

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SPA TOURISM BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19¹

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ABSTRACT

As COVID-19 pandemic has left great consequences on all economic activities, social media has served as a vastly helpful communication tool for most industries, including tourism. The spa destinations are trying to attract tourists by changing the way of using social media while adapting to the new situation. The aim of this paper is to analyze the social media used in the promotion of spa tourism. The authors compare two different phases: pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 using data collected from 126 owners of tourist accommodation in spas destination. The research showed that during the period of COVID-19, the respondents most often use Instagram and Booking, they post the content most often once a week using photos and text. In addition, the results show that the respondents emphasize the location and price (in the pre-COVID-19), but during the COVID-19 pandemic, they put importance on health safety and cleanliness.

KEY WORDS: social media, spa tourism, COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has always been an important factor in tourism. Small and large companies in tourist destinations must be aware of this and take advantage of the new opportunities that are opening up in the sector, but also adapt to new trends in times like the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourism and technology go together and now, in the modern world, it is impossible to understand them without each other.

Choices of internet platforms, social networks, and virtual communities have become important places for exchanging information. Accessibility, uniqueness, influence, interactivity, acceptance of social media is an exceptional tool in the promotion of destination. For that reason, the ability to recognize the needs and desires of travelers at a certain moment and the way of presenting them through social media is important for the success of the company's business in the tourism market.

Over time, various social media have forced entities operating in the tourism market to face new technological solutions and adapt their business in that direction. Considering the characteristics of the tourist service, it is necessary to bring it closer to the potential tourist in the best possible way. In that context, social media play aenormously important role, because they enable the sharing of images (photos), videos, comments and 360° panoramas. With the development of the Internet, social media has become the main communication tool for promoting tourist destinations, accommodation facilities and other travel services.

A tourist crisis like COVID-19 implies unexpected events that initiate disruptive changes in the entire tourist system, resulting in the loss of reservations, arrivals and stays. Tourism in spa destinations was forced to stop due to the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. And the bearers of the tourist offer have come to a situation where they face a lack of guests. The crisis has also resulted in changes in communication, so spa destinations have turned to more frequent use of social media. In order to attract guests, they had to devise a strategy on how to do it in challenging times when safety and health care come first.

The tourism industry is one of the sectors that have benefited the most from the internet and as a result social media has become an integral part of every spa tourism promotion and planning. The link between spa tourism and social media is closer than ever, and promote services and reach tourists in a

more personal way. Due to the uncertainty caused by the pandemic, tourists need to get the necessary information in order to make the right decision regarding travel. With the courageous presence of the Internet in today's world, social media can be one of the most effective tools for marketing and destination promotion. Social media has proven to be the main means of communication.

This study investigates how the pandemic changed the communication of the spa destination on social media. The aim was to compare data on social media and their content related to accommodation capacity in spa destinations in the period before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN TOURISM

Social media allows a large number of users to access the Internet to share, collaborate, publish, modify, update, evaluate and like of various contents. The approach is based on community and joint action, within tourists can activate, connect, collaborate with others in real time at any time and from anywhere on the planet (Bulatović et al., 2019). The social media has become the main source of information for tourism workers and tourists who have increased requirements and preferences (Leung, 2013). The transformation from passive searching for information, content creation, collaboration and networking by using the Internet, into an interactive tool with a new opportunity for easy obtaining information for tourist exchanging opinions with other people, booking trips, payments is very significant today (Angeleski et al, 2018). Social media is a global phenomenon that has a great impact on society, especially in terms of opportunities for new ways of communication that have found wide application in modern business, such as tourism (Jevtić et al., 2021). Social media has the following role in tourism: destination examination, social communication, educational role, transmission of culture, fun and sales (media are the main resources of advertising) (Bertrand, 2018). Social media is an increasingly important instrument of strategic communications in spa tourism and a basic channel for transmitting messages and information and building quality relationships with tourists.

Nowadays, it is impossible to imagine the functioning of tourism without the social media (Dramićanin et al., 2020). In the context of tourism, the social media influence the arrangement of opinions and expectations of tourists regarding spa destinations, tourism service providers and owners of accommodation facilities, given that they play a key role in creating and

managing their image and brand. Considering the role of social media in tourism, they can be classified as (Mei et al., 2017):

1. paid media: TV commercials, spots, advertisements in print media, Internet and social media,
2. earned media- related to publicity,
3. owned media- which refer to media,
4. entity owns: websites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram,
5. shared media: which refer to interactions through social media.

Planned, designed, strategic creation of internet connections between the spa destination and tourists is the key of increasing the visits, so online existence has become imperative for both, and since the emergence of social media two-way communication and personal feedback, reviews and impressions of tourists have become mandatory and almost decisive in choosing destinations, accommodation, transportation and other services (Xiang et al., 2011). The change in the way of communication and the content itself has conditioned the change in the way in which tourists assemble important information. There is more trust in social media networks and information they collect and synchronize with other tourists. Social media requires all marketing activities integration and uses believable advertising to provide a competitive product and service experience (Živković, 2014).

Experiences and knowledge about the offer and tourist destinations, as well as their evaluation, are gained through social exchange and interaction of social network participants (Mašić, 2016). Strategic and tactical management of this type of communication is necessary in order to take advantage of new opportunities, introduce innovations and strengthen the competitiveness of spa tourist destinations and owners of tourist accommodation (Tham et al., 2013). Social media as marketing tool have the potential to change the relationship between the spa destination and tourists (Gohil, 2015).

In recent years, social media has become one of the most influential and useful tools that a spa destination can use. It is necessary for the owner of accommodation capacities to create useful content on their social media platforms, because the use of social media has made it possible to increase the capacity utilization.

TOURISM IN SPA DESTINATIONS DURING COVID-19

Tourism industry has been facing numerous challenges recently, which are completely new and unknown to theory and practice (Marjanović et al.,

2020). As the world is facing an unprecedented global health, social and economic emergency with the COVID-19 pandemic, travel and tourism is among the most affected sectors with airplanes on the ground, hotels closed and travel restrictions put in place in virtually all countries around the world (UNWTO, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is different from all modern pandemics. There are three key characteristics that make it stand out. Initially, this is a real pandemic, compared to SARS. Secondly, is its complexity in relation to the financial crisis, natural disasters, epidemics and terrorist attacks. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all spheres of life and economy, and the crisis is expected to continue to spill over from one sector to another. Third, the duration of the pandemic stands out. Almost two years after the outbreak, no final end is in sight, despite the fact that the situation has generally improved (Canhoto et al., 2021).

Measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (social distancing, travel and movement bans, community movement bans, self-isolation, gathering restrictions) have stopped global travel, tourism (including spa tourism) and leisure activities (Luković et al., 2020). Tourism is certainly one of the most affected activities, considering that it is a service activity that includes travel to a certain destination and direct contact of tourists with service providers (in this paper work: spa destinations and owners of accommodation facilities). The emergence of the COVID-19 virus has led to the adoption of measures to ban travel by a large number of destinations, which has further reduced the number of tourist trips (Marinković et al., 2021). Already, during 2020, several studies were published on the impact of the pandemic on the spa industry and tourism, with an emphasis on how it can contribute to improving the health of people with COVID-19. Based on the analysis, the pandemic significantly affected spa businesses and the extent of damage cannot yet be responsibly assessed, neither can predict with certainty the development of the situation in the future (Šenkova, 2021).

In order for tourism develop (such as spa tourism), without any risks to the safety of trip participants, open borders, stable political, social and economic, as well as health and safety conditions are necessary (Perić et al., 2021). The purpose of informing about risks is to make clear, instruct or advise potential tourists of possible critical situations that may happen at the destination (Dramićanin et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology was based on primary data from an online questionnaire (distributed through social networks). Total number of

respondents was 126; they were the owners of tourist accommodation in spa destinations on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. The research was conducted during March-April 2022. The aim of the research was to compare two phases: before and during the COVID-19, through the analysis social media used in the promotion of spa tourism. The similarities and differences in the ways of using social media will be mentioned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire consisted of 12 closed-ended questions. The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part consists of the questions related to the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents; the other 8 questions were closely related to social media and the promotion of spa tourism. The demographic structure of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristic	N	%
Gender		
Female	79	62.70
Male	47	37.30
Level of Education		
High school	78	61.91
Academic degree	35	27.78
Master degree	12	9.52
PhD degree	1	0.79
Age		
18-25	6	4.76
26-35	57	45.24
36-45	39	30.95
46-55	18	14.29
56-65	6	4.76
Type of accommodation		
Private accommodation (house, studio, apartment, villa)	100	79.37
Hotel (hotel, garni hotel, motel)	26	20.63

Source: Author's, based on research

The largest number of respondents is female (79 respondents- 62.70%), with a high school diploma (78 respondents- 61.91%), aged between 26-35 (57 respondents- 45.24%) and owning private accommodation (100 respondents- 79.39 %).

In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents answered questions related to social media that they have used and are currently using to promote their accommodation facilities in spa destinations. The questions were combined on the method before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The influence of social media in spa destination can be viewed from three perspectives: the tourist, the owner of the accommodation and the analysis of the published content. From a tourist perspective, it is important to understand the influence of factors that motivate and influence tourists. From the perspective of the accommodation owner: the impact of online content on capacity utilization. The content which is created on social media by the owners raises the level of trust and expectations from by potential tourists (Agbi, 2019).

The next question was about the type of social media they used before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents were able to mark multiple answers (Table 2).

Table 2. Type of social media

	Before COVID-19		During COVID-19	
Facebook	100	79.37%	83	65.87%
Instagram	81	64.29%	124	98.41%
Booking	65	51.59%	102	80.95%
Website	39	30.95%	45	35.71%
Other (Youtube, Airbnb, Twitter, Vrbo-ex HomeAway)	27	21.43%	42	33.33%

Source: Author's, based on research

Based on the answers of the respondents, it can be concluded that in the period during the COVID-19 pandemic, only the use of the social network Facebook decreased, while other channels of promotion and distribution of content via social media increased (mostly Instagram).

The Instagram platform is partly blamed for excessive tourism in many destinations. Many photos that appeared on Instagram helped bring new tourists to their destinations, resulting in a rapid influx of tourists. As the popularity of social networks grows and the presence of travel companies grows, consumers demand more direct forms of communication. Engagement with companies on social media increased during the pandemic.

Research shows that social media spending increased by 72% during the pandemic, highlighting the level of utilization (Market Research, 2021).

The next question was the frequency of publishing content on social media (Table 3).

Table 3. Frequency of publishing content on social media

	Before COVID-19		During COVID-19	
2-3 days	38	30.16%	42	33.33%
Once a week	35	27.78%	18	14.29%
Every day	25	19.84%	58	46.03%
Several times per month	16	12.70%	6	4.76%
Once a year	12	9.52%	2	1.59%

Source: Author's, based on research

During the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents were more likely to post content via social media. The biggest jump was noticed with the item: "I post content every day", where the percentage of responses has increased by more than 100%.

The approach and form of displaying content about spa destination and accommodation on social media depends on the characteristics of media (texts, photos, videos and maps). The advantage of communication via social media is reflected in the fact that information available to far more tourists than they are these is some classic types of communication (printed materials, television shows, promotions, etc.). Unlike of the mentioned types of communication, on socialmedia are offered interactivity in developing relationships between stakeholders and tourists, which plays a key role in communicating and developing relationships with potential tourists (Božić, 2018).

The next question was about type of content that respondents used most often to promote their accommodation in spa destination before and during COVID-19 (Table 4).

Table 4. Type of content

	Before COVID-19		During COVID-19	
Photo	64	50.79%	35	27.78%
Video	23	18.25%	25	19.84%
Text	18	14.29%	34	26.98%

Paid advertisements	21	16.67%	32	25.40%
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Source: Author's, based on research

Before COVID-19 respondents most often used photos (images) in promotion on social media, and during the pandemic period, they used text and paid advertising more than before COVID-19 period.

A direct connection between the content of social media in tourism and the engagement of tourists has been noticed (Omebe, 2021).

When constructing content for social media, the owners of accommodation capacities in spa destinations put emphasis on certain categories in the hope that in that way they will attract a larger number of tourists. In the next question, respondents had the opportunity to select several categories of answers related to the content on social media (Table 5).

Table 5. Content of social media

	Before COVID-19		During COVID-19	
Location	81	64.29%	63	50.00%
Price	72	51.14%	49	38.39%
Comfort	56	44.44%	42	33.33%
Cleanliness	42	3.33%	84	66.67%
Value for money	40	31.75%	44	34.92%
Facilities	34	26.98%	20	15.87%
Tourists attraction near property	29	23.02%	14	11.11%
Health care	12	3.92%	80	63.49%

Source: Author's, based on research

In the period before the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents most often stated the location, price and comfort of their accommodation facility in spa tourist places. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the emphasis was on cleanliness and health care.

Spa destinations can identify the most popular and unpopular features of their services among tourists (Flores-Ruiz et al., 2021). These sources of information are also becoming key promotion resources for companies in the spa tourism sector (Del Mar Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

In order for spa tourist destinations and tourist service providers (owners of accommodation facilities) to take the best position, both in the global tourism market and in the minds of key stakeholders, it is necessary to strategically approach communications through social media, as a significant segment of strategic online communications.

The growth of travel-related applications is likely continue and the tourism industry must understand the motivating factors and needs of travelers in order to connect communities based on common interests. Social media is an extremely effective form of promotion that can be used to increase tourist loyalty and lead to increased sales. As social media continues to grow, so will it grow the importance of its use as a promotional tool for spa tourism - The tourism industry is ready to take over the advantage of social media, as the industry has long relied heavily on the reputation of the destination, consumer opinion, dissemination of information and positive advertising.

Social media is becoming a powerful technology that millions of tourists turn to every day in search of information, contacts and business agreements. That is why spa destinations (and bearers of accommodation offers) must find a way to the more they are present on this medium in order to expand their markets and succeed attract tourists who search the Internet for information and conditions for their next trip. In addition, how tourist activity is directly dependent on the amount of information which is available to potential tourists, is very important for spa destinations presence on social media, given that it is a very effective tool for exchanging information.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of the paper, therefore, was not to predict the impact of social media on the future development of spa tourism, but to determine similarities and differences in the ways of using social media before the pandemic differed significantly from what happened under its influence. The future research may include the third phase-post-COVID-19, so it is possible to compare all three periods (before, during and after).

The limiting factor of this research is the small sample of respondents. Future research may cover a larger area, and all types of accommodation in

spa destinations may be included in the research (or only one type: private accommodation owners or only hotels).

At the same time, during the research, it was concluded that older respondents do not sufficiently deal with modern channels of promotion, such as social media. Future research can be done according to the annual categories of respondents and preferences for the use of social media in business. In addition, TikTok as a modern social media is not included in this research, although modern tourists spend a lot of time researching it. The future research can be launched in the direction of analyzing only social media videos for the purpose of promoting spa tourism (Youtube, TikTok and Instagram).

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