

Sports Tourism Products: Social Media Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In addition to good accommodation and sports infrastructure, Slovenia has an extremely developed system of training, testing, and rehabilitation of athletes. Slovenian athletes have always topped in various sports providing excellent training and friendly partnerships for athletes and sports teams coming to the preparations. These characteristics provide an opportunity for developing off-peak tourist products, focusing on sports and sports recreation. However, sports recreation marketing faces challenges like the division into sports-oriented and sports-related vacations. Accordingly, the main goal of this paper is to discern the link between sports and tourism, marketing strategies and tools, and identify the potential variables that could encourage Slovenian organizations in enhancing successful engagement of sports tourism in the following years. Therefore, to discuss the possibilities for sporting organizations to cooperate with the tourism industry, an in-depth discussion based on the case studies of Slovenian companies from two different destinations is conducted.

KEYWORDS

Marketing of Sports Tourism Products, Organizations, Slovenian Tourist Resorts, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Slovenia is one of the European countries with the highest tourism growth. In 2018 Slovenia evidenced 5,9 million tourists (Žibert, et al. 2018) while in 2019 it had a record season with 6,2 million international arrivals which are 5% higher than the previous year which position Slovenia above the European average (Slovenian Tourist Board, 2020). Slovenian tourism market's strategic focus is to decrease seasonality by providing diverse tourism content all year round, extending the average stay rate, focusing on marketing for micro and macro destinations, and targeting quality travelers who are in search of personal benefits (Slovenian tourist board, 2020). In such cases, Slovenia recognized sports tourism as one of the critical factors to carry out their strategic plans whether it means winter sport in the Alps, training, recreation, or therapy in sports and thermal centers, or different kinds of active or passive sports tourism. Such an extensive offer in Slovenia is highly beneficial for tourism and the Slovenian economy overall. Slovenian sports tourism has proven to be prosperous and highly competitive. The research which investigated Slovenian and foreign sports tourism confirmed that

Slovenian sports tourism is more competitive in fields of transport, hospitality, primary supply, and destination image than competitors (Maravić, Bednarik, and Lesjak 2015).

An additional benefit of Slovenia is that it could provide sport activities all year round because it can offer both summer and winter sports (Wise, Perić and Đurkin, 2019). This fact is extremely beneficial for Slovenian tourism which could concentrate on sports tourism in off-peak seasons and have fruitful tourism all year round and avoid seasonality (Valek, Shaw, and Bednarik 2014). According to the touristic website Sometimes Home (2020), the off-peak season in Slovenia begins in October and lasts till May.

However, some of the stated challenges for sports tourism did not bypass Slovenia. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish and evaluate sport tourism travelers by their travel motive, so that it can provide a personalized and adjusted offer. Tourists who traveled for a sports-oriented vacation have different expectations and aspirations than sports-related vacation travelers. One way to reach and market the specific tourist group and simultaneously gather data and information from potential guests is the usage of social media marketing and big data. For gathering and processing a daily growing amount of business data, information and communication technology usage is needed. Through the years, information and communication technologies are changing today's business operations by progressively including consumers in innovation processes of creating new products and services (Sørensen and Falch, 2019). Since the tourism industry depends on information quality, information and communication technologies are getting more attention when it comes to enhancing tourism-oriented businesses (Marušić, et al., 2019). Social media as a new web 2.0 technology allows accessible and procurable creating and spreading information worldwide (Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). Also, it ensures meeting consumers' requirements and needs timely and effortlessly by creating buzz news, learning from consumers, targeting consumers, using check-ins, games, crowdsourcing, social shopping, promotion activities, etc (Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). Moreover, information and communication technology like websites approaches consumers to offered services in an interactive way, hence encouraging them to reserve accommodation in hotels or buy a ticket for an airplane more often (Jaković, Pejić Bach, and Šimičević, 2005). According to Van Huy, et al. (2019) websites should offer consistent information and create common trust among visitors as well as have a friendly and attractive design.

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to differentiate between tourism and sports, marketing techniques and strategies, and to identify variables that could help Slovenian organizations have more successful sports tourism services throughout the year. Therefore, this study is based on answering three research questions as follows:

- RQ1: What are the advantages of Slovenia for marketing active products for sports organizations?
- RQ2: What type of products can Slovenia market in the off-peak seasons for sports organizations?
- RQ3: How social media could be used in promoting sports tourism products?

To gain a more in-depth insight into their marketing and strategic mechanism, this investigation will explore two Slovenian sports organizations and sports facilities through the case study analysis. This paper will present two Slovenian tourist organizations in the tourist destinations of the Mediterranean and Alpine areas as a possible model for the deseasonalisation of tourism with the inclusion of sports services.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The sport was developed side by side with humanity, which gives strength to our body and mind and provides them to work together. Thus, the meaning of sport in our lives could not be underestimated (Novikova, Sakharchuk, and Ilkevich, 2013). Sports and tourism are frequently mixed and combined,

regardless of the purpose of travel are for business or leisure, people bind sports activities on their trip (Fraiz, de Carlos and Araújo, 2020; Rivera, 2018). The research conducted a few years ago included various types of respondents who concluded that 90% of travelers prefer to include sports activities with their vacation (Gozalova, Shchikanov, Vernigor, and Bagdasarian, 2014). For example, agro-tourism is becoming popular among travelers because despite looking for peace and nature, this kind of traveler also looks for sports activities like horse riding, fishing, mountain biking, boating, etc. (Stanovčić, et al., 2018). However, sports tourism in the context of sports tourism centers or destinations with sports services can be offered to both recreational travelers and professional sports athletes (Polanec, 2014). Accordingly, sports tourism does not mean just recreational vacation, it is much more than that and it became an influential part of the tourism economy (Pambudi, 2018). It represents one of the fastest-growing parts of the tourism industry with a lot of potential and development opportunities, and it recently received a lot of attention both from research and businesses (Hasani, Moghavvemi, and Hamzah, 2016). UNWTO stated that sports tourism is worth approximately \$ 800 billion, which is about 14% of travel and tourism revenue overall (UNWTO, 2018).

The connection between sports and tourism has its origin way back to the Ancient Greeks where travelers visited sports arenas and other centers and attended the great sports events in the honor of the God Zeus (Ivanovski and Popović, 2018). Regardless of the ancient tradition, sports tourism as a type of tourism appeared just in the early 1990s when tourist travel started rapidly increasing (McIntosh, Goeldner and Ritchie, 1995). At the end of the 1990s, a study reported that 75,3 million Americans and 37% of Canadians traveled for sports reasons, either to play or observe (Gibson, 2003; Gibson, Walker, Kaplanidou, Thapa, and Geldenhuys, 2011). During the 2000s more extensive investigations were undertaken on the topic, where research concentrated on the economic, social, cultural, and other impacts of sport tourism. Furthermore, they investigated their patterns, benefits, and possible challenges (Holden, Shipway, and Lamont, 2019).

Even though academic interest in sport tourism is relatively young the term itself was established earlier. Numerous research tried to develop a comprehensive definition of the term, but the two definitions stand out: 1998. H. Gibson provided the definition which is very popular and commonly used. It describes sports tourism as a “tourist trip which involves a change in the everyday lifestyle, to participate in a sports activity, or to watch sporting events, or to visit sport’s attractions” (Gibson, 1998). Another widely recognized definition of sport tourism has been developed by Standeven and De Knop (1999), who expressed that sports tourism include all “forms or active or passive engagement in physical activity, both occasionally or regularly, which is undertaken for non-commercial or non-business purposes, and which requires traveling outside the place of permanent residence and work”. The newer conceptualization by author Mokras-Grabowska (2016) confirms and agrees with both previously stated explanations and adds that the term ‘sports tourism’ should be categorized based on the traveler’s motivation for the trip. Specifically, not all travels where people do some sport-related activities such as jogging should be categorized as sports tourism. Sports tourism should be a trip where the sport is the motivation of the travel.

Based on the adopted conceptualizations, sports tourism distinguishes three elemental types of sports tourism: (i) active sports tourism: a traveler actively participates in a sport (ii) nostalgia and sentimental sports tourism: travelers’ motive of a journey is to visit sports attractions. (iii) event sports tourism: travelers’ motive for a journey is to watch sports (Kersulić, Perić, and Wise, 2020). It is crucial for tourism sports organizations to comprehend which type of sport tourist traveler they target because different types need different tourist offers which should be tailored and strategically planned. Therefore, sports tourism could consist of both active or passive travel, as long as the motivation for travel is a sport, as previously stated.

To be successful, when a sports tourism organization or destination decide to enter a sports tourism market, it needs to determine four critical elements (Yang, Lo, Chao, Shen, and Yang, 2020):(i) identify the factors which influenced on destination decision to enter a sports tourism market (ii) techniques and strategies to pursue the sports tourism market (iii) identify the key trends in the particular market

(iv) identify the key issues and challenges in the particular sports tourism market. When creating a strategy, it needs to decide to focus on the destination of a sports category (traditional, niche, or emerging sports), leveraging financial and physical assets, leveraging skills and knowledge to gain competitive advantage, and position the destination on the sport tourism map.

Nonetheless, the success of sports tourism depends on several factors. For instance, author Gozalova (2013) confirmed a high correlation between the advancement of the sports tourism of the specific destination and resources allocated for sports infrastructure. Nevertheless, if famous sports arenas, health centers, spas, or recreational indoor or outdoor areas are considered, the infrastructure is an important factor of destination for sports tourism success. There are few approaches for sports tourism infrastructure: For instance, the destination can create a new infrastructure to increase the sports tourism market. In this case, the destination seeks a competitive advantage through building new infrastructure. The second one is that destinations have existing sports infrastructure and attract the same sport tourism visitors. The third scenario is that non-sport infrastructure such as nature or infrastructure built for other purposes is used in the sports tourism market (Pouder, Clark, and Fenich, 2018).

Melo and Sorby (2017) assert that the key elements of sport tourism development are enhancement of the individuals' need for sport and recreation in terms of global health awareness, adapted worktime schedule which provides more free vacation time, and increased household income. Furthermore, authors Nicolau and Santa-Maria (2017) concluded that sports celebrities have a beneficial impact on the tourist destination.

The success of sport tourism depends highly on its marketing strategies. In recent years, social media became the prevalent marketing tool that can reach and engage different population groups worldwide. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media represents various applications developed on the rules of Web 2.0 technologies' concept, enabling users to generate and share their content via the Internet. Social media encompasses various forms of communication and collaboration among Internet users as collaborative projects, blogs and microblogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game communities, social communities, and opinion-sharing communities like forums (Alves, Fernandes, and Raposo, 2016; Gupta, Tyagi and Sharma, 2013; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). It supports "two-way" viral interaction between consumers and businesses, or consumers with other consumers in a community or individual level (Kakirala and Singh, 2020).

De facto, existing and future clients around the world are the ones who are participating in generating, colluding, and giving their opinion on the global electronic market, hence, manipulating the process of marketing communication (Assad and Gomez, 2011; Hamilton et al., 2016; Li, Larimo and Leonidou, 2021). Concurrently, social media encourage consumers with similar interests to exchange their experiences, create trust-communities, and promote services/products by using the "create-your-own-content" method on social media, e.g. tweets on Twitter, hashtags on Instagram, posts on Facebook or blogs, etc. (Zollo et al., 2020).

On the other hand, authors Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger III (2019) argue that social media marketing encourages various businesses in enhancing their position on the market by strengthening the connection with consumers, and, therefore, amplifying their chance of generating higher profits (Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger III, 2019). Social media marketing represents the growth of marketing strategies, incorporated and applied in social media with the purpose of timely and direct communication with existing and future consumers (Cheung, Pires, and Rosenberger III, 2019). When adopting social media as a marketing tool, it is crucial to choose the appropriate type of social media, as well as the proper way of communication (Gretzel and Yoo, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to set the social media marketing strategy, hence, to decide about the number of channels and the engagement activities within the chosen social media (Gretzel and Yoo, 2013). According to Sireger et al. (2020), social media marketing strategy is based on identifying marketing issue, settling social media marketing goals, conducting social media audit and analysis, establishing or purifying social brand, assessing

appropriate social media channels, creating content, controlling community and impact, measuring and quantifying marketing results, carrying out and administrating the marketing plan.

Bearing all the aforementioned in mind, it is easy to conclude that social media marketing impacts consumers' further activities on the market (Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger III, 2019). Furthermore, the vast majority of people (93%) using social media agreed that all businesses should use marketing via social media since this kind of marketing strategy is more economical and more efficient in reaching a larger population of users for businesses (Koay et al., 2020; Amersdorffe et al., 2012). This is particularly important since it is expected that 3,02 billion people in the world, which is almost 1/3 of all people on the planet, will become social media users during this year (Statista, 2019; Lopez-Carril, Escamilla-Fajardo, and Gonzalez-Serrano, 2020).

Moreover, various researchers dealing with social media in business recognize many social media usage benefits in diverse business sectors. According to Lopez-Carril, Escamilla-Fajardo, and Gonzalez-Serrano (2020), social media is already present in politics, advertising, health, music, or video games, etc. Some of the social media usage benefits as a marketing method are reducing financial expenses on promoting activities, reaching larger ranges of potential consumers, creating products and services tailored to the requirements and preferences of users, thereby increasing sales of products and services thus created, etc. (Nadaraja and Yazdanifard, 2013). For example, authors Gupta et al. (2013) investigated social media usage in healthcare. Their results show how social media, as a marketing channel, enables a more effective and quicker acknowledgment of health issues among people worldwide. In their paper, authors Kim and Ko (2012) stated how social media marketing enables the luxury fashion industry to generate higher profits, strengthens the relationship between the company and customers, initiates the future consumption of consumers, etc.

Also, social media is widely used in promoting tourism activities, tourist destinations, and tourism events (Lopez-Carril, Escamilla-Fajardo, and Gonzalez-Serrano, 2020). As Kakirala and Singh (2020) state in their paper, there is a noticeable line of parallel growth of social media and tourism activities. For most businesses and consumers in tourism, social media is crucial in shaping destination image and promoting destination in the context of marketing activity (Kakirala and Singh, 2020). As today's consumers seek new travel information as destinations, prices, hotels, etc., on the Internet, it is advisable for each competitive business in tourism to consider adopting a social media marketing method as a cost-effective and easy way to implement a marketing method (Matikiti, Mpinganjira, and Mornay Roberts-Lombard, 2018). For example, authors Lagrosen and Grunden (2014) examined social media marketing usage in seven spa-hotels in Sweden, concluding that hotels are using customers' opinions shared on social media as actuators for creating new services. Since the only currency in social media marketing is the level of future impact, it can be concluded that one's opinion on the visited destination or hotel will shape the opinion of other travelers (Gretzel and Yoo, 2013; Kayumovich, 2020). Besides, social media usage in the tourism industry enables tourism agencies, air companies, etc., to timely recognize and react to eventual changes in consumption, as well as to track and investigate the social and demographic characteristics of their consumers (Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2020). Therefore, tourism companies integrate social media channels within their websites to track travelers' preferences of their services and the services of their competitors as well (Leung, 2013). According to Siregar et al. (2020), Facebook and Twitter are the most popular social media in the tourism industry, while Pinterest, Blog, Youtube, and Instagram share second place. Similarly, Čurlin, Pejić Bach, and Miloloža (2019) accentuate the importance of Twitter as one of the most popular social media for the tourism industry. Social media such as LinkedIn Company Page, Google +, Flickr, and Tumblr are still trying to get their "spotlight" on the social media marketing stage (Siregar et al., 2020).

Additionally, social media plays an extensive role in all sports tourism types, especially in events sports tourism. Generally, scientific circles recognize social media like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram as important and effective marketing tools in the sports industry (Lopez-Carril, Escamilla-Fajardo, and Gonzalez-Serrano, 2020). A major sport event has a great impact on host tourism and destination

branding, consequently having a financial effect (Kennelly and Toohey, 2012). A massive event such as the World Championship or Olympic games have viral social media coverage and, therefore sports tourism promotion. The Rio Olympics was one of the first global sports events with social media coverage, and the marketing on social media had begun three years before the event (Lee, Groves, Liu, and Edwards, 2019). In 2018 EHF (European Handball Federation) EURO2018 Championship was held in Zagreb, Split, Varaždin, and Poreč. The event had 2.3 million views via YouTube and 1.3 million views on Snapchat. During the event, 110.000 new tourists came to Croatia. Consequently, the aforementioned brought to Croatia 8.7 million euros only in the context of tourism (Perić, 2018).

Accordingly, other than a powerful tool for marketing and promotion, social media usage for sports tourism is helpful to generate information databases that could be a useful source of knowledge about potential guests and their preferences. Therefore, social media, as the most powerful promotional tool, could serve as a strategy development tool for sports tourism.

Even though sports events, sports celebrities' impact, sports buildings, and infrastructure generate great revenue and have a tourism impact, sports tourism has some challenges. Sports tourism often does not have a strategic plan provided by the sports organization in collaboration with the public and the private sector (Parent, Rouillard, and Naraine, 2017). Several authors recognized and addressed the absence of coordination between tourism organizations and sports organizations (Devine, Boyle, and Boyd, 2011; Harrison-Hill and Chalip, 2005; Weed, 2009) and suggested their solutions. However, there is no unanimous opinion on the topic. The top-down or bottom-up approach is argumentative. Some authors such as Deery and Jago (2005) prioritized the national level leadership coordination, as opposed to Weed (2003) who imply that a bottom-up approach may result in greater success as a broader space for creative work. Moreover, researchers stressed out that non-profit organizations should also be included in the sport tourism collaborations (Babiak and Thibault, 2009; Misener and Doherty, 2013). While the approach has been submitted to different schools of thought, the fact that the collaboration between all parties involved is necessary, and therefore critical, considering that the travelers when to arrive cannot separate experience regarding accommodation quality, sport tourist organization service, and destination overall. Another prevalent challenge for sports tourism is seasonality. Sports tourism management provided various suggestions to eliminate the seasonality of the sports by developing indoor facilities and stadiums, but some sports, such as skiing depend on the weather (Mhanna, Blake, and Jones, 2019). One of the countries which successfully adopted and developed sports tourism for a long time is Slovenia. Landscape and nature in Slovenia provide an environment that could set the groundwork for almost all types of sport. Good infrastructure, training, rehabilitation and sport systems, and excellent active sportspersons all contributed to sports tourism success in Slovenia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The Advantages of Slovenia for Marketing Active Products for Sports Organizations

In this part of the paper, authors shall provide the answer to the first research question about the advantages of Slovenia for marketing active products and services for sports organizations (RQ1).

Slovenia is one of the European countries with the highest tourism growth in 2019. It had a record season with 6.2 million international arrivals, which is 5% more than the previous year, which puts Slovenia above the European average (Slovenian Tourist Board, 2020). One of the strategic emphases of the Slovenian tourism industry is to reduce seasonality by providing a variety of tourist content throughout the year, increase the average length of stay, focus on marketing micro and macro destinations and focus on quality travelers seeking personal benefits (Slovenian Tourist Board, 2020). In this context, Slovenia has recognized sports tourism as one of the key factors in implementing its strategic goals, be it winter or summer sports, training, competitions, sports recreation, or rehabilitation after injuries with therapies in Slovenian natural Spa resorts. All segments of sports tourism contribute

to an increasingly important share of revenues to the overall tourism cake. Slovenian sports tourism proved, to be successful and very competitive, as the research that analyzed Slovenian and foreign sports tourism confirmed that Slovenian sports tourism is more competitive in the fields of transport, catering, primary supply, and destination than competitors (Maravič, Bednarik in Lesjak 2015).

An additional advantage of Slovenia is that it can carry out sports activities all year round, as it can offer both summer and winter sports. This fact is extremely important for Slovenian tourism, as, in Slovenia, we could focus on sports tourism out of the main seasons and have favorable tourism indicators throughout the year, and avoid seasonality (Valek, Shaw and Bednarik 2014). However, some of the mentioned challenges of sports tourism in Slovenia have not been bypassed. Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate and evaluate sports tourism travelers according to the motive of the trip to be able to provide tailor-made and customized offers. Tourists who have traveled on a sport-oriented holiday, have different expectations and desires than tourists associated with traditional holidays. One way to reach and market a particular tourist group and simultaneously collect data and information from potential guests is to use social media marketing and big data.

Today, sport is a necessary component for tourists, where destinations that offer active holidays with elements of the sport, systems of active learning of sports content, or getting to know the destination, while playing sports, have become important factors to tourism development and sales success in demanding tourist markets. This is especially true for tourism service providers in the Alps, Scandinavia, and the Pyrenees in Europe and the tourist-developed part of North America.

The implementation of sports programs in tourism requires professionally trained staff in the field of kinesiology, good knowledge of other tourist products/services, and offers and cooperation with sports organizations of the local regional, and national levels. Slovenia is an ideal destination in the heart of Europe, which can offer consumers high-quality services for accommodation, food, and programs. As a comparative advantage, Slovenian sports can offer well-developed professional and local sports organizations, but they are not prevalent enough in business activities of tourism. The reasons for poor cooperation between the two fields is the gap between the volunteer approach that prevails in some clubs but also an underestimation of the content that the sport can offer the tourism industry regarding trendy sports services. Specialized private companies, which offer adventure programs and especially trendy sports, as well as some Slovenian tourist companies, became significantly better involved in the marketing of the sports offer. Some national federations and clubs in cooperation with the local community and tourist resorts have been for decades trend makers of a selected sport product in Slovenia that generates an important share of income also for the tourism industry.

Marketing of sports offer and programs, can be divided into six basic forms starting with the marketing of sports recreation, prophylaxis programs for active population and elderly people in tourist services, sports training programs for athletes, sports training programs for faster and more successful rehabilitation after injuries and operations, marketing of adapted sports programs for a target group with special needs, marketing of sports events in tourist centers. A very important segment in the period outside the main seasons is also the organization of seminars, congresses, and education in the field of sports, as the Slovenian National Sports Federations are increasingly successful in hosting major sporting events as well as international congresses and education.

As it was discussed earlier, social media in the context of marketing activities is mainly incorporated within the websites. In the case of the Slovenian official tourist website (Slovenian tourist board, 2021), several social media channels are also integrated with it. Within the Slovenian official tourist guide website (Slovenian tourist board, 2021), Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn, YouTube, Tripadvisor, and V Kontakte, are used. Each social media site is positioned in a particular area for social media at the bottom of the website. In that way, each visitor can easily click on each social media channel and follow the Slovenian official tourist guide profile on a proffered social media channel. Also, social media is used for sharing and creating “user-content”. Accordingly, at the end of each post on the website, visitors are offered several social media sites to share the

post they read with their community on their profiles via one or more chosen social media channels. Considering their engagement in promoting sports tourism, at the beginning of their website, visitors are introduced to sports activities in Slovenia, such as skiing during the current winter season of the year. In the sport tourism context, Slovenian official tourist guide websites use social media like YouTube by showing video materials of skiing in their famous mountains. Moreover, in the part of the website (Slovenian tourist board, 2021) named “Good to know”, they use the logo for approval like “thumb up” which is similar to “likes” on Facebook. Besides, the Slovenian official tourist guide website (Slovenian tourist board, 2021) offers many pictures of sports activities, enabling visitors to “share” them on preferred social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest. Furthermore, the Slovenian tourist guide website (Slovenian tourist board, 2021) actively uses its profiles on social media to promote Slovenian nature and appropriate sports activities (e.g. skiing, riding horses, biking, etc.), famous athletes that are promoting sports activities in some part of Slovenia (e.g. world-class climbers in Trbovlje) or various sports events organized in Slovenia (e.g. Ljubno FIS Ski Jumping World Cup Women). For example, on their Facebook profile, comments from satisfied users are allowed on each of the published posts, which accordingly raises the value of what they promote. Therefore, they are supporting visitors to share their own positive experiences, reactions within their own, or another social community, and to create “user-generated” content.

Furthermore, the Slovenian tourist board settled down criteria for sport event organizers, where they select different important events and support them as partners, benefiting great international exposure through mass and social media. The selection of organizers includes target markets, the possibility of promotion thru different activities that are important for tourism.

The Type of Products that Slovenia Can Market in the Off-Peak Seasons for Sports Organizations

In this part of the paper, authors shall provide the answers about the type of products that Slovenia can market in the off-peak seasons for sports organizations and how social media could be used in promoting sports tourism products, thus addressing RQ2 and RQ3.

Marketing of Sports Recreation in Tourism

Marketing recreational sports is the broadest part of the sport, which can be marketed in tourism. It starts with the youngest age categories and is present as a cloud for all age categories, also increases with the oldest. There is a lot of flexibility in marketing this type of offer, as groups are often heterogeneous, and at the same time, the time component of the guest also plays an important role.

For children, it is possible to organize various forms of sports exercises, courses, and sports kindergartens, where an integral part of the program is tied to sports facilities and nature. Parents on holiday like to offer children individual or group lessons during a certain period of the day, especially because their children are in the process of getting acquainted with new content in the field of motor skills. For the implementation of such programs, a basic equipped space (sport playrooms) is required, preferably also covered sports areas and outdoor sports areas.

Children and adults are offered courses in skiing, snowboarding, cross-country skiing, tennis, golf, squash, horseback riding, and all the activities requested by a tourist. In addition to the group, the course providers offer individual training hours, exercises for two, and exercises for completed groups. An indispensable part is the so-called soft parts of sports marketing in tourist programs, such as cognitive trips in the surroundings, morning, and group exercises, where it is possible to attract people interested in activities that they did not intend to use before.

The middle generation requests activities that can be carried out independently, such as tennis, mountain biking, hiking, swimming, and skiing. Thus, it is necessary to provide quality training programs but also service activities such as renting equipment, sports shops, etc.

For all age categories, it is necessary to organize a variety of recreational competitions or tournaments and arrange them for each group of active guests.

Today, many people of all ages are using social media. However, earlier generations like “baby-boomers” or Generation X are still lagging behind new functionalities being introduced into social media (Bento, Martinez, and Martinez, 2018). In promoting sports activities to children and adults, it would be advisable to promote such content that will reflect their values, opinions, emotions, or current or desired lifestyle (Bento, Martinez, and Martinez, 2018). Also, since younger people are more willing to participate in electronic word of mouth marketing by sharing posted content on social media, it would be advisable for tourism companies to promote giveaways, or like-to-win or share-to-win activities, etc. In this way, younger people will bring older people on social media and encourage their interest in promoted content (Bento, Martinez, and Martinez, 2018).

Marketing Prophylaxis Through Sport in Tourism

People’s awareness of the importance and concern for health has been growing rapidly in recent years. On the one hand, there is less and less time for systematic exercise, and on the other hand, the middle and older generation, in particular, want to do something for themselves, at least on holiday. They are also willing to check their health through physical tests during holidays. In the marketing of such programs, spas in Slovenia play a leading role and more and more active vacations are also offered in other tourist centers and resorts. The new insurance system and some companies currently provide to a limited smaller part of the consumers an annual preventive active vacation and more and more families dedicate one of their selected holidays to health. In the past, such programs were linked to longer stays and more medically programmed exercise. Currently, there is a bigger demand for shorter holidays connected with intensive sports programs, especially from the active population that tries to exercise regularly also at home.

Profiles of various spa-hotels on social media like Facebook, YouTube, or Instagram could share short video clips or pictures with famous athletes promoting their services. Also, they could use the “like to win” or “share to win” strategy on some of their best offers, as well as creating Facebook stories or Instagram stories with various contests (Bento, Martinez, and Martinez, 2018).

Marketing of Athletes’ Training Camps and Preparation for Competition

Professionalization in sports has led to the necessity of athletes, staying in preparatory periods outside their home place, namely in resorts that offer optimal conditions for training. The nature of different sports and the different timing of competition cycles is an important condition for the resorts that should also be able to satisfy both quality accommodation needs, appropriate training conditions (technical equipment), as well as other specific needs of this target group.

The preparation of sports teams or individual athletes is usually done outside the main tourist season, which provides resorts or hotels with good complementary activity in filling the accommodation capacities. The needs of sports teams and individual athletes are usually also quite specific, as especially top athletes need optimal conditions for which they are willing to pay fairly. Top athletes and teams are a magnet and attraction for other athletes who are willing to spend a little less but are an important factor in filling capacities in the off-season of resorts.

When booking accommodation, they book sports facilities and possible medical services. During the preparation period, they want to meet local teams in tournaments, which is why it is necessary to organize various forms of tournaments during the preparation periods. Marketing the preparations of sports teams is particularly interesting from a marketing point of view, as the preparations are usually followed by journalists, who through their media reports and interviews, provide quality free media support to marketing.

The Slovenian tourism industry adapted extremely quick to the new COVID standards and regulations offering sports teams high level and international federations standards, “bubble training conditions”

In this case, tourism agencies or companies, and hotel resorts, can use social media to share the experiences of famous athletes or sports teams that were training on campus or were preparing for

competition. By doing so, they can attract other sports teams or athletes to consider their resort, city, or country for some new sports event preparation. Besides, recreational sportspeople can also be motivated to visit this country or resort if they see positive comments on posts or pictures (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) or video (YouTube, TikTok, etc.) that represent their favorite sports team or a famous athlete they prefer.

Sports Offer for the Needs of Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation, as an integral part of the spa programs, is divided into two parts. The basis is the continuation of hospital treatment, which follows various operations or recovery from injuries. Patients already have a predetermined number of therapies that the spa doctor appropriately schedules during treatment. Despite a wide range of therapeutic procedures, one of the most important things in the process for rehabilitation is kinesitherapy, which includes individual exercises, group gymnastics, and exercise in a fitness center with normal and special fitness machines. The second part of the treatment consists of patients, who were not referred for treatment through social insurance, but decided to pay the costs themselves due to the difficulties they have. In such cases, it is easier for the spa doctor to consider their wishes and arrange therapies for them according to a diagnosis he/she made. Such guests are also better consumers and normally their injuries do not prevent them from consuming other offers provided by their hosts.

Medical institutions for rehabilitation, as well as spa hotels, should integrate social media as a marketing tool within their websites. For example, such organizations could publish posts of patients' experiences, and let others comment on such posts or share those posts with their communities via other social media. They could also inform the community about their medical services or famous medical staff working thereby creating short promoting videos on YouTube or Instagram.

Marketing of Holidays with A Sporting Offer for the Target Groups of People with Special Needs

Tourists with special needs who have either congenital or acquired disabilities that require special attention. Given the great potential in Europe, they also need to be offered quality conditions in the field of active holidays. Hotels and tourist centers are adapting the infrastructure to better the mobility of people with special needs, followed by offering sports content. The offer of active holidays is moving from health and spa resorts to active holiday centers. This makes the need for expertise and special methods to implement programs that require additional and supplemented aids for this segment of consumers.

Hotels and tourist centers should promote their adapted infrastructure and special programs for customers that need special attention by using posts, pictures, videos, etc. This kind of marketing ensures the interaction of people who either have a certain difficulty themselves or know someone who has some disability, and whom they would like to help. Social media can help in creating a new circle of people who share the same interests and establishing a safe environment for a slightly more sensitive group of consumers. According to Pejić Bach et al. (2019), trust is one of the most important elements for establishing medical tourism that can be created by giving accurate and timely information on social media. By promoting their content in this way, hotels and tourist centers can also learn what this type of consumer needs the most, what they like and do not like, how they would like to be treated, what their competitors are doing in this field, etc.

Marketing of Sports Events in Tourism

Sports events are an increasingly important element in the promotion and marketing of tourist centers and resorts around the world. The organization is very complex, and in the first phase does not bring significant profits, but by gaining sponsors, such events can be an important source of income for organizers and co-organizers. In addition to tourist organizations that offer only a part of their services and sometimes facilities, clubs, associations, and National Federations that operate on a voluntary or

professional basis are key stakeholders involved in the process of marketing sports events. Without them, this important activity for some resorts would be impossible.

Social media marketing can be very useful when it comes to promoting sports events in tourism. Facebook and Twitter are the two most popular social networks used in promoting activities within the sports industry (Nufer, 2016; Witkemper, Lim and Waldburger, 2012). In this case, it is advisable for each country that is a host of a sports event to primarily focus on announcing the upcoming sports event and then parallelly promote the country as a desired traveling destination. Also, tourist information centers and accommodations in a host country should promote their services aligned with the upcoming sports event. Besides sports events and their effect on enhancing sports tourism, also top athletes can be influential via social media by promoting concrete sports tourism centers or destinations in which they have been (Polanec, 2014). Therefore, tourist information centers and accommodations could use sports teams or individual athletes to capture short videos in which they invite people to the sports events' destination. In this way, people will develop an interest in such a destination because they would be emotionally affected by the promotional video, post, or picture shared by their favorite player. Most people would be encouraged to visit the host destination, go to such sports events, and cheer for their sports team.

Sports Events of Local Importance

Tourist centers and resorts organize various sports and recreational events, especially in the period outside the main tourist season, to attract guests and occupy empty accommodation facilities. This type of event includes competitions in individual sports (marathons, cross-country skiing, mountain biking competitions, recreational tennis tournaments, etc), as well as in group sports (football tournaments, handball, and basketball tournaments ...). Such competitions are covered mainly by local media, but minimal earnings or only a cost-recovery can be expected. The organization involves sports professional staff from tourism companies, as well as local sports clubs and organizations, and to a lesser extent, the local community and companies are involved. Sports events organized by sports recreation companies in tourist centers (Ski open, Snowboard Grand Prix, major tennis tournaments) are profitable, but even here tourist companies do not generate much money. A more important factor is media coverage of such competitions, which is also reflected in the greater participation of sponsors and partners. Sports events and competitions with a better financial effect are organized by tourist companies for well-known clients (trade union competitions, sports games of companies ...), and these are organized either in the main tourist season or in the post-season period. Consumers are spending many additional funds for different activities offered by resorts.

Sports Events of Regional Importance

This group includes sports competitions and events of an international character, up to the highest European level of competitions. The organization is complex and requires interdisciplinary cooperation of various professional teams and timely planning of implementation. Tourist companies are interested in such competitions of the tournament type or the type of events, especially in the period outside the main season, which means the long-term planning (European cups, Open championships, International competitions). The holders of the implementation are usually important sports clubs and associations in the region. Those competitions are usually supported by sponsors, local communities, and regional administrative units. For tourist companies, the competitions are interesting mainly from the point of view of promotion and getting guests to fill accommodation capacities.

Sports Events of National Importance

The organization of large sporting events of national importance is interesting for providers of tourist services due to long-term planning dates, good financial returns, and excellent media coverage both at home and abroad. Tourism companies do not carry a large organizational burden and are only part of the chain of contractors but at the same time, in the long run, they can generate a lot of

money from such events. Funds for the organization represent an abundant source of income also for activities (trade, production ...) that are not directly related to the implementation of the competition. The organizers can be national federations, clubs, or completely purposefully organized companies, which take care of the realization of such events.

Specific Congresses, Seminars, and Education for Sport in Tourist Resorts

The education process in sport has always consisted of a theoretical and practical part, where some of the sports could be learned, improved, or tested only in a natural environment or sport facilities, that are connected with tourism facilities and terrains (e.g. Ski slopes, sports halls diving spots...) National and international federations are also active in exchanging knowledge and transferring the educational process to tourist resorts where they organize intensive workshops and exchange of knowledge. Resorts that can offer full professional services, facilities that meet international standards and a relaxing atmosphere are starting to be popular locations hosting many sport-related educational events.

CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

Given that the extant literature scarcities firm research on the sports tourism investigation in Slovenia, authors of this work used descriptive case study methodology to deliver insight in favor of our set research questions (Yin, 2008). Case studies include two Slovenian tourist organizations in the tourist destinations of the Mediterranean and Alpine area as a possible model for deseasonalisation. Due to the anonymity, both tourism organizations were named by following pseudonyms: Company A1 and Company A2.

In this work, authors used data collected from tourist organizations' websites and applied social media networks. By analyzing the collected data, authors want to distinguish the connection between tourism and sports, marketing techniques, strategies and identify the variables which could help Slovenian organizations to have even more successful all-year-round sports tourism.

Case Studies Description

Today, sport is an infallible component of tourist programs, with destinations that offer active holidays with elements of the sport, systems of active learning of sports content, or getting to know the destination. Such destinations of sports tourism are becoming leaders of tourism development with sales success in demanding markets. In Slovenia, sports services are increasingly represented in all regions and destinations, and as a good example, can site the Mediterranean part with Koper, Izola, and Portorož and the alpine part with Kranjska Gora and Planica.

The first observed company, Company A1, is a tourism organization including several accommodations in three different locations in Slovenia like Portorož, Strunjan, and Izola. All accommodations within Company A1 are rated with two or five stars, depending on the level of accommodation services. It includes accommodation packages for families and couples and those visitors who are looking for an active vacation. Also, Company A1 offers wellness and spa facilities and destinations offers for business meetings and events.

On the other hand, the second analyzed company in this paper, Company A2, has a long tradition in tourism of Kranjska Gora. It is established in 1974. and offers four accommodations in Kranjska Gora. Within company A2, each accommodation has three or four stars. Company A2 comprises accommodations and special offers for family vacations, organization of business events and congresses, wellness, and sports activities, and fun and relaxing facilities.

Both destinations also have a standardized and well-developed sports infrastructure, which is either owned by the state or local communities or tourism companies. Above all, there is a well-diversified and organized club activity, which completes the operation of tourist resorts. In sports clubs of both destinations, the best Slovenian athletes and medal winners of European and world championships

and the Olympic Games trained there. Both destinations are also regular organizers of the biggest sports competitions, such as European and World Cups, as well as championships and traditional mass sports events and competitions for young people. Some clubs are organizers of competitions with significant financial investments, which also use the event to obtain funds, which they re-invest into sports. In this part, however, these organizers will not be highlighted, but examples and opportunities of smaller clubs, associations, and federations from various sports. It is they, who can take advantage of the tourist infrastructure and off-season months in destinations as an opportunity to generate additional funds. At the same time, there is a positive impact also for the tourism industry.

Case Studies Results and Discussion

Case Study: Company A1

Case Company A1 has built a recognizable international congress tourism brand in the past, where they have organized several international sports congresses in cooperation with the International Ski Federation (FIS), the European Olympic Committees (EOC), and other international and national sports federations. In 2015 and 2018, they actively participated in the organization of the World Karate Championship (UWK) in Koper and the European Traditional Karate Championship in Portorož. Each of the events brought more than 1,000 athletes, officials, and guests to the destination tourist centers for a longer period at a time when they were otherwise modestly occupied or even hotels were closed. All this is possible only with long-term planning and cooperation of company employees and coordination with local, national, and international sports organizations. Sports organizations cooperating with a company benefited from the full support of all tourism-related services such as transportation, catering, promotion, and coordination with local authorities & ministries. International federations involved in the events just set standards and were responsible for the implementation of the event, where a local federation provided sports equipment part of volunteers at the sports fields, and financial support from sponsors. The company that was involved in managing the events, coordinated all the activities and determined three main stakeholders: (i) Sport - with the International federation and national federation (that were responsible for sport part of the event); (ii) Tourism – with tourism company that was responsible for all inhouse tourism and sport support (accommodation, catering, meeting rooms and sports facilities) and Portorož tourist association; and (iii) Education - with Tourism Faculty Turistica, that was a partner at the voluntary part of events.

The main stakeholder, the Slovenian Fudokan federation, received standards for organizing events from the World Fudokan federation and was active together with the organizing company in the phase of preparation, coordination with local partners and associations that were involved in managing the event. The local tourist organization supported events with some funds and logistics that included the involvement of local and national representatives of ministries. Both events were also supported by the National Tourism Board and partners. The Faculty for Tourism, with its students, supported events with volunteers and used the event as part of their education process. The main coordinator coordinated all the activities, agreed on the conditions with all main stakeholders, and provided partners, transportation means, and logistics needed for the organization while a partner hotel group played an active role in all phases of the event. The aforementioned partner hotel group started with systematic work in the field of marketing sports tourism services in 2018. Sport tourism services consisted of various elements of sports offers and programs for different target groups. This was the reason why they were vitally linked to local sports organizations, sports infrastructure providers, and national and international sports federations.

In the context of marketing and its' promotion activities, Company A1 uses social media marketing. They offer social media like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter within their contact information on the website. Visitors can click on every given social network and follow their updates and posted content. There is also a blog section on their website. However, according to the dating of the displayed content, which can be easily shared on other social networks, it is noted that there should be more engagement around the blog as social media. According to the company's

engagement on social networks, i.e. their participation in publishing content and encouraging interactive communication with followers, this company makes the most of the functionality of Facebook and Instagram. They publish various messages, slogans, or Instagram #hashtags about their services and sports activities they offer, as well as holiday wishes. Accordingly, Company A1 wisely uses social media marketing by creating posts on social networks to arouse visitors' emotional reactions, strengthen the relationship with their community, and attract new people.

Case Study: Company A2

Like other providers of the Alpine area, Company A2 faces the challenges of filling the accommodation capacity of the main seasons.

With the strategy that was implemented in 2015, they paid special attention to sports services. The company strategy defined the hotel's target group, target groups of active tourists, activities, and relations to different stakeholders in sport and tourism. Tourism is facing many changes in the last period as new trends, the different expectations of guests, and the orientation of tourist destinations (Pintar, Pobegajlo, and Fakin, 2015). They paid special attention to off-season programs and activities and with the support of the organizing company started cooperation with the International Paralympic Committee (IPC). The long tradition of international ski competitions under the auspices of the FIS, such as the annual World Cup (WC) events in Kranjska Gora was upgraded with IPC alpine and cross-country world cups, which were organized consequently always in off-season periods. IPC started to organize also their international spring conference in company facilities, which is proof that the decision to sport tourism services was the right one. The company was also active in 2019 when part of the World Alpine Skiing Championships for disabled athletes was organized in collaboration with the neighboring Italian Sella Neveia. The company cooperates with local sports clubs, the organizing committee of WC alpine skiing, and the Planica Olympic Center. They are the official providers of standardized accommodation, food, and partly logistics for preparations and competitions in this Nordic center, wherein 2020 they were an indispensable partner of sports for the needs of the Chinese Ski Federation, which held their national championship in Planica. In the last years together with specialized sport event organizations, the company increased the number of professional sports teams that use Kranjska Gora as a domicile for their spring/summer/autumn training camps. In addition to the focus on sports tourism, the company has defined the standards of accommodation, food, sports facilities and started organizing international sports congresses and seminars in the way of standardizing the entire provider of the tourist center. Hotel code and education of the staff play important role in the standardization of the sport tourism orientation of the company.

Company A2 also integrated social media within their website. They primarily promote their content on the website. Social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are suggested at the bottom of the website. However, the Facebook profile is not available, so it would be advisable for Company B to update regarding available social media networks. According to the posts' dates on social media networks, Twitter is lagging behind Instagram. Accordingly, Instagram presents the most accurate social media network Company A2 uses. Company A2 has a high engagement in creating and publishing posts about sports activities they offer and upcoming sports events. They actively post videos and pictures with accompanying content showing famous athletes as their guests, organized preparations for sports teams, and offering diverse sports activities like skiing, skating, hiking, golf, cycling, fishing, alpinism, and water sports. Also, they promote wellness and relaxing centers. By promoting sports activities in pictures and videos, Company A2 also promotes the nature of their country, beautifully furnished accommodation, culinary specialties, etc. These kinds of posts on social media networks could arouse feelings of comfort and desire within the visitor to travel to such a destination.

Discussion

The observed companies present two complexes connected with many accommodation facilities near sports facilities. Both of them are positioned near classified National Olympic Training Centers in Koper and Planica and Kranjska Gora. These complexes are offering many opportunities for active holidays, training camps, competitions, and specialized congresses to different stakeholders. For example, athletes can receive training, personalized sports nutrition, complete support in the training process, and quality accommodation. Nevertheless, to fulfill the expectations of athletes, local communities, local and regional sports clubs, and federations should be involved in the process even more. Up until now local clubs and federations from around the world already use these two locations due to the favorable climate and training conditions throughout the year with the support of the previously described activities.

However, both examples present good practice in sports tourism due to having the good support of local communities, developed sports clubs, company management, as well as constant coordination with employees of international and national sports organizations. Given that the implementation of sports programs in tourism requires professionally trained staff and good knowledge of other tourism services, specialized employees cover the field of sports tourism and have constant contacts with other stakeholders, without whom the development of sports tourism services would not be possible. Only excellent coordination with local clubs and the community and active support to international sports organizations ensures the management company strategically plans its sales and marketing activities. The satisfaction of all partners in the projects of sports preparations for indoor and outdoor sports throughout the year is possible only with constant investment in staff, and modernization of sports infrastructure.

Furthermore, social media is becoming one of the most preeminent marketing tools within many business sectors, including the tourism industry. It plays a vital role in assisting tourism companies to enhance tourism services by observing consumers' comments, likes, dislikes; establishing the community of existing consumers that will promote tourism companies to other people, etc. Moreover, social media marketing is becoming a popular strategy in sports tourism as well. Tourism companies worldwide use social media features to promote upcoming sports events, sports activities they offer, famous athletes and sports teams as their guests, etc. In such a way, tourism companies advertise their destinations and develop an emotional connection with people that like sports or idealize promoted athletes. Therefore, they attract other visitors who would like to have an active vacation or follow their sports team on the sporting event. In this paper, two companies are observed. Both investigated companies in the presented case studies have a few social media networks integrated into their websites. They both actively use the Instagram profile of their company. The first company (Company A1) actively uses the Facebook profile to share posts and establish interaction with its visitors. The second company (Company A2) does not have an active Facebook profile, while its Twitter profile is out-of-date. Both companies mostly post pictures and videos of nature with the content describing services they offer and enabling visitors to like or comment on posts. The second company is more oriented towards sports tourism via social media by posting information about sports events, pictures with a sports team on preparations in their accommodation, videos with famous athletes, etc.

CONCLUSION

Tighter links and cooperation between sports and tourism can bring a lot of benefits to all stakeholders, especially in an off-peak season, which is specific for each destination. In this paper, authors provide a discussion related to the research questions about the advantages of Slovenia in terms of sports tourism, as well as various specializations in tourism to maximize these advantages and turn them into reality in Slovenian destinations. To fulfill the mentioned goals of the study, desk-top research and case study analysis were applied to map the research in the field of sports tourism and social media usage.

Regarding the discussed results in this paper, Slovenia generally has many opportunities to improve their current tourism sports offers. Slovenian tourist destinations offer many services in the context of sports tourism like sports recreation, prophylaxis through sports, athletes' training camps and preparation for the competition, sports services for the needs of rehabilitation, holidays with a sporting offer for the target groups of people with special needs and various sports events. Proposed usage of social media strategies in promoting tourism and sports services like using "share-to-win" or "like-to-win" posts on social networks, encouraging user-created content, sharing experiences of other visitors or famous athletes and sports team, etc., could be beneficial for their future offers.

To support our conclusions, a case study analysis on two Slovenian tourism organizations was also conducted. Given the obtained results of both case study analyses, it can be concluded that successful sports tourism can be provided due to synergic collaboration among sports organizations and tourism organizations. Also, crucial for sports tourism sustainability is support from local communities and ministries. Also, establishing quality cooperation with various local, national, and international sports committees and organizations with timely planning off-peak sports tourism activities can be valuable for tourism organizations operating. Moreover, since social media is becoming one of the most crucial aspects in operating modern businesses, both companies were investigated from their social media usage perspective. Based on their websites and profiles on social media, both companies show that they recognized the importance of social media marketing in tourism and sports tourism by using websites integrated with social network profiles, mostly Facebook and Instagram. However, as the functionalities of the social media marketing application, in general, have not yet been fully utilized, certainly, the observed companies have room to advance their promotion in tourism and sports tourism in particular. Therefore, both observed companies should consider using more social media facilities for promoting their activities like applying user-content in their promoting activities, creating "trust communities" on social networks, having higher engagement on emerging social networks e.g. TikTok, engage famous sports teams, and athletes in promoting video clips, and pictures, etc.

In spite of the contributions of this study, there are limitations that needs to be indicated. This paper presents preliminary results so our conclusions are based on the desk-top research and case studies of two Slovenian tourism organizations. Though, they provide a good basis for future research in the direction of the development of specialized tourism. Therefore, authors of this paper encourage other scholars to conduct similar case study analyses in their countries and investigate the presented topic.

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