showed that only few articles, compared to the number of other lower ranked journals and proceedings, are published with the keywords competitiveness and reputation. While searching the databases, it was noted that a few hundred articles with the mentioned key words have been published in journals with a lower impact factor.

The existing literature gap is mainly focused on the empirical research. The theory indicated that (online) reputation plays an inevitable role in increasing the tourist demand and tourism destination competitiveness which results in improving the quality of life and socioeconomic prosperity.

The paper contributes to the existing literature in the area of tourism destination competitiveness and online reputation and provides challenging directions for future research.

Future research will emphasize the development of a conceptual model for measuring the impact of online reputation on tourism destination competitiveness. Factors that impact online reputation are numerous, e.g. online trust toward social media, attitude towards online reputation, online message components, and allow researchers to contribute to the existing literature. Also, future research will be based on applying online reputation as an indicator of the Dwyer and Kim (2003) model.

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**Jelena Komšić**, MA, Teaching Assistant

University of Rijeka  
Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Opatija  
Department of Quantitative Economics  
Primorska 42, P.O. Box 97, 51410 Opatija, Croatia  
Phone: +385 51 294 313  
E-mail: [jelenak@fthm.hr](mailto:jelenak@fthm.hr)

**Jelena Dorčić**, MA, Teaching Assistant

University of Rijeka  
Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Opatija  
Department of Quantitative Economics  
Primorska 42, P.O. Box 97, 51410 Opatija, Croatia  
Phone: +385 51 294 681  
E-mail: [jelena.dorcic@fthm.hr](mailto:jelena.dorcic@fthm.hr)